

Book Review: Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History

An exercise in myth-making

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This is the first of a two-part review of Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History, by Jenny Hocking, University of Melbourne 2012.

Jenny Hocking's two-volume biography of Gough Whitlam provides some useful factual information on the life and career of the Australian Labor Party leader and prime minister. But it falls well short of the mark in providing an understanding of the events that shaped his life and political role.

This is particularly so in the second volume, published in September, which deals with the Whitlam government of 1972-75 and the governor-general's November 11 coup that led to his dismissal—the first and only time that an Australian federal government had been removed in such a manner.

The failings of the biography are the outcome of Hocking's political outlook. While not explicitly stated, her work is based on a definite perspective. She is representative of a layer of intellectuals whose life-work has been devoted to maintaining the myth of Labor as the party of social reform—advancing the interests of the people against entrenched ruling elites.

Whitlam's demise, therefore, is presented as the downfall of a social reformer whose government was never accepted as legitimate by key sections of the Australian political establishment. Hocking's narrow national outlook means that she almost totally ignores the global context in which the Canberra Coup took place. It was the expression in Australia of the end of the post-war economic boom, an international upsurge of the working class and the political turbulence that followed, which saw the military coup against the Allende government in Chile, as well as the destabilisation of British Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and German Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt through the operation of the intelligence services.

While dealing with history, Hocking's biography serves a definite contemporary political purpose. Right at the point where the essential role of the Labor Party as the central prop of the state and the capitalist ruling class is becoming ever more clearly exposed, posing the necessity for the working class to break from the nostrums of Laborism, her book is aimed at promoting these nostrums.

The first volume is devoted to Whitlam's rise through the ranks of the Labor Party from the time he joined in July 1945. Whitlam, who was first elected to parliament in 1953, came to the Labor Party not as an advocate of the interests of the working class, but as a proponent of increased powers for the federal government, which he saw as vital for the building of the Australian nation.

Whitlam's first major political activity, while he was serving in the air force during World War II, was in support of the 1944 referendum initiated by the Curtin Labor government to change the constitution in order to give the federal government greater powers.

His political outlook, no doubt shaped at least in part by his family circumstances—his father was a leading public servant in the national

capital Canberra—placed him on the right wing of the Labor Party. Some of his opponents even maintained that he would rather have been in the Liberal Party.

Whitlam denounced such claims, insisting that his concern was to make the Labor Party "electable" so that it could gain power and carry out its program of reform. He was never more at home than when denouncing his opponents in the party for their "purity", which he insisted could be maintained only by remaining politically impotent.

While the conflicts between Whitlam and the Labor "lefts" were bitter at times, they were never of a principled character.

From the time of the Labor Party's adoption in 1921 of a "socialist objective"—in response to the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917—the overriding concern of the "lefts" was to maintain the illusion that the party was "socialist", lest the working class seek a revolutionary alternative. Whatever their differences, the Labor right wing and the "lefts" were united in their insistence that the labour movement had to be subordinated to the parliamentary system. "Socialism" would come about via legislation, within the framework of the capitalist state, not through capitalism's overthrow.

Whitlam's concern for "electability" was, in that sense, the most consistent expression of this reformist outlook, enabling his elevation to the leadership of the party, notwithstanding opposition from sections of the "left". His commitment to the parliamentary order was to shape his response to the two most important events in his political career—the Vietnam War and the dismissal of his own government in the Canberra coup.

The Vietnam War

The Whitlam mythology has portrayed him as an opponent of the Vietnam War. The facts speak otherwise. As Hocking has to acknowledge, Whitlam had "strong reservations about the focus of the election campaign of 1966 on Vietnam." He was rightly regarded with suspicion, if not outright hostility by the growing antiwar movement.

Whitlam's central concern was not opposition to the war, but with what he saw as "reform" of the party to gain office. He maintained that withdrawal of Australian troops was "neither practical nor principled". The task of the Labor Party, he said, was to "serve and preserve democracy, Parliamentary democracy. I do not seek and do not want the leadership of Australia's largest pressure group." Taking aim at those in the party who were involved in the antiwar movement, he insisted that "protest involves a heavy responsibility; it should not be treated as the private luxury of irresponsibles."

Ensuring "electability", in Whitlam's view, involved breaking the domination of the party's organisational apparatus, ensuring a greater role

for the parliamentary bodies in determining policy, and thereby making the party more responsive to the demands of the ruling class.

Whitlam's campaign for "reform" of the party structure was to culminate in the reconstruction of the Victorian branch of the Labor Party in 1970. However, he would have been powerless to act without the support of the "lefts". The turning point was the 1969 election, which saw a major swing to the Labor Party after its electoral drubbing three years earlier. Recognising that the next election could bring them government—but for the vagaries of the Australian electoral system Labor would have won in 1969—leading "lefts", most notably Clyde Cameron, joined Whitlam's campaign for "reform" of the Victorian branch.

The intervention into the Victorian branch was critical to ensuring support for a Labor government from key sections of the ruling class who were increasingly concerned with the growing movement of workers and the radicalisation of youth in the antiwar protests.

Starting with the May-June 1968 events in France—the largest general strike in history—the international political situation was characterised by a growing upsurge of the working class. This global movement found its expression in Australia in the May 1969 general strike, held in opposition to the leadership of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which resulted in the virtual destruction of the industrial relations system on which the Liberal government had relied since coming to office in 1949.

Fearful of the growing militancy of the working class, crucial sections of the bourgeoisie looked to the installation of a Labor government to try to contain it. Their outlook was exemplified above all by the Murdoch press, which increasingly swung its support behind Labor, in particular at the December 1972 election that brought Whitlam to power.

Over the next three years, the Labor government was wracked by profound contradictions. Whitlam had been put in office to contain the movement of workers and youth, and he attempted to do so by withdrawing Australian troops from Vietnam and implementing a program of limited reforms. He did so under conditions of a worsening global economic breakdown and rising working class combativity that provoked a deep political crisis, which was only resolved through his ousting.

The coup of November 11, 1975, which forms the pivot of Hocking's second volume, ripped open the façade of the parliamentary system, and revealed that standing behind it is a ruling class prepared to resort to outright dictatorship when it considers that its interests require such methods.

Dictatorial measures, however, are only adopted in exceptional circumstances, because the stability of bourgeois rule, its very legitimacy in the eyes of the broad mass of the population, resides in the fact that it is considered to be democratic. Therefore, when such action is taken, it must indicate that powerful social forces have come to bear on the central political figures involved.

The "bad man" theory of history, which attempts to explain great historical events as the outcome of individuals and their predilections, is utterly threadbare when it comes to deal with issues like the 1975 coup. Hocking focuses attention on Whitlam and other individuals, paying almost no attention to the underlying processes.

Whitlam had been installed with the backing of key sections of the ruling class. Hocking, however, in her bid to portray him as a battler against the political establishment, concentrates almost exclusively on the extent to which the Labor government, elected after 23 years of Liberal rule, was not regarded as "legitimate" within some ruling circles.

She points to the opposition to the Labor government from the Nixon administration and US intelligence circles, then deeply involved in covert operations to bring down the Allende government in Chile—operations that culminated in a military coup on September 11, 1973, the murder of Allende and the murder, torture and imprisonment of thousands of

workers and left-wing activists.

Clash with Nixon

The first clash with Washington came at the end of 1972 when the Nixon administration began the carpet bombing of the North Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, and the port of Haiphong. During five days at the end of 1972, more bombs were dropped than in the previous three years. A bomb-laden B52 flew from the US base at Guam every five minutes.

Having just been elected on a groundswell of opposition to the Vietnam War and Australian involvement in it, Whitlam was forced to issue a public protest against the American actions, a position echoed by other governments around the world. The objections brought a furious response from the White House. The head of the department of defence, Sir Arthur Tange, called it "a major crisis in the Australian-American alliance" and warned that the alliance could even be ended.

Whitlam assured Nixon that his government was not anti-US and that he looked forward to a period of positive co-operation. His essentially right-wing foreign policy was made clear in February 1973 when he visited Indonesia, declaring that the need to strengthen Australian ties with the Suharto regime was "the number one objective of my government". General Suharto had come to power in a bloody coup in September-October 1965, with the active collaboration of US intelligence forces, in which anywhere between half a million and a million workers and peasants were killed.

Hocking details that from the time the parliament reconvened in early 1973, after the December 1972 election, the Liberal Opposition was determined to use its numbers in the Senate to try to remove it. As the Senate Opposition leader Reg Withers put it, "the Senate may well be called upon to protect the national interest by exercising its undoubted constitutional rights and powers."

Yet the reason such views became dominant in ruling circles was bound up with powerful global processes that Hocking barely mentions.

Throughout 1973 the first signs of the global economic crisis were beginning to make themselves felt. The decision of the Nixon administration in August 1971 to remove the gold backing from the US dollar, thereby destroying the foundation of the post-war international monetary system, led to the unleashing of inflationary forces through the capitalist economy—the sharpest expression of which was to be the quadrupling of oil prices within the space of 12 months.

Under pressure from big business to take action, Whitlam sought to establish a system for the state control of wages and prices. He put forward a referendum to give the federal government these powers in December 1973, but it was resoundingly defeated due to overwhelming opposition in the working class.

Workers then acted as they had voted. The next 12 months was to see the highest level of strikes since the great upsurge of 1919, which had developed under the impact of the Russian Revolution of November 1917, as workers in Australia won the largest wage increases in history.

The Whitlam government's inability to contain this movement was viewed with growing alarm in key sections of the ruling elite, including those that had backed Labor's election in 1972. An early indication of this shift was the decision of the Murdoch press, which had been an enthusiastic supporter of Whitlam just 18 months earlier, to remain "neutral" in the double dissolution election of May 1974, which Whitlam had called in the face of the Senate's refusal to pass key government legislation.

To be continued



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