An exercise in myth-making

Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History by Jenny Hocking

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A 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.

Following the 1974 election, which saw the return of the Labor government, the caucus attempted to revive the party's standing in the working class and give the government a "left" face. Jim Cairns, a "left", was elected as deputy leader and hence deputy prime minister. While Whitlam had sought to retain right-winger Lance Barnard in the position, he soon appointed Cairns to the position of treasurer amid a worsening economic outlook.

The growing economic instability and the rising movement of the working class saw intelligence and big business interests become increasingly active.

Hocking recounts: "Cairns' ascension drew immediate action from security services even beyond Australia. Within days an internal ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] document compiled on the deputy prime minister was on its way to one of ASIO's favoured journalists, *The Bulletin*'s Peter Samuel. *The Bulletin's* cover story of June 22, 'Cairns: ASIO's Startling Dossier,' provided a damning assessment of the new deputy prime minister based on an ASIO report that had 'fallen into its hands.' The dossier claimed that Cairns espoused 'a kind of socialism … that bears a striking resemblance to that promoted by the Communist Party of Australia'."

The US administration also took note. Hocking recounts that a meeting of the staff of the secretary of state held on June 14 announced "we have a possible security problem with Cairns" but nobody had been able to determine whether he was a "communist".

Forces in the business world were in motion as well. The assistant general manager of the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac) Russell Prowse called on businessmen to mobilise and fight for the cause of "free enterprise" against the government, and for the "Australian way of life."

Hocking recalls the words of Liberal Senator Peter Rae as capturing the political frenzy that had seized the Liberal Opposition at the time. "Throughout 1974 and 1975, Australians saw a threat to their way of life. They demanded strong anti-socialist leadership. From Mt Isa to Bunbury, I found small numbers of people talking about the prospect of armed rebellion. Whitlam's tax-heavy socialism was a disaster."

In fact, as Hocking points out, the government had just been re-elected. How then to explain the animosity towards it? She puts it down to the feeling in the Opposition and business circles that, after 23 years of Liberal rule, the election results of 1972 and 1974 were an aberration.

Such explanations completely ignore the impact and political implications of the changes sweeping through global capitalism after the destruction of the Bretton Woods monetary system and the end of the post-war boom. What terrified the ruling classes was not the "socialism" of the Whitlam government but that it seemed incapable of containing the turbulent movement of the working class under conditions of rapidly deepening economic crisis.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in its July 1975 economic outlook assessment, noted that the recession in member countries was the most serious since World War II, with unused industrial capacity at record post-war highs, together with record unemployment. "The extent and simultaneous nature of the decline was unlike anything in the post-war period," it noted.

During 1975, the ruling class increasingly turned against the Labor government and supported its removal, by whatever means, despite the political dangers involved.

Hocking reviews the series of "scandals" surrounding the Labor government in 1975, chiefly centring on the "loans affair" in which the government sought to raise $4 billion for infrastructure projects from sources in the Middle East that were flush with funds from increased oil revenues.

The "loans affair" had all the hallmarks of a CIA "dirty tricks" operation, with never-ending hints of financial impropriety (none of which was ever established), fake documents, and a cast of characters to match. These included the mysterious "little commodities dealer" Tirath Khemlani and George Harris, president of the Carlton Football Club and friend of former Liberal Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, who emerged to try to "assist" the Labor government in its attempted loan raising.

The purpose of the campaign was to create the "extraordinary events" and "reprehensible circumstances" which the newly-elected leader of the Liberal Party, Malcolm Fraser, said would justify the Opposition using the lack of a Labor majority in the Senate to block the annual Budget and thus deny the government financial Supply.

Hocking draws attention to the significance that the governor-general, Sir John Kerr, attached to the "reserve powers" he held, powers that derived in the final analysis from the British Crown. Kerr even sought advice from the Australian National University (ANU) on their use and took part in two private "tutorials" on this subject in September 1975. This was fully a month before the Liberals first blocked Supply in the Senate, creating the crisis that would enable Kerr to step in and sack the government.

One new fact that Hocking brings to light, discovered through research into Kerr's archives, is the role played by former chief justice Sir Anthony Mason in the coup. After the ANU tutorial group, of which he had been a part, had been disbanded, Mason continued to advise and hold discussions with Kerr—discussions which both parties sought to keep hidden from Whitlam. Mason functioned as the "third man" in the coup, secretly giving advice to and encouraging Kerr, together with Sir Garfield Barwick, then chief justice and former leading Liberal.

Buckingham Palace was also involved. In September 1975—once again well before the Supply crisis had erupted—Kerr had discussed with Prince Charles, during ceremonies for Papua New Guinea independence, the possibility that he might have to sack the Whitlam government. Kerr was anxious lest Whitlam get wind of such action and contact the Palace first and have Kerr's commission withdrawn.

According to Hocking: "On his return to England, Charles took up Kerr's concern with the Queen's private secretary, Sir Martin Charteris. Unknown to Whitlam … Charteris then wrote to the Governor-General just one week before the Supply crisis began, with quite remarkable advice. Charteris told Kerr that, should what he euphemistically termed 'the contingency to which you refer' arise, the Queen would 'try to delay things' although, Charteris acknowledged, in the end the Queen would have to take the advice of the Prime Minister. Neither Kerr nor the Palace ever revealed that, weeks before any action in the Senate had been taken, the Governor-General had already conferred with the Palace on the possibility of the future dismissal of the Prime Minister, securing in advance the response of the Palace to it."

Within a day of Supply being blocked, Robert Ellicott, the Opposition shadow attorney-general and former solicitor general, a friend of Kerr and the cousin of Chief Justice Barwick, produced a legal "opinion" that the governor-general would have to sack the government.

Whitlam's "mistake"

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Whitlam continued to maintain that the governor-general would not act against him. He insisted that the supposed constitutional proprieties—that the governor-general had to accept the advice of the prime minister—would be maintained.

Hocking argues this was a mistake on Whitlam's part, deriving from his

belief that the public service bureaucracy, in which his father had held a leading position, would act properly toward the Labor government and that officials of the state would do likewise. No doubt, Whitlam's family background and his political outlook predisposed him to such a view. But other factors were far more significant.

When the crisis broke, Whitlam was an experienced campaigner in the cut and thrust of the Labor Party and the labour movement more broadly. He was well aware of the significance of social and class forces. Consequently, his role in the coup and in the events leading up to it cannot be put down to faith or political blindness.

Whitlam was acutely conscious of the consequences of any decision by him to move out of the framework of the parliamentary system and directly challenge the ruling elites that had conspired to overthrow his government. He acted accordingly.

In seeking to explain Whitlam's actions, Hocking quotes a passage from his 1975 John Curtin Memorial Lecture, delivered in Canberra on October 29 as the crisis over the blocking of Supply was intensifying:

"The question is not just whether this particular Government, the Whitlam Government, will be allowed to govern for the term for which it was elected. The question is whether any duly elected reformist Government will be allowed to govern in the future. What is at stake is whether the people who seek change and reform are ever again to have any confidence that it can be achieved through the normal parliamentary process."

Hocking makes no reference to the broader political context in which this speech was delivered, apart from noting that since the crisis had begun the government's opinion poll ratings had increased. A much more significant development was taking place—a growing movement in the working class for a general strike to thwart the actions of the Liberals. It was this movement that provided the context for the next two paragraphs of the speech, which Hocking does not quote:

"During my period as Leader of the Opposition I addressed myself to three principal tasks: to develop a coherent program of relevant reform; to convince the Labor movement as a whole that Parliamentary institutions were relevant in achieving worthwhile reform. The great organizational battles between 1967 and 1970, particularly in Victoria, were essentially about that third task. It was the toughest of all.

"I would not wish on any future leader of the Australian Labor Party the task of having to harness the radical forces to the restraints and constraints of the parliamentary system if I were now to succumb in the present crisis."

Throughout the political crisis, Whitlam chose his words carefully, lest he say anything that would trigger an independent intervention by the working class in the political crisis. Even his famous "maintain your rage" call, uttered on the steps of parliament house after Kerr had sacked his government, was directed to "the campaign for the election now to be held and until polling day."

Likewise, ACTU president Bob Hawke, when asked about the possibility of industrial action in response to the coup, warned of the possibility of "the unleashing of forces the like of which we have never seen."

There is no sense of this social and political turbulence in Hocking's book. Everything seems to take place in the parliamentary arena or the upper echelons of the state. On the basis of her analysis, one could easily come to the conclusion that it was all really an unfortunate accident: that if only the previous governor-general Sir Paul Hasluck had stayed on, or if Kerr had not been so obsessed with his own role, or Whitlam more conscious of the machinations against him, then events of 1975 might not have happened.

This method serves to prevent a real understanding of these events—especially for those who have grown up in the 37 years since they took place. Above all, the coup demonstrated that for all the myths of "exceptionalism", the Australian economy and its political system are not immune to the powerful forces unleashed by changes in the global situation.

Whitlam was well aware that had he challenged the decision to sack him, he would have, to use Hawke's words, unleashed forces "the like of which we have never seen," opening the way for a struggle for political power by the working class. That the crisis was able to be contained was due not just to Whitlam but above all to the Labor and trade union leaderships, as well as the Communist Party Stalinists, who occupied key positions in the trade union apparatus and who worked to subordinate the working class to the capitalist state.

Today, in the midst of an economic crisis going far beyond that which engulfed the world in the 1970s and precipitated the Canberra coup, all the contradictions of Australian capitalism are no less explosive.

They have already had a political impact in the June 23, 2010 coup within the Labor Party, which led to the ousting of Kevin Rudd as prime minister. Rudd's removal was orchestrated by forces within the ALP, which, according to WikiLeaks cables, had the closest connections with the US embassy and were regarded by it as "protected sources". Viewed against the background of the events of 1975, to maintain that Rudd was simply ousted because of his office management style, or because of low opinion poll ratings, is ludicrous.

Since the events of the Canberra coup, almost four decades ago, the political landscape has changed. The Labor Party has been transformed into a direct corporate instrument, with subsequent Labor governments, starting with Hawke and Keating, reversing all the limited social reforms enacted under Whitlam. Indeed, the term "reform" has been drained of any progressive social content and is now used to denote pro-market measures.

Yet Hocking and others are still attempting to breathe life back into the Labor Party. So devoted is she to the Labor mythology, that, at an event to launch the second volume of the Whitlam biography in September, she even claimed that the Gillard government—the open representative of US imperialism and the corporate and financial elites—would go down in history as a government of reform.

In the new revolutionary period that is opening up, the events of November 1975 have decisive contemporary relevance. The conscious assimilation of the lessons of this strategic experience—above all the necessity for the working class making a fundamental break with Laborism and building a revolutionary party based on socialist internationalism—will be essential for the struggles now unfolding.