

Australian Labor leader Gough Whitlam (1916–2014)

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A series of tributes, from all sides of the political establishment, as well as the mass media, has accompanied the death of former Australian Labor Party leader and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on October 21, hailing him as the “great man” who changed the face of Australian politics.

As far as developing an understanding of Whitlam and his place in history is concerned, there is nothing to be learned from this outpouring.

Whitlam’s political career, his rise to power and his spectacular demise, when he was sacked by the governor-general, Sir John Kerr, in a coup on November 11, 1975, was intimately bound up with major international processes in the early 1970s—the expansion of the post-war capitalist boom and its disintegration.

The lustre which attached itself to Whitlam’s name in the popular mind, and which continued to brighten throughout the final 40 years of his life, is a product of the fact that he was associated with the last period of genuine economic and social reforms benefitting the working class.

The vast transformation in the political landscape since the three-year Whitlam Labor government is expressed in the transformation of the very meaning of the word “reform.” Then, it signified economic, social and cultural advances for the broad mass of the population. Today, it stands for retrogression in every sphere: giving free rein to the ever-more destructive effects of the capitalist “free market,” which benefits the corporate and financial elites at the direct expense of the working class through the evisceration of jobs, wages and social advances—a policy carried forward and deepened over the past four decades, above all by the Labor Party that Whitlam once led.

Whitlam was born in Melbourne, the son of a senior public servant, Fred Whitlam, and spent his early youth in the national capital Canberra when his family located there in 1927, following the opening of the national parliament building.

Receiving a well-rounded education, studying Greek, Latin, literature and the arts, and displaying a high-degree of intellectual capacity, Whitlam studied for an arts/law degree at the University of Sydney, where he met and then married his lifelong partner, Margaret Dovey.

In June 1942, in the midst of World War II, he received military call-up papers for service in the Australian armed forces, and enlisted in the air force.

Whilst in the military, Whitlam was involved in his first major political engagement, campaigning in support of the Curtin Labor government’s 1944 referendum proposal to render permanent the sweeping powers it had assumed during wartime, and to utilise these powers to direct post-war reconstruction.

While the referendum was defeated, the motivations that led Whitlam to support it and to join the Labor Party in 1945 were to guide his political activity for the rest of his life.

He saw the Labor Party not as a means of prosecuting the class struggle, as did the vast bulk of the party’s working class members, many of whom held socialist aspirations, but as the vehicle for the modernisation of Australian society, within the framework of the capitalist profit system,

and initiated by a Labor-led national government working through parliament.

Whitlam’s obvious capacities quickly marked him out for elevation through the ranks of the Labor Party and, in February 1953, he entered the federal parliament as the Labor member for the outer south-western Sydney suburban seat of Werriwa. As the local member, Whitlam encountered the problems facing young working class families as they moved to the suburbs to try to secure a better standard of living. The post-war world was marked, at that time, by the lack of adequate roads, sewerage facilities, schools and health services, along with other necessities of modern suburban life.

From his entry into parliament, which he saw as the fulcrum of political life, Whitlam was soon regarded as leadership material. After serving as deputy to Arthur Calwell, he became Labor Party leader in February 1967, following Labor’s landslide defeat at the 1966 poll.

The 1966 election had been fought on the issue of military conscription, which was introduced for 20-year-olds by the Menzies government in 1965 as a result of its decision to participate in the Vietnam War. The campaign was marked by lurid depictions of the “Communist threat”—with television advertisements featuring maps of China and South East Asia replete with pulsating arrows pointing down to Australia to the sound of sombre music. This was nothing but a variation of the so-called “yellow peril”—a stock in trade of national politics since before the federation of the national state in 1901.

Throughout this period, Whitlam was regarded, with justification, as being on the right-wing of the Labor Party, partly because he was not fully committed to opposing the Vietnam War. His name was certainly anathema to the more left-wing and socialist-minded members, especially in the Victorian branch.

Whitlam’s elevation to the party leadership coincided with the start of what was to become a sea change in Australian politics, the product of a vast transformation internationally that both produced and was intensified by an immense and developing upsurge of the working class throughout the world.

Amid a growing radicalisation of student and working-class youth, opposition to the Vietnam War was escalating. Above all, the working class was pressing forward in a series of increasingly militant trade union struggles in Britain, revolutionary upheavals during May–June 1968 in France (culminating in the largest and most extensive general strike in history) and the “Hot Autumn” in Italy. At the same time a series of national liberation struggles erupted, spearheaded by the war against US imperialism in Vietnam.

This international movement found expression in Australia, which had been shrouded for decades in the official promotion of parochialism and racism, epitomised above all by the White Australia policy, the cornerstone of every parliamentary party’s platform.

Growing numbers of students and workers began to take part in antiwar protest movements and workers pressed forward with increasingly

militant struggles for improved wages and conditions. These culminated in a virtual general strike in May 1969, in response to the jailing of a union official. But the movement went beyond wages. There were rising demands for a universal health care system and the expansion of educational opportunities, especially in the universities, which had largely been the province for those coming from better-off families.

Whitlam was certainly not a leader of this movement. But he was extremely conscious of its importance. He saw his specific task as harnessing it to a broad program of reform through parliament, which would be implemented by a Labor government—the first in 23 years. He sought to address the concerns of the mass movement and to fight for his reform agenda through reasoned argument—in a manner that stands in marked contrast to the superficial sound bites and endless repetitions of phrases like “moving forward,” in what passes for political discourse today. His speeches in parliament, exchanges with the press, as well as during public appearances, were characterised by flashes of genuine wit. His political arguments, while delivered in a certain patrician-style, were an attempt to elevate the public debate. And these qualities certainly contributed to his growing support.

The political mood sweeping through broad masses of the population was summed up in the 1972 Labor election slogan “It’s time.” But the high point of Whitlam’s career—the return of the first Labor government in a generation—coincided with another great shift, which was, in the final analysis, to determine his government’s course.

Whitlam had based his entire perspective on the belief that the economic boom of post-war capitalism, which had underpinned his political career and the reforms he was advocating, would continue indefinitely. Consequently, he was never much concerned with economic issues, let alone having any appreciation, much less comprehension, of the contradictions within the capitalist system. But while he might have ignored the laws of capitalist economy, they did not ignore him.

During its first year, the Whitlam government rapidly implemented a reform program. It ended Australian participation in the Vietnam War, released draft resisters and accorded diplomatic recognition to China. Later it established a universal health care system, Medibank, made university education free, increased social services and pensions, and provided single mothers with an income. But underlying economic processes had been unleashed that were to bring this reform agenda to a shuddering halt.

In August 1971, President Nixon had announced on television that henceforth the US would no longer continue to redeem US dollars held abroad with gold. The removal of the gold backing from the US dollar brought to an end the Bretton Woods monetary system that had formed a crucial underpinning of the post-war expansion.

The consequences rapidly unfolded. An international inflationary spiral developed, followed by a global recession in 1974–75, the deepest to that point since the 1930s.

The election of the Labor government in 1972 had been backed by important sections of the ruling elites, most notably the rising media baron, Rupert Murdoch. They viewed it as the best option to bring the rising movement of the working class, which had virtually paralysed the McMahon Liberal government, under control.

Despite his efforts—Whitlam failed in his attempt to secure the passage of a referendum to control prices and wages in December 1973—the movement continued to grow and in 1974, as the stock market plunged, workers won the largest wage increases in history.

With recession deepening, the corporate and financial elites insisted on the implementation of increasingly harsh measures against the working class. Whitlam bowed to their demands, but the movement of the working class failed to recede. It was within this situation in Australia, combined with fears of turbulence in the region following the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam in May 1975, that the ruling classes, the state

apparatus and above all the CIA decided to act and remove the Labor government in the governor-general’s coup of November 11, 1975.

If the name of Gough Whitlam has retained its broad appeal after the passage of almost 40 years since the end of his prime ministership, even in the eyes of those who were not politically active at the time, or were not even born, it is because he is regarded as a social reformer who represented the interests of ordinary people against powerful elites who opposed those interests.

The reality is that the 1975 coup only succeeded because Whitlam and the entire Labor and trade union bureaucracy, in which the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia and the Socialist Party of Australia played a key role, accepted the sacking of the government by working to suppress the struggle against it by an even more powerful force—the working class.

Whitlam was acutely conscious that opposition to the coup could take dangerous, revolutionary directions outside the framework of parliament. In a speech just two weeks before his removal, Whitlam declared: “I would not wish upon any future leaders of the Labor Party the task of having to harness radical forces to the restraints of the parliamentary system if I were now to succumb in the present crisis.” He accepted his removal in order to stifle any challenge to parliament and the capitalist system.

The cowardly retreat by Whitlam and the Labor and trade union bureaucracy opened the way for the unprecedented attacks on the working class in Australia and internationally that have continued to escalate since the events of 1975.

In 1981, US President Reagan was able to launch a frontal attack on the American workers’ movement through the mass sacking of air traffic controllers because he knew the US union leaders would act no differently from their Australian counterparts. Likewise, Thatcher knew, when she confronted the British trade union leadership in the year-long miners’ strike of 1984–85, that she was facing her Labour and trade union “opponents” who did not want to win.

As for Whitlam’s heirs in the Australian Labor Party, who try to boost their own miserable careers by invoking the reforms with which he is associated, their response to the coup was to issue the injunction: never again. Henceforth they would make their number one political priority not social advancement but the suppression of the working class—a program they have relentlessly carried out in the decades that have followed.

Malcolm Fraser, who was installed as prime minister after Whitlam’s removal and who continued in office for more than seven years, once perceptively remarked that the most important outcome of his term of office was the transformation it effected within the Labor Party.

The pro-market restructuring and social regression carried out in the US and Britain by the arch-conservatives Reagan and Thatcher was implemented in Australia by the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating between 1983 and 1996, backed to the hilt by the trade unions.

The new agenda was bound up with the globalisation of production beginning in the late 1970s that undermined all forms of national economic regulation which had underpinned the previous program of national reform on which the Labor Party and the trade unions had been based. Under Hawke and Keating, and their successors, all the past gains of the working class were sacrificed to the never-ending drive for “international competitiveness.”

Far from overcoming the crisis of capitalism, the processes associated with the globalisation of production have profoundly exacerbated its contradictions. The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 has initiated a new period of economic breakdown, war and social counter-revolution.

The political shift to war and austerity was expressed in Australia in another political coup—the ousting of Kevin Rudd as prime minister in June 2010. Rudd’s efforts to ease regional tensions had cut across the

launch by US imperialism of its confrontational “pivot to Asia” against China. Unlike in 1975, this time a state-organised coup was not required. Rudd’s removal was carried out by factional operatives within the Labor Party itself, designated, in cables released by WikiLeaks, as “protected sources” of the US embassy.

Nearly four decades after the turbulent events that marked the high point of Whitlam’s career, it is time for the working class and all those opposed to war, austerity and the ongoing assault on democratic rights, and committed to genuine social, economic and cultural advancement for all, to undertake a major political shift themselves. It is time to abandon the illusions and delusions of the past and to undertake the building of a new leadership in the working class—a revolutionary socialist party—capable of leading the working class in the overthrow of the moribund capitalist system and the establishment of world socialism.



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