Jenny Hocking’s second and concluding volume on Gough Whitlam covers the tumultuous period of his government and, usefully, his active public life after he left parliament in 1978.

The Whitlam Government set a frenetic pace from the outset, although executive action would prove easier than legislative. Recognition of China, the abolition of conscription, equal pay for women and the last rites for the White Australia policy were amongst the changes which could be effected without parliamentary approval. A more independent foreign policy was a welcome change from the ‘all the way with LBJ’ mentality of the conservatives. Indeed, in the Government’s first month of office, three ministers caused a diplomatic sensation when they attacked US President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for their bombing of North Vietnam. The contrast with today, when certain Labor Government Ministers name-drop about their close acquaintance with the war criminal Kissinger, is instructive.

With the ALP out of office for 23 years, the Whitlam Government lacked a single minister with prior experience and this deficiency was compounded by the party’s determination to persist with a cabinet comprising the full (27 person – all men) ministry, in contrast to the conservatives’ cabinet/outer ministry dichotomy introduced by Menzies in 1956. While 27 might be a good number for an academic board, it proved to be pretty much hopeless for a cabinet. Moreover, several of the 27 were hacks and time-servers, achieving ministerial office due to longevity rather than talent. Given that Whitlam was no Rudd when it came to micro-management, this was a story unlikely to end well. Nor did it help that many ministers were reluctant to trust the public service, sometimes with good reason.

At a time when the parliamentary party was more important than in subsequent Labor Governments, ministers who were rolled in Caucus could re-fight the battles in Caucus and even if reversals were rare, the impression of discord and disunity was disastrous, especially during its second term as the Government’s reputation for ineptitude grew.

It was the worst time for a government to be led by a man who professed a minimal interest in economics, as some ministers resembled children let loose in the lolly shop, unimpressed by arguments for financial and budgetary prudence and anxious to make up for a generation of frustration. Possibly, there was a psychological acceptance that Federal Labor never ruled for long; best to make the most of what time was available. The oil crisis of 1973 changed the post-war economic paradigm: inflation and unemployment could co-exist and endless growth might not be there to finance a reform agenda. For some then, it was a tragedy that Gough could not get over the line in 1969, even if it would have cost David Williamson (and us) Don’s Party.

The Liberal/Country Party opposition was ruthlessly determined to ensure that Labor’s reign was indeed brief, an ambition they achieved in less than three years. Hocking convincingly portrays the conservatives as essentially undemocratic in their failure to acknowledge the Government’s legitimacy. This was best illustrated in the views of their Senate leader, Reg Withers, who regarded the 1972 election result as ‘temporary electoral insanity’: the hapless voters simply didn’t know what they were doing (pp 61–62). Of course, there were more forces aligned against the Labor Government than just those in parliament. Of necessity, Whitlam’s reform agenda threatened an array of powerful vested interests (including conservative State Governments) more than willing to join the federal coalition parties in a relentless campaign of destabilisation. In a story which (amazingly) has attracted no public comment, Hocking reveals the then Governor of Western Australia, the blimpish Douglas kendrew, as being engaged

REVIEWS

It’s time!

Gough Whitlam His Time, The Biography Volume II by Jenny Hocking


Review by Paul Rodan
in planning a bizarre and complicated bloodless coup to oust Whitlam from office (pp. 94–95).

With his narrow re-election in 1974, Whitlam essentially secured not a renewed mandate but a stay of execution, and Hocking portrays well the siege mentality which would soon engulf the Government. With Senate numbers perverted by conservatives’ breach of convention, the Government was always one money bill away from oblivion. Ultimately, Whitlam would come tantalisingly close to staring Fraser down in 1975, if we accept that some Liberal senators would soon have broken ranks over blocking the budget, although this must forever remain in the realm of speculation. Hocking is appropriately harsh on Kerr for his deceit of his Prime Minister during the budget crisis: this aspect of his behaviour is now only defended by the fiercest of partisans. He craved establishment approval and acted accordingly. It is simply inconceivable that had the party roles been reversed, he would have dismissed a conservative government. Kerr’s very appointment as Governor-General is another reminder of that flawed Whitlam judgement.

Whitlam’s was an authentic reforming Labor Government with an impressive array of legislative achievements, although these invariably entailed blood and toil given Senate numbers. Universal health insurance (butchered by Fraser, resurrected by Hawke) remains an enduring success and while fairer electoral boundaries may not excite tabloid editors and shock-jocks, they are vitally important in a genuine democracy. The passage of civilised divorce law reform would put a number of private detectives out of work. Needs-based schools funding was an important initiative, although later undone by John Howard. The abolition of tertiary education fees provided many with an education they would otherwise not have had, and Hocking makes clear Whitlam’s disillusionment with the later re-introduction of student fees, albeit on a loans/deferred repayment basis. A start was made on the recognition of Aboriginal land rights.

Hocking also provides a detailed account of Whitlam’s time as ambassador to UNESCO, in which he made a significant contribution to advancing Australia’s interests. Given the amount of politicking in the world of the UN and its agencies, a political background seems to have been more than useful.

While space constraints are obviously relevant in a text of 480 pages, it is surprising that no mention is made of the controversial recognition of Soviet sovereignty over the Baltic states—important in its own right, but also as a possible window on Whitlam’s big-power thinking. This would be of relevance in the enduring controversy over his attitude towards Indonesia’s takeover of East Timor in 1975. On that issue, Hocking makes a reasonable fist of defending Whitlam, but for some, the jury is still out.

Unfortunately, as with several MUP books in recent times, the error rate is unacceptable, although much improved on Volume I. The most egregious slip is the description of Bill Snedden as ‘a former Prime Minister’, but also annoying is the confusion of PhDs and medical doctors, the mistaken identification of a left-wing Labor MP as a right-winger and confusion between Minister Connor’s legal first name (Reginald) and the name by which he was known (Rex). The sins even include a proofing ‘own goal’ with one of the project’s Research Assistant’s surname spelled in two different ways—in the same paragraph! There is also the occasional impression of uncertainty in terms of some of the finer detail of Australian politics; an example being the implication that McMahon could have held a simultaneous half-Senate election with that for the Lower House in 1972—a constitutional impossibility, given senators’ terms, until mid-1973; a senator only ever known as ‘Bill’ is identified as ‘William’.

In summary, Hocking’s is a sympathetic but fair treatment of one of Australia’s most significant political leaders. She is aware of his strengths and weaknesses and is at her best when depicting the forces arrayed against his reform programme. The importance of Whitlam’s reinvention of the ALP as an electable political force can never be overstated and his contribution to an authentic, non-jingoistic Australian nationalism has never been undone. We shall not see his like again.

Paul Rodan is an adjunct professor at Swinburne University of Technology and sits on the AUR Editorial Board.