

POLISHING GOUGH

Toby Miller

The last great, failed modernizer has gone. More of that in a moment. For now, let's talk about me. I airbrushed Gough Whitlam into history.

Well, not exactly.

Just after the 1972 Federal election, Canberra's then afternoon paper (the *Evening News*?) wanted to acknowledge Whitlam's past in the city. He had attended two schools, and been dux of one. A school where I was a pupil.

I forget why I was not in class that afternoon, but I was skulking around the cloisters when the headmaster suddenly and unusually emerged from his lair, looking worried. 'Boy, come here,' he said. (Or maybe it was 'Miller.' He knew my name because my father was a governor).

The *Evening News* wanted a photo of a student polishing the school's honours board entry for 1934. So a prepubescent boy was needed to stand on a stool and smile a plump smile for the camera while holding a dry cloth next to the great alum's name, polishing away. I was that child.

I continued to curate his legend as time passed. For example, I loudly corrected US newsreaders the next year when they pronounced his name 'Goo' or 'Guff.' And as a quasi-Australian, I felt a certain pride that the country's leader was articulate, interesting, and above all, different by contrast with so much of the nation's mundanely Anglo-Celtic monoculture of the time. I know readers are now proud of what is quaintly termed their 'Judaean-Christian heritage,' and despise the notions of an expanded popular democracy that are derided as 'political correctness.' But take it from me. The place was boring as bat shit, quite apart from anything else.

Moving on from me, though, let's situate the Whitlam legend just a wee bit less parochially—in the history of modernization. The first half of the 20th century boasted some extraordinary men who led their nations towards liberal social and cultural policies, secularism, and development. They were successful in their own time, and many

of their achievements live on today: FDR in the US, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Nehru in India.

The second half saw notable failed attempts at similar projects: LBJ in the US, Britain's Harold Wilson, Nasser in Egypt, and ... Edward Gough Whitlam.

The success stories were of men who surfed a wave of optimism in opposition to horrendous adversity—the Great Depression, colonialism, and partition. The failures were men who thought the post-War boom was endless and ongoing, and economic and social problems could be managed by governments. Expansive, expensive, centralized regeneration was the order of the day.

Where did it all go wrong for Whitlam? It was his fate to reform the Labor Party and expand its middle-class appeal, but in the process help undermine the horizontal craft unionism that had sustained it; to assume the Prime Ministership at the very moment when the First World's long boom was in eclipse; and to inherit several colleagues who were administratively inexperienced and incompetent and more than a few senior bureaucrats who were hostile suburban numpties.

When we make a little audit of his achievements, they pale next to his dreams (imagine if Australia had a high-speed rail network) and his failings (some would say 'hubris,' others 'East Timor'). And they certainly pale next to his exit.

I was out of the country for most of his time as PM, and I can remember sitting in my parents' studio in London on September 11, 1973, listening incredulously to the radio as the BBC described a coup against Salvador Allende in Chile.

At the time, I was a conspiracy theorist of conspiracy theories: I thought they were all made up by cabals of powerless, paranoid people who blamed the woes of the world on the CIA.

Today, twenty years of living in the US and a decade working on Latin America have put paid to that. There really are conspiracies, and the CIA really is at the heart of many of them.

But back in 1973, I doubted that, and had one vestige of pleasure as I heard the tragic news from South America: at least it couldn't happen in Australia.

Flash forward a little over two years to November 11, 1975. A former classmate, who happens to edit this magazine, has just reminded me that I ran around our school quad the following morning in a state of even greater distress than that awful place usually conjured up in me, staggered by what had just happened, and without the *Evening News* to prop up my faltering self.

Regardless of the alleged role of the United States in Whitlam's dismissal, it happened because he acted unwisely. He appointed someone as Governor-General whom he thought was an ally without doing due diligence. He misjudged the function and operation of the Senate. He underestimated Malcolm Fraser. And he misread the Australian electorate.

But in keeping with the fate of LBJ's Great Society agenda and Wilson's White Heat of Technological Change dream, Whitlam's vision was in some ways also a structural victim of conjuncture: a moment of shocking, transformational economic and political change such as our very own Global Financial Crisis. In his case it was the Oil Shocks of 1973-74 and their legacy of stagflation.

It's easy to dismiss the Whitlam era. But... the Family Law Act; almost universal indoor plumbing; speaking to China; ending conscription; displacing racist immigration policies; listening to Aboriginal people; an independent Papua New Guinea; and public health care. How many readings this have not benefited, directly or indirectly, from those sea changes?

So when we look back at his era, let's not forget the kind of world that Whitlam wanted to see, and partially helped create. He was no socialist in the sense that I wish for, but he wanted a fairer, more just Australia. A better epitaph than some will have.

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