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## The Dismissal of the Whitlam Government: One Politician's Comments

### **Abstract**

The twentieth anniversary of the dismissal of the Whitlam Government on 11 November 1975 saw a great outpouring of the reminiscences of hack journalists from the bourgeois press, all convinced that they and they alone knew what had really happened. Most such revelations concentrated upon the personalities of the three principal protagonists Kerr, Fraser and Whitlam instead of the forces that these three individuals represented.

## THE DISMISSAL OF THE WHITLAM GOVERNMENT

One politician's comments

*George Petersen*

**T**he twentieth anniversary of the dismissal of the Whitlam Government on 11 November 1975 saw a great outpouring of the reminiscences of hack journalists from the bourgeois press, all convinced that they and they alone knew what had really happened.

Most such revelations concentrated upon the personalities of the three principal protagonists Kerr, Fraser and Whitlam instead of the forces that these three individuals represented.

Kerr is easiest to categorise. A one-time Trotskyist, he gave up the class struggle when he got a cushy job in Army Intelligence during the Second World War and became a grovelling servitor of the ruling class. To blame him for being a scab is like blaming a lion for eating meat. The person to criticise is Whitlam who appointed him as Governor-General when his jailing of Clarrie O'Shea in 1969 had demonstrated that he was a class traitor.

Fraser has been considered a figure of fun since he lost his pants in Memphis, but that is to underrate him. He is an arrogant member of the ruling class and will stop at nothing to maintain the privileges of his class.

He has spoken of having to intervene because of corruption in the Labor government as instanced by the examples of Cairns and Connor. Two things need to be said about this propaganda. Firstly neither Cairns nor

Connor committed any criminal offence. Secondly one may judge Fraser's personal integrity by his unconditional defence of Ian Sinclair against allegations of corruption in 1979.

Whitlam is by far the most complex character of the three. He was not interested in politics until he was thirty when he was converted to support of the ALP. As a lawyer he was attracted by Evatt's move to increase the powers of the Commonwealth by amending the constitution. He became an MP for an outer Sydney seat by a fluke in 1952 when he managed to win a pre-selection ballot against ten other candidates. Without any machine of his own, he came up the middle to win in a bitter fight between a pro-CPA leftist and a 'grouper' right winger.

He brought to parliament a commitment to Fabian policies based on the concept of the great leader coming down from on high to bring benefits to the ignorant masses. His concern to establish a welfare state on the Scandinavian model endeared him to reformers who abjured the class struggle, but were repelled by both the traditional socialism without doctrines of the ALP and trade union bureaucracy and the do-nothing policies of Menzies and his successors; who did not take away any existing benefits but were determined not to introduce any new ones.

Whitlam came to the top in the Parliamentary Labor Party because he produced reformist policies which could be implemented in a period of capitalist prosperity. In 1972 he surprised all of us on the left who expected him to be one more right wing do-nothing office holder.

Instead he began to implement a programme of social reform covering housing, pensions, transport, aboriginal affairs, migrants, women, health, the arts, free tertiary education and assistance to local government.

One important local result of the Whitlam victory was that Rex Connor was elected to Cabinet and became Minister for Minerals and Energy. In that position he could give full vent to his radical nationalism, particularly in preventing the local coal owners from engaging in cutthroat competition in their sales in Japanese markets. They were

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not grateful. The State Country Party MPs attacked him for interfering in the marketing arrangements. Their attitude to Rex Connor was similar to the hatred of the United States ruling class for President Roosevelt when he saved American capitalism with his New Deal policies. His interference in what they saw as their god given right to control their own markets, with government interference restricted to the provision of subsidies, ensured that when he stumbled they would swoop on him like vultures on a kill.

If the bosses hated Rex Connor's guts, the same could not be said of the workers in the mining industry. He was made a life member of the Miners' Federation. To this day the period 1972 to 1975 is regarded with affection as the golden era by local coal miners.

Jim Cairns was similarly hated by the ruling class. They never forgave him for his leadership of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations; even though he was at pains to point out his respect for the democratic political processes in the United States. When, in 1975, Whitlam made noises about cancelling the American lease North West Cape spy base it was evidence to the United States imperialists of the pernicious influence of Jim Cairns. With his links to the CIA, forged during the Second World War, this appears to have played a major part in John Kerr's determination in November 1975 that Whitlam should go.

The hostility that Whitlam aroused amongst the Liberal and Country Party politicians came as a shock to me. None of the measures he was promoting were in any way anti-capitalist. He was not anti-imperialist, as he demonstrated particularly when he supported the Indonesian genocidal war against the people of East Timor. ('Timor is not viable' he proclaimed with Olympian arrogance). It seemed to me that all he wanted was to establish in Australia a Swedish-style welfare state. The Liberals and the Country Party however were prepared to tolerate only a very right-wing Labor Party, which, in the words of British song writer Leon Rosselson wanted 'to reform the country bit by bit, so nobody will notice it'.

Whitlam was particularly hated by the Country Party

politicians. Initially I was puzzled why this should be so, particularly when Whitlam was so determined to bring services to country people which they had not received from Liberal/Country Party governments. I finally reached the conclusion that they resented these reforms because he was undermining their rights to distribute largesse through the bureaucracies they controlled. The ruling class might have been prepared to accept most of the Whitlam reforms but they were not prepared for improvement in the living standards of the working class. The Whitlam Government gave real increases in wages and working conditions to Commonwealth

Public Servants through such reforms as equal pay for women, four weeks annual leave, 17% leave loading, three months paid maternity leave, better compensation and long service leave conditions, a reduction in weekly hours for the general division from 40 to 36 and three quarter hours per week. These benefits 'flowed over' to other workers and there was a general increase in wages, so that, by September 1974 the share of wages in the Gross Domestic (non-farm) Product increased from 58.7% to 64.9%.

It was this change in the proportions going to the respective classes which prompted the Liberals to force an election in 1974, which Whitlam won, but without a clear majority in the Senate. It is now history that the Liberal/Country Party in State Parliaments in Queensland and NSW broke all the recognised conventions regarding casual vacancies to ensure that Whitlam never had a majority in the Senate.

Alas, the international crisis of 1974 brought the Whitlam reform programme to a halt. It has now become conventional wisdom in the ranks of the various Parliamentary Labor Parties that Whitlam went too far too fast, and that the prime examples of this folly were the big increases in wages during 1974. Neville Wran expressed this view very well at a State parliamentary Labor Party caucus meeting in February 1977, soon after his election as Premier. Dealing with the question of indexation of wages he said we could not again support a situation like 1974 where there was a 1% increase in the Gross National

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Product, but wages rose 47%, which was disastrous for the economy.

The Liberal/Country Party did not accept the 1974 defeat. They were determined that, if Labor was ever to gain office again, it would be a government which would not improve the living standards of the working class at the expense of the ruling class, which would be sufficiently obedient to the demands of capital, and which would be snivellingly subservient to United States imperialism.

After 1974, the Australian political situation moved into the crisis situation which culminated in the double dissolution of the Federal Parliament on 11th November, 1975 by John Kerr. First there came the shock at the dismissal from Cabinet of Jim Cairns for having (in my view inadvertently) misled parliament in reply to a question from one of the Liberals.

It is symptomatic of Labor parliamentarians that they always abide by parliamentary conventions that Liberal politicians treat with contempt whenever they find them inconvenient. The difference between the two sets of politicians is that ALP parliamentarians depend upon the bourgeois institutions to justify their places at the top whilst the Liberals depend directly upon the bourgeoisie themselves for their power. I had seen too many instances of Robin Askin and John Maddison lying their heads off in State Parliament to be at all concerned about what Jim Cairns had done, especially as it appeared to me that he had a good defence to the accusations of lying that had been laid against him.

Even the 1975 austerity budget introduced into Federal parliament by one-time leftist Bill Hayden did not reconcile the establishment to the existence of the Whitlam Labor Government. The employers were still outraged that the Whitlam Government had not prevented the 'wages explosion' of 1974. Also, there were still too many radical elements in the Government to their liking.

One of these elements was Rex Connor. Connor's 19th century nationalism led him into a quixotic campaign to develop a native Australian capitalism which would recover, process and distribute its own resources, and if

the native bourgeoisie would not do the job, then the government should do it. When Connor and I were friends he often talked to me about it, and how he would love to be in a position in Federal government to make his dream a reality. That was why he had deserted the left when he got to Canberra. He wanted to make cabinet, and he could be sure of being there only if he was in the Whitlam faction.

In fact, what Connor was proposing was quite rational. He simply wanted to borrow four billion dollars from Arab world oil funds and invest them in various infrastructure projects that would lead to investment in processor industries. Today, when Australian's net overseas debt is over \$160 billion, most of it incurred by private enterprise with nothing to show for it but conspicuous consumption by the bourgeoisie, it is difficult to understand what all the fuss was about with Connor's proposition.

As a member of the right Connor had no friends in whom he could confide. All that the right in the ALP are ever concerned about is winning elections and in ensuring that their faction get the plums of office. Whitlam's mild exercises in social democracy were radical enough for them. Connor pursued his plans in secret, taking no other parliamentarians, except perhaps Paul Keating, into his confidence.

Of course it was impossible to keep his plans secret. The local members of the capitalist class were horrified. It is probably incorrect to describe them as a comprador bourgeoisie but they have thousands of links with United States and British capitalists. The examples of Cuba and Nicaragua are always there to demonstrate the danger of losing everything if they were to be really independent capitalists. Their direct agents, the boffins in the Treasury, were not going to allow Connor to bypass them.

Connor's determination to achieve his goal led him into negotiations with Khemlani to obtain funds to which Khemlani did not have access. At the time it amazed me how Connor, with his undoubted cunning and brains, could have been so hoodwinked by someone who was so obviously a United States agent. The only conclusion I could reach was that he had become so fixated on achieving



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his aims before he reached the ALP retiring age of 70 (he was then 68) that he became blind to the obvious.

It was inevitable that he should mislead parliament and be dismissed from Cabinet in October 1975. Although both Connor and Cairns were not personally corrupt, the fact of their dismissals from Cabinet gave verisimilitude to the false allegations of corruption. These allegations were, in my opinion, a major factor in Labor's defeat at the subsequent Commonwealth elections. Stewart West and I urged Connor not to resign, and to fight his dismissal. Connor thanked us for our support but told us (quite correctly) that he had no alternative but to accept his dismissal. Following Connor's dismissal Fraser's Liberals resolved to vote against Labor's budget in the Senate. The 'supply crisis' ensued.

None of us expected the dismissal of the Whitlam Government on Tuesday 11 November 1975. My State electorate was then divided between the Federal electorates of Cunningham represented by Rex Connor, and the electorate of Macarthur represented by backbench Labor MP, John Kerin. About midday I telephoned John Kerin in Canberra from Parliament House in Sydney about a local problem concerning one of our constituents. When John answered the phone he told me that Kerr had just dismissed the Labor Government.

It is now history that whilst Whitlam told the Australian people to maintain our rage, his solution to the constitutional crisis was to do nothing but vote Labor in the subsequent election. This was endorsed by Bob Hawke, then president of the ACTU, who told striking trade unionists to cool it.

Two days after the dismissal Maurie Keane and I and left wing Federal MP Tom Uren addressed a rally in Sydney's Hyde Park called by the Australian Union of Students, expressing solidarity with the actions of workers and students. The ALP's Sydney office sent Senator Jim McClelland to call for restraint. The noisy reception that he received unfortunately did nothing to change the attitude of either the ALP or the trade union leaders.

As far as my own personal participation in the events

of 11 November 1975 were concerned that was the end of the struggle. A friend of mine, who, at the time, was active in one of the Trotskyist sects, when I told him that Maurie Keane and I were the only two State MPs to do anything at all about the dismissal, was incredulous and said to me 'Was that all?' When I came back to Wollongong on Thursday night the only thing left for me to do was to help Rex Connor organise the subsequent election campaign. The rage felt by the workers was diverted by people like me and Connor into organising a series of public meetings in which we urged the masses to vote Labor.

I feel the same way when I heard coal miner veteran Fred Moore tell us of the numerous stoppages organised or supported by the South Coast Labor Council. We politicians knew nothing about these actions.

Most of my parliamentary colleagues took the same view as Whitlam. The numerous spontaneous strikes that occurred in the following two weeks were hosed down by the Labor politicians and the trade union officials. They were concerned only that there should be no loss of Labor votes, because voters might be alienated by workers taking strike action. This attitude was pernicious nonsense. The hypothetical swinging voter who intends to switch his or her vote from Labor to Liberal because trade unionists go on strike is a figment of the imagination of Labor politicians, the right wing leaders of the ACTU, and the editors of capitalist newspapers.

In fact, in the early weeks following the dismissal, all serious opinion polls showed a large swing of voters back to Labor. The swinging voters reverted to their previous inclinations to vote Liberal only when the industrial action was suppressed and the only reason given them to vote Labor was presented by Gough Whitlam in his turgid panegyrics of that obsolete nineteenth century bourgeois Magna Carta, the Australian Constitution. Obviously, Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke had learned nothing from the 1974 British elections in which Wilson had defeated Heath largely because British coalminers did not heed the directions of their Bob Hawkes to cool it.

The result of the election was a crushing defeat for the

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ALP. To those who have experienced Bob Hawke in his 8 year Prime Ministership as the reliable servant of the Australian capitalist class, and as the grovelling servitor of United States imperialism, it requires some effort to remember that he once had a reputation for leftism. On 27 October 1976, Hawke, as President of the ACTU, was guest of honour at a reception held in the now defunct Wollongong Workers Club. Many of those present had been his most devoted supporters when he was elected as President, but they were less than satisfied with his more recent behaviour on two recent issues.

The minor issue was the ACTU support for the principle of funding Medibank from a 1.6% levy instead of from consolidated revenue. He did not convince his audience when he told them that a levy was necessary to make sure that those on high incomes (then over \$12,000 per annum) paid their share.

They were even less convinced with his reply to the question why he did not call a general strike on 11 November 1975. As an indication of his authoritarian contempt for the working class it is worth quoting in full:

I made the judgment at that time that the Australian work force, the overwhelming majority of the electorate, would take the view that there would be a backlash if we did as some people suggested and we called a national strike. I would think that the worst thing in the world we could have done would be to call a national strike. There would have been a response from certain sections but we would not have got a majority of the Australian workers. There would have been a backlash from the conservative forces. That was my assessment of the situation. In the post November scene the events showed my assessment was correct. Whilst there was a great deal of anger on the part of sections of the community, the supporters of Fraser and Kerr were able to put to them other issues. The election was lost on those issues. If we had taken action there would have been a diversion from those issues. I accept there are alternative assessments available. Your analysis might be worthwhile but I would ask that there be a reciprocity of accepting our integrity. We took the action we thought would produce the best result.

It is all too easy to blame Whitlam and Hawke for the ease of the dismissal. Things might have been different, if, instead of having lunch after Kerr dismissed him, Whitlam had gone to Parliament House and advised the Labor minority in the Senate to vacate the President's chair and vote against the Budget so that Fraser lacked supply. But that might have provoked a civil war with Kerr as Commander-in-Chief turning the army on the workers—which Whitlam no more wanted than Lang did when faced with a similar situation on 13 May 1932.

The question has to be asked; 'What happened to the ALP left? Why didn't they provide an alternative?'

The simple answer is that Whitlam destroyed the ALP left when, in September 1970, the Federal Executive of the ALP intervened to destroy the native radical neo-syndicalist left in Victoria. In doing so he had the inglorious support of the South Australian leftist Clyde Cameron who led the charge, and sections of the pro-Communist Party left exemplified by Jim Cairns and Ian Turner in Victoria and the 'Steering Committee' leaders Arthur Gietzelt, Tom Uren and Lionel Murphy in NSW. They did so in order to obtain places in the bureaucratic structure of the ALP which had been denied them by the old conservative right. In the process the bulk of the 'left' became enmeshed in the machine, which they could not challenge because they were part of it.

As one of the few lefts outside the Steering Committee I found it frustrating that, apart from a few individuals, my only allies were members of the Trotskyite sects, none of which had any links with workers organised in trade unions, and all of which proclaimed themselves as the one true faith with the price of cooperation being adoption of that faith.

Then why did not the Communist Party mount a challenge? It is true that they were electorally insignificant but they still held the leadership in a number of trade unions. But their left adventurous tactics and ignominious defeat in the 1949 coal strike had made them chary of ever challenging a Labor government again. In addition they were enmeshed in the tactics of the Popular Front

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which linked them with the timid middle and left ALP bureaucracies of the trade union movement, organised in the Steering Committee in NSW, or the Socialist Left in other states. Since 1949 they had lost many positions and they were not going to put themselves at risk of losing more (which happened anyway). The result was that, whilst they did lead a number of local industrial actions, there was never a possibility of extending those struggles to the mass of the workers in the key industrial areas of the capital cities.

In the subsequent years I often wondered what the left could or should have done to counter the effects of the dismissal of Whitlam. Apart from the subsequent election defeat the most immediate effect was that never again would the ALP leadership present themselves as upholders of the banner of radicalism.

When Wran won the NSW State Government in 1976 and Hawke won the Federal Government in 1983 they did so on promises to be better administrators of capitalism than their conservative rivals. They did not break those promises.

The result is that today there is a wide acceptance in the Australian society that the difference between the two major parties is as one Democratic Senator said, the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledumber. It is indicative of the bankruptcy of left politics today that the petty bourgeois Democrats and Greens are seen as the only possible alternatives.

How the left are to break out of that situation and present an alternative is another problem for which I do not have a ready answer.

**George Petersen**

*10 February, 1996*

*George Petersen was State MP for Illawarra  
from 1968 to 1988*