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E G Whitlam: Reclaiming the initiative in Australian History

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Abstract
How are we to understand the place of the Whitlam government in Australian history? My starting point is an observation that history is not only contingent but our understanding of it is nominalist. That is to say that it does not have a necessary, or natural, structure. We make, and re-make, narratives according to the way in which we arrange and re-arrange what we know about what has happened in the past. Human beings crave a satisfactory narrative to explain the past as a means of understanding the present but, in so doing, they usually have to make use of the imagination which can be a misleading, indeed, treacherous, friend.

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How are we to understand the place of the Whitlam government in Australian history?

My starting point is an observation that history is not only contingent but our understanding of it is nominalist. That is to say that it does not have a necessary, or natural, structure. We make, and re-make, narratives according to the way in which we arrange and re-arrange what we know about what has happened in the past. Human beings crave a satisfactory narrative to explain the past as a means of understanding the present but, in so doing, they usually have to make use of the imagination which can be a misleading, indeed treacherous, friend.

We are all prone to impose templates on history as a means of making sense of what has happened. Such templates make it easier to grasp complexity and to reduce it to something which can be more easily grasped. In so doing we run the risk of not only becoming blinkered hedgehogs but also of being captured by powerful myths which, for a whole range of reasons, we want to believe, even if they fly in the face of the available evidence.

Clive James made the following comment in his Times Literary Supplement review of John Howard’s biography of Sir Robert Menzies:

> Perhaps the most resonant fact was that the Prime Minister who abolished the last vestiges of the White Australia policy was not Whitlam but Harold Holt. Whitlam gets the credit because of the power of myth, which plays a worryingly large part in Australia’s politics and in its writing of history. In my view - admittedly only the view of a cultural critic, and an expatriate as well - the intellectual life of Australia since the Whitlam years has been increasingly weakened by the reluctance of almost the entire educated population to deal with past events whose implications might undermine their heartfelt views.¹

James may have got some of the details wrong, Whitlam drove the last nail into the coffin of White Australia, but the general point, regarding the tendency to view the recent past in partisan terms, is well made. Such partisanship marks both those who have a positive and a negative view of Whitlam. The ‘Whitlam years’ play an important role in a particular narrative of Australian history which gives a unique place to those years as a time of rapid and beneficial social, political and cultural progress. Of course, such a narrative only makes sense if one accepts that there is a meaningful idea of progress, or perhaps in the current climate, the endless need for this thing called ‘reform’. Progress, and its wayward child

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¹ Clive James, ‘Australia Fair,’ Times Literary Supplement, 15 April, 2015, www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1543967.ece
reform, has been perhaps the most important myth underlying Australian politics, especially for what Jill Roe once termed the ‘thinking classes’.²

One could say: how could it have been otherwise in a settler society born in an age in which the West had its moment of glory, perhaps its one efflorescence, in world history? The odd thing is that there has been virtually no scholarly interest in tracking the idea of progress in Australia, although one can discern a number of different varieties, including a Scottish Enlightenment stadial model in the mid nineteenth century and an Idealist vision of spiritual and moral growth in the first half of the twentieth century.³

Of course, where there are narratives there are also counter-narratives, all competing for our attention. The most famous was the vision of history presented by C H Pearson in the early 1890s of a world in which the dynamic of liberal individualism had been exhausted and all that remained was to live from day to day in a socialist state.⁴ Sixty years later philosopher John Anderson defined progress as the ‘going on of what goes on’, and championed the intellectual superiority of an approach based on pessimism and decline to one founded on optimism and progress.⁵

But despite the extraordinary events of the twentieth century, which the West inflicted on itself and the world, a mood of pessimism, and surrender to inevitable decline, were very much minority tastes in Australia. Even where critics were scathing in their criticism the failings of the country, they seemed to remain positive that the future would be a better place. This was a pattern which can be traced back to the 1850s in New South Wales when the failings of the present were contrasted with the glorious possibilities of a democratic future.⁶

It has been this dynamic of an acute awareness of the failings of the present and a hope that the future will see those failings overcome which has often fuelled the way in which political narratives have been constructed in Australia.

The hope has been one of social progress, democracy and the creation of a more equal society. At a popular level this is probably summed up by the notion of rough justice embodied in the term ‘fair go’. This term, however, says little about what a ‘fair go’ means in terms of policy. Equally, it cannot form the basis of a narrative of progress without much ideological elaboration. The most popular of these narratives in the context of Australian history is that of party of initiative and party of resistance. It can be traced back to W K Hancock and beyond to Clarence Northcott.⁷ As Henry Mayer put it in his classic critique of the thesis in 1956:

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The Australian Labor Party is presented as the party which, whether in or out of power, has been the “magnetic pole by which all political ships must set their courses”. Labor, pretty generally, has been awarded the prize for “positive initiative”. Deakin’s “necklace of negatives”, originally intended for Reid, has been mass-produced and hung around the neck of the Nationalists and the United Australia Party by almost everyone. The Country and Liberal Parties have also been adorned, but with rather more hesitation. 

Mayer was in turn criticised for his critique, but the point remains that it nevertheless remained as a powerful narrative for understanding the course of Australian political history, a template which could be used to make sense of that history. In part, the narrative comes out of the peculiar turn of events of the first decade in Australia, including what most fascinated observers, both local and foreign, of the rise of the Labor Party and its assumption of office. Deakin, the initiator of liberal progress, was forced to ‘fuse’ with those around whom he had hung the “necklace of negatives”; his last major political act was to lead the campaign against the attempts by the Labor Party to extend Commonwealth power in the 1911 referendum.

How then did the Whitlam government come to be seen as embodying ‘progress’? It all goes back to its foundation myth, the jingle ‘It’s Time’.

**It’s Time**

It’s time for freedom,
It’s time for moving, It’s time to begin,
Yes It’s time

It’s time Australia,
It’s time for moving, It’s time for proving,
Yes It’s time

It’s time for all folk,
It’s time for moving, It’s time to give,
Yes It’s time

It’s time for children,
It’s time to show them, Time to look ahead,
Yes It’s time

Time for freedom,
Time for moving, Time to be clear,
Yes It’s time

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Time Australia,
Time for moving, It’s time for proving,
Yes It’s time

Time for better,
Come together, It’s time to move,
Yes It’s time

Time to stand up,
Time to shout it, Time, Time, Time,
Yes It’s time

Time to move on,
Time to stand up, time to say ‘yes’,
Yes It’s time9

The implication of the jingle would seem to be that Australia at that time under a Coalition government was stationary and lacking in freedom, history had become stalled and the country turned into a stagnant pool where little of note happened. This contrast between stagnation and activity is very reminiscent of the way in which orientalism operated in which a dynamic West was pitted against a stagnant and decaying East. It has strong overtones of J S Mill who placed a great emphasis on movement and intellectual activity. Consider the following quotes from Mill’s ‘Considerations on Representative Government’:

This question really depends upon a still more fundamental one, viz., which of two common types of character, for the general good of humanity, it is most desirable should predominate — the active, or the passive type; that which struggles against evils, or that which endures them; that which bends to circumstances, or that which endeavours to make circumstances bend to itself.

All intellectual superiority is the fruit of active effort.

In proportion as success in life is seen or believed to be the fruit of fatality or accident, and not of exertion, in that same ratio does envy develop itself as a point of national character. The most envious of all mankind are the Orientals.10

Whitlam was presenting himself as the active type who struggles against evils and his opponents as passive types who merely bend to circumstances. Now there would be action after a period of stagnation. There is an emphasis on rupture, not continuity, it was time to move, time to begin.

This emphasis on movement, change and rupture is confirmed by some of the key sentences and phrases of Whitlam’s policy speech:

The decision we will make for our country on 2 December is a choice between the past and the future, between the habits and fears of the past, and the demands and opportunities of the future. There are moments in history when the whole fate and future of nations can be decided by a single decision.

We have a new chance for our nation. We can recreate this nation. We have a new chance for our region. We can help recreate this region.

We want to give a new life and a new meaning in this new nation to the touchstone of modern democracy – to liberty, equality, fraternity.\textsuperscript{11}

The rhetoric has a 1789 feel to it.\textsuperscript{12} It is marked less by socialist zeal, in fact there is very little socialism in it, than by a repudiation of what could be described as the Burkean liberalism of the Menzies’ era. François Furet has argued that there was a crucial point in 1789 when the leaders of the French Revolution ceased thinking in terms of reform within the existing order and began to look to constructing a new order.\textsuperscript{13} Whitlam, of course, like Deakin before him, remained staunchly Burkean on constitutional matters (in particular the supremacy of parliament). Also like Deakin, he was radical on issues of public policy. Radicalism implies the repudiation of the past, of tradition, and in that sense Whitlam can be viewed as a radical liberal, as an heir of John Stuart Mill.

The only problem with a radicalism which seeks to ‘recreate the nation’, as the National Assembly discovered after 1789, is that it also generates opposition from those who feel threatened by radical change. As change pertains to the ‘glory’ of a government rather than its power, and hence has a strong symbolic dimension, the focus and emphasis on change is potentially divisive. Whitlam wanted to be seen as an agent of change; whether that was the best approach to take to achieve actual change is a different matter. Menzies’s approach was fundamentally Burkean; change there would be but it would be gradual and built on what had been inherited from the past. But they were both at heart liberals; one the heir of Edmund Burke, the other of John Stuart Mill. Deakin was the heir of both.

The idea that a rupture with the past was required implied that the faults of Australia were manifold and the country in need of a complete regeneration if it was to achieve its destiny of being dynamic, democratic and devoted to achievement. Intellectuals in Australia have long mocked its ordinariness, its devotion to ‘middling standards’ and ‘the spreading rash of nineteenth century suburbanism.’\textsuperscript{14}

D H Lawrence also characterised Australians as apathetic and passive. Consider the following passages:


\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} editorial the following day certainly saw it as such, depicting Whitlam and Bob Hawke as ‘irresponsible revolutionaries’ and the Labor party’s policies as ‘directed, openly or covertly, to the destruction of the existing order’. in ‘Gough Whitlam, the Father of Modern Australia’ \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} editorial 22 October 2014


\textsuperscript{14} W K Hancock, \textit{Australia}, London: Benn, 1930, 273, 285.
And in this state, this very Australian state, you could hardly get a word out of him...The indifference, the marvellous bedrock indifference. Not the static indifference of the east. But an indifference based on real recklessness, an indifference with a deep flow of loose energy beneath it, ready to break out like a geyser.

The aboriginal sympathetic apathy was upon him, he was like some creature that has lost his soul, and simply stares.

The indifference—the fern-dark indifference of this remote golden Australia. Not to care—from the bottom of one’s soul, not to care. Overpowered in the twilight of fern-odour. Just to keep enough grip to run the machinery of the day; and beyond that to let yourself drift, not to think or strain or make any effort to consciousness whatsoever.  

Just as D H Lawrence had felt a kind of revulsion for Australian life in *Kangaroo* in the 1920s so Brian Penton, writing in the early 1940s expressed a disquiet with the way in which Australia had developed. Penton believed that the promise which Australia had demonstrated in the 1890s, an age of vitality and activity, had been dissipated and Australians had lost the plot. As with Hancock, he believed that something had gone wrong in twentieth century Australia:

Once in the nineties, it looked as though Australia was going to have a national credo. That was in the days when the *Bulletin* talked about a republic for Australia and scorned imported hokum. A promising time. It looked as though the labour Party was going to get itself a national philosophy—but what came of it? A muddle-headed outfit consisting of a few militant realists, a lot of sectional trades unionists, and some scared, respectable politicians who compromised the half-expressed aims of the party’s founders out of existence till, in the last election, you could not really tell Labour from the U.A.P.  

Moreover, argued Penton, the blame for this failure lay with the Australian Labour Party:

The failure of Australians to get a national consciousness, a national credo, a sense of their own identity...may be laid entirely at the door of the Australian Labour Party. Looking back over the past troubled ten years you will find the Labour Party initiating not a single great liberal campaign...On all big issues and in all crises the Labour Party is timid or downright reactionary.  

Not that the other side of politics was much better. The sickness was at the heart of the Australian body politic: ‘I admit that at the end of this inquiry you will find yourself

16 Brian Penton, *Think—Or Be Damned*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941, 61–2  
17 Penton, *Think—Or Be Damned*, 64
disenfranchised—between a hesitant, gutless, confused, and complacent Labour Party at one end of your voting ticket and an unctuous money-grubbing conservative party at the other.\textsuperscript{18}

In this regard it is worth remembering that Lloyd Ross depicted the 1890s as a new Elizabethan Age, an age of intellectual vitality.\textsuperscript{19} The whole myth of the 1890s was founded on a distinction between ages of energy and vitality and ages of stagnation and passivity in the history of Australia, with passivity being linked to so-called bourgeois values and being obsequious to the empire. From this perspective, the 1890s were the touchstone of what could be described as an Australia which possessed and exhibited Millian vitality. The hope was that post-1972 would be such an age.

The passivity of Australians is also linked to a tendency by the educated classes to look down on the ordinary Australian with contempt, even loathing. This is not a new phenomenon. Witness the following passage by A J Marshall in \textit{Australian Limited} in 1943:

\begin{quote}
You can spot an Australian in London or on the Continent at thirty yards, because he usually wears a kangaroo, a boomerang or map of Australia in some conspicuous position. (In many ways this is a very good thing as it enables civilized people to avoid him.)\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Marshall continues with such statements as ‘Most Australians don’t think at all’ and then presents the case for ‘trained scientists’ to solve the problems of the country.\textsuperscript{21} (This reminds one of the BAAS Victorian Handbook of 1914 which has, as its first chapter, ‘The problems in the State of Victoria which await scientific solution.’\textsuperscript{22}) These sorts of attitudes are not dissimilar to those described by Fred Siegel in his work \textit{The Revolt against the Masses} which tracks similar disdain for ordinary people amongst American intellectuals in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23} For intellectuals like Marshall, education becomes the great panacea for all which is wrong with Australia. Of course, in 1943 this is not a very large group in Australia; by 1963 it has increased in size considerably.

English expatriate J D Pringle, who came to Australia to be editor of the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, found a similar emptiness of the spirit in Australia in the 1950s. He claimed that ‘If then, culture is to be judged by the general standard of education and the arts among the population, once again it must be said that Australia has little or none.’\textsuperscript{24} This was a not uncommon view of the intelligentsia of the time; although it was generally not restricted to any particular political party. Anti-intellectualism was seen to be a central feature of Australian life across the political spectrum. This view found full expression in one of the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Penton, \textit{Think—Or Be Damned}, 72
\textsuperscript{19} Lloyd Ross, \textit{William Lane and the Australian Labor Movement}, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 3
\textsuperscript{20} A J Marshall, \textit{Australia Limited}, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1943, 7
\textsuperscript{21} Marshall, \textit{Australia Limited}, 11, 21
\textsuperscript{22} J W Barrett, ‘The problems in the State of Victoria which await Scientific Solution,’ in A M Laughton & T S Hall, (Eds) \textit{British Association for the Advancement of Science Australian Meeting 1914: Handbook to Victoria}, Melbourne: Government printer, 1914, 29–69
\textsuperscript{23} Fred Siegel, \textit{The Revolt against the Masses: How Liberalism has Undermined the Middle Class}, New York: Encounter, 2013
\textsuperscript{24} J D Pringle, \textit{Australian Accent}, London: Chatto and Windus, 1958, 116
\end{flushleft}
most influential books ever written about Australia, Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country*, Horne claimed that ‘in a sense—Australia does not have a mind’.\(^{25}\) He went on to characterise Australian public life, like Lawrence, in terms of its emptiness and vacuity. He asserted that ‘the public emptiness of Australian politics comes from its lack of intellectual strength’.\(^{26}\) Horne linked the supposed deficiencies of Australian public life with the long years of Liberal/Country Party government under Sir Robert Menzies:

> an archaic flavour in political affairs, a sense that much of this might have been happening at some earlier period in history. Even for Australia the deadness was remarkable. Politicians seemed pompous and out of touch. They seemed to be conducting a political debate that they had read about in an old book. Politicians did not project the symbols of modern life...men of the Menzies-Calwell generation became virtually exiles in their own country.\(^{27}\)

The sin of Menzies, and it should be noted of then Labor Party leader Arthur Calwell, was that they were yesterday’s men. Horne’s comments are somewhat extraordinary in that they provide no evidence and are simply a rhetorical denunciation. Hence the emphasis on deadness and a ‘political debate that they had read in an old book’ and ‘virtually exiles in their own country’. This was rhetorically impressive but essentially meaningless. Of course the 1950s and early 1960s was a time of old rulers, from Eisenhower to Churchill to Adenauer. If one looks closely at Menzies one can see that he did have a sort of a ‘steady as it goes’ approach but that attitude was informed by the terrible events he had lived through during the first half of the twentieth century.

In a slightly different vein Manning Clark wrote regarding Menzies as ‘a man who had not understood the forces of the age; or, if he understood them, seemed to resist humanity’s march from the darkness into the light, and paid a terrible price for so doing.’\(^{28}\) Again, this owes more to rhetoric than to reality. Clark claimed to have looked into Menzies’s soul at the funeral of H V Evatt, but Clark had a clear capacity to see what he wanted to see.

From another perspective, FW Eggleston wrote a decade earlier that ‘Australians once prided themselves on being in the vanguard of social progress, but they have now allowed themselves to lag far behind.’\(^{29}\) But as a Liberal who believed in social cooperation and the need for individuals to make the public interest paramount, he did not look to Labor, which he saw as a party which worked for the interest of the trade unions as the means of achieving that goal. Labor was the party of initiative insofar as it took initiatives which favoured its own sectional interest. Eggleston saw the Liberal party as representing ‘a policy which is a truer expression of the Australian pattern of culture than any other’ because it was not bound to a sectional interest, even if its weakness was its lack of willingness to change that

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\(^{26}\) Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 192

\(^{27}\) Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 193


pattern. This was not an unfair statement, and reflected the Burkean nature of liberalism under Menzies. But then, in his debt to philosophical idealism and his belief in social cooperation, Menzies had much in common with Eggleston. Eggleston also bemoaned the lack of ‘the publicist, the man detached from politics but able and well-informed’ in Australia.

There were others who shared Eggleston’s less than positive estimation of the Labor Party. Consider J D Pringle’s description of a typical Labor politician, ‘not usually a man who cares much about ideas…a tough, shrewd opportunist, a master of the more disreputable political arts, but utterly ignorant and contemptuous of wider horizons…a good mixer, genial, often with a racy, down to earth turn of speech. You see him at the races or drinking in a hotel bar surrounded by his cronies, red-faced, big-bellied, hard-eyed, the image of Tammany all the world over.’ Craig McGregor, writing in the mid-sixties, described the Labor Party as ‘fundamentally conservative, meliorist, non-Socialist…in many ways, rather old-fashioned…It is suspicious of intellectuals and has again and again turned down the help of the academics and thinkers’. This description is not all that dissimilar to that made by Brian Penton some twenty years earlier. Writing in 1958, Colin Clark who had worked for the Queensland Labor government before becoming a professor at Oxford, bemoaned the small number of Labor members of parliament with university degrees. Clark observed that ‘on the whole, it remains a very badly-educated party.’ Admittedly a jaundiced observer, he also described unscrupulous practices by Queensland Labor Party, including forged ballot papers, which he claimed were ‘perhaps unique in the history of the British Commonwealth.’

McGregor also commented on the party of progress/party of resistance model and its inapplicability to contemporary Australian politics. In fact he remarks favourably on the capacity of Liberal governments to adapt to changing circumstances:

What the Liberal Government has shown itself to be, however, is fairly flexible and responsive to community pressures, readier than the ALP to depart from political theory for the sake of practical solutions…it is susceptible to the political currents (including reform movements) around it.

Equally, not every commentator saw Australia as a cultural and intellectual wasteland. Colin Clark, wrote that ‘the scholastic standards attained by Australian school-children are generally comparable with those of English school-children of the same age and type of school’ Clark thought that the source of Australia’s problems was its attempt to use

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30 Eggleston, Reflections of an Australian Liberal, 153
31 Eggleston, Reflections of an Australian Liberal, 255
32 Pringle, Australian Accent, 52
33 Craig McGregor, Profile of Australia, Ringwood: Penguin, 1966, 202
34 Colin Clark, Australian Hopes and Fears, London: Hollis & Carter, 190
35 Clark, Australian Hopes and Fears, 244
36 McGregor, Profile of Australia, 188
37 Clark, Australian Hopes and Fears, 295
excessive tariffs to protect Australian manufacturing industries, a problem exacerbated by what he saw as the outdated ideas produced by its academic social scientists.\textsuperscript{38}

This survey of ideas indicates that the situation was much more complex, and interesting, than Horne and Manning Clark would have us believe. Of course, in all of this we are dealing with the way commentators saw Australia rather than with the reality of Australian social, cultural and political life. Nevertheless, what is apparent is that the political situation in the early 1960s was not clear cut. Standing in 1960 it would have been difficult to predict how Australian politics and political culture would develop. Both of the major political parties could be, and were, accused by intellectuals of belonging to an outmoded world. Both were led by men who had grown to manhood in the shadow of 1914. Coming back to my original point about contingency, one wonders what might have eventuated if the Labor Party had won the 1961 election. Or going back even further, Australia would be a rather different place if the 1954 Labor split had never occurred. Certainly ‘It’s Time’ as a rhetorical strategy would not have been possible if there had been a memory of a Calwell led government fresh in the public mind.

In this regard I think that Nick Cater’s recent analysis in \textit{The Lucky Culture} is very plausible; the rise of the newly minted educated class is crucial. Responding to John Douglass Pringle’s claims of 1958, Cater states bluntly that ‘more than fifty years later Australia has its educated class.’\textsuperscript{39} It was members of this class, which had barely existed during Eggleston’s lifetime, who were to create what can be described as the new party of initiative—party of resistance paradigm in Australia. Donald Horne argued that the 1950s had seen the end of a chapter in Australian history but the new Australia was struggling to be born; the real problem, according to Horne, was that there was at that time no place for ‘the kind of extraordinary man who can see the new shapes of the future—or present—and enjoy challenge, living life at a fuller pitch.’\textsuperscript{40} ‘Material prosperity in the future,’ he claimed, ‘is likely to lie, for the first time in history, with clever, educated people.’ He also identified Whitlam as someone who seemed to recognise this need for a ‘new tone and style’.\textsuperscript{41}

It was, of course, Menzies who was responsible for extending Commonwealth funding to universities, allowing for considerable university expansion, much to the applause of someone such as Hugh Stretton, in the hope, which was soon dashed, that it would produce people like himself and Eggleston, devoted to the advancement of the liberal ideal of the public good. Building on the foundations laid by Chifley in enabling returned servicemen to attend university after World War II\textsuperscript{42}, Menzies clearly believed in the role which clever people would play in Australia’s future. It was the massive expansion of the universities, and the newly created Colleges of Advanced education in the 1960s, which created the audience

\textsuperscript{38} Clark, \textit{Australian Hopes and Fears}, Chapter XI
\textsuperscript{40} Horne, \textit{The Lucky Country}, 13
\textsuperscript{41} Horne, \textit{The Lucky Country}, 11
\textsuperscript{42} Stuart Macintyre, \textit{Australia’s Boldest Experiment: War and reconstruction in the 1940s}, Sydney: NewSouth, 2015, 328–9
for Horne’s ideas. Don’s Party would be unthinkable without Menzies’s reforms. They were Menzies’s children.

What way would this new knowledge class jump? It was most certainly not a foregone conclusion that they would jump to the Left. It was by no means certain that the Liberal party would move towards a greater appreciation of conservatism. Even as late as the 1980s B A Santamaria was predicting a split on the Right in Australia between conservative and liberal groups. Perhaps it was the influx of Catholics into the Liberal Party which was crucial in the re-making of the Liberal party. This is a poorly understood process much in need of systematic investigation. Again it was, I think, contingency, not necessity, which provides the best explanation. In this regard Whitlam may have been crucial in creating the image of a Labor Party which was the friend of the educated class, something which Pringle and Colin Clark would have found extraordinary.

If Cater is correct then what matters is not so much what the Whitlam government was actually like, but the image which Whitlam managed to project, very successfully, into the wider community, and how that government has come to be portrayed in Australian history. In this sense, Manning Clark was very prescient; history, or perhaps historians, have been much kinder to the Whitlam government than the voters who, quite sensibly in 1975, decided that they had had enough of a dysfunctional government.

In this way, the whole notion of party of initiative/party of reaction could be resurrected in a new guise, one which emphasised the Labor Party as the party of ideas and the natural representative of the new knowledge class. The party of anti-intellectualism in Australia had become the party of the intellectuals. It could be represented as the party of modernisation and progress, of energy and ideas; it could claim the Millian heritage which is very important in Australian political culture. When On Liberty was published in 1859 it received major attention in newspapers in both Sydney and Melbourne. This is not to say that under Whitlam, and even today, the Labor Party continues to contain elements which are decidedly unreconstructed. Of course, here I am talking in terms of image, or to be more fashionable, discourse or narrative. The reality, as can be seen in the recent documentary on Rudd and Gillard, is often quite different; Tammany Hall has not yet been laid to rest.

The great achievement of Whitlam, and I say Whitlam because there were many in his government who were very traditional and old-fashioned, was to create this image, and to convince many others in the knowledge class, especially intellectuals such as Horne and Manning Clark, that he was the transformative hero for whom they had been waiting. He was their John Galt, their social democratic equivalent of a Randian hero. And, it can be argued,

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45 Manning Clark, ‘History will be kinder to Labor than the People,’ in his Occasional Writings and Speeches, Sydney: Fontana, 1980, 203–8
47 John Galt is the hero of Ayn Rand’s novel Atlas Shrugged
Randian heroes have an impeccable ancestry stretching back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. I say this advisedly because Rand became the hero of the educated classes in America who established Silicon Valley. She is the philosopher of self-esteem and feeling good about oneself. For a variety of reasons, she has only ever been a minority taste in Australia. Nevertheless, educated Australians wanted to be individualistic and creative, but in a way somewhat different from their American cousins. At heart, and this is what the ‘It’s Time’ jingle captured, they were the heirs of J S Mill, not of Karl Marx. Whitlam appealed to them for exactly this reason: it was energy and vibrancy which they craved, not the dullness of an ‘end of history’ socialist paradise.

One can see from the following quote the sort of emphasis which Manning Clark placed on the role of individuals who he saw as creative thinkers as agents of positive social change: ‘So the men and women with the creative gifts were the true psychedelic agents of their age; they expanded our minds and helped us to see ourselves as we really are.’ Despite the shades of Timothy Leary, Clark, like Horne, believed that bold creative thinkers were the true transformative agents of positive political and social change. Whitlam was such a figure for him, although Clark’s notion of hero, like his prose style, owed more to Thomas Carlyle than Ayn Rand. Whitlam was the prophet who should have transformed Australia:

It seemed then that the years of unleavened bread were over. At long last we had a teacher who had the chance to lead us out of the darkness into the light, always provided THEY did not cut him down, that THEY spared him a little before he went from hence and was no more seen.

What does Clark mean by the years of unleavened bread? If he is referring to Corinthians 1.5 then this seems to mean the need for Australians to be re-made with new leavening, with perhaps Whitlam as a Christ figure. Of course, this is very much in line with the way in which Whitlam’s coming to power had been portrayed in both the ‘It’s Time’ theme song and Whitlam’s policy speech. There will be a rupture with the bad old days; a great man would liberate the creative, dynamic and progressive values of the Australian people, or at least, its creative elite. The self-actualisers will finally be rewarded and those whose needs are merely the ‘lower needs’ of social approval and safety will be put in their place. Of course, this vision of human nature may be ascribed to Maslow in the 1940s but its true roots lie in liberalism:

This individual vigour, then, and manifold diversity, combine themselves in originality; and hence, that on which the whole greatness of mankind depends—towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and of which

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48 See the documentary ‘All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace,’ Part 1, ‘Love and Power’ made by Adam Curtis
49 Manning Clark, Occasional Writings and Speeches, Melbourne: Fontana, 1980, 201–2
50 Clark, Occasional Writings and Speeches, 202
especially those who wish to influence their fellow-man must never lose sight: individuality of energy and self-development.\textsuperscript{52} All intellectual superiority is the fruit of active effort. Enterprise, the desire to keep moving, to be trying and accomplishing new things for our own benefit or that of others, is the parent even of speculative, and much more of practical, talent.\textsuperscript{53}

The years of Whitlam were a time of true transformation, and this was because he had appreciated what the creative Randian and Millian heroes of Australia had to offer: ‘So in those three halcyon, golden years, in contrast to the pro-British archaic, philistinism of their predecessors, Whitlam gave the men and women with creative gifts a place of honour and respect in Australian society’. But, alas, Whitlam had been cut down by the philistines. Writing of 11 November 1975 Clark stated that ‘It may be the day which proved once and for all just how hopelessly wedded we, as Australians, are to the petty-bourgeois values, to that very sickness which the progressive part of the world is shedding and destroying.’\textsuperscript{54} It is very likely that Clark saw himself when he looked at Whitlam. Just as C H Pearson’s depiction of a world entering old age reflected his own aging, it can be argued, Clark’s empathy with Whitlam came out of his own suffering at the hands of the ‘philistine’ critics of his History of Australia. Australians just could not recognise, nor understand, their creative heroes.

This led to Clark viewing Whitlam as a tragic figure, a prophet of progress and ‘the light’ who had been betrayed and destroyed by those who could not appreciate his true worth; but the image is Christian, with Whitlam as Christ, not Platonic as is described in the allegory of the cave in the Republic. Mark McKenna suggests that Clark was sculpted by Whitlam in the image of Thucydides.\textsuperscript{55} To see Whitlam in terms of Thucydides is a little misleading. Thucydides’ History can be read as a tragedy culminating in the devastation of the Sicilian campaign and the work is meant, as is that of Herodotus, as a warning against hubris and the dangers of imperial ambition. But none of the major figures from Pericles to Cleon to Alcibiades are in any sense Christ like and are invariably inflicted with the failing of hubris. Clark manifestly failed to see Whitlam’s hubris, as McKenna admits ‘he could only see his idealism’;\textsuperscript{56} Whitlam lacked the humility required to be a Christ figure. The tragedy, for Clark, comes from Australians failing to recognise who Whitlam is and how he has come to save them from themselves. The tragic narrative follows on from a view of history which emphasises a corrupt present and the hope of a glorious future. That future will invariably not be realised and the disappointment created by that failure will need to be explained.

A good comparison is with W K Hancock’s Australia written in 1930. For Hancock the chief character is the Australian people. They did not require a prophet or Randian hero to goad

\textsuperscript{52} Wilhelm von Humboldt, The Limits of State Action, J W Burrow (Ed.) Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993, 12
\textsuperscript{53} Mill, ‘Considerations on Representative Government’, 190–1
\textsuperscript{54} Clark, Occasional Writings and Speeches, 208
\textsuperscript{55} Mark McKenna, An Eye for Eternity: The life of Manning Clark, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2011, 582
\textsuperscript{56} McKenna, An Eye for Eternity, 580
them down the road of justice. One can read in Hancock’s account of the Australian people a ‘tragedy’ but it is one caused by their virtues, or rather the excesses which those virtues generate. Australian are a kind open hearted people who fail to understand their own moral failings and so end up creating something quite different to what they set out to achieve. Seeking justice, they create injustice. Hancock’s solution to the problem is to wait for a time when Australians are more mature, as is expressed in his parable of the dog.\textsuperscript{57}

In another way Clark’s depiction of Whitlam also resonates with the Gallipoli narrative. It may have been a massive defeat but it was a glorious defeat, one well worth celebrating. Whitlam should be celebrated as a Sisyphean hero struggling to achieve the light but constantly thwarted; Australian history then becomes the tale of a series of such heroes. A careful reading of Clark’s monumental \textit{History of Australia} indicates that this was indeed Clark’s historical vision. In this regard, the idea of a hero leader, as espoused by Manning Clark and Donald Horne, with an emphasis placed on their capacity to stimulate intellectual capacity and creativity is something new in Australian culture, but something in line with the way in which Australian democracy has moved over the past fifty years.

If we attempt to look behind the sort of mythology which came to be associated with Whitlam what can be discerned as going on?

- Whitlam was attempting to ‘modernise’ the ALP and to portray that modernisation as also extending to Australia as a whole. He was taking a Tammany Hall Trade Union Party, which was in many ways decidedly traditionalist, and turning it into a vehicle for progress. He was making the party much more Millian. This should be seen in the context of a Labor Party which has a long tradition of controlling its politicians and being opposed to individuals who demonstrated initiative.\textsuperscript{58} Modernisation meant making the Labor Party the party of individual emancipation as opposed to a party which sought to control individuals. It also meant making the Labor Part shed much of its Tammany Hall image and seem to be a party of honesty.

- That modernisation was very much linked with the coming to age of the new knowledge class which was the product of the extension of secondary education in the 1950s and tertiary education in the 1960s. This was a massive change in a country which had never been renowned for an excessive interest in education. It was linked to the development of manufacturing industry. If Australia was to remain in the forefront of progress it needed to have modern industries and a modern education system. It was effectively a new vision for Australia based on an updated notion of what constituted progress and national development in which education was central.

- That process was inaugurated by Menzies through both his schools and universities policies, including Commonwealth funding of universities and Commonwealth involvement in the funding of schools.\textsuperscript{59} But as with most things, Menzies did not rush these changes, but he was a convinced advocate of the importance of education,

\textsuperscript{57} Hancock, \textit{Australia}, 288–9


\textsuperscript{59} Melleuish, ‘Sir Robert Menzies and Australian Education,’
not just in terms of technological progress but also because he believed that education would create engaged citizens who would seek the public good.

- With regard to education there is no substantive difference between Menzies and Whitlam. Both believed in the ideal of an educated Australia. The major difference between them was the rate of change; Whitlam took what Menzies had begun and took the educational ideal to its logical conclusion by making university education free. The alternative vision to such policies were figures such as B A Santamaria and Colin Clark who retained a sort of rural sentimentality founded on Chesterton and Belloc. Santamaria would come to see the universities as a major corrupting force in Australian culture.

- Whitlam can be seen as a new version of Menzies. Most certainly Craig McGregor considered him as such in the mid-1960s. Like Kevin Rudd forty years later Whitlam was not traditional Labor, but a ‘clean skin’ outsider in the sense that he could not be identified by the likes of John Douglas Pringle as belonging to Tammany Hall.

- For a variety of reasons Whitlam sought to adopt a view of Australian history not all that dissimilar from Horne and Clark. Australia had been asleep since the 1940s and in need of a new ‘leavening’ to make it once again dynamic and progressive. This was a clever strategy for Whitlam for both reasons internal to the Labor Party and as a means of selling himself to the Australian public. It was an intelligent strategy for an outsider who was not carrying too much in the way of traditional Labor baggage and wished to transform both Labor and the country.

- The subsequent failings of the Labor government from 1972 to 1975, many of which were a consequence of its unreconstructed nature, were mythologised from within this renewed narrative of progress and modernisation. Hence we arrive at a sort of tragic narrative.

- The key outcome was that Labor was successful in winning the ideological battle, even as it lost the battle for power, at least in the short term. After a somewhat confused situation in the 1960s Labor came to be seen as the natural political expression of the new knowledge classes. This enabled it to be re-anointed as the ‘party of initiative’. The Whitlam government may have been a miserable failure in many ways but it was a great success in winning the battle of ideas. Its self-image came to dominate the historical record; Manning Clark was right.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that there has never been a Conservative Party in Australian politics. Menzies was very careful to re-launch a Liberal Party in 1944 after nearly thirty years. I think that there were reasons for the need to ‘own’ the word liberal, much of which has to do with the dominance of a discourse of progress in Australian political culture. Liberalism in Australia was founded on a doctrine of progress, even if, as Stephen Chavura and I recently argued in relation to the Federation debates, it could contain powerful Burkean

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60 McGregor, Profile of Australia, 204
elements. Menzies clearly believed that he, and the Liberal Party which he led, were agents of progress, both in a national and international sense. As was discussed earlier, Frederic Eggleston, saw liberalism, and especially its capacity to create enhanced social cooperation, as crucial to possible future progress in Australia.

It can be argued that Whitlam, with the sort of Millian principles proclaimed in 1972, enabled the Labor Party to lay very strong claim to the heritage of liberal progress in its new form with a powerful emphasis on the transforming power of education. The two most important sources of a more pessimistic approach to politics in Australia, the secular Calvinism of John Anderson and the conservative political Catholicism of B A Santamaria, were to find a home in the Liberal party. Together, they formed the intellectual underpinning of the major Australian conservative intellectual journal of the second half of the twentieth century Quadrant. Anderson did not believe in progress; he did not support the expansion of the universities in the 1950s. Santamaria believed that the expansion of the universities was one of the biggest mistakes which Menzies ever made and he was a significant critic of the new educated classes. He was, in many ways, the father of the ‘culture wars’ of the early twenty first century. Menzies was said to be close to Santamaria in retirement; both John Howard and Tony Abbott had connections with Santamaria. With Whitlam’s second election victory at the 1974 double dissolution, the DLP went out of business and the Liberal Party became the natural home of conservative Catholics. This transformed the Liberal Party.

On the surface the re-birth of the party of initiative-party of resistance model with the Whitlam government appears to be a natural flow-on from earlier developments in Australian history. But such a model works best when it does not touch the real world of politics. By the 1960s the model no longer seemed to be relevant for an understanding of Australian politics. It was difficult to present the Labor Party as a party of change and social progress. Whitlam’s great achievement was to claim the heritage of Millian liberalism for the Labor Party, to present it as the party of change and dynamism, just at the time when a new educated group emerged in Australian society seeking the freedom and individual autonomy which Mill espoused. It need not have happened that way; there is a certain irony in the fact that Whitlam turned out to be the beneficiary of an act of which Sir Robert Menzies was rightly proud: the reform of Australian higher education.

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