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Today the politics of fear is being used by the Howard government for specific political goals. The main one is to ‘legitimise the moral and political beliefs of those in power ... and for managing dissent and silencing those who seek a greater share of power and resources’ (p.21). It is accompanied by a culture of secrecy raised by Andrew Podger, former Department Secretary and Public Service Commissioner, at his farewell (p.119). Bureaucrats who question the direction of the government policy are now more likely to be silenced, ‘often by their superiors in fear of the call from the minister’s office’ (p.122). The Howard government even attempts to intimidate the courts. Threats to state governments to achieve policy compliance are now routine and extended well beyond what is required for accountability (p.123). A moral dimension is required in our public life, concludes Dr. Lawrence, and a capacity to think for ourselves.

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M. Sexton, The Great Crash; The short life and sudden death of the Whitlam Government, Scribe, Melbourne, 2005

When I first heard of the publication of Michael Sexton’s The Great Crash I was keenly interested to see what it would contain. Unfortunately I was disappointed for this book is a republication of his 1979 work Illusions of power: The fate of a reform government together with a new introduction and conclusion. The main content of the book remains entirely unchanged, and it is slightly misleading to describe it on the back cover as ‘revised and updated’. When I refer to these unchanged chapters I will designate them as Illusions, when I refer to the new material and the overall work I shall refer to Crash. Illusions of Power came three years after the 1976 rush of books on the Whitlam government and its downfall. Illusions was a better book than any of the 1976 crop. It was informed by Sexton’s own experience as an advisor and ministerial private secretary in 1974-75. It is long out of print and perhaps in testimony to its value second-hand copies are rarely seen. In this review I will consider what value the new material adds and then evaluate whether the 1979 chapters remain of value today.

Michael Sexton is the current NSW solicitor-general and I am sure too busy, even if inclined, to update Crash.
In the new introduction he hints at a more substantive argument. He notes that *Illusions* relied heavily on parliament and media reports and a range of government documents that on November 11 had been removed from the offices of former Labor ministers. He explains that although he undertook interviews, most confidential, with many participants in the government, he found these interviews unreliable and frequently contradictory, so he preferred to rely on documents. In the age of insider journalism and unsourced exclusives there is something to be said for sticking to the documents, but only as a starting point, as a source of questions to guide interviews. *Illusions* was a missed opportunity. There has been substantial work on the Whitlam government since 1975 but little archive-based political and policy history. The strengthening tides of 'true believers' nostalgia has largely crowded out such work. *Illusions* saw it itself as going one step beyond the books of 1976, not just in its use of documentary material but in its interpretation of the Whitlam government as being in office but not in power due to the institutional constraints on the government. Sexton's own evaluation of these constraints induces nostalgia for a time when even a Murphyite legal reformer and future NSW right Labor Senate candidate would identify the power of capitalist corporations as an obstacle to a Labor government. Yet Sexton's approach remains predominantly legal-institutional. He notes in *Crash* that his approach was distinctive among Labor's intellectual supporters (if not machine politicians) in the immediate post-Whitlam years in stressing the errors and mistakes of the government, at a time when the natural inclination on the left was to cast Whitlam as victim. Since the 1990s and fall of Keating the tide of 'true believers' nostalgia has become overwhelming, and it will be a challenge for Jenny Hocking's upcoming Whitlam biography to escape this.

Sexton structured *Illusion* around particular policy areas linked to the key personalities of Whitlam, Connor, Cairns, and Murphy together with Kerr. These chapters are followed by a consideration of the role of the Senate, and the attitude of the Canberra bureaucracy to the government. He concludes with an examination of the loans affair, the blocking of supply, the events of the dismissal and then the 1975 election. Thirty years later these chapters stand up well, the analysis of personalities is convincing, and they remain a narrative of the government's fate that rises above the merely chronological and communicates something of the excitement, drama and chaos of these three years. In retrospect there are weaknesses. In particular, the discussion of economic management gives almost no attention to wages policy; presumably this would have required a chapter on Clyde Cameron. The fact that these chapters are still worthwhile shows the gaps in Australian political historiography. Only perhaps in the next decade the 1970s will finally become part of history.

Like the Great Depression, 1975 made almost everybody on the intellectual left a Marxist, even if only a little bit and for a little time. In the conclusion to *Illusion* Sexton tried to steer a middle path between the spate of neo-Marxist conclusions about the limits of reform (who remembers the pre-parliament and prison Andrew Theophanous?) and the emerging pragmatic Labor consensus that Whitlam had gone too far and too fast. Sexton's preferred weapon against corporate power; the establishment of competing government enterprises seems inconceivable now, but his pessimism about the Senate might make a comeback under a future Labor government after the interment of the Democrats. In retrospect however Sexton's work was more influential in its criticism of the obstructiveness of the Canberra bureaucracy and here a clear line can be drawn from it to later Labor reforms.

Within four years of *Illusion* Labor was back in power, some might see the party's record as confirming Sexton's 1979 pessimism about the prospect of reform but Sexton has largely left this argument behind. The new conclusion to *Crash* is a minor contribution to the interminable 'wither Labor?' argument that reached a deafening and entirely uninspiring climax in 2005. Sexton tries to explain the political longevity of Labor in 1983-96 but can offer only a few suggestions; the rise of the Democrats neutralised the Senate threat, Labor managed the bureaucracy better and business people were coopted by their appointment to advisory bodies. This curious later suggestion reveals that his 1970 focus on corporate power was populist rather than Marxist. Sexton then offers, without great enthusiasm, some suggestions for future Australian governments and analyses of Labor's post-1996 woes. Flatter taxes might be a good idea, perhaps decriminalisation of some drugs, nuclear power etc. John Howard is a good politician, Labor's intellectual supporters are out of touch with public opinion, Labor candidates are drawn from a limited talent pool etc. There is not much here and it all seems rather tired.

Is this book worthwhile buying? It remains the best narrative of the Whitlam government, but it adds little to what we knew in 1979. The new content does not make *Crash* worth purchasing if you have *Illusions*, but if not it is worth a buy, perhaps together with the best of the 'true believers' manifestos: Jenny Hocking and Colleen Lewis' *It's Time Again*.

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