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Political limits of today intensify rosy memory of Whitlamism

The popular response to Gough Whitlam’s death tells us more about the politics of the present than the past. Whitlam has been cast as a messiah; as Labor’s saviour; and as the slayer of what Paul Keating calls “Menzian torpor”.

The truth is more complex and interesting. Whitlam was a man for his time: his achievements were representative of new and old social movements, including the emerging progressive intelligentsia, feminists, non-Anglo migrants and the working class. Whitlam the person, the patrician, the electorally focused politician and the staunch anti-Communist was at times in tension with these social movements. “Whitlamism” as memory has existed in a time very different from that of Whitlam as Labor leader.

Like Keating or Julia Gillard, Whitlam has functioned as what cultural theorists call a “floating signifier” – a symbol whose power and significance is necessarily distantly connected to historical events. “It’s Time”, “the sweetest victory of all” and the “misogyny speech” exist in a world of symbols but are none the less real for this.

In 1966, archetypal Labor traditionalist Arthur Calwell led federal Labor to a landslide election defeat after a campaign fought on issue of conscription. Calwell’s 1966 policy speech included many Whitlamite ideas such as a war on poverty and the pursuit of equal pay, but they sank without trace. Nine years later, in 1975, Labor crashed to a similar defeat under Whitlam. The
result left Labor supporters in despair, but Labor has won exactly half of all federal elections since then.

The 1966 defeat saw Labor pushed back to an ageing and disproportionately native-born rump of loyalists whose political loyalties were shaped in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1975, Labor was swamped by a short-term reaction against economic crisis and political incompetence, but the foundations for long-term political success had been laid.

Labor’s political resurgence in the late 1960s reflected not just the new social movements but also a mood of self-assertion among the party’s working-class base and the expansion of this base from its old, male, blue-collar core to include many white-collar workers. In the 1950s, hopes for social change were constrained by the spectre of Stalinism and the legacy of the 1930s, but by the late 1960s anything seemed possible.

The post-1945 capitalist boom defeated the old left, but capitalism by the late 1960s destabilised itself by the undue raising of expectations. The old left had sometimes seemed to propose what John Anderson in 1945 called “misery socialism”: an economy of constrained fair shares. But Whitlam’s concept of collective needs was broad. The public sector that he imagined was to be rich and autonomous as the private sphere; private affluence was not to be limited but to be matched by public affluence.

Whitlam sought to fulfil, rather than to end, the promise of capitalism. The art of the old left was socialist realism, whose imagined proletarians recalled a golden past of 1890s mateship or an illusory Soviet utopia. Whitlam’s artistic monument was Blue Poles: abstract expressionism from the heartland of global capitalism.

The experience of the Whitlam government failed to meet the expectations of its victory in 1972. Labor demonstrated the limits of social democratic reformism: voter aspirations for government services and higher wages collided with the fact of shrinking capitalist economy. It was unsurprising that voters rejected Labor in 1975. Whitlam’s downfall led to two distinct responses: one favoured by most Labor politicians and another by the broader left.

One heir of Whitlam’s legacy is that of a modern Labor Party whose appeal is based around public services and cultural diversity combined with “responsible” economic management. This appeal has been politically successful. Since 1975, Labor has moved from being a permanent minority party to a regular contender for power.

Whitlam himself anticipated this model with his government’s turn towards economic conservatism in 1975. Bill Hayden, appointed by Whitlam as treasurer, overturned Labor orthodoxy and pledged to fight inflation first despite record unemployment and constrain the growth of the public sector. Apologists for contemporary Labor, such as Bob Carr, cite Whitlam’s pragmatism and his commitment to making Labor electable, but this vision has competed in the public mind with a different ideal.

The current mourning for Whitlam identifies him as standing for a vision of radical democracy – the celebration of human possibility rather than the dutiful acceptance of economic limits. Student members of the Labor Party, confronting Green and Trotskyist competition, use Whitlam as an icon to attract members.

Among the broader left, Whitlam functions as a symbol to berate the contemporary Labor Party. But this approach seems to offer little more than despair and frustration with a nation assumed on implausible grounds to be more selfish and racist than it was 40 years ago.
What are the legacies of Whitlam for contemporary Labor and its rivals to the left? We could argue that the 1975 version of Whitlamism remains a winning formula. Labor remains a competitive electoral force, despite its self-inflicted wounds of recent years. Cultural diversity and slightly better public services is a package that voters seem to like more often than not.

Despite this, the spectre of Whitlamism as a dream and vision will continue to haunt Labor, reminding a pragmatic party of what once was and what might be again. The contemporary left, too often ensconced in righteous minority status, might also learn some lessons from Whitlam’s brief success in developing a majority coalition for radical change.