Shorten: Gough Whitlam redefined our country

Vale Gough Whitlam: a legend in our lifetime

Ellen Whinnett, Herald Sun
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GOUUGH Whitlam has been remembered as a courageous reformer, a visionary and a political giant who changed Australia forever.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten led tributes in Parliament House to the 21st prime minister of Australia, who died on Tuesday in Sydney at the age of 98.
“It was his vision that drove our politics then and which still echoes through our public life four decades on.”

Mr Shorten said: “Like no other prime minister before or since, Gough Whitlam redefined our country — and in doing so he changed the lives of a generation — and generations to come.

“The Whitlam government should not be measured in years but in achievements.

“By any test, our country is better because of him,” he said.

One after another, MPs spoke about Mr Whitlam and his legacy — establishing Medicare, starting the Aboriginal land rights process, universal healthcare, abolishing the death penalty for Commonwealth offences, ending conscription, introducing no-fault divorce, decolonising PNG, and even introducing sewerage systems in western Sydney.

Many speeches also made humorous reference to Mr Whitlam’s healthy ego and wit, with Mr Shorten recalling Mr Whitlam’s 80th birthday, where the former PM commented “I do seem to be eternal”.

Mr Shorten recalled Mr Whitlam contemplating a meeting with his Maker: “He said, ‘You can be sure of one thing, I shall treat Him as an equal’.” Laughter filled the chamber.

The famed “It’s Time” election campaign and song — described by Mr Abbott as the only election song anyone remembers — was mentioned by a number of MPs.

Most recalled the extraordinary love affair between Mr Whitlam and his wife of almost 70 years, Margaret, who died in 2012. Mr Whitlam famously declared her “my best appointment”.

Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull brought tears to the Labor benches when he concluded his speech with: “One of the things we can be happiest about today is the fact that the old couple are no longer apart.”

TERRY McCRRANN: A GREAT AUSTRALIAN, BUT A TERRIBLE PM

DOWNFALL: JOURNALIST'S PEN A DAGGER FOR GOUGH

THE DISMISSAL: THAT FATEFUL DAY OF RAGE
“A loving and generous father, he was a source of inspiration to us and our families and for millions of Australians.” Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove said Mr Whitlam was “a towering leader of his time who made a significant contribution to the life of our nation. His legacy endures”.

The man who replaced him after he was sacked as prime minister, Liberal Malcolm Fraser, went on to become a great friend of his former political enemy.

He described Mr Whitlam as warm, jovial, witty, always up for debate but never carrying personal animosity.

“He’s going to be remembered as a giant of an Australian who contributed enormously to Australian life in so many ways,” he said.

The first Labor PM after Mr Whitlam, Bob Hawke, said the country was a better place for Mr Whitlam’s work.

“I remember him not only with immense respect but also with great affection,” he said.

“Without any question, Labor’s emergence in 1972, after 23 years in the political wilderness, owed more to Gough’s imaginative, determined leadership and oratorical skills than any other factor,” he said.

Another former Labor PM, Paul Keating, said Mr Whitlam had made Australia a more “inclusive and compassionate society at home — a more engaged and relevant country abroad”.

“He snapped Australia out of the Menzian torpor — the orthodoxy that had rocked the country asleep, giving it new vitality and focus. But more than that, bringing Australia to terms with its geography and place in the region,” he said.

Former Labor PM Kevin Rudd said Mr Whitlam was an extraordinary statesman who had left an “indelible mark on Australia”.

“People often forget Gough’s courage. People often forget that he proudly wore the uniform of Australia, flying with the RAAF in the Pacific war, playing his part in the defence of our country.
“Because of what he did between 1972 and 1975, our leaders will always be judged on whether we drive for major changes, not how deftly we manage ‘more of the same’.”

Former Liberal PM John Howard said Mr Whitlam’s 1972 election was his “greatest achievement”.

“With flair, and notwithstanding considerable resistance, he reformed and modernised the Australian Labor Party,” he said.

“Gough Whitlam was prime minister when I entered Parliament in 1974. His ready wit, eloquence and prodigious recall gave him an easy mastery of the Parliamentary arena.”

Victorian Premier Denis Napthine called on all Australians to honour Mr Whitlam’s “commitment to public service and his enduring legacy”.

Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews called Mr Whitlam was the father of a nation.

**FLAGS AT HALF-MAST AS STATE PLANS FUNERAL**

A STATE funeral will be held for Gough Whitlam, as flags on government buildings nationwide flew at half-mast.

Mr Whitlam’s four children said there would be a private cremation, but a public memorial service would follow.

They are discussing with Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s office a suitable, secular venue, probably in Sydney, for the nation to pay its respects to the Labor leader who governed the country for just three years but left an indelible legacy.

Mourners on Tuesday laid floral tributes, photographs, and national and indigenous flags on the steps of Old Parliament House, where Mr Whitlam made his famous “nothing will save the governor-general” speech in 1975 after being dismissed by governor-general Sir John Kerr.

Handwritten notes thanked him for his policy reforms.

The Labor caucus and dozens of Labor staffers last night made an emotional pilgrimage to the Old Parliament to lay flowers and pay their respects.
Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull made a funny, warm and emotional speech in the House.

Opposition treasury spokesman Chris Bowen suggested in his speech that the Government consider acquiring the modest house in the western Sydney suburb of Cabramatta where Mr Whitlam lived with wife Margaret and their four children.

In Melbourne, La Trobe University students staged a lockdown of their vice-chancellor’s office in protest against government attempts to deregulate higher education.

The students said that their protest action was in honour of Mr Whitlam, who had made university education available to all.