

THE WHITLAM LEGACY

A SERIES OF OCCASIONAL PAPERS
PUBLISHED BY THE WHITLAM INSTITUTE

VOL 6 | JULY 2016

**GOUGH WHITLAM'S VISION OF
THE AUSTRALIAN *RES PUBLICA*:
CREATING CIVIL POSSIBILITY
IN RHETORIC AND ACTION**

PROFESSOR ANNA YEATMAN

Whitlam Institute
WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



Authored by

Professor Anna Yeatman

Anna Yeatman is a professorial fellow in the Whitlam Institute at Western Sydney University where she leads a public policy program called 'Human Rights and Public Life'. She has a background in political and social thought. She has also engaged in public policy as a researcher, teacher and evaluator. She is a trained Feldenkrais practitioner. Recent publications include: (coedited with Peg Birmingham) *The Aporia of Rights: Explorations in Citizenship in the Era of Human Rights*, Bloomsbury, 2014; 'A two-person conception of freedom : the significance of Jessica Benjamin's idea of intersubjectivity', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 15:1, 2015, 3-23; and 'Feminism and the Technological Age', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 29:79, 2014: 85-100.

The Whitlam Legacy

The Whitlam Legacy is a series of occasional papers published by the Whitlam Institute offering contemporary insights on matters of public interest inspired by Gough Whitlam's public life and the legacy of the Whitlam Government.

About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University at Parramatta commemorates the life and work of Gough Whitlam and pursues the causes he championed. The Institute bridges the historical legacy of Gough Whitlam's years in public life and the contemporary relevance of the Whitlam Program to public discourse and policy. The Institute exists for all Australians who care about what matters in a fair Australia and aims to improve the quality of life for all Australians.

The Institute is custodian of the Whitlam Prime Ministerial Collection housing selected books and papers donated by Mr Whitlam and providing on-line access to papers held both at the Institute and in the National Archives.

The other key area of activity, the Whitlam Institute Program, includes a range of policy development and research projects, public education activities and special events. Through this work the Institute strives to be a leading national centre for public policy development and debate.

For more information about the Whitlam Institute, please visit our website: www.whitlam.org



Foreword

When we first launched the ‘Whitlam Legacy’ series of occasional papers in 2011, it was with the explicit intention that the papers should offer contemporary insights on matters of public interest inspired by Gough Whitlam’s public life and the legacy of the Whitlam Government.

We believed then as we do now that it is critical not simply to retain a sense of history but to encourage a deeper understanding of its reverberations in the present. As veteran journalist Laura Tingle has made clear in her recent Quarterly Essay [Issue 60: 2015], ‘political amnesia’ comes at a high cost.

Professor Yeatman’s paper, *Gough Whitlam’s vision of the Australian res publica: creating civil possibility in rhetoric and action*, is essentially addressed to the people of our times. On reading it again, I could not help but be reminded of the power of the parable in the way that the contemporary meaning emerges from her gentle exposition of the ‘civil passions’, ‘civil ethos’ and ‘civic possibility’ that lie at the heart of the Whitlam vision.

Importantly, Yeatman makes clear that this is a vision grounded in political and social realities. It is designed to be applied with the consent and the involvement of the public. It turns on its head the empty lament that people today just don’t trust politicians by pointing out that for Whitlam the key was to have trust in the people. The hallmark of a genuine democrat.

This is the slightly revised version of a paper presented to a Whitlam Institute forum *Gough Whitlam and the Social Democratic Imagination: the challenge for contemporary public policy*, held at the Female Orphan School on November 6th 2015.

Eric Sidoti
Director
Whitlam Institute

GOUGH WHITLAM'S VISION OF THE AUSTRALIAN *RES PUBLICA*: CREATING CIVIL POSSIBILITY IN RHETORIC AND ACTION¹

Introduction

It is easy to honour Gough Whitlam and his legacy in the spirit of building a mausoleum. Yet as we know GW emphasised relevance. So if we want to honour him and his legacy, our challenge is to rethink what he offered to the people of Australia in terms of our present needs.

Whitlam's policy program was compelling because he had a clear and principled conception of social democracy that was relevant for the times. It was a conception of social democracy that straddled two eras: (1) the development of the post-war welfare state that married the tasks of post-war reconstruction and the democratization of industrial capitalism; and (2) the development of international human rights conventions in the period 1965 to 2006. It was his ability to rethink Enlightenment humanism and the 'rights of man' in terms that fitted a non-discriminatory and postcolonial idea of human rights that made his version of social democracy relevant to the period in which he was a political actor, and, I would argue, also relevant to us today.

Whitlam is well recognised as someone who used speechmaking to good effect, who worked closely and creatively with his speech writers, who was tireless in sustaining the key pedagogical points of these speeches, designed as they were to communicate his program for change. He sought to educate people in what the program meant, and why it mattered. It is this Whitlam I want to discuss here, not to reiterate these well-understood points, but to take this understanding further.

I want to propose that Whitlam was one of those rare political actors who understands that a *res publica* is conceived, built, and sustained primarily through rhetoric, and through the public that rhetoric brings into being. By *res publica*, I mean not just the 'the state' as an institutional order oriented to serving the public interest, but also a public that is engaged in public discourse and public affairs. Whitlam understood that it is not possible to have a state (a system of public office) that imaginatively and ethically serves the public interest without an engaged national citizen public.²

Consider that ringing phrase with which Gough began the 1972 campaign speech: 'Men and Women of Australia'. In this mode of address Whitlam calls the public into being and gives it the task of working with government in building Australia as a *res publica*. Thus this speech concludes with:

But the best team, the best policies, the best advisers are not enough. I need your help. I need the help of the Australian people; and, given that, I do not for a moment believe that we should set limits on what we can achieve together, for our country, our people, our future.

It is not that institutions are irrelevant, far from it, but if institutions such as the parliament, the political party, the public sector, and the federal system of government are to be of practical value, they have to be expressed, articulated, *and* continually created in rhetoric. It is rhetoric that breathes new life into these institutions, and that reinvigorates the prudential practice of those who serve in public office. It is a rhetoric of civil possibility that is shared both by public officialdom and the public.

1 This is the slightly revised version of a paper presented to a symposium *Gough Whitlam and the Social Democratic Imagination: the challenge for contemporary public policy*, Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University, November 6th 2015.

2 The Wikipedia entry on '*res publica*' is instructive and worth consulting: it begins with: '*Res publica* is a Latin phrase, loosely meaning "public affair". It is the root of the word "republic", and the word "commonwealth" has traditionally been used as a synonym for it; however translations vary widely according to the context. "*Res*" is a nominative singular Latin noun for a substantive or concrete thing—as opposed to "*spes*", which means something unreal or ethereal—and "*publica*" is an attributive adjective meaning 'of and/or pertaining to the state or the public'. Hence a literal translation is, 'the public thing/affair'.

It is this point that Whitlam makes when he insisted on ‘relevance’. In his book *The Whitlam Government* (1985, 2-3) he refers to four senses of relevance for the program of reform that over the course of twenty years he developed and made the basis of his electoral campaigns in 1969 and 1972: *constitutional, political, philosophical* and ‘*actual* relevance to the needs of modern Australia’.³

Rhetoric as the modality of civil possibility and the creation of a *res publica*

The conception of rhetoric I use here is Nancy Struever’s (2009), a Humanities scholar. She argues that rhetoric is oriented to possibility, specifically, to civil possibility. She (2009, 2) speaks of ‘rhetoric’s remarkable capacity for renewal, for “modernizing” the reinvention of its civil strategies in response to novel civil affairs.’ Possibility is the modal commitment of rhetoric—it is not Lenin’s ‘what is to be done?’ so much as ‘what can be done?’—or more accurately, ‘what is it that we can, or might do together?’

Let me open up the character of rhetoric in how it ‘deeply engages modality as the primary quality of civil experience (Struever 2009, 1).’ I will suggest that we consider this character in relation to the following points:

- Creating a sense of civil possibility
- Topicality: ‘rhetorical values resonate with rhetoric’s topical concerns: its engagement with a community’s shared beliefs, shared opinions (*endoxa*)’ (Struever 2009, 2-3)
- Evoking civil passion and a civil ethos
- Developing and educating a competent public
- Creating a shared political narrative that is structured in terms of making fundamental political and civil values topically relevant
- Negotiating differences of civil import
- Politics as a practice that responds to the needs of the state as *creatio continua*.

Creating a sense of civil possibility

The opening words of the 1972 election campaign speech in Blacktown exemplify Whitlam’s commitment to rhetoric taken in this sense:

Men and Women of Australia:

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. For Australia, this is such a time. It’s time for a new team, a new program, a new drive for equality of opportunities. It’s time to create new opportunities for Australians. Time for a new vision of what we can achieve in this generation for our nation and the region in which we live.

Here we find the modernising aspect of rhetoric, the conjuring of civil possibility as a break with habits that no longer serve us, a break with fears that paralyse our capacity for civil creativity, and the claim that it is time to develop a new vision that can guide our collective existence.

³ The quote runs in full: ‘The program was developed on the basis of a three-fold relevance—its constitutional relevance, its political relevance, and its actual relevance to the needs of modern Australia. For a party of social democracy, however, the program required a philosophical relevance.’ He says of the failure in 1963 of the ALP to provide an adequate ‘alternative to the policies of the Menzies Government’: ‘New and attractive policy programs, meeting the aspirations of both the Party and the electorate, had to be developed if the Party was to regain government’ (Whitlam 1985, 4).

Whitlam's rhetorical role in standing for the claims of relevance of the now, not the tired habitual and often dysfunctional patterns of the past, was repeated at many key junctures in his political career: not just the campaign of 1972, and the campaign of 1969, but before this, in the reform of ALP policy and party organisation, and in the break with an older generation of Australian politicians: Evatt, Calwell, and Menzies. This generational break involved a rejection of established patterns of privilege. For example the rejection of the White Australia policy:

In Whitlam's view there was a longstanding 'conspiracy' between Evatt, then Calwell, and Menzies to preclude debate on the White Australia policy either in the parliament or at any of the citizenship conventions held every January in Canberra. 'Their generation thought it not only impolitic but improper to challenge the White Australia Policy' policy (Hocking 2008, 206).⁴

Topicality

Whitlam was working with others to articulate a newly emergent Australian common sense: shared beliefs and common concerns that expressed a new topicality.⁵ One that was not labourist but that integrated the new non-discriminatory conception of human rights. This idea of civil possibility carved out a new sense of *place*—a multicultural Australia that also sought redress for past wrongs and dispossession for Indigenous Australians, that supported 'civil equality for men and women', specifically equal pay (Hocking 2008, 201), and that supported projects of decolonization in Australia's region. A civil sense of place expressed in an Australia that conducted itself as a sovereign power committed to justice at home and internationalism abroad.

In this articulation of a new Australian topicality, Whitlam was joined by a new generation of Labor politicians: Tom Uren, Lionel Murphy, Moss Cass, Jim Cairns, and Don Dunstan (Hocking 2008, 198). Whitlam also argued that this new topicality demanded of the Labor Party that it rethink its constituency. Hocking (2008, 200) speaks of his view 'that the party needed to become more inclusive in membership and appeal beyond union members to white collar workers, migrants and middle-class employees—those with educated, professional backgrounds like himself, John Menadue and the body of policy advisors and analysts he was building around him.'

In Whitlam's rhetoric, as it articulated this new Australian topicality, we can see how it creates a sense of civil philosophy centred on a relevantly inclusive sense of the public, on clearly naming the policy challenges that faced Australia at this time, and on an open engagement with possible constituencies for the political party that stood for this topicality.

4 Hocking (2008, 206-7) gives us a clear sense of just how bitter was this break with the past within the Labor Party:

In 1961 Gough Whitlam joined with Don Dunstan, the charismatic, energetic and progressive South Australian state member for Norwood, to prepare a paper advocating the removal of the words 'Maintenance of White Australia' from the party's platform, for discussion at the 1961 federal conference. Calwell who had not been consulted and was vehemently opposed to any change, intervened, as Dunstan later recalled.

Arthur called us to his room at Parliament House and launched into a tirade. He said it would be the ruin of the Party if we altered the immigration policy and that 'it was only the cranks, long-hairs, academics and do-gooders' who wanted the change and that the workers would never stand for it. We stood our ground. He called in Gough Whitlam and demanded that Gough, as a loyal deputy, support him. Gough said, "Wait one moment. I have been careful always to support you publicly. But inside the Party if you call me before a Party committee and ask my opinion I will give my own. And I think it morally indefensible that a social democratic party should have the words "Maintenance of White Australia" on its platform. Arthur looked as if he was about to have apoplexy.

5 Race Mathews (1986, 110) comments: 'The sixties and early seventies were a time when Australians were ready to break out of the cramped, claustrophobic and Cold War-ridden social and political horizons of the preceding decade. Prosperity and confidence were as high or higher than ever before in our history. There was a willingness to acknowledge social problems and a determination that they should be overcome. Whitlam saw clearly that the prevailing climate of opinion presented the ALP with a rare and precious window of opportunity for giving effect to its platform and philosophy.'

Evoking civil passion and a civil ethos

Whitlam's rhetoric is designed to excite and to empower its listeners in discovering that they share his recognition of civil possibility and that they have the civil capacity to turn this recognition into action. It is the excitement associated with hope, with feeling inspired, uplifted, and invited to participate in improving our society. It is the feeling of empowerment associated with knowing that each of us has a unique capacity to assist in developing a wise, grounded and creative civil response to the challenges of our times. It is the sense of existential security that we feel when we have the capacity to assist in developing a wise, grounded and creative civil response to the challenges of our times. It is the sense of existential security that we feel when we know that we are cooperatively pulling together to meet collective challenges. It is the sense of trust that we enjoy when we know that our political leaders are willing to include us in their vision and its implementation.

These civil passions, and this civil ethos, are the opposite of the depressive feelings we feel when governmental elites neither trust us nor include us, and when we know this is so because these elites have turned away from civil possibility. This is because they are bent on serving their own interests and privileges, inviting government to be captured by powerful private interests that handsomely reward them.

Rhetoric moves people. It is within this 'appeal to the strong affect of the passions, pathos, and the softer emotions, ethos' (Struever 2009, 3) that they become motivated to learn about their shared situation, civil possibility, and civil capacity. Our capacity to think and to think well has first to be elicited and developed through shared motivation to improve things, to tap our human potential, and to share joy in being alive.

Developing and educating a competent public

Rhetoric is incomplete then unless it also operates on the level of thinking: both informing, and creating the capacity to think about the meaning of such information. Hocking (2008, 46) explains how this aspect of rhetoric was expressed in Whitlam's methodical and pedagogical conception of the party program:

Whitlam's speech to the 1965 party conference was as significant as a statement of his method as it was for its recitation of his core policy concerns. In it he gave a textbook articulation of Fabianism as a framework for reform that involved process as much as form and in which the party platform played a central role: [quoting Race Mathews] 'Whitlam adopted the Fabian approach of sustained policy analysis and exposition from the time he entered parliament in 1952.' Information gathering, policy development, public persuasion and education, implementation. This was both the essence of the Fabian inspired notion of 'the program' and the source of its electoral mandate.

In this speech Whitlam said:

The public cannot be educated on the need for change in the course of three weeks or even three months before an election; it requires the three years between elections. (...) People should be able to pick it [the Platform] up at a bookstall and pursue it at their leisure. They should be able to find out readily and privately what the Labor Party is thinking about and what it proposes to do. They should be confident that the Party has the capacity and resolution to carry through its compact with electors who support its Platform (cit Hocking 2008, 247).

Creating a shared political narrative where fundamental political and civil values are made relevant

Rhetoric has to offer a political narrative that is framed by timeless political values that are rediscovered and restated in terms of current relevance. Civil possibility is an inherently political phenomenon. Here I am guided by Hannah Arendt's conception of politics, one that I think Gough Whitlam like other political practitioners of rhetoric such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Eleanor Roosevelt share:

Politics deals with the coexistence and association of different men. Men organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences (Arendt 2005, 93).

All political leaders make compromises that, either at the time or in retrospect, we may consider problematic, and no one is perfect. That said, we recognise the political leader in terms of rhetoric, where civil possibility is opened up rather than closed down.

It is because politics deals with the question of peaceful co-existence that the following political values are timeless: freedom, equality, justice, reason, and peace itself. Rhetoric invokes these values in such a way as to make them topically relevant. Martin Luther King's speech 'I have a dream' is a clear example of this point,⁶ as is the concluding part of Gough Whitlam's 1972 campaign speech: 'We come to government with malice toward none; we will cooperate wholeheartedly with all sections of this nation in a national endeavour to expand and equalise opportunities for all our people.'

Negotiating differences of civil import

Politics is the art of negotiating differences in relation to determining what is actually possible in such a way as to widen and transform what up to this point everyone thought was possible. Gough Whitlam's approach to some of the major fault lines in Australian politics was one of deploying rhetoric to negotiate differences. In this way rhetoric is profoundly realistic, it works with people as they are, not as they should be, but at the same time it is oriented to the practical creation of a context and process within which these differently situated players listen to each other and negotiate their differences.

This was Gough Whitlam's approach to industrial relations, and it was his approach to the extraordinarily vexed issue of State aid to non-government schools. The Labor Party had stubbornly dug itself a grave in holding on to a policy of no state aid to non-government schools, especially in the context of the Split within the Labor Party where 'former Labor supporters ... had willingly embraced the DLP's major policy plank of State aid for non-government schools (Hocking 2008, 230).' Whitlam saw this policy 'as the great policy obstacle to electoral success (Hocking 2008, 229).' In rejecting it, he enunciated an approach to government support for schools that was oriented to equity and universality: 'The core issue was for him one of justice, not religion, his concern being to ensure equality of opportunity through education, not its sectarian denial: "I never wavered from my quest to establish these two principles: national responsibility for education funding at all levels, and for all educational institutions, government and non-government"' (Hocking 2008, 228).'

⁶ This speech ends a series of invocations 'and so let freedom ring from ...'(and King names different places in America) with: 'And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

Thus the Schools Commission was designed according to the principles of bringing all the stakeholders together. In the 1969 campaign speech Whitlam said: 'We ... propose as the first act of the next Labor Government to establish an Australian Schools Commission. It will consist of representatives of the State departments, the Federal Catholic Schools Committee, the universities and the teaching profession as well as Commonwealth departments.' Not only that but the stakeholders would have their task of cooperation informed by and made accountable to needs-based planning.⁷ Whitlam made it clear in the 1969 campaign speech that the Schools Commission 'will no more impede the freedom of schools or impose uniformity on them than the Universities Commission has impeded or imposed upon universities.' Diversity was to be valued, but all schools were to come under a civil umbrella that ensured such difference did not translate into a difference of resources and standards between rich and poor schools.

Politics as a practice that responds to the needs of the state as creation continua

As political thinkers like Hobbes (a point made by Struever 2009, 38-39; and also by Frost 2009) have insisted, the state is as much an idea and a practice that instantiates the idea as it is an institutional order. If the state becomes an institutional order that is not enlivened by rhetoric, then it is readily captured by factions and private interests. Instead of exemplifying and instantiating the public authority, the state withdraws both from public purpose and the public.

Rhetoric evokes the idea and the practice that turns the state into a living and civil reality. Gough Whitlam understood this point. It lies behind such statements as: 'My determination... was not so much to enlarge the power of the national Government but to enlarge the agenda for the national Parliament (Whitlam 1985, 2).' Whitlam's commitment to administrative reform should be seen also in this light. But it is especially in the state's aspect as a political community that Whitlam emphasises the need for continuous creation. In the 1972 campaign speech he said:

An Australian Labor Government will want the Australian people to know the facts, to know the needs, to know the choices before them. We want them always to help us as a government to make the decisions and to make the right decisions. Australia has suffered heavily from the demeaning idea that the government always knows best, with the unspoken assumption always in the background that only the government knows or should know anything. Vietnam was only the most tragic result of that belief; the idea that the government must always know best permitted the Liberals to lie their way into that war. They could never have got away with it otherwise.

The Australian Labor Party will build into the administration of the affairs of the nation machinery that will prevent any government, Labor or Liberal, from ever again cloaking your affairs under excessive and needless secrecy. Labor will trust the people.

Whitlam also understood that if the state is to be all of an idea, a practice, a set of institutions, and public engagement in public policy, it has to exemplify what I call the principle of public containment of social life. It is this principle that ensures that private power of different kinds cannot become the basis of domination and exploitation. It is this principle that makes it possible for society to assume the dimensions of a civil order where the timeless political values of justice, equality, freedom, reason and peace enter into the fabric of social relations, into how people conduct themselves, and into how they treat each other.

⁷ The recent Gonski review of school funding should be understood as a recovery, intended or otherwise, of the vision that underwrote the Schools Commission which began an era of 'school reform' in Australia that lasted until the Howard Government came into power in 1996.

It was his commitment to the principle of public containment of social life that led him to defend the sovereignty of the Australian state expressed especially in its foreign policy and in its effective capacity to manage a national economy. It was his commitment to this principle that led him to offer a robust idea of the public sector and to defend the principle of public ownership. It was also the basis of his idea of public equality. Let me take these in turn.

As Blandine Kriegel (1995) explains sovereign power is expressed in three ways: independence from external powers, internal coherence as a civil and political community, and law as the internal limit of sovereign power. I would suggest that Whitlam's entire rhetoric, understood both as words and as practice, was committed to this idea of sovereign power.

In the Blacktown 1972 speech, Whitlam argued that opportunity for Australians required them to have a greater control over their economy: 'Unless Australians reassert a greater measure of control over their own industries and resources, they will find opportunities within their own country closed to them.' He went on to propose that the threat to such opportunity now arose in relation to the increased power of private multinational actors—the multinational corporation:

Australia's most profitable, important and fast growing industries are already in foreign hands. The companies which control them are, more and more, multi-national corporations—corporations whose resources are as large as those of many national governments and larger than any of our own state governments.

His recognition of how the increased power of multinational corporations threatens sovereign power was expressed just two years before the New International Economic Order formulated an international code for transnational corporations that influenced the UN in creating a Centre on Transnational Corporations (Bair 2009, 367-368; and see her most illuminating chapter on this set of initiatives in historical context). The promise of this set of initiatives in 1974 for developing a cooperative rather than zero-sum relationship between MNCs and sovereign power provoked determined opposition from such neoliberal think tanks as the Heritage Foundation. This foundation led the campaign to weaken US support for the United Nations, which was portrayed as attacking free enterprise. By the 1980s the Heritage Foundation could congratulate itself for its success in getting the US to withdraw from UNESCO and the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations closed (Bair 2009, 377).⁸ By then the neoliberal onslaught on the idea of national sovereignty, especially for new postcolonial states, was in full flight (see also Plehwe 2009).

Whitlam also championed the idea of public enterprises in order to create competition in instances where enterprises 'are entirely in foreign hands, or are in too few hands—shipping, oil refining and newspapers... (Hocking 2008, 200).' He argued for 'Commonwealth responsibility for rail and roads, hospitals and education; and public competition in newspapers through the establishment of daily papers operated by a "non-partisan body such as the ABC": "only public enterprise can provide the competition of news and views on which an informed democracy depends" (Hocking 2008, 201).'

⁸ Whitlam was appointed by the Hawke Labor Government as the Australian ambassador to UNESCO in 1983, and in his account of his time in this role (Whitlam 1997, chapter 5) he provides a circumstantial account of how the Heritage Foundation successfully lobbied the Reagan Government to withdraw the US from UNESCO. His account seems to take for granted the albeit lamentable neo-conservatism of that Government, there being at this time little or no understanding of how a neoliberal agenda was beginning to be rolled out across the Trans-Atlantic.

But perhaps it was his conception of public equality that most clearly exemplifies his commitment to sovereign power as the principle of public containment of social life. In his book on his government, Gough Whitlam explains this 'doctrine of positive equality' in this way: 'This concept does not have as its primary goal equality of personal income. Its goal is greater equality of the services which the community provides (Whitlam 1985, 3).' In the 1969 campaign speech (p.2), he speaks of 'the opportunities which only governments can make', a point he elaborates in his book on his government:

The approach is based on this concept: increasingly, a citizen's real standard of living, the health of himself and his family, his children's opportunity for education and self-improvement, his access to employment opportunities, his ability to enjoy the nation's resources for recreation and cultural activity, his legacy from the national heritage, his scope to participate in the decisions and action of the community, are determined not so much by his income but by the availability and accessibility of the services which the community alone can provide and ensure. *The quality of life depends less and less on things which individuals obtain for themselves and can purchase for themselves from their personal incomes and depends more and more on the things which the community provides for all its members from the combined resources of the community* (Whitlam 1985, 3, emphasis added).

Later he says:

Increasingly, the basic services and opportunities which determine the real standard of life of a family or an individual can only be provided by the community and only to the extent to which the community is willing to provide them. Either the community provides them or they will not be provided at all. In the Australian context ... this means that the community, through the national government, must finance them or they will not be financed at all (Whitlam 1985, 198).

Here a remarkable and radical feature of Whitlam's construction of civil possibility is evident. He sees quality of life as more important than quantity of income with regard to the civil dimensions of our existence. In other words, if it is justice, freedom, equality, peace, and reason that we value, we are talking about a shared quality of life, not how much money we privately own. He places quality of life in the category of civil needs, an order of needs that corresponds to a civil mode of co-existence. Further, it is clear only the state or political community can provide for civil needs. Finally, Whitlam points the moral of his rhetoric: it does not matter how rich you are, you cannot enjoy quality of life unless you have access to shared civil needs provision.

Here Whitlam radically reconceives the socialist objective of Labor's 1921 Constitution. He offers a conception of the public sector as the range of publicly provided basic services and opportunities that underpin a civil existence. He was enormously frustrated that the trade union movement did not seem to understand nor commit to this conception of socialism (see Whitlam 1985, 198-199).

It goes without saying that the public sector conceived in this way can exist and be funded by public revenue only if sovereign power is intact. Whitlam's vision of civil possibility and civil life could last only as long as Australia was relatively free from the newly ascendant ideology of neoliberalism that justifies a reversal of what Whitlam stood for: instead of the public containment of private power, neoliberalism champions the instrumental use of public power to pursue private power. Neoliberalism has assisted the multinational corporation in weakening if not destroying sovereign power at least for now. Not only has the idea of the public sector been cast into oblivion but the notion that the quality of life matters more than how much you own has been too. This has justified the progressive handing over of the range of services that Whitlam saw as core supports for civil needs provision to private, for-profit providers, increasingly large corporate providers if not multinational corporations.



Conclusion

The promise of rhetoric in conjuring civil possibility and evoking civil capacity is rich, generative, and transformative. When rhetoric is operative in human society, we discover cooperative and collective modes of being that improve and develop human society. It is however also the tragedy of rhetoric to incite a counter-revolution, one that shuts down civil possibility and civil capacity. If we wish as I do to claim Whitlam for rhetoric then we need to carefully examine how he opened civil possibility and developed civil capacity in Australia, and consider how we may make these live again.

References

- Arendt, H. (2005) 'Introduction into Politics,' in *The Promise of Politics*, ed J. Kohn, New York: Schocken Books, 93-201.
- Bair, J. (2009) 'Taking Aim at the New International Order,' in P. Mirowski and D. Plehwe eds *The Road From Mont Pélerin: the making of the neoliberal thought collective*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 347-386.
- Frost, L. (2008) *Lessons from a materialist thinker: Hobbesian reflections on ethics and politics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hocking, J. (2008) *Gough Whitlam A Moment in History: The Biography, Volume 1*, Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press.
- Kriegel, B. (1995) *The State and the Rule of Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mathews, R. (1986) 'Victoria's War Against Whitlam,' in *The Whitlam Phenomenon: Fabian Papers*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 109-130.
- Plehwe, D. (2009) 'The Origins of Neoliberal Economic Development Discourse,' in P. Mirowski and D. Plehwe eds *The Road From Mont Pélerin: the making of the neoliberal thought collective*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 238-280.
- Struever, N. (2009) *Rhetoric, Modality, Modernity*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Whitlam, G. 1969 Election Campaign speech
<http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1969-gough-whitlam>
- Whitlam G. 1972 Election Campaign speech
<http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1972-gough-whitlam>
- Whitlam, G. (1985) *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Penguin Books.
- Whitlam, G. (1997) *Abiding Interests*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Whitlam Institute

WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Western Sydney University Parramatta campus
Cnr James Ruse Drive & Victoria Road Rydalmere NSW Australia 2116
Locked Bag 1797 Penrith NSW Australia 2751
T + 61 2 9685 9210 F + 61 2 9685 9110 E info@whitlam.org
www.whitlam.org

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

