

1. A political ingenue

Picture a young boy, not yet nine years old, watching dramatic TV footage of the largest street protests ever seen in the city of Melbourne, Australia's second largest city. That was me, in 1970, when activists took to the streets, protesting Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war and the conscription of young men to serve in the defence forces.

These rallies were held throughout 1970 and 1971, the occasionally violent clashes with police broadcast on our local news bulletins each night. My father saw this as a symptom of imminent societal collapse. It wasn't. It was merely an outpouring of anger from a collective of young people who had been let down by their federal government. There are parallels in Australian politics fifty years later.

The Vietnam war protest rallies were justified on multiple grounds. We now know that America's vaunted military forces were unable to stem the tide from the north, but many more Vietnamese lives were lost than would have been the case without American intervention. And the US lost many of its own young people fighting in that war, as did Australia.

In 1973, I was in my first year of high school. The ALP (Australian Labor Party) government of Gough Whitlam had been elected just a year earlier, after very nearly 23 years of

unbroken governance by the Liberal government of Sir Robert Menzies and his successors, Harold Holt, John Gorton, and William ‘Billy’ McMahon.

One of the first orders of business for the new Labor government was ending conscription (‘national service’) and announcing we would withdraw our troops from Vietnam. An entire generation of young Australian men living with anxiety that their number might come up and they would be conscripted could exhale at last. Even as an eleven-year-old, I was relieved on both accounts. Curiously, I joined the Royal Australian Air Force less than a decade later... but it was my prerogative then, as an adult.

There were other Whitlam government initiatives that were welcomed by Australians in the years that followed. I was not to know it at the time, but the Family Law Act of 1975, introducing fault-free divorce, helped me and my first wife to navigate divorce when our relationship failed sixteen years later.

In 1974 I moved to a new school, where one of my classmates was Craig Keating, a young man far more politically engaged than I was, even as a thirteen-year-old. I still remember Craig rushing up to me one day in 1975 to tell me that the government had been toppled – dismissed by the governor-general of the time, Sir John Kerr. Craig was shocked by the events of that day, Remembrance Day 1975. As a political innocent at the time, I had no words to say in reply.

But the dismissal of the Whitlam government was a betrayal of young people at the time, even private-school types like Craig and me. If you wanted free university education, universal health care or a law to combat racial discrimination, it was Gough Whitlam who delivered on that promise.

In the days leading up to 11 November 1975, the opposition – led by Liberal MP Malcolm Fraser in a coalition with the Country Party (later renamed the National Party) – had convinced the governor-general to dismiss the Whitlam government using executive powers that had never been exercised before in the

history of Australian politics. Many Australians, if not most, were not even aware that these powers existed.

It was the ‘nuclear bomb’ of Aussie politics – unprecedented and undemocratic, an awful legacy for the governor-general and the Liberal opposition to leave to posterity. Governors-general to this day have steered clear of any hint they would ever exercise that power again.

The dismissal of the Whitlam government was the sort of mischief that has become one of the hallmarks of the Liberal Party, a party that enjoyed literally decades in power under the leadership of founder Sir Robert Menzies. It was Menzies and his successors’ long term in office from 1949 to 1972 that likely entrenched a ‘born to rule’ mentality in many of the party’s members. And to win an election, no bar is too low, no trick too dirty.

While there’s no doubt that Labor has also been guilty of its own tricks and duplicity, the Liberal Party is the one that has attracted more press over the years for scare campaigns, smear tactics and confected outrage to place its opponents on the back foot.

That is true even today, as I write this, just three days after the 2022 federal election. This election has been marked by claims that the Labor opposition will be ‘soft on China’ and they will be ‘poor economic managers’ in government. In the former case, a seemingly innocent trip to China some years back by Richard Marles, the deputy leader of the ALP, hints that Labor will not take a strong stand against Xi Jinping’s communist state.

As for being superior economic managers, the Liberal/National coalition of prime minister Scott Morrison and treasurer Josh Frydenberg funnelled billions of dollars to private-sector enterprises in order to keep workers employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. That has brought the nation’s unemployment figure down to 3.5 per cent, but at the expense of rising inflation and many millions wasted improving shareholder

dividends for companies that remained profitable right through the pandemic.

The Morrison government's boast is based entirely on this very low unemployment figure, ignoring everything else that threatens to derail the economy. We have been in a state of stagflation – shrinking real-world wages and rising inflation. And what the Liberal Party won't tell the punters is this: the party has taxed higher, across the board and as a proportion of GDP, than Labor over the past three decades, snatching more money from PAYG ('Pay as you go') earners through bracket creep. All this is just the latest in a long tradition of tactical and strategic disinformation from the centre-right of politics in Australia.

In 2019, the Morrison government told Australians that Labor's preoccupation with climate change and electric vehicles would end the weekend for Australians. They wouldn't be able to drive anywhere while waiting for their vehicles to recharge. I own an EV; my weekends are unaffected.

In 2013, the federal opposition, led by Liberal leader Tony Abbott, offered Australians a number of promises, many of which were broken once they won the election that year. Not least of them the promise to leave funding untouched for the nation's two public broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). The ABC, a corporation which was there to hold governments of both stripes accountable, was immediately hit with a funding freeze. Abbott claimed this was intended to reduce the debt and deficit left by the previous Labor government, but it embodied more than a touch of 'behaviour control', to keep journalists in line under threat of retrenchment.

If you go back to the Howard government that ran the country between 1996 and 2007, many Australians will recall the 'Children overboard' scandal, which attempted to paint asylum seekers on a sinking vessel as desperate criminals who would compel the Royal Australian Navy to rescue them by throwing

their kids into the water. This was later discredited by the Navy itself¹. Then there was the ‘Tampa’ incident of 2001, a stand-off between the Australian government and desperate refugees who had taken control of a Norwegian-operated container vessel to demand asylum in Australia. They only took control of the vessel after being told that it would not be permitted to berth in Australia. John Howard, prime minister at the time and just recently returned from a trip to the US during which the 9/11 terrorist attack took place, saw an opportunity to present these refugees (who had been rescued from a sinking vessel in international waters) as pirates or Islamist terrorists. When Howard stridently told the public that ‘we will decide who comes to this country’², he cast himself as a strong leader in a world scarred by recent images from New York. Howard had also played the race card in 1988, telling Australians that Asian immigration needed to be wound back. This set the tone for a wave of rising racism in subsequent decades, and whereas PM Malcolm Fraser threw the gates wide open for Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, and Labor’s Bob Hawke also expedited approval for 20,000 Chinese asylum seekers in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, the Australian government has been much more reluctant to accept refugees in the years during and since John Howard’s reign.

So, all this is why I’m unashamedly a fan of this country’s centre-left political exponents, allied with the fact that I want governments to be progressive, to welcome change for the better. I don’t want things to stay as they are.

The coalition claims that Labor ran a ‘Mediscare’ campaign in 2016, but there would have been no scare if not for the coalition’s

1 David Marr, ‘Burnt hands, children overboard, it all seems the same to Peter Reith,’ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/11/peter-reith-abc-children-overboard-david-marr>

2 David Marr & Ben Doherty, ‘We will decide who comes to this country,’ Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/we-will-decide-who-comes-to-this-country-20110819-1j2cj.html>

known hostility to universal health insurance³. Labor doesn't always get it right, and nor do the Greens, but as the recent COVID-19 global pandemic has shown, a market economy can always recover from a pandemic; the same can't be said for immuno-compromised and elderly human lives. This book takes a look at the political battleground in Australia in the years since Howard and focuses heavily on the four-year period after Scott Morrison ascended to the role of prime minister, a period punctuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, catastrophic bushfires and floods, and a series of scandals as often as not papered-over by a conniving, partisan press.

The title of the book reflects my interest in things automotive and my previous role as technical editor at carsales.com.au. The anarchy engine of parliament is fed fuel by lobbyists and the press, subjected to the pressure of debate within the House of Representatives and ignited in the Senate to produce much noise and heat, but not always much actual progress. Far from a smooth-running, high-performance democracy, Australians have endured stalling anarchy for most of a decade.

³ Jim Gillespie, 'Labor's 'Mediscare' campaign capitalised on Coalition history of hostility towards Medicare', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/labors-mediscare-campaign-capitalised-on-coalition-history-of-hostility-towards-medicare-61976>