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Social democratic peers in Europe and Canada achieved more than Gough Whitlam

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 27, 2014 12:00AM

TO have lived through the late 1960s and early 70s is to have experienced an unforgettable sense of exuberance. From Stockholm to Ottawa, Bonn to Canberra, a tidal wave of social upheaval resulted in far-reaching political renewal.

Projecting an electric mood of change, new governments promised enlightened leadership to heal a world still riveted by nuclear dangers and Cold War divisions.

That promise galvanised electorates reshaped by postwar affluence and by the spread of higher education: with the atom cracked and space conquered, it seemed governments, by harnessing science to economic and social planning, could solve every problem.

Encouraging hopes that far exceeded capabilities, those ambitions ultimately crashed against the constraints of reality. And by far the greatest failure was Gough Whitlam's.

But if Whitlam towered on the local scene, no one better captured the new spirit of the age than Canada's Pierre Trudeau. Dominating the first leaders' debate in Canadian history — a testimonial to the power of television — the dashing bachelor swept to power in 1968, gaining 64 per cent of the votes of "professionals" and close to 70 per cent of votes in the large metropolitan areas. With youthful crowds mobbing the recently elected PM, Marshall McLuhan hailed "Trudeaumania" as the first example of what politics meant "in the turned-on world of the 20th century".

Trained at Harvard, Paris and the London School of Economics, Trudeau seemed to fuse in his "just society" the ideals of contemporary social science with the permissiveness of the swinging 60s. Closely watched by Whitlam's future private secretary Peter Wilenski, who was then posted to Ottawa, he moved to liberalise divorce, decriminalise homosexuality, expand higher education and, long before Whitlam did, recognise Mao's China.

But Trudeau was not alone in that "summer of 69". When Willy Brandt assumed the chancellorship of the German Federal Republic in October that year, he was the first social democrat to do so since 1930.

In Sweden, too, a new generation came to office as Olof Palme replaced Tage Erlander, prime minister since 1946. Three years later, they were joined by Whitlam and the New Zealand Labour Party's Norman Kirk, elected, within days of Whitlam, on the slogan "It's time for a change".

The optimism, however, soon soured. As government after government overcommitted, the economic turmoil associated with the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system and the oil crisis highlighted the gap between aspirations and possibilities. Yet, even as adversity hit, some proved far more durable than others.

Following the discovery of an East German spy in his private office, Brandt resigned in May 1974, but Helmut Schmidt retained the chancellorship for the Social Democrats for another eight years. Palme, assassinated in 1986, served as Sweden's prime minister for 11 years, while Trudeau held his position for

a remarkable 15.

In Australia and New Zealand, however, it was only three years after their common date of birth that the Labor governments shared a common end. But Kirk's run was nipped in the bud: he died in office, causing an outpouring of national grief, and it was his colourless successor, Bill Rowling, who lost power in 1975. Whitlam was alone among his social democratic counterparts in suffering an ignominious electoral defeat so soon after a charismatic triumph.

Whitlam's fate reflected the sheer recklessness of his economic policies. Unleashing public spending, his government increased outlays, as a share of GDP, at an annual rate twice that under Trudeau and Schmidt.

Australia's economy reeled as it struggled to absorb both a massive shift in resources from the private to the public sector and an unprecedented real wage explosion that the Whitlam government encouraged.

Unwinding the macroeconomic damage took 20 years and forced over a million Australians permanently out of the labour force. And still today "free" programs such as Medicare cripple our fiscal prospects.

But the contrast between Whitlam and his counterparts was even greater in political competence than in economic management. The difference was not only that Trudeau, Schmidt and Palme knew how to run a government. Tightly self-controlled, they internalised what Trudeau called the "discipline of power".

But, even more importantly, they understood that political authority involves more than being right: it requires the credibility that comes from combining tactical flexibility with strategic direction.

Instead, consumed by hubris, Whitlam displayed a rigidity compounded by arrogance. As a result, while placing enormous weight on the role of government, he could never master the political process.

No doubt, Labor's factionalism, which weakens even its strongest leaders, contributed to the debacle, as did inexperience and the urge to finally realise long-held dreams. But other leaders, too, had to deal with fractious colleagues and pent-up reforms. And with grandeur comes responsibility: not the endless blame-shifting that permeates Whitlam's memoirs.

In the end, the era's social democratic ambitions rested on an illusion. There is no royal straight road along which social and economic problems can be solved by force of intellect alone; rather, policy must find its way through the thicket of its confusions and contradictions.

If Whitlam suffered more than most, it was because the distance between his Promethean aspirations and what could have been achieved was as great as his confidence in his own abilities.

"Great men", wrote Lord Acton, "are almost always bad men." Whatever his flaws, that cannot fairly be said of Whitlam. A self, not a selfie, he had character, which today's Labor leaders so painfully lack.

But as they indulge in yet another bout of promising more than our economy can bear, they should consider his fate: and as in Shelley's *Ozymandias*, contemplate "Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."

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