

Back To the Future:

Urgent Issues for the Men and Women of Australia

by

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Gough Whitlam
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great privilege for me to be here this evening, before so many people, in order to honour the contribution to Australian public life of Gough Whitlam. I'm not quite sure where to begin in describing this former Prime Minister. I know I am not alone in considering Gough a "national treasure" but I understand he objects to this moniker since he has always had an international perspective on everything, including himself.

I don't know if he had similar objections to the name conferred on him by the women on the staff in his Prime Ministerial office - or, indeed, if the Hon E.G. Whitlam even knew they called him "Eggwit". But it was a term of endearment as well as admiration for the man who made it OK again to be an intellectual in Australian politics and who inspired a whole generation of people like myself, and allowed us to see that politics had something to offer us.

Like that other great, although far less successful, intellectual in politics, the American Adlai Stevenson whom we loved for saying "Eggheads of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but our yolks!" Gough Whitlam opened up avenues of political opportunity we did not even know existed. We learned you could take on the world – and change it.

I also want to thank the ACTU for this initiative in reviving the public lecture. The timing could not have been better. At present there are changes happening in our country which disturb or anger many of us and which require a kind of scrutiny and debate to which public lectures lend themselves.

And I especially want to thank Jennie George and Bill Kelty for inviting me to participate in this series. I value the opportunity to pay tribute to Gough, and I am also pleased to be able to make my contribution to the public debate on the state of Australian politics today.

I'd like to begin with a bit of history.

Spike Milligan once wrote a book called *Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. Borrowing from this idea, I propose to begin my remarks tonight with an anecdote I'll call *Gough Whitlam: My Part in his Ascendancy*.

It was June 1966, in Adelaide. A month earlier the *Adelaide News* had reported under the headline "Girl Chosen ALP Leader" that a 21 year old Arts student by the name of Anne Cooper had been elected unopposed as the "first ever woman President of the Adelaide University ALP Club". The same item also reported that a week earlier Miss Cooper had been elected President of the Norwood branch of the Young Labor Contingent.

A few weeks later the same newspaper carried a photograph of this political tyro standing under an umbrella gallantly wielded by Gough Whitlam. They were pictured on campus at the University of Adelaide where the then Deputy leader of the ALP had just delivered a lunch-time address to students. The headline read "Rain was no Problem". Then, as now, the paper that gave Rupert Murdoch his start in life had missed the story.

And the story was: how did Gough Whitlam come to be in Adelaide? It was well known that the South Australian branch of the Labor Party was implacably opposed to the silvertail lawyer from Sydney and his fancy plans for reforming a party structure that suited them very nicely thank you very much. Since in those days it was not even possible, let alone politic, for the federal leadership of the ALP to visit a state without the sanction of the State party, how come the Deputy Leader of the Federal Party was in town?

Well it was pretty simple really. The young Turks of the Labor Party - I suppose a better name would have been the Whitlamites - had staged a bit of a coup. They had taken over key positions in the young Labor organisation and were working inside the party to support the kinds of reforms that would make Labor electable.

People like David Combe and John Bannon and Chris Sumner and Chris Schacht were all involved - and so was Anne Cooper who, as you've probably guessed by now, was me. But the Labor Party was suspicious of this bunch of mostly university students who had invaded their ranks; we were not trusted and so the State Secretary used to send along to our meetings a person he labelled an observer and we called a spy. The person in question was the Assistant State Secretary, Mick Young. Now, we all liked Mick but we knew he had a job to do and so we couldn't have him finding out what we were up to. Since we couldn't get up to much - given the scrutiny - at Young Labor, we had to look for another vehicle.

We found it in the University ALP Club. It did not take long to take it over. I became President and as my second act I invited the Deputy Leader of the Federal ALP to come and address a meeting of students, an invitation which he eagerly accepted.

That, as I said, was my second act. My first, so we could not be accused of disloyalty, was to invite the Leader, Arthur Calwell, who also accepted. The two speeches were within a couple of weeks of each other. Calwell gave a rambling address about the Vietnam War and endured being pelted with banana peels and lunch wrappings, the favoured form of student comment on anything that bored them. Calwell was a man of great dignity and integrity but he was not a person who could inspire my generation. Whitlam was, and a packed hall of students listened spellbound to his address. No higher compliment could be paid than not a single banana peel was tossed at Gough. Even the Liberal students listened in depressed silence.

Once he'd delivered his speech Gough was of course able to travel around Adelaide and talk to party members. I think he stayed a couple of days - and

a lot of organising got done. It was Whitlam's first opportunity to talk to his supporters in South Australia. Needless to say, the State party had all its worst fears confirmed. Yes, those university students were an untrustworthy bunch of middle-class meddlers. (Mick Young, it soon turned out, was himself a closet Whitlamite; he went on to work for Gough as well as becoming Federal Secretary of the ALP and, later, a Minister in the Hawke government.)

Eight months later, in February 1967, Gough Whitlam was elected federal leader of the Labor Party. My effort was, I concede, a minute contribution to the Whitlam ascendancy but I was proud to have been at least a small pebble on Gough's path to power. It was to be nearly six long years before his landmark It's Time victory in December 1972.

KIM BEAZLEY spoke eloquently at the dinner which launched this lecture series about the debt owed to Gough by a generation of politicised middle-class young people. Gough Whitlam was a beacon whose bright light ignited previously apathetic students and others into action. To be a Whitlamite meant to think rationally but to have political passions, to care about justice and equality, and to make these concepts the guiding principles we applied to every area of social and political life.

It meant learning to develop positions on such subjects as education, Aboriginal affairs, social security, health policy and, of course, conscription and the Vietnam War. Perhaps strangely, women did not include themselves as part of the agenda because we did not yet have the view that it was necessary. But it was not long before all that changed, and by 1972 the economic and social status of women was very much part of the Whitlam Government's program of reform.

We became ardent about these issues because we were convinced of the essential injustice of so many areas of Australian life, and we were energised by realising not only that change was desirable - but it was both possible and permissible.

This was a pretty radical concept during the governments of the patriarchs Menzies and Holt when nothing much happened and people - especially students - were encouraged to believe that politics was something best confined to men in Canberra who themselves were unconvinced that anything much needed changing.

Things began to spice up somewhat in the late 1960s and the Gorton and McMahon governments were more active, as indeed was the whole society. Some of us by then were starting to believe that Gough's reformist zeal was too little too late. But even we incipient "revolutionaries" - whether we modelled ourselves on Che Guevara in the Bolivian jungle or, only slightly more realistically, on radical students like Dany Cohn Bendit or Ulricke Meinhof in Europe or the US, none of could fail to be moved and excited by the sheer scope and pace of the changes wrought in the first two weeks of the Whitlam Government.

It is worth recalling that cracker-jack start.

Rather than wait for Caucus to convene to elect a Ministry, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his deputy, Lance Barnard, were sworn in as a two-man government - dubbed the duumvirate - who between them had responsibility for twenty five portfolios and who in the thirteen days of their administration made 40, many of them momentous, decisions.

This was a frenetic start, particularly given the glacial pace of activity of preceding governments. And the decisions ranged from establishing diplomatic relations with China to setting up the Australian Schools Commission to abolishing the 27 ½ per cent luxury tax on contraceptives.

But it was the first two decisions of the Whitlam government which both summed up that this government was indeed different from its predecessors and which confirmed the faith of the Whitlamites.

Press Release Number One announced that the Prime Minister had already signed the papers releasing from prison seven young men who had been jailed for refusing to be conscripted to fight in Vietnam.

There was no more emotive issue at the time. The injustice of the Vietnam War and Australia's participation was bad enough but that was underscored by the capricious cruelty of the method used to determine who was going to be sent to Vietnam. They employed the kind of lottery machine that these days we use to pick Lotto winners; if the ball bearing your birth-date came out, it was into the army for you.

Two of my brothers were subjected to the lottery. Fortunately for them and for our family, their numbers did not come up but the tension we all experienced as the draw approached, and the patent unfairness of using a lottery to play around with young lives enraged a very sizeable proportion of the population. Those whose number *had* come up and who refused to be inducted into the Army were sent to prison. It seems scarcely believable today. But there was no mistaking the elation, and the appreciation, that attached itself to this first act of the Whitlam Government.

Press Release Number Two sent an important signal of another kind. This announced that the Full bench of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission would be reconvened in order for the Equal Pay case to be reopened. This government, unlike its predecessor, was going to support the application for women to receive equal pay. Mary Gaudron, a Sydney barrister who would later become Australia's first woman High Court judge, was briefed to appear for the Commonwealth. Two weeks later the Commission adopted the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

That important decision was extended and consolidated in 1974 when, largely due to a case brilliantly documented and argued by Edna Ryan on behalf of the Women's Electoral Lobby, the Commission extended the minimum wage

concept to women. As a result 300,000 low paid women received an immediate pay rise to the level of the male minimum.

By 1975 the record of the Whitlam government on women was a mixed one. There was funding for women's services, and paid maternity leave for female public servants, and the new Family Law Act provided no-fault divorce. But anti-discrimination legislation had not been proceeded with, and the ambitious \$130 million child-care program was cut back to \$75 million during a budget squeeze, (and that figure represented a triumph of lobbying against a proposed Treasury allocation of a mere \$32 million).

Nevertheless the women's movement, and the women of Australia, owe a tremendous debt to Gough Whitlam and his government - and I'd like to spend a few moments explaining why.

There are two enduring legacies.

First was the establishment of various women's policy-advice mechanisms; the second was the recognition, via funding programs, that specific services for women were necessary. The two of course are linked. Neither would have been possible had the Whitlam government not been responsive to the political demands of women, especially as expressed through the newly formed Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL).

Early in the life of the Whitlam government an advertisement appeared in the national press for a Women's advisor to the Prime Minister. The job was an initiative of Peter Wilenski who was the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary and who was very open to feminist and other radical ways of thinking. The advertisement invited any interested woman to apply, making it clear the government intended to recruit not just from outside the public service but, possibly, from outside Canberra. It was also made clear that feminists were welcome. Hundreds of women from all round Australia responded and seventeen were short-listed and flown to Canberra for a weekend of interviews and assessment.

The press responded with predictable mirth and mockery to the whole exercise, dubbing the successful applicant Elizabeth Reid "Supergirl" and, in one memorable article, the Melbourne *Herald* began its piece on Reid with the following: "Would the sisterhood please stand still for a moment and stop wobbling under their T-shirts? I have just been talking to the M stroke S who represents your interests in the capital... Miz Liz". (Even that effort was eclipsed two years later by a headline in the Sydney *Telegraph* announcing the International Women's Year United Nations Conference in Mexico City: "Mum's the Word as the Big Yak-Yak begins".)

But despite the media ridicule, the women of Australia knew there was now a voice for them. Elizabeth Reid received thousands and thousands of letters from ordinary women, telling her what they wanted, what they thought was important, what they hoped the government would do. Her office over time grew from being a staff position with the Prime Minister to a public service

office with policy advising functions and ultimately evolved into the Office of the Status of Women which, under the Hawke government and the influence of Susan Ryan by then a Senator and a Minister, and who had been one of the applicants for the “Supergirl” job, was expanded and upgraded by being made a division of the Prime Minister’s Department. The Elizabeth Reid appointment was the first step in the creation of the femocrat - the feminist bureaucrat - whose influence over policy and spending was to become a unique and always controversial feature of Australian public policy over the next twenty-five years.

IT WAS IN THIS VERY ROOM on International Women’s Day in 1974 during a speakout (as we called them then) on the subject of women and violence that the impetus came for the establishment of two important and enduring services for women. Elsie Women’s Refuge and the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre grew directly out of that speakout, out of the energy and the determination that powered this room on that day 23 years ago.

Both the initiatives eventually received funding from the new government. (When I say “eventually”, it took nine months before the federal Minister for Social Security, Bill Hayden, would agree to give Elsie money. That seemed like a life-time in those impatient days; today we are more realistic and would doubtless conclude that this was a remarkably speedy response).

A host of other services for women were spawned as a result of the actions of that day. As we now know, the need for women’s refuges has grown and grown and there are, unfortunately, now hundreds around Australia. But at least they are there. Before Elsie there was virtually nowhere for a woman and kids escaping domestic violence to go.

I HAVE ALWAYS believed that the Australian women’s movement was fortunate in that in the early 1970s when we were at the height of our energy and imagination and, dare I say it, arrogance, we got a Labor government. In the US, our American counterparts got Richard Nixon who in 1971 used the presidential veto on a child-care bill on the grounds that it had “family weakening implications”.

The Whitlam government was responsive to lobbying from WEL and other women’s groups and this responsiveness forced Australian women’s groups to become engaged in the practical business of politics in a way that was totally foreign to our counterparts in the US and England. It soon became obvious that in order to administer programs and monitor policy, new forms of machinery were needed.

As the Canberra-based political scientist Marian Sawer wrote in 1990 in her book *Sisters in Suits*: “Over the last fifteen years Australian women have created a range of women’s policy machinery and government-subsidised women’s services (delivered by women for women) which is unrivalled elsewhere”. Sawer pointed out that in 1988 a visitor to Australia had only to turn to the ‘Help’ pages of the telephone book in any major Australian city to

find a range of services such as women's refuges, domestic violence referral and crisis intervention lines, rape crisis centres, incest centres, women's information lines, abortion counselling and lesbian lines. None of these services, she points out, were available twenty years earlier. Most of them got their start from Whitlam government funding.

As Sawyer also reminds us in her book, the Whitlam government's decision to allocate what then seemed the enormous sum of \$3.3 million in grants for projects to celebrate International Women's Year in 1975 sent the women's movement into a frenzy of application. As Pat Giles, later to be a Senator from Western Australia, said at the time, the word "submission" took on a whole new meaning for the women's movement.

It is now twenty five years - a quarter of a century - since the Whitlam government was elected but the broad social initiatives, and the thinking behind them, to a very large extent reflected the way Australians saw themselves and how they wanted to be. The values of justice and equality were a principal element of this. Whitlam's was our first modern government in that it set out to enshrine those values, to reflect the aspirations of those modern Australians for whom it definitely was Time for change. What was set in place then has in large part endured. Until now.

A FEW WEEKS ago writer Bob Ellis said in a newspaper article that he was now ashamed to be Australian; a week or so later the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a full page of reader letters on race and the stolen children under the headline "Poor Fellow My Country" and in recent weeks it has been virtually impossible to have a conversation with anyone at all without the talk coming round to the question: what is happening to this country?

There are a number of things driving this reaction. The principal one is, of course, race. The rise of Pauline Hanson and the shockingly inadequate response of the Prime Minister to her and to the issues of Aboriginal reconciliation, land rights and stolen children have caused extreme discomfort to many Australians. And, for the first time in twenty-five years, Australia is once again being widely depicted abroad as a racist nation.

Many of us feel profoundly ashamed that this is happening, but also extremely frustrated that *we* - people like you and me who *don't* agree with Pauline Hanson or John Howard - are being misrepresented. It is the way we used to feel back in the 1960s when we were embarrassed by the White Australia Policy. Then, as is increasingly the case now, we can only limply protest our disagreement with the view of our nation which is fast taking hold around the world.

Most of us used to feel proud that multiculturalism in Australia had allowed people from diverse and often antagonistic backgrounds to settle more or less peacefully here. When I used to visit here while I was living in the United States I would marvel at the lack of evident ethnic tension, in comparison with

what was happening in New York and Los Angeles, and of the palpable benefits to the Australian life-style from this multicultural mix.

And indeed, it was something that was acknowledged around the world.

Last November Bill Clinton, the President of the United States, gave a speech to the people of Sydney from Mrs Macquarie's Chair. A huge lunchtime crowd from the central business district flocked to hear him talk about how the world will be watching Sydney during the 2000 Olympics:

This city has people who trace their origins to more than 140 different nations. There are only 197 different national groups represented in the Olympics. In our largest county, Los Angeles County, we have people from over 150 of those groups. We're becoming an increasingly interconnected world. Australia has a higher percentage of immigrants who came here and built decent lives and strengthened your country through hard work than almost any other country on Earth.

When you drive down the streets of Sydney tonight and you look at all these different people making a contribution to your country, think with sadness, but prayerful hope about all the people who live around the world who are still being persecuted because they are different from their neighbours, because they have different religious views or they're from different racial or ethnic or tribal groups...

Mr Clinton then referred to the "terrible spectacle" of the thousands of refugees in Rwanda, to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and to Bosnia where people who are biologically the same but who through accidents of political history belong to different religious groups and who "killed each other's children with abandon after having lived for decades in peace". But, he went on:

there is a lot of evidence that we can all do better than that. And when the world comes to Sydney they will see that. So think about that. Think about how every day in every way, when you bring in people who are those like me who trace their roots to England or Ireland or Scotland, to various Asian countries or South Asia or Latin America or the Middle East or Africa - every day you do that when the world is looking at you, you offer a rebuke to all those who would take away the lives and the futures and the fortunes of the children of this world because they are different from them.

While Mr Clinton was talking in this way, quite a few people in the huge crowd began crying, young men in suits, business women, a typical and one might have thought cynical lunch-time crowd was moved to tears by a portrait of Sydney (and Australia) being painted by a visiting President which evidently corresponded with the vision they also had for their city.

At the time that vision had just begun to come under assault, and it was obvious that these Sydney-siders were affirming that the kind of city, and the kind of country they wanted was not the one lambasted by Pauline Hanson;

they wanted to hold their heads up in the kind of country being described by Bill Clinton.

And don't we all!

Yet that consensus has now been fractured - and we, and especially those of us who are not of Caucasian appearance, are paying a price. Asian friends tell me the climate in this country is now distinctly chilly as far as they are concerned. I have a friend who tells me when she returned from Hong Kong recently that some of the Chinese passengers were scared to get off the plane. We have heard from Sir Ronald Wilson, president of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, that complaints to that body about racial abuse have doubled in the past six months and that, for the first time in the history of the Commission, now outnumber complaints based on sex.

Race is perhaps the major flashpoint but it is not the only area of policy where government actions are changing the fabric of our nation.

There used to be, for instance, broad agreement that this country would provide a social safety net for all of its people. We did not want to be like the United States where people had no unemployment benefits, no welfare, no health insurance, and in all too many cases nowhere but the streets to live. We were also grateful that we did not have the race or the crime problems of that country. That broad agreement was bi-partisan and persisted through the administrations of three Prime Ministers since Gough Whitlam, including that of the conservative Malcolm Fraser.

There has been tinkering at the edges. For instance, no government since has endorsed or perpetuated the Whitlam notion of the universality of benefits. Both for budgetary and equity reasons, subsequent government have adopted means-testing and tapering in an effort to target benefits to those most in need. The Fraser government cut back on some services and attempted to get users to pay for others. But there had been no substantial departure from the belief that Australia is a country that chooses to provide for its people.

Until now.

Sometimes I have to remind myself that I am not still living in New York because increasingly where I do live does not look like Australia.

There are middle-aged women living on the streets in Sydney's eastern suburbs. On the mornings when I go to Centennial Park for exercise I see the one who has made a bus shelter in the middle of trendy Oxford Street her place of abode. Another woman sleeps beside her belongings piled on a bench in Springfield Avenue in Potts Point. One of the most distressing aspects of living in New York was having constantly to step over the bodies of sleeping homeless people on the footpaths. That is now happening here. (Sadly enough it's happening here right at the time when in New York homeless people are no longer to be seen on the streets).

In recent months we have told Australian citizens our immigration policy will no longer allow them to be united with family members here. We have legislated to prevent newly arrived immigrants from receiving any government benefits for their first two years. We have abolished the labour market training programs which were the heart of the Working Nation program. We have kicked kids aged under 18 off the dole and ordered them to stay in school, and told families earning as little as \$40,000 a year they will have to support their unemployed (and legally adult) children to the age of 21.

We have increased the amount students must contribute to their higher education, and insisted that post-graduate students pay the full amount upfront. We have encouraged universities to compensate for reduced government funding by lowering their academic standards to admit students who can afford to pay full fees.

We have cut off legal aid for people wanting to go to court, and have imposed extremely steep daily court appearance charges on individuals and corporations. (Only an action by the Senate last week prevented the proclamation of new fee levels of \$40,000 a day for corporations and \$20,000 a day for individuals to appear before the High Court).

All this is occurring in a context of persistently high unemployment. We have made life immeasurably tougher for a lot of people, including those battlers who helped deliver electoral victory to the government. There are a lot of people out there who are hurting badly, and many others live in fear that they too are about to be relegated to the economic scrap heap. This fear applies at all levels of employment; these days we see CEOs and senior executives as well as blue-collar workers being dispensed with. (The difference is that the higher up the economic food chain you are, the more likely it is you will receive generous financial compensation to leave.)

And the combined effect of high unemployment and reduced government assistance is that many people have no means of support. If we don't give it to them, they will find ways to take it. Another increasing similarity between Australia today and the United States, especially New York, of a decade ago is a sharp increase in petty crime.

We are witnessing the criminalization of poverty.

Robberies, muggings and burglaries are now so commonplace they don't even rate reporting in the tabloid press unless there is violence. And we can at least be thankful for the gun buy-back, one Howard government initiative which was widely applauded, because it appears to have reduced the number of robberies where a gun is used. Drug dealing is another growth area for people, especially kids, who either have to finance a habit of their own or who see it as an easy way to make money.

The accumulation of these and many other changes which I have not listed has had a profound effect. It is a long time since we have experienced so

much anger, despair and rage in this country. Many people feel betrayed, because this is not what they voted for. Others are grieving for a way of life and a set of values that appear to have been lost. Many feel the country is going backwards. Most cannot believe that it has taken a mere eighteen months to erode or destroy policies, programs and guiding assumptions that were the work of many, often painful years.

WOMEN, LIKE ABORIGINES, seem to have been singled out as targets by this Prime Minister who appears to be determined to recast society into a more family-oriented mould, one he feels is more fitting than the way things actually are.

The assault on Aborigines began as soon as John Howard assumed office. Cleaning up ATSIC became a more urgent national priority than addressing unemployment. Over the past year we have witnessed one shameful episode after another: land rights under threat; Aboriginal reconciliation in tatters; the refusal to apologise for the stolen children scandal a national blight; the attempted roll back of Mabo and legislation proposed to avoid the application of the High Court decision on Wik.

Alongside actions of this magnitude and this emotional velocity, those that impact on women may seem slight, some of them even trivial. But this does not mean they should be overlooked.

We are all depressingly familiar with what is happening on race and with Aboriginal affairs. It is the subject of almost daily newspaper headlines and television reports; it is constantly addressed by our pundits and commentators. When it comes to women, I suspect most of us know very little of the changes that have already occurred - or are foreshadowed. Yet they will have a cumulative impact that has the potential to turn back the clock for women.

And, it appears, that's exactly how John Howard would like it.

He is on record as claiming that the 1996 Federal election result represented "a repudiation of the stultifying political correctness which had afflicted so many areas of the Australian polity during the previous decade". Speaking to the Australian-Asia Society in May this year, in a speech his office had touted as being principally about rebutting Pauline Hanson and reaffirming Australia's presence in Asia, the Prime Minister made a puzzling detour to denounce political correctness and to assert that "many Australians ... resent the constant claim that our history has been little more than a litany of racism, sexism and imperial triumphalism".

Mr Howard evidently doesn't have a problem with racism or sexism or imperialism - he just doesn't want to know about them. (He apparently does not want to know about homosexuality either, having told Qantas that he did not wish to be served by male flight attendants on his first class flight to London last week).

When it comes to women, as with Aborigines, he would like to lead us back, back to a time when we all accepted uncomplainingly our lot in life and terms like “racist” or “sexist” were utterly superfluous.

Maybe this is not surprising coming from a man who has lived most of his life in Wollstonecraft, a suburb of Sydney whose very existence was predicated on a lack of sympathy for improving the status of women. It is, after all, named after the first recorded refugee from feminism. Edward Wollstonecraft fled England for the colonies in order to escape the notoriety of his aunt, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, one of the first and most enduring of feminism’s texts.

In any event, the political combination of a fervent family conservative like John Howard and a fervent religious zealot like Independent Senator Brian Harradine is a dangerous one for women.

Imagine if you gave these two a clean political slate what they might get up to. Supposing they could enshrine their view of women and family into government policy, what would they do? I imagine they would work principally on two fronts: get women out of the work-force and back into the business of being full-time mothers.

They’d probably start by taking the razer to the family planning agencies - even the Catholic ones (forcing Catholic women back to “Vatican roulette?”); then they’d ban non-surgical alternatives to abortion like the drug RU-486 and after that they’d get officials working on a new model criminal code to replace existing state abortion laws with a new national code that was significantly more restrictive than the current situation in New South Wales and Victoria. They’d amend the Sex Discrimination Act to ensure that only married women had access to fertility programs.

Even in an environment of budgetary restraint, they’d no doubt manage to find, let’s say, \$12 million for a “family strengthening strategy” that would, to quote Jocelyn Newman, the Minister for the Status of Women, “acknowledge women’s major role in maintaining family life”. I guess a further \$8 million to fund a program to reconcile homeless youth with their parents would be a snag and then this could be topped up the following year by cutting off dole payments to these kids. And then they might toss a few more million into setting up 34 new community based-marriage and relationship education services.

Next, they’d probably turn their attention to the labour market where all those women are taking the jobs and making male unemployment look bad. If they deregulated those areas of the work-force where most women are - casual and part-time jobs - ensuring that wages and conditions trended down, it might not take long for women to get the message. But, in case a stronger signal was needed, they’d slash away at child-care places, make the cost of care up to \$20 a week more expensive (reckoning that might be a sufficient economic trigger to get more women to stay at home) but, just to make sure,

they'd clamp down on before and after-school care so there'd be nowhere for working women to leave their kids.

If they were to do this - what would happen?

Well, guess what! They have. All of the above - and more.

It's the Wollstonecraftization of Australia!

We don't yet know how all these changes are affecting women generally, although we can be sure there are many cases of individual hardship, and there is already anecdotal evidence of the child care changes forcing some women to leave their jobs. The most recent labour force statistics (May 1997) indicate a decline in women's participation rate and a corresponding increase in the unemployment rate for women since the Howard government's first budget.

MARGARET ATWOOD, the Canadian novelist, tells a wry anecdote about the reaction in various countries to *The Handmaid's Tale*, her best-selling novel about an America overtaken by religious fanatics who reimpose ultra-traditional roles on women. In Canada, Atwood recounts, people say, "It couldn't happen here"; in England they say, "Jolly good yarn"; and in the US they say, "How long have we got?"

A few years ago, when I first heard this anecdote I would have put the Australian reaction alongside Canada's: it was simply too fanciful to contemplate. Well I guess I suffer from limited imagination, or else I'm a cock-eyed optimist, because I did not think it possible for the clock to be turned back on gains that women wanted, had demanded and, having got them, valued.

And maybe in the end I'll be right, but the present pattern is disturbing. Especially when we see the changes in that other important area of legacy from the Whitlam government, the machinery of government. This is the boring bureaucratic stuff. It's hard to get excited about, but it is the means of administering policy, of measuring progress (or back-sliding) and of generally keeping a score-card of how women are going.

The Office of the Status of Women (OSW) is still there, despite efforts by the government to merge it with the Affirmative Action Agency, and it should now survive with Pru Goward, the high-profile friend of John Howard at the helm, although her lack of policy experience may hamper OSW's principal, policy scrutineering role. The performance of this role is likely to be further hamstrung by the sacking yesterday of the highly experienced Meredith Edwards, a Deputy Secretary in the Prime Minister's Department and one of feminism's leading theorists on the interaction of the social security and taxation systems. Edwards had been Goward's boss and had chaired the committee that recommended her for the job.

OSW's funding has been cut by 38 per cent and its staff cut from 50 to 21. (These cuts were mainly of people who administered the program of grants to women's organisations which was abolished last year; following intense lobbying the program was partially restored - but not the staff to run it!) Since the change of government, OSW has been prevented from attending all international meetings, including bodies like the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the OECD Working Party on Women and the Economy of which Australia is a member.

The Register of Women in OSW has been abolished. This was the list of women qualified to serve on government boards and authorities and once a resource for Ministers and bureaucrats under Prime Ministerial directive to increase the representation of women on decision-making authorities. The Register had been criticised for being out of date and useless and this may be the case, although I used it in 1992 when I was working in Paul Keating's office to find women to put up for the Reserve Bank board. The Register threw up at least six plausible names, including that of the person who was ultimately appointed: Janet Holmes a Court.

The Women's Budget Papers, a department by department report on how their policies and programs impacted on women have been cancelled.

The Women's Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs is likely to be abolished following a review to determine whether the department's equity functions should be "mainstreamed". The Women's Bureau was established in 1963 by a Liberal government and for more than 30 years has monitored women's employment and related issues.

The government has not replaced Sue Walpole, the former Sex Discrimination Commissioner, who resigned in February. The government is now technically in breach of the Sex Discrimination Act which requires the position to be filled. But even if a new Commissioner is appointed - and the rumour is that an appointment is imminent - the functions of the job will change drastically under amendments to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission currently before the Senate.

The specialist Commissioners (Sex, Race) will lose their powers of investigation and conciliation; complaints will instead be handled by a new position of full-time President who will not have specialist knowledge of case law and precedents in these areas and who will have had his budget and staffing reduced by 40 per cent and so is unlikely to be able to handle anything like the current volume of complaints. At present, if conciliation fails a complainant can seek a no-cost public hearing to adjudicate the matter. (The threat of such a hearing was often sufficient to secure a satisfactory conciliation.) Now, following a High Court decision, such public hearings must go to the Federal Court where the government has proposed a filing fee of \$1,000, and the cost-rule will be abolished, leaving the losing party liable for the costs of the other side. We can expect a dramatic decline in complaints under the Sex Discrimination and Racial Discrimination Acts.

There have been many other changes. I will quickly mention just a few (or we'd be here all night!). The Affirmative Action Agency no longer requires complying companies to submit Annual Reports, and the Minister for Administrative Services has directed departments to no longer check affirmative action compliance in awarding government contracts. The Act itself is to be reviewed by an external panel; it will be instructive to see who is appointed and what they recommend.

Other monitoring bodies or activities have already gone. For example, the Women's Statistics Unit in the Australian Bureau of Statistics has been abolished (and I suppose that means the end of that extremely useful research tool the *Australian Women's Yearbook*). Without the figures on violence, on time-use, on smoking - on whatever - we won't know what is happening. The Australian Institute of Criminology had embarked upon a four year project to establish a national data base on domestic violence orders in an attempt to establish true levels of violence against women. We know there are about 30,000 such orders each year but we don't know much more than that. And we won't - because the project has been shut down.

(Domestic violence is a tricky one for this government. They're against it of course - isn't everybody! Their research, like the previous government's, shows this is an enormously important issue to women but even though the Prime Minister has agreed to host a Domestic Violence summit later this year, the issue seems way down on the priority list. In the recently announced \$14 million National Crime Prevention Strategy only \$210,000 was allocated to domestic violence prevention.)

NONE OF THIS is the stuff of headlines. Individually many of the changes might seem to be technical and even trivial. But the cumulative effect is likely to be devastating. I worry that we will wake up one day in the not too distance future and find our rights rolled back, our programs eviscerated and the policy watch-dogs gone or muzzled. If that were to happen, not only would women be worse off - but Australia would be a poorer country. We, women and men, would truly have gone back to the past.

We would have lost an important element of the vision and the commitment that characterised Australia's first truly modern government. It would be a bit like living in the 1960s, except back then we could envision a better future. Now it seems it is the past we have to look forward to.

We have to go back to get to the future. We have to reaffirm the values of equality and justice that were the foundations of the kind of country we wanted - and which we thought were entrenched - and which all of us here want to see reinstated as the guiding principles of government.

I hope that we don't first have to go through a period of disenchantment and disengagement as happened before. Back then a great many people who had despaired of this country had gone into seemingly permanent expatriation. The election of the Whitlam government brought many of them flocking back:

they wanted to be part of the creation of the new Australia. They looked forward to feeling pride in their country. Many of them were writers and artists and they were beckoned by what promised to be a bold new future.

And in so many ways it was. And perhaps the boldest action of those early days, certainly if you were to believe the tabloid press at the time, the most scandalous action of the Whitlam government was to spend \$1.2 million of taxpayers money on a modern abstract painting, "Blue Poles", by an American none of them had ever heard of: Jackson Pollack. The reaction to this acquisition by the National Gallery was if anything even more hysterical than the "Supergirl" appointment. Today the painting is valued at \$30 million and is regarded as Pollack's most important work, so much so that next year it will be loaned to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London to be the centrepiece of a major Jackson Pollack retrospective.

"Blues Poles", it turns out, was an astute investment.

Perhaps we could make the same point about many of the policies and approaches of that time: they were investments, in people, in beliefs, in values. They were an affirmation that courage and boldness and innovation are often required to forge new paths. And new paths were needed then because the old ones no longer suited us. They didn't suit us then and they won't suit us now. We can't go back, and the more current forces try to make us, the more we have to resist. The fundamentals that applied then still apply now. They have not dated. We know that; we must ensure that everyone else does too.

In conclusion, I want to make one final point and that is about the people who worked with and for Gough Whitlam on his historic journey. Because of who he was and what he stood for Gough attracted great people and that was part of the magic. I know I am talking in the past tense about a man who is still very much alive - and may he thrive for many many years yet - but I do want to pay tribute tonight to three people who were an essential part of the Whitlam revolution and who, sadly, are no longer with us. Edna Ryan, Mick Young and Peter Wilenski each in their own way and their own area embodied the values and ideals I have outlined this evening. For their sake, and in memory of each of them, as well as for all of us, let's do whatever must be done to restore our faith in our future.