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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Whitlam, Hon. Edward Gough, AC, QC

SPEECH

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Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (12:30): I would like to join with the previous speakers in paying my respects to the family of Gough and Margaret Whitlam. I start by acknowledging Catherine, Nicholas, Tony and Stephen, their partners and their family for the wonderful support and great love that they have shown their parents for many years, and of course Gough's dear friends, who will miss him so greatly.

I have often thought it was fitting that Gough Whitlam was Australia's 21st Prime Minister, because with Gough Whitlam Australia came of age. An Australia that once thought small was asked to think big. An Australia once closed and inward looking opened to the world. Gough rejected those old ideas of what Australia should be and led us to what Australia could be. The Australia that Gough Whitlam was born into in 1916—almost a century ago—was a very different place. We were at war in support of mother England; Australian women had only relatively recently secured the right to vote; and Indigenous Australians were shamefully excluded from our national life and even from our census. Gough's life, nearly a century long, chartered the evolution of our nation from one of insularity and dependence to one of openness and confidence.

Gough had only three short years in government, but they were, arguably, the most transformative years in Australian political history. Free university education meant that my brothers and I, many people on the Labor side here and, no doubt, many on the other side too were the first in their families able to afford a university education. You could have a university education based on your intellect, your hard work and your desire to go to university rather than based on your parent's income. He brought in universal healthcare, Medibank—now Medicare; rights for women; and support for sole parents, homeless Australians and new Australians—as they were called in those days. He made room for all of us in our nation. Who can forget that image of Gough Whitlam pouring the sand into the hand of Vincent Lingiari—starting a process of giving land rights to Indigenous Australian who had waited far too long and worked so hard to achieve that gain.

Gough's commitment to equality for women was perhaps best embodied in the wonderful relationship that he had with his beloved wife Margaret—a relationship that spanned nearly 70 years of marriage. Gough's reforms for women were landmark. They included the election of the first Labor woman to the House of Representatives, Joan Child, in 1974. His partnership with Margaret was such a driving force in that drive for equality for women. Gough respected her. He listened to her views. He treated her as an equal in every way. When she died, just a few months short of 70 years of marriage, he said: 'We were married for almost 70 years. She was a remarkable person and the love of my life.'

On hearing of Gough's passing today, many people have described Gough as a giant of our nation—and he was. He was, as the Deputy Prime Minister said, a towering figure physically. He also had the ability to deliver soaring rhetoric. But his actions were also very down to earth. He was a very warm person on a one-to-one basis. I remember when my parents first met him. They were almost embarrassed to talk to him, because they admired him so much. He was so incredibly warm and welcoming to them, particularly to my mother. His ability to talk at an international level about issues of enormous complexity and convince an audience on the one hand and speak person to person to any Australian and make them feel respected and included was phenomenal. It was a phenomenal ability.

From helping to sewer Western Sydney to his reforms to health and education, it was that ability to merge the idealistic and the pragmatic that made him such a great leader. He delivered so many reforms that mattered so much to the everyday lives of Australians. He and Margaret worked together in Western Sydney to argue for public libraries and swimming pools. Those things mattered to Gough. They mattered to the people he represented and they mattered to him. They were a great motivator for him—the things that made him work so hard as a local member and as a member of parliament.

As well as that phenomenal drive to help the everyday lives of Australians at that suburban level—in Western Sydney in particular—he also saw himself and he saw Australians as citizens of the world. He turned Australia into that outward looking nation. He ended conscription and he brought our last troops home from Vietnam. He delivered independence for Papua New Guinea. He said at the time:

By an extraordinary twist of history, Australia, herself once a colony, became one of the world's last colonial powers. By this legislation, we not only divest ourselves of the last significant colony in the world, but we divest ourselves of our own colonial heritage. It should never be forgotten that in making our own former colony independent, we as Australians enhance our own independence. Australia was never truly free until Papua New Guinea became truly free.

Most enduringly perhaps, Gough helped us find our place in Asia. He visited China, of course, as opposition leader, leading the world. As Prime Minister, he established diplomatic relations with the PRC, where, to this day, he is still remembered with great affection.

Gough united with Malcolm Fraser to campaign for a republic—part of his long-term push to cement Australia's independence. As Prime Minister, he changed the national anthem from *God Save the Queen* to *Advance Australia Fair* and he dispensed with the British honours system. He was a fine ambassador to UNESCO and both he and Margaret were part of our successful bid for the Sydney Olympics. Malcom Fraser said about him:

He wanted Australia to be an independent player on the world stage. He didn't want Australia to be a subject to any other nation.

His whole career expressed that.

Gough's legacy, both domestically and on the world stage, is now so deeply ingrained in our national character that we sometimes take it for granted. We forget, perhaps, how fierce the battles were. All of our prime ministers have served our nation with great loyalty and distinction, but there will always be something special about Gough. He had an ego—that is true—and he was the first to make fun of himself for that. He said in the early 2000s:

I feel I am eternal but not immortal.

As always, as he would say, he was right about that.

His contribution to Australia has changed us fundamentally and permanently—but, do you know, the great man still came to branch members' Christmas parties, he still did Labor Party fundraisers for me and many of my colleagues, and he would turn up without fanfare. One year, we had our Christmas party upstairs at a pub, and he needed assistance up the stairs. I said to him, 'Gough, if you'd told us you were coming, we would have had the party anywhere just to make it a little bit easier for you to attend.' He waved away that consideration and said, 'Comrade, I'm just a humble branch member now.'

He also had Margaret to keep him in check. I remember one of these fundraisers where he was speaking, and he got onto a favourite topic: the single gauge railway. It ended with Margaret banging her stick on the ground and saying, 'Enough now, Gough. They've heard enough. Sit down!' They loved each other very deeply, and each of them made an enormous commitment to the service of all Australians. They will be deeply missed, as I said, by their friends, by their family and by our own colleague John Faulkner, who had a very special friendship with Gough Whitlam.

The outpouring of grief that we are witnessing today is mourning not just for a man but for everything that he represented. He had a clear vision of the country that he knew Australia could be, and he had the ability to project that vision to the world. More than anything else, Gough's memory should inspire us to have courage in politics—a reminder that often the most important reforms are the hardest. As we have seen from today, from this unprecedented public response to his passing, it is those reforms that Australians cherish; it is those reforms that will outlast us all.

Gough, my friend and comrade, rest in peace.