

IT'S TIME — 20 years after Gough

On December 2, 1972, Gough Whitlam won the federal election and began an era of unprecedented reform. His government scraped through one more election before Whitlam was sacked by then Governor-General Sir John Kerr 17 years ago last Thursday. But by then the social and political face of Australia had changed forever. As we approach the 20th anniversary of Labor coming to power, MARC McEVROY looks at what Australia was like in those days

THE Labor Party catchphrase was "It's time!" and almost half of Australia's seven million voters agreed. On that first December Saturday, 20 years ago, a towering figure called Gough Whitlam led Labor to victory in the federal election, ending 23 years of Liberal and Country Party Government.

The electorate believed it was time for change. Labor had been running huge two-page advertisements in newspapers saying "Join us... It's time!" supported by photographs of television stars and writers such as Nick Tate, Tom Kenneally and Elizabeth Kirkby.

It was a winning marketing campaign of a kind never before used by Labor strategists.

Australia's post-war golden age was sluddering to a halt.

The start of the Whitlam era, which began two years after the Poisedon mineral boom, was marked by Vietnam moratoriums, green bans led by Jack Munday against property developers and anti-Springbok football demonstrations.

There were student sit-ins and street confrontations with police.

The growth of manufacturing industries and full employment had helped the country prosper but world developments began to affect Australia adversely.

Economic activity slowed down, wage-price inflation accelerated and unemployment rose.

When Gough got in, Australians hadn't heard of holiday leave loading and they got only three weeks annual leave.

But almost everyone had a job as well as the opportunity to buy their own home.

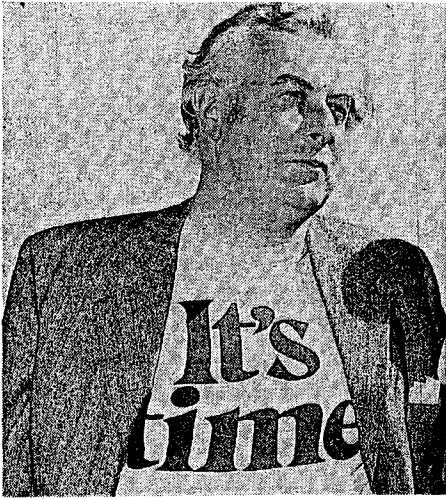
Executive directors and government project officers earned \$10,000 while teachers and social workers got \$5000.

It cost \$3000 for a Holden Kingswood, \$170 for a 24-inch television, \$2 a week to rent one, \$30 for a radial tyre, and \$1895 for the now defunct Mini Clubman.

Men and women were wearing clogs and bell-bottoms. Hot pants, long hair and lava lamps (coloured wax swirling in water) were also in.

Land at North Balgowlah was selling for \$14,000, Maroubra two-bedroom units for \$20,000, land at Bate-man's Bay for \$1950 and home sites at Blacktown for \$7950.

Although three-bedroom units at Vaucluse cost \$30,000, you could get a three-bedroom house at Mt Druitt for \$15,000.



Gough Whitlam: 40 major decisions in 13 days

Hopes were high, prices were low and hot pants were cool

Abigail was titillating TV viewers on Number 96 and Mike Willesee had created tabloid TV, with A Current Affair while Bill Peach maintained formality on This Day Tonight.

In the meantime we watched Homicide, trotting on the ABC, World Championship Wrestling, Roller Game, GTK, Professor Julius Sumner Miller, Cartoon Corner and Aunty Jack.

If television became too much we could go to the cinema to see Burt Reynolds in Deliverance, Barry Humphries in The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, Liza Minnelli in Cabaret, Marlon Brando in The Godfather, Malcolm McDowell in Clockwork Orange, Mick Jagger in Ned Kelly or Jane Fonda in Kluge.

And it cost only \$3.50 a seat.

On the airwaves, of which John Laws was king, the most commonly heard music was by David Bowie, Jethro Tull, Slade, Black Sabbath, Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Diamond, Cat Stevens, Elton John, America, Carly Simon, James Taylor, Neil Young and Yes.



Our own Jamie Redfern made a record with Liberace.

In fact 1972 was the year of camp rock — all glitter, tinsel, velvet and unisex. Bowie and Marc Bolan were the prophets of the movement.

While Frank Crean, Clyde Cameron, Tom Uren, Jim Cairns and Lionel Murphy were being earmarked for ministerial portfolios, Bob Hawke was earning kudos as ACTU president and the first prize in the Opera House lottery was \$200,000.

Two days after the election, Whitlam was sworn in by Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck.

Closer to home, half a gallon of ice-cream cost 49 cents, toilet rolls were 15 cents, a can of peaches 18 cents, light globes 30 cents and a packet of assorted cream biscuits 50 cents.

Manly had won the rugby league grand final, Mohammed Ali was boxing his way to another world heavyweight title, Ken Rosewall was playing in the Queensland tennis championships, Dennis Lillee was bowling for Australia against Eng-

land and Tony Mundine was Commonwealth boxing champion.

Dolby cassette players were big but personal computers, child care, unleaded petrol, crack and AIDS were unheard of.

In Sydney, December 2, 1972, was a beautiful sunny summer's day with a top temperature of 26C and Lawrie was Australia's best selling poet.

Beneath the surface, though, Australia's economy was being battered by the downturn in Western economies and the increase in the price of oil.

The first was linked to the US financing of the Vietnam War, the second to the politics of Middle East oil producing countries.

In December 1972, Australia's cost of living had risen 6.1 per cent, unemployment was 2.5 per cent and inflation was 8.2 per cent.

On polling day, the Australian dollar was worth \$US1.93, 362 yen and 1.97 pounds sterling.

Industrial unrest was widespread and for the first time in 20 years people were questioning their values and goals as dissatisfaction grew about standards of education, social welfare, the treatment of Aborigines, immigration and foreign policy.

The Liberal-Country Party coalition had been floundering under ineffective leaders since Sir Robert Menzies stepped down.

The most quoted statement of Prime Minister Billy McMahon, whom Whitlam de-

feated, was, "I haven't made up my mind yet."

Australia's population was more than 13 million and 83 per cent of people lived in towns and cities. NSW and Victoria had the highest urban concentrations, Queensland and Tasmania the lowest.

On December 2, US President Richard Nixon had agreed to talks with South Vietnamese leader President Thieu, Ralph Nader was leading consumer rights, the US had 27,000 soldiers in Vietnam, Ferdinand Marcos ran the Philippines, Idi Amin cannibalised Uganda, Chilean leader Salvador Allende had yet to be assassinated and Apollo 17 astronauts were preparing to fly to the moon in 10 days' time.

In Australia the Little Red School Book — a Scandinavian handbook advising school students on drugs and sex — had been banned, the Sydney Opera House was a year from completion, Sir Robert Askin was NSW premier, parents of Australia's 23 thalidomide children were seeking financial aid from the Federal Government, and Pipping Lane had won the Melbourne Cup.

On the same day Australians voted for Gough, Belinda Green became Miss World.

Migrants (who still came mostly from Mediterranean countries) and their impact on employment were a focus of public debate, as were apartheid and green bans.

Self-identifying groups were quickly spreading, such as Resident Action, Women's Liberation, Urban Renewal, Student



Big in '72: Idri Amin, top left, Jamie Redfern, top right, Abigail, above, and Liza Minnelli in Cabaret, right

Power and Black Power, all engaged in raising consciousness and trying to change society.

The protest movement was flourishing in an affluent consumer society, allowing many young people to "drop out" — a trend started in the '60s.

The most significant thrust of the protest movement concerned Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and the question of whether Australian troops should be fighting there.

It was the single most divisive issue and was responsible largely for Labor's electoral success.

The Australia-wide demonstrations in 1970-71 had been described by Liberal MP Billy Snedden as "a democracy

being pack-raped by political bikies".

In 1969-70 there were 8000 Australian troops in Vietnam but by December 2, 1972, Australia's involvement was negligible and the official abolition of conscription and Australia's participation in the war were merely symbolic changes of policy.

By then 50,000 Australians had served in Vietnam and 500 had died there.

The thrust of Labor's campaign had been directed at Sydney and Melbourne. The "It's time" feeling was not national.

Whitlam said on election night that unemployment and inflation were the main cause of the previous government's poor showing.

A Coalition majority

of seven seats was replaced by a Labor majority of nine in a House of 127 seats.

Labor polled 49.6 per cent of the total valid vote and won 67 seats in the House of Representatives.

The Coalition won 58, of which the Liberals got 38. Labor's net gain was eight seats and the overall swing to Labor was about 2.5 per cent.

Whitlam and his deputy, Lance Barnard, were sworn into office immediately as Australia's two-man national government, sharing all 27 portfolios until the election results could be finalised in marginal seats and the party could meet and form ministries in the usual way.

This duo made 40 major decisions in 13 days.

Conscription was abolished, seven jailed draft resisters were freed and 140 Australian soldiers still in Vietnam were ordered home.

An equal-pay claim for women was reopened in the Arbitration Commission and taxes on wine and contraceptive pills were abolished.

New mining leases on Aboriginal reserves were to be held over until a new system of land tenure could be developed, and the arts received huge grants.

The New Year's Imperial honours list was torn up.

Sporting teams selected on a racial basis were banned from playing in Australia.

And diplomatic relations were opened with the People's Republic of China.

The Whitlam years had begun with a vengeance.