

Idea whose time had come

OBITUARY
BY HOWARD JONES

FIVE weeks after man first landed on the Moon, Gough Whitlam proposed something that ultimately turned out to be even harder to achieve — a huge new combined city for Albury-Wodonga.

He started the Albury-Wodonga National Growth Centre project in 1973, four years after raising the idea in a speech in Sydney when he was still the federal opposition leader.

On April 17, 1970, he visited Albury for a Rotary conference to expound his theories for regional development, drawing on the views of the then-head of Uncle Ben's, Wodonga, Dr Henry Nowik.

Naturally, Mr Whitlam couldn't, and didn't, start the growth centre alone.

But, crucially, he



● Gough Whitlam and Tom Uren at Albury Airport in 1973.

convinced Victoria and NSW to sign up to a joint project, together with the city councils of Albury and Wodonga, which previously had barely ever agreed on anything.

Mr Whitlam beamed as the plans for a city of 300,000 people by

2000 developed, but the project faltered even before his government was dismissed in November, 1975.

Public servants balked at being transferred en masse from Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne and even the entreaties of the

minister responsible, Tom Uren, couldn't convince them otherwise.

Under the Fraser government, the target was halved to 150,000 and abandoned in 1990.

Nevertheless, the development corporation, created by Acts of the

three parliaments, did achieve great things and, amazingly, has survived for more than 40 years.

It is now almost forgotten that the Albury-Wodonga experiment was to be the prototype of creating new inland cities on the Canberra model.

Also forgotten, perhaps, is that Mr Whitlam and Mr Uren actually spent far more taxpayers' money improving Melbourne and Sydney's very bad water and sewerage systems in poorer suburbs.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Mr Whitlam returned to Albury-Wodonga several times for university ceremonies, Labor Party functions and arts events.

With a wicked smile, he'd ask why it hadn't been called Whitlamabad, and recalled he had opened — now Rydges Albury — as the Travelodge in 1971.

"I went from the Travelodge to The Lodge," he quipped.

During one of his later visits, he revealed that had his government succeeded in establishing a University of Albury-Wodonga, he would have seen his lawyer friend John Nagle as chancellor.

Judge Nagle in retirement worked to achieve a single cross-border university but, instead, NSW established Charles Sturt University and Victoria then created a campus of La Trobe University.

This was "mad", Mr Whitlam told me in 1992, with Margaret at his side (actually he used an expletive I can't print here).

He was in Wodonga then for La Trobe to hand him an honorary degree, and he half-joked he should get one from CSU as well.

In 1997, CSU similarly

honoured Mr Uren and invited Mr Whitlam to be the guest speaker.

In 2001, he attended the 30th birthday of Rydges (then the Country Comfort), happily being snapped with Nico Mathews, a Labor councillor who had posed with the great man as a baby in 1975.

Finally, in October 2004, he opened an exhibition at the Albury Art Gallery.

He had launched the Albury-Wodonga Regional Art Foundation there in 1989, describing founding director Audrey Banfield as a "formidable woman".

Mr Whitlam is honoured in Wodonga in the name of a very small street in Federation Park.

Surely he deserves something better in Albury-Wodonga — if not the name Whitlamabad.

Experience influenced a lifetime

BY ANTHONY BUNN

DOING work experience in *The Border Mail's* photography department gave Albury's Cameron Schmutter the chance to meet Gough Whitlam in 1989.

The then Xavier High School student witnessed the former prime minister's intellect when he joined a reporter interviewing him.

"Obviously he was a very intelligent man," Mr Schmutter said yesterday.

"The journalist was talking about a range of things with him and there didn't seem to be a thing he couldn't talk about.

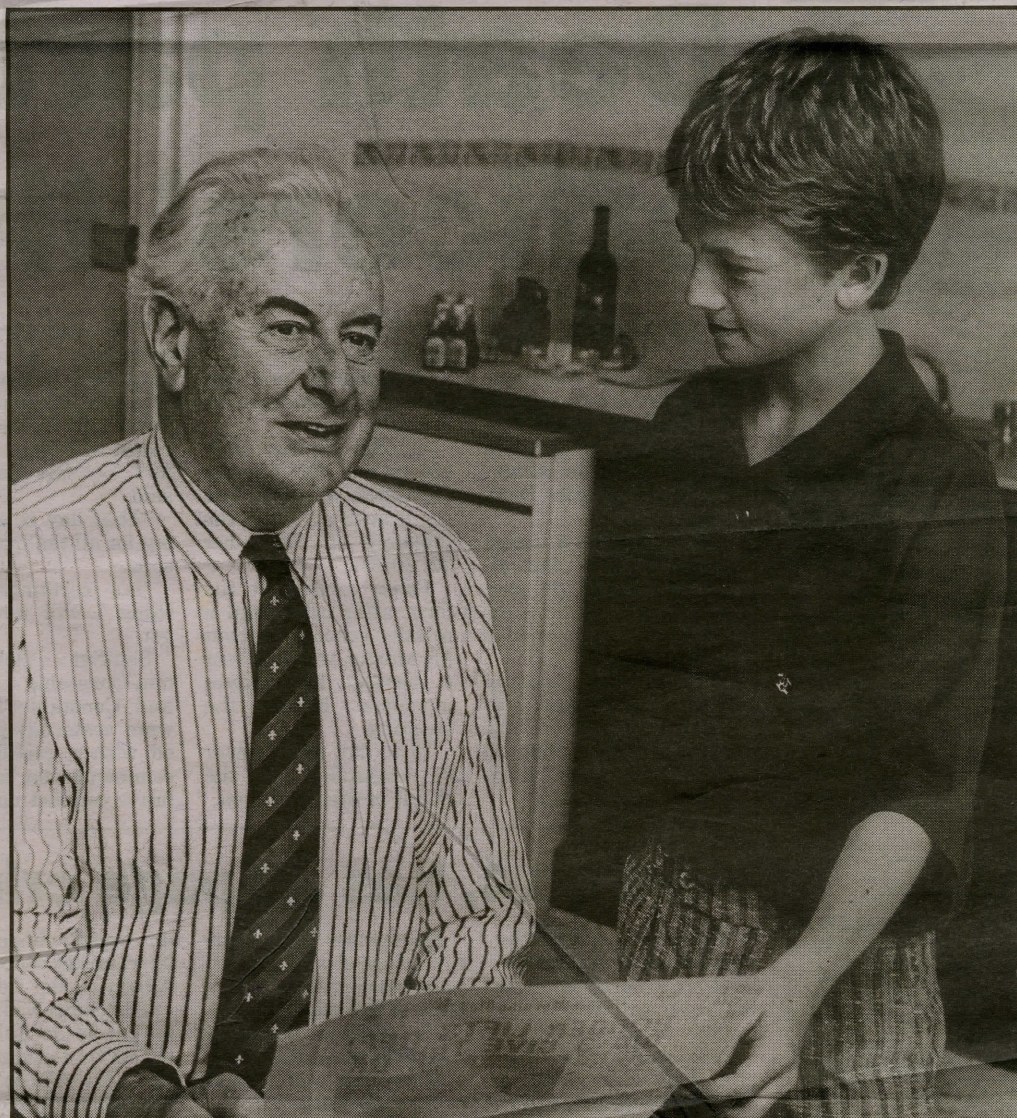
"He was a very nice bloke, quite humble."

Mr Schmutter, who is now a chef servicing the army, said his politics had been influenced by the encounter which occurred when he was a 15-year-old year 10 student.

"As an adult I developed an affinity with the Labor Party," he said.

"I've looked at both parties on their merits, (but) the fact he did show some interest in my thoughts as a young person had some bearing."

Mr Schmutter was born in October 1973, the same month as a formal agreement was signed between the federal, Victorian and NSW governments to mark Albury-Wodonga becoming a National Growth Centre.



● Cameron Schmutter meets former prime minister Gough Whitlam in 1989. They are holding *The Border Morning Mail* from 1973 when the National Growth Centre project was launched.