

Gough Whitlam cheered Hanoi's brutal victory

- HAL G.P. COLEBATCH
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FORGOTTEN in the eulogising of Gough Whitlam and his government is that it favoured a communist victory in Vietnam, and regarded the Saigon regime with hatred and contempt.

Its attitude to Hanoi's attack on its neighbour in spring 1975 varied between mere approval and outright glee. Not a word of sympathy was expressed for the plight of the south, or disapproval of Hanoi's attack, despite the fact the north was obviously the aggressor. With the solitary exception of Richard Klugman, no sympathy was expressed for the Vietnamese boatpeople either.

Government spokesmen gave the impression a northern victory was a foregone conclusion, and the government cable to the Australian ambassador to Hanoi at the beginning of April 1975 referred to Hanoi's "inevitable" victory but no preparations were made for evacuating at-risk South Vietnamese.

Whitlam suggested in parliament on April 8, that South Vietnam was the aggressor getting its just deserts rather than the victim: "These strongmen, these realists, the men on horseback, insisted on a military solution. So a military solution it is now to be. 'Look at your works, ye mighty, and despair!'"

Deputy prime minister Jim Cairns welcomed the victory not just of Hanoi but of the psychopathic Khmer Rouge who murdered a third of Cambodians: "The Saigon and Phnom Penh governments should fall. That is the best solution." In an interview following the fall of Saigon, Cairns said anti-communist Vietnamese would be dealt with as "collaborators", likening their fate to that of Nazi collaborators after 1945.

In the debate in parliament during Hanoi's final attack, Whitlam was in Jamaica so did not contribute but Labor senator and minister for repatriation John Wheeldon ridiculed the Saigon government: "What did we see in the dying hours of the so-called Saigon government? What did we see of these heroic defenders of democracy? We saw them doing the scoot as fast as their legs could carry them, unlike (the communist leaders)."

Wheeldon ignored the fact the US congress had cut off supplies to South Vietnam and that South Vietnamese formations, such as the 18th Division, fought heroically, chewing up three communist divisions before it was overwhelmed.

Minister for science Bill Morrison claimed the South Vietnamese Army “scuttled” out of Nha Trang as though they were cockroaches. (In 1940 the British “scuttled” out of Dunkirk for similar reasons but it did not mean their cause was corrupt and worthless.) Saigon’s forces were “hard-faced profiteers and looters” he added, presumably in contrast to the gentle flower-people driving the tanks of Hanoi’s 19 armoured divisions.

This hatred for South Vietnam of many Labor members was not logical: South Vietnam suffered from some corruption but by any measure was a far freer and more pluralistic society than the totalitarian north. Its people did not want conquest by the north, as hundreds of thousands of boat refugees proved a few years later, and fought bravely against it for years.

Many of its public servants and soldiers were upright and dedicated. It was a recent military ally of Australia and more than 500 Australians had died to defend it. A large part of the population was Christian or Buddhist and did not want communism. It had never been the aggressor in the war.

One can only assume the hatred of the Left and much of Labor was partly due to internal Australian politics and partly reflexive anti-anti-communism.

When Liberal senator Magnus Cormack said in the Senate: “There is a vast body of terrified people moving in the south of the Republic of Vietnam”, Labor senator James Keefe, a member, like Cairns, of the World Peace Council, a Soviet front, interjected jovially: “A bit like the Liberal Party.”

Labor senator Arthur Gietzelt claimed it made no more sense to talk of North Vietnam invading South Vietnam than of Queensland invading NSW.

In Clyde Cameron’s memoirs, *China, Communism and Coca-Cola*, he records his delight that “the right side had won” and describes how Whitlam, before departing overseas, refused a request by foreign affairs minister Don Willesee to have the air force rescue those Vietnamese whose lives were especially at risk because of their association with Australians during the war.

Whitlam refused, describing them as “f. king Vietnamese Balts with their political and religious hatreds against us”. There is no evidence Willesee tried to countermand this. That the endangered Vietnamese were abandoned deliberately was confirmed in 1976 by the bipartisan report of the Senate select committee on foreign affairs, Australia and the refugee problem.

Hal G.P. Colebatch wrote a PhD thesis on Australian reactions to Vietnamese refugees.