

# 1975 GOUGH WHITLAM SACKED

At one hour after noon on 11 November 1975 the Governor-General of Australia, Sir John Kerr, dismissed from office the Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, and appointed Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser to lead a caretaker government, pending an election for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The shock waves from the biggest political bombshell in Australian history took only minutes to reach every part of the country, evoking a gamut of emotions, from surprise to anger, bitterness, relief, and undisguised joy.

Afternoon newspapers splashed the news under banner headlines, such as that in the Melbourne *Herald* which read: *Kerr sacks Whitlarn — Now Fraser is PM*; morning newspapers, with more time available, devoted almost their entire editions the following day to what many newsmen still consider the story of the century.

During the preceding four weeks the Senate, controlled by the Liberal-National Country Party Opposition, had been blocking Supply — the funds needed to run the Government — in an attempt to force Whitlam, who had a majority in the House of Representatives, into a Federal election.

It was an unprecedented move in Australian Federal politics, causing the *Age* to warn on 16 October that 'With the funds blocked, it is only a matter of weeks before the Government will be unable to pay its bills, including public servants' salaries, capital works and recurring costs.'

On the morning of 11 November the bitter controversy finally came to a head. In an early-morning conference with Fraser, the Prime Minister threatened that if Supply was not passed, he would advise the Governor-General to call a half-Senate election for early in December.

Fraser, in turn, refused to approve the money Bills until Whitlam resigned or called an election for the House of Representatives. This Whitlam refused to do. It was a stalemate — which Kerr ended a few hours later by sacking Whitlam and his Government.

As Whitlam met his supporters after the interview, he told them: 'I've been sacked.' They all thought he was joking.

In a statement, Kerr justified his action this way:

*Because of the Federal nature of our Constitution and because of its provisions, the Senate undoubtedly has the power to refuse or defer Supply to the Government.*

*Because of the principles of responsible government, a Prime Minister who cannot obtain Supply, including money for carrying on the ordinary services of government, must either advise a general election or resign.*

*If he refuses to do this, I have the authority and indeed the duty under the Constitution to withdraw his commission as Prime Minister.'*

To many Australians the move, although perhaps correct in terms of constitutional law, seemed to transgress the concept of giving an opponent a 'fair go'.

Newspapers reflected this in their outspoken condemnation of the Governor-General's move. Noted the *Age* on 12 November:

*Yesterday was the most extraordinary in the political life of this nation. It was also one of the most regrettable. The decision of the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, to dismiss the Whitlam Government was, we believe, a triumph of narrow legalism over common sense and popular feelings. We do not deny that Sir John had been placed in an appallingly difficult position by two stubborn men. We accept that he had a legal power to do as he did, and that he acted in good faith. But we believe he was wrong.*

Another Melbourne newspaper, the mass-circulation *Herald*, commented:

*We believe the Whitlam Government was incompetent. But the use of a Senate majority was not the way to unseat it...*

*No Australian Government, no matter how properly and repeatedly voted into power by the electorate, will in future be able to carry through its*

*policies, if it lacks a Senate majority, without constantly bowing to Senate wishes and the threat of an election.*

Shortly after the sacking, Whitlam told supporters; ‘God save the Queen ... no one can save the Governor-General.’

He was wrong. The nation, the ultimate arbiters of the dispute, went to the polls on 13 December 1975, and to the A.L.P.’s shock and surprise, provided an overwhelming victory for the ‘temporary’ Government.

In the House of Representatives the Liberal-Country Party coalition increased its number of seats from sixty-two to ninety-one, while Labor dropped from sixty-six to thirty-six. In the Senate the Government ended up with thirty-five seats — eight more than the A.L.P.

Throughout Australia the swing against Labor had been 7.4 per cent. The people had made their choice very clear.

But, as the celebrated historian Professor Manning Clark pointed out in an article published in the *Australian* a few weeks after the election, history will make the final judgment:

*It may be that the Whitlam years prove that we can only march forward by destroying our old corrupt society root and branch. If that is so then those who live to see that day will remember November 11 and December 13 as the days when the wind was sown which led to the whirlwind.*

*It is just one of the ironies of human affairs that men who see themselves as saviours of a society are often its grave-diggers...*