

Key documents “missing” from 1975 Canberra Coup

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This year will mark the 50th anniversary of the November 11, 1975 dismissal of the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam by Governor-General John Kerr, the official representative of the British monarchy.

Kerr used the royal “reserve powers” embedded in the 1901 Australian Constitution to remove an elected government at a time of acute global geo-strategic and political crisis, tearing aside the façade of parliamentary democracy.

The political lessons of the Canberra Coup and what it revealed about the real anti-democratic calculations and machinations in ruling circles are more important than ever today as the capitalist class turns increasingly to authoritarian and fascistic forms of rule, spearheaded by the Trump White House.

2025 opened with the January 2 publication of extracts^[1] from an article by academic and Whitlam biographer, Professor Jenny Hocking, drawing attention to three seemingly crucial sets of documents about the Canberra Coup that have apparently inexplicably disappeared.^[2]

These murky disappearances add to the already-existing evidence of high-level involvement by the political establishments and intelligence apparatuses in the US, UK and Australia in the orchestrated removal of a government under conditions of explosive international and domestic turmoil.

One of the reportedly missing documents is a file kept on Whitlam by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country’s political surveillance agency, which works closely with its American and British counterparts. Another set is the Government House Guest Books for the months leading up to the dismissal, which could reveal the visitors who personally advised or conspired with Kerr inside his official Canberra residence. The third is an archive of correspondence between Kerr and his now known prominent supporters, notably Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was a pivotal member of the British royal family, a former head of the UK armed forces and a man who had intimate connections with the US intelligence apparatus, as did Kerr himself.

Hocking was informed that the ASIO file on Whitlam was purportedly “culled” by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) “only weeks” before her formal request for access to them. She was also told that the Government House Guest Books for 1974–75 were nowhere to be found, while the archive correspondence between Kerr and his supporters was “accidentally” incinerated.

The global context

To understand the significance of the culling, disappearance or incineration of these documents, all in violation of legal archival protocols, it is necessary to first place the events of 1975 in their historical

context.

The Whitlam government’s removal was not simply an Australian experience. It was part of the response in the ruling class internationally to the global upsurge of the working class and potentially revolutionary struggles that erupted with May–June 1968 general strike in France. That upheaval was followed by:

- A near-general strike in Australia in May 1969 over the jailing of a trade union leader
- The “Hot Autumn” of workers’ strikes in Italy in 1969
- The 1970 election and 1973 CIA-backed overthrow of the social democratic Allende government in Chile
- A wave of struggles in Britain, culminating in the bringing down of the Heath Conservative government in 1974
- The downfall of the Nixon administration in the US in 1974 and the final defeat of the American military in Vietnam in April 1975
- The ousting of dictatorships in Portugal, Greece and Spain in the period 1974–76.

Whitlam’s government was removed because it had failed to contain the powerful movement of the working class that had brought the Labor Party to office in 1972, after 23 years of conservative party government. There were related concerns in Washington over Labor’s inability to stem the popular opposition to the US military alliance, triggered by the atrocities of the Vietnam War, and the presence of the key US satellite spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia.

Whitlam, like the Labor Party as a whole, was firmly committed to the US military and strategic alliance, no less than his Labor prime ministerial successors, Hawke, Keating, Rudd, Gillard and Albanese. Whitlam was not an opponent of the Vietnam War, let alone of Washington. But popular opposition to the war, and to the conscription of 20-year-olds to fight it, had grown rapidly since the late 1960s as the massive scale of the US bombings and killings in Vietnam became more widely known. In order to prevent that movement, which erupted largely outside the control of the Labor Party, from challenging the parliamentary order itself, Labor promised to end conscription and withdraw Australian troops from Vietnam, subject to consultation with the White House.

These policies were, in fact, in line with those of the Nixon administration, which sought unsuccessfully to hand the war over to its South Vietnamese puppet regime before the ultimate defeat in 1975. In the Nixon Library in 2012, Vietnam War-era records revealed that by the time Whitlam was granted an audience with Nixon, in Washington in late July 1973, the Australian prime minister had done everything he could to prove that he could be relied upon to back US imperialism, including by backing away from advocating a grouping of non-aligned nations in Asia and a supposed zone of peace in the Indian Ocean.

The tapes showed that Whitlam had also assuaged American concerns that a Labor government would rescind the agreements over Pine Gap and other US installations in Australia. But anxiety continued in Washington about the Whitlam government’s capacity to contain the discontent. Just a

month before the Watergate affair forced Nixon from office in August 1974, the US president ordered a secret study of American relations with Australia, exploring options for relocating US intelligence facilities elsewhere.

Whitlam had led the Labor Party to electoral victory in 1972 on a program of limited social and economic reforms, such as a medical insurance scheme and abolition of university fees. However, the formation of a Labor government triggered pent-up working-class demands for higher wages and better conditions. In response, Whitlam called a 1973 constitutional referendum to hand the federal government the power to control wages (“prices and incomes”), only to suffer a resounding defeat. The following year, 1974, saw the greatest levels of strikes since 1919, resulting in the largest wage rises in Australian history.

In the midst of this turmoil, and facing a disastrous defeat in Vietnam, the Nixon administration dispatched Marshall Green as the US ambassador to Australia. Green had a record with US-backed coups, including while he was the US ambassador to Indonesia during the CIA-backed military coup of 1965–66 that massacred up to one million workers and peasants and brought General Suharto to power. Under Green’s command, State Department and CIA officials at the US Embassy in Jakarta provided the Indonesian armed forces with “shooting lists” bearing the names of thousands of local, regional and national leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). (See: “Fifty years since the Indonesian coup”).

There is no doubt that Green, the White House and the CIA had a hand in the destabilisation of the Whitlam government that preceded its dismissal. That included businessmen with various intelligence connections embroiling the government in a scandal involving overseas loans. This “loans affair” provided the pretext for the Liberal Party opposition to block the government’s 1975 budget in the Senate, potentially depriving it of funds. That in turn became the justification for Kerr to sack Whitlam, with the support and encouragement of the British royal establishment.

Lord Mountbatten’s authorised biography later recorded him writing to Kerr days after Whitlam’s dismissal to congratulate Kerr on his “courageous and correct action.” During the same period, Mountbatten was heavily involved in parallel operations in Britain, including a potential military dictatorship, for similar reasons, to overturn Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s 1974–76 Labour government. That eventually led to Wilson’s sudden unexplained resignation in 1976. In 2006, it was revealed that Mountbatten, a relative and mentor to both Queen Elizabeth and her son (now King) Charles had been engaged with other senior military figures in the CIA and MI5-backed plots against Wilson.

The Palace letters

The latest revelations of missing 1975-related documents further point to anti-democratic machinations at the highest levels. In 2020, after a four-year legal battle—all the way to the High Court, Australia’s supreme court—Professor Hocking finally secured the release of correspondence between Kerr and the Queen’s Palace showing how closely Kerr conspired with the monarch and her senior advisers in the British ruling establishment in executing Whitlam’s removal.

Between 15 August 1974 and 5 December 1977, Kerr exchanged an extraordinary total of 212 letters with the Queen through her official private secretary, Sir Martin Charteris, a former high-ranking military officer. Kerr, in the manner of an intelligence officer—which he had once been—supplied the palace with detailed briefings, complete with newspaper clippings, on the political crisis wracking the Labor

government, including the “loans affair.”

In this correspondence Charteris gave the green light for the dismissal, and assured Kerr of the Queen’s support if Whitlam tried to head off his sacking by asking her to dismiss the governor-general instead. Nervous of the response in the working class, however, Charteris advised Kerr to time his coup carefully and to claim that he acted as a last resort and without the palace’s knowledge. Kerr, in turn, reassured Charteris that Whitlam would seek to prevent a general strike.

A mass political movement of workers, students, youth and professional people had erupted against the Liberals’ blocking of supply, but the entire Labor Party and trade union leadership, notably the Labor “lefts” and Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia, worked to stifle it.

Throughout his letters, Kerr referred to the threat posed by the working class, while reporting that Whitlam was doing his best to prevent a revolt. On October 17, for example, he informed Charteris: “The prime minister [Whitlam] appealed to the trade union movement not to stage a general strike.”

When it was finally carried out, the dismissal sparked days of mass strikes and huge protests. Once again, Whitlam and the union bureaucrats, under the leadership of then Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Bob Hawke, blocked demands for a general strike, paving the way for the anti-democratically installed Liberal-Country Party government to call and win an election in December 1975.

Whitlam’s “culled” ASIO file

In her latest article, Hocking reported that 20 years ago she stumbled across a reference, in an unrelated document, to Whitlam’s ASIO file, which clearly would be “a critically important historical record.”

However, four months later, the National Archives, the official repository of all such government records, informed her that, “having maintained this security file for nearly 40 years, it had been destroyed in a routine culling, just weeks before I requested it.”

The NAA told Hocking that, according to ASIO’s records, the destroyed file “contained material of a vetting nature only”—as if such intelligence agency “vetting” of a prime minister was perfectly acceptable! Hocking’s request for access to the ASIO documents referred to in this response went unanswered. Despite NAA legislation and protocols requiring such records to be collected and preserved for history, the NAA had issued an authorisation for ASIO to destroy Whitlam’s security file within weeks of Hocking’s request to view it.

This is doubly significant because ASIO played an active role in the coup. Most prominently, a negative ASIO “dossier” on then Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns was sensationally leaked to a right-wing media magazine, the *Bulletin* in June 1974. That fed the destabilisation operation against the government, which ultimately involved Whitlam sacking Cairns in July 1975 an unsuccessful bid to save his own post.

The lost Government House guest books

In her article, Hocking reported that in 2010, she first requested access to the Government House guest books held by the NAA, which provide the official details of visits and visitors to governors-general. The catalogue listed 29 files, enumerated consecutively, constituting visitor books from May 1953 to February 1996, but there was a gap, covering two consecutive file numbers, from July 1974 until December 1982.

In June 2023, the NAA submitted an application to Government House requesting the delivery of the guest books for 1974–75. Government House replied that “it does not hold any guest books, visitor books, guest registers or visitor registers from 1975 as defined by the Archives Act 1983.” Government House is required under that Act to place the guest books as “Commonwealth records” in the NAA archives.

There has been longstanding speculation that security and defence officials, including the Chief Defence Scientist Dr John Farrands—supposedly the recognised authority on Pine Gap and the other US bases in Australia—had briefed Kerr about military and intelligence concerns that Whitlam planned to divulge information about CIA agents working at Pine Gap. Vice-regal Notices show that Farrands met Kerr on 28 October 1975.

Much more collaboration is likely to have taken place. Kerr regarded himself as the military commander-in-chief, as specified in the 1901 Constitution. He had direct relations with military commanders and is known to have also had consultations with at least two High Court judges before removing the government.

The burnt archive of Kerr’s prominent supporters

In 1978, soon after Kerr left office, a cache of letters “of outstanding value” to Kerr was supposedly accidentally reduced to ashes inside the Government House. Kerr’s official secretary, David Smith, wrote to Kerr expressing his dismay at having carelessly left this box of significant letters unattended in the photocopying room. According to Smith, a cleaner then inadvertently threw the entire contents into an incinerator.

Kerr had apparently sought these congratulatory letters for use in his forthcoming autobiography *Matters for Judgement*. Among his correspondents was Mountbatten, along with a former Governor-General and distant royal relation, Viscount De L’Isle, and other prominent figures supporting Kerr’s removal of the government.

From the letters finally released in 2020 following the High Court’s ruling in Hocking’s case, we know that the future King Charles was one of those hailing Kerr’s action. Charles’s letter to Kerr, written in similar terms to Mountbatten’s, stated: “What you did [...] was right and the courageous thing to do.”

Conclusion

Together with the bloody CIA-backed military coup in Chile in September 1973, the Labor government’s dismissal was one of the first moves in what became an international counter-offensive against the working class, fronted by figures such as Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain. The role of Whitlam and the union leaders, like their counterparts internationally, in suppressing the opposition of workers and youth encouraged the capitalist class worldwide to go on the attack.

Today, the economic and political situation is even more unstable and explosive. As this year’s *World Socialist Web Site* New Year statement explained, the unprecedented oligarchic and fascistic character of the Trump administration, marks a violent realignment of the state to correspond with the nature of capitalist society itself, and not just in the United States. The world’s richest individuals and corporations control resources on an unfathomable scale, producing immense class tensions.

Outlining the revolutionary content of the decade of the 2020s, the statement explained:

Across the world, capitalist governments are staggered by massive political crises, confronting popular opposition and increasingly turning to authoritarian measures...The past five years have been dominated by the response of the ruling class to the capitalist crisis. The next five years will be dominated by an explosive eruption of the class struggle, which is already under way. Workers throughout the world confront an escalating global war; an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, along with the emergence of new pathogens like H5N1 bird flu and mpox; a coordinated assault on basic democratic rights and a massive increase in exploitation and social want.

The tearing aside of the veneer of parliamentary democracy in 1975 is a warning that Australia is no exception to the readiness of the capitalist class internationally to again resort to dictatorial measures to suppress the rising struggles of the working class.

The experience of 1975 also demonstrates the willingness of all the political elites, including Labor governments and union bureaucrats, to acquiesce in authoritarian forms of rule. There is only one way forward to defend fundamental democratic rights. The stranglehold of the billionaire oligarchs over society must be broken through the expropriation of their wealth and the socialist reorganisation of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

Jenny Hocking, “The continual cover up – Jenny Hocking on the strange disappearance of Gough Whitlam’s ASIO file” <https://johnmenadue.com/the-continual-cover-up-jenny-hocking-on-the-strange-disappearance-of-gough-whitlams-asio-file/>

Jenny Hocking, “Critical Archival Encounters and the Evolving Historiography of the Dismissal of the Whitlam Government,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 11 April 2024, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ajph.12979>

[1] Jenny Hocking, “The continual cover up – Jenny Hocking on the strange disappearance of Gough Whitlam’s ASIO file” <https://johnmenadue.com/the-continual-cover-up-jenny-hocking-on-the-strange-disappearance-of-gough-whitlams-asio-file/>

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