

## Edward Gough WHITLAM, AC, QC

Prime Minister from 5 December 1972 to 11 November 1975



- Gough Whitlam became the 21st prime minister when the Australian Labor Party won the 1972 federal election. He replaced the Liberal Party's William McMahon.
- Member of the Australian Labor Party from 1945. Member of the House of Representatives for Werriwa (NSW) 1952-1978. Treasurer and Attorney-General 1972, Minister for External Affairs, Customs and Excise, Trade and Industry, Shipping and Transport, Education and Science, Civil Aviation, Housing, Works, and Environment, Aborigines and the Arts 1972, Foreign Affairs 1973, Environment 1975.
- Whitlam's government dismissed by Governor-General Sir John Kerr because he had been unable to secure passage of Supply bills through the Senate. Malcolm Fraser appointed as caretaker prime minister, replacing Whitlam as a result of the double dissolution election 1975.

### Main achievements (1972-1975)

- Implemented wide-ranging reforms of the Labor Party's organisation and modernised its policy platform. Implemented reforms in every field of public policy, including education and regional development. Record number of Bills introduced and enacted.
- Established Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1972. Initiated Australia's first federal legislation on human rights, the environment and heritage. Amalgamated various defence departments into single agency, established Legal Aid Office, National Film and Television School, launched construction of National Gallery of Australia, Australian Development Assistance Agency. Reopened Australian Embassy in Peking, People's Republic of China 1973 after 24 years.
- Established Trade Practices Commission and Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service 1974. Established Law Reform Commission, Darwin Reconstruction Commission, Australian Film Commission, Australia Council, Australian Heritage Commission, Consumer Affairs Commission and Technical and Further Education Commission, and a national employment and training program, abolished university tuition fees.
- Introduced Family Law Act providing for national Family Court, and Racial Discrimination Act. Established Medibank. Telecom and Australia Post replaced the Postmaster-General's Department. An Order of Australia replaced the British Honours system. Introduced social welfare reforms including supporting mothers benefit and welfare for homeless people. Royal commission on Norfolk Island, inquiry into Fraser Island and Ranger Uranium. Handed title deeds to part of traditional lands to Gurindji people in Northern Territory 1975.



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## Personal life

- Born 11 July 1916 in Kew, Victoria. Educated at Mowbray House and Knox Grammar School in Sydney. Father became deputy Crown Solicitor for Commonwealth and family moved to Canberra 1928. Attended Telopea Park High School and Canberra Grammar School, then completed Arts and Law degrees at University of Sydney 1935-41. Edited college journal. Won blue for rowing, wrote verse.
- Served as navigator in Royal Australian Air Force, stationed in Northern Territory for much of the Second World War. Completed Law degree at University of Sydney. Admitted to state and federal courts as barrister 1947, and appointed Queens Counsel 1962.
- Married Margaret Dovey on 22 April 1942. Began campaigning for Curtin Labor government in support of expanding Commonwealth's powers for post-war reconstruction. Built house in Cronulla with War Service loan. Active in local community groups. Moved to Cabramatta following changes in his electorate boundaries.

## Life after politics

- Member (with Margaret Whitlam) of 1995 Sydney bid team for Olympic Games. First national visiting fellow at Australian National University 1978. Visiting professorships at Harvard University 1979 and University of Adelaide 1983. Australian Ambassador to UNESCO in Paris 1983. Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, World Heritage Committee.
- Chaired General Assembly of World Heritage Convention 1989. Made Member of Honour by World Conservation Union 1988. Australia's Constitutional Commission 1985, Chairman of Australia-China Council 1986-1991, Chair of Council of National Gallery of Australia 1987-1990. Founded Hanoi Architectural Heritage Foundation, member of Australian Olympic Committee delegation, corresponding member of Academy of Athens, honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities 1993. Received Redmond Barry Award from Australian Library and Information Association 1994.
- Published books and articles including *The Truth of the Matter* (1979), *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975* (1985), and *Abiding Interests* (1997). Lecturer on political and constitutional issues, including the republican movement. Assisted with development of Whitlam Institute at University of Western Sydney since 2000.

## Character

- Various described as articulate, quick-witted, a prodigious reader with a remarkable memory, a renowned public speaker and political commentator, a rational optimist. An 'erudite, pedantic manner...given to forceful, impetuous action'. (Source: *Acts of Parliament*, MUP, 1988, p 465)

## Did you know?

- Whitlam was the first Labor prime minister since 1949.
- He was the first prime minister to visit the People's Republic of China.
- Whitlam's government introduced and enacted a record number of Bills. The Senate rejected 93 Bills, more than the total number (68) rejected since Federation.

## Sources

National Archives of Australia: <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au>

Lloyd, Clem, 'Edward Gough Whitlam', in Michelle Grattan (ed), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 2000, pp 324-353

## Further reading

Souter, Gavin, *Acts of Parliament: A narrative history of the Senate and House of Representatives*, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne University Press, 1988

Hocking, Jenny, *Gough Whitlam: A moment in history: The biography (Volume 1)*, Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University Publishing, 2009



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