

Edward Gough Whitlam

Prime Minister of Australia 1972–75

Edward Gough Whitlam was born in Melbourne in 1916, and raised in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, as his father pursued a career in the Commonwealth Crown Solicitor's Office. Whitlam studied law at Sydney University before enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force after the Japanese entered World War II. He received his call-up in May 1942.

A member of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) from 1945, Whitlam entered the House of Representatives when he won a by-election for the Sydney seat of Werriwa in November 1952. Often considered a 'silvertail' in a Labor caucus dominated by men of a trade union background, Whitlam nevertheless impressed with his abilities, becoming party deputy leader in 1960 and leader in 1967. As Leader of the Opposition he gave Labor its best chance of winning government since 1949. Assisted by the momentum of the 'It's time' slogan, Whitlam led the ALP to win the 1972 federal election, ending 23 years of Liberal–Country Party coalition government.

The first Whitlam ministry, where all portfolios were shared between Whitlam and deputy leader, Lance Barnard, was sworn in on 5 December. It was replaced on 19 December by the full ministry, which could not be selected until the final make up of caucus (which in Labor governments elect the ministers) was known. Motivated by a reformist zeal, the Whitlam government introduced many initiatives in key areas that included foreign relations, defence, education, health and urban development.

When the non-Labor-dominated Senate attempted to block legislation supporting the government's reform agenda, Whitlam sought – and was granted – a double dissolution. His government was returned in the 1974 double dissolution election, but a combination of ministerial ineptness and personal rivalries over the next 12 months caused the government's popularity to wane. Then the Malcolm Fraser-led Opposition delayed the passage of the Budget supply bills in the Senate in 1975, and the government fell into crisis. It ended only when the Governor-General, John Kerr, controversially dismissed Whitlam's government, and installed Fraser as caretaker Prime Minister, pending a double dissolution election.

Labor was heavily defeated in the election of December 1975. Whitlam continued in parliament as Leader of the Opposition until the end of 1977 and resigned from the House of Representatives on 31 July 1978.

National Archives holdings relating to Gough Whitlam

The National Archives holds a substantial collection of records created by Gough Whitlam in his years as prime minister and member of parliament. Commonwealth records – including Cabinet records – of the Whitlam government period are available once they enter the open access period.

In the tables below links take you to the item or series details in RecordSearch, the Archives collection database. There you can find more information. In many cases you can view entire digitised records.

Selected personal records of Gough Whitlam – held in the Sydney Office

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series number |
|---|------------|---------------|
| Drawings by Tony Rafty | 1952–68 | M546 |
| Records of the Constitution Review Committee | 1956–59 | M178 |
| Photographs relating to Mr Whitlam's parliamentary term of office | 1952–78 | M155 |
| Parliamentary and policy records collected by Mr Whitlam as Deputy Leader and Leader of the Opposition | 1960–72 | M157 |
| Records of the Federal Executive | 1960–78 | M2282 |
| Miscellaneous correspondence of the Australian Labor Party collected by Mr Whitlam | 1960–78 | M2283 |
| Press office – press releases, statements, press conferences, interviews and speeches | 1962–75 | M170 |
| Folders containing acceptances to invitations and replies | 1963–77 | M875 |
| Folders of correspondence relating to messages, forewords and articles written by Mr Whitlam for journals and other publications | 1967–75 | M534 |
| Original cartoons featuring Mr Whitlam | 1967–75 | M547 |
| Correspondence and publications concerning 1968 electoral redistribution | 1968 | M862 |
| Copies of outward correspondence (green copies) – Leader of the Opposition | 1969–72 | M159 |
| Photographs relating to Mr Whitlam's term as Prime Minister | 1972–75 | M151 |
| Press office – Prime Ministerial press releases, speeches, press conference transcripts and transcripts from interviews on radio and television | 1972–75 | M163 |
| Correspondence files | 1972–75 | M514 |
| Files of correspondence relating to ministerial/departmental policies and activities | 1972–75 | M519 |

Cabinet records of the Whitlam government – held in the National Office, Canberra

| Title or description of record | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| Whitlam ministries – folders of Cabinet submissions | 1972–75 | A5915 |

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| <u>Whitlam ministries – folders of decisions of Cabinet and Cabinet committees</u> | 1972–75 | A5925 |
| <u>Whitlam ministries – Cabinet files</u> | 1972–75 | A5931 |
| <u>First Whitlam ministry decisions and administrative actions</u> | 1972 | A5931, CL48 |

Further information

For more information about holdings relating to the period of the Whitlam government see the following fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 239 - The loans affair, 1974–75*
- *Fact sheet 240 - The dismissal, 1975*

Gough Whitlam: Guide to Archives of Australia's Prime Ministers

The Whitlam Years – commentaries on the Cabinet documents of the 1972–75 Whitlam governments.

A collection of personal records of EG Whitlam is held by the Whitlam Institute at the University of Western Sydney.