

The Dismissal

AUTHOR: PAUL KELLY

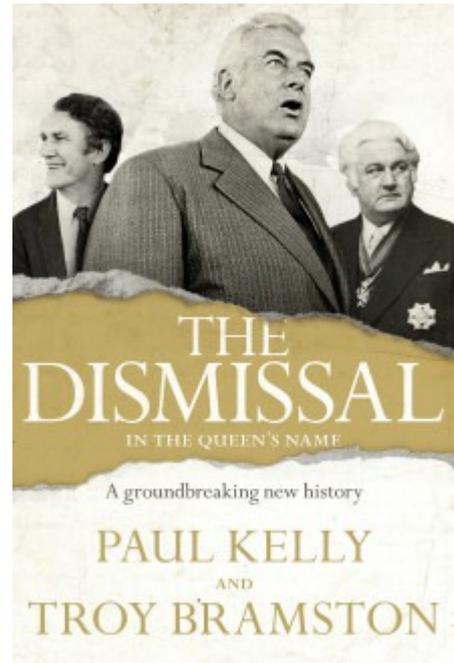
AUTHOR: TROY BRAMSTON

Q&A

With Troy Bramston, co-author (with Paul Kelly) of *The Dismissal*

Why is this event of 40 years ago still relevant to Australians in 2015?

The dismissal of Gough Whitlam's government in the afternoon of 11 November 1975 by Governor-General Sir John Kerr is the most dramatic event in our political history. It was the result of a great parliamentary clash over the budget forced by the opposition led by Malcolm Fraser. This was a contest between political titans – Whitlam and Fraser – with an ambitious and cunning Governor-General in the middle. The political institutions were put under great strain as precedents were shattered and conventions were torched and the pursuit of power. It still matters because this was a highly unsatisfactory solution for Australian democracy.



The book is billed as "a groundbreaking new history". What are some of the surprises readers will find?

We didn't set out to write a book that simply retold a well-known story. We were motivated by the astonishing amount of new archival material that's now available, mostly from Kerr. We also conducted about 40 new interviews. These include former Liberal and Labor leaders, alongside judges, politicians, political staff, party officials, public servants and members of the royal household. We interviewed former US President Jimmy Carter about any possible CIA links to the dismissal. We also accessed UK archives concerning the British High Commission in Canberra and the office of then British PM Harold Wilson.

As a result, we reveal what the Palace and the British government really thought about the dismissal; the extent and ramifications of Kerr's secret discussions with High Court judge Anthony Mason; what Fraser really knew and when he knew it; the astonishing mistakes that Whitlam made; and how the High Court has lived with Sir Garfield Barwick's legacy. We analyse the perennial claims about a CIA link to the crisis; and recount what the party leaders who came after Whitlam and Fraser thought of the actions of their predecessors.

For a reader who doesn't have a living memory of the Dismissal – would your book be a good place to start?

Absolutely. We also made sure we used the key insights from previously published books, newspaper accounts and documentaries concerning the dismissal. But we wanted to use the new material – archival documents and fresh interviews – to give the story a dramatic reinterpretation that yielded insights for readers who may or may not be familiar with the dismissal. In our book, you'll find that we document the crisis from key vantage points: the Palace, Government House, the Labor government, the opposition parties, the public service and the High Court.

It's a political drama, and a human drama – is this story more one than the other?

The politics and the personalities are what make the story so compelling. They infuse each other. The Whitlam government was beset by scandal and chaos that was exploited by the Fraser-led opposition. Much of the dysfunction of the government was caused by human factors as ambitions collided with reality and the flaws of the principal players were exposed. But they operate within a political system and the key institutions were stretched and pushed more than ever before. The crisis was caused by a cocktail of ruthlessness, incompetence and deception. It's unlikely to be repeated because the political circumstances are unlikely to be repeated, nor are larger-than-life personalities like those in 1975 likely to reemerge any time soon.

Of the key characters in the book, who do you personally find most compelling?

This is a book that is dispassionate in its analysis and brutal in its conclusions. There are no heroes in the book. Whitlam's blunders in the crisis were sometimes beyond belief. He missed all the warning signs, didn't think strategically or undertake contingency planning. Fraser's ruthlessness still shocks. He risked all on being able to read Kerr better than Whitlam, and he did. But, as we explore, Fraser paid a price for his strategy and to some degree it affected his reputation and the performance of his government. Kerr outwitted and outlasted Whitlam but he's been condemned by history. We show the extent to which he failed the duty of a wise vice-regal representative and acted imprudently in his dealings during the crisis.

What did your research involve? Who did you meet, where did you look, what did you find?

We spent hundreds of hours in many archives in files piled so high you couldn't jump over them. We got new papers cleared for access in the National Archives. We obtained oral history interviews in the National Library that hadn't been heard before. We were also fortunate that several people gave us access to their own private papers. We also undertook research in the UK and obtained access to papers not made public before. The interviews with key players were fascinating. We were given incredible insight into events and personalities. You can learn the most revealing things by looking at a one-page letter, peeking inside a secret diary, reviewing a file of memos or talking to someone who was an eyewitness to a significant moment. We were both stunned by some of things we learnt from the hard slog of archival research and interviewing.

Have you always been fascinated by this story? Or was there a time later in your career when it grabbed your interest?

Paul was a young journalist working in the Canberra press gallery during the crisis, spoke to Whitlam and Fraser at the time, and reported it for *The Australian*. He subsequently wrote two books, *The Unmaking of Gough* (1976) and *November 1975* (1995) about the dismissal.

I was born six weeks after the dismissal, and became fascinated by it while at high school. When Kerr died in 1991, I wrote a school assessment on the dismissal, which referenced Paul's books – and got 30/30! Many years later, I interviewed Whitlam and Fraser and other key figures in the dismissal. To have the opportunity to write a new book about it with the leading political journalist and historian of the past 30 years was irresistible.