

Post War Australia: Politics, Indigenous Affairs and Women

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Category: 20th Century: Political History

NOTE: This piece of work was undertaken over a 55 minute period in an in-class written exam. The content deals with some of the Year 9 and 10 Australian History Syllabus in NSW, Australia.

How and why was Gough Whitlam dismissed on November 11, 1975?

In 1975, Gough Whitlam's Labor Government faced a hostile senate. They held a minority of seats in the senate, even though they were the party in office at the time. The events that followed led up to the first sacking of an Australian government in their history, on Remembrance Day, 1975.

Gough Whitlam was a superb orator, a handsome and tall man and packed full to the brim with fabulous visions for the future of Australia. His motto, 'It's Time', symbolized that it was time for Labor – after the lengthy reign of the Liberal Government – to rise to power. Whitlam pledged a myriad of promising reforms and was consequently voted into Prime Ministerial office by the people of Australia. As time passed, Gough Whitlam's reforms began to run low on funding, necessary for their establishment. This was due to the fact that the senate was not passing his party's supply bills – the money for resources needed to run the country and fund government operations.

Gough Whitlam was rapidly losing popularity with the Australian public as a result. Inflation was ever rising, reaching the monumentally high rate of 17%, and unemployment was at 5%. Gough Whitlam just didn't seem to be producing the goods.



Figure 1 - Edward Gough Whitlam.
Australian Prime Minister (Labor) 1972 - 1975

Many people started to question his ability to run the nation, as corruption and incompetence started to show in his party's actions. The media played a significant part in the Whitlam government demise, portraying Labor in a negative light. This alleviated the problems the Whitlam Government faced during their demise.

The Media tended to focus on obscure mishaps, blowing them far out of proportion. These included the in-depth coverage of the purchase of the 'Blue Poles' painting (\$1,000,000) which was seen as wasting tax money, and the affair of a Labor Senator with Juni Morosi. To add to the dilemma, an oil crisis further added to the social and economic downfall in Australia.

There was one person who had a vast amount of power, and had the ability to put an end to these series of crises – John Kerr, the Governor General. Liberal Leader Malcolm Fraser continued to block supply bills within the senate, and the situation was becoming dire. Another tactic of the Liberals was to replace

outgoing (whether they be deceased or retired) Labor Senators, with Liberal seat holders.

As November 11 grew nearer, Governor General Kerr met with the Shadow Attorney, Bob Ellicott QC. Mr. Ellicott legally stated that John Kerr was the only man able to dismiss a Prime Minister, and the pressure on John Kerr was intensifying.

At this stage, the Whitlam Government merely had the funds to last them until November 30th, about 6 weeks time. By then, he must have forced the senate into passing his supply bills. Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser called for an election, but on November 11th –Remembrance Day- 1975, Governor General John Kerr publicly dismissed Gough Whitlam's Labor Government, on the steps of Old Parliament house, Canberra. National outrage immediately erupted. Unionists and University students demonstrated outside Parliament House, and protests all around Australia boomed out the phrase "We want Gough!"

The sacking was narrowed down to 'failure to perform'.

Malcolm Fraser was appointed caretaker Prime Minister under which he guaranteed the passing of supply bills, called an election and did not introduce any new policies over the duration of his temporary role. Gough Whitlam lost the proceeding election in a landslide and Labor remained as opposition following the dismissal. Gough Whitlam's inability to produce what he pledged in his campaign ultimately cost him his Prime Ministerial position in government.

How have the rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people in Australia changed during the post-war period?

During the post-war period the rights and freedoms of Aboriginals have changed in a very significant manner.

During the 1940's a new concept of assimilation was introduced as the policy towards indigenous peoples in Australia, to replace the previous policy, protectionism. Assimilation aimed to have all people of Aboriginal or mixed blood to live like "white" Australians. In the 40's and 50's the policy of assimilation fell short of equality in three major ways: the fact that Aboriginals did not receive equal opportunities in society, they were paid less than regular "white" Australians, and their roles in World War Two and the booming cattle industry went all but unrecognised.

During assimilation, many children were taken from their families too, and made to live like "white" Australians. In the 60's the Aboriginals began fighting for their right to equality and in 1965 the "Commonwealth Conference for Aboriginal Policies" was held. This led to the replacement of assimilation by a new policy, integration, in 1965.

Integration allowed the culture of indigenous people to co-exist with that of non-indigenous people. In the midst of the integration policy, the Aboriginals took part in what is now known as the 1967 Referendum. Section 51 and 127 of the Australian Constitution – the set of laws by which a country is governed – were discriminatory towards indigenous people under the integration guidelines. The Referendum resulted in these two sections being amended.

During the re-entry of the Labor government into power in the 1970's, another policy had been conceived – "self determination". This policy was implemented under Gough Whitlam's Labor Government, allowing "indigenous peoples to determine all aspects of their lives". In 1976 however,

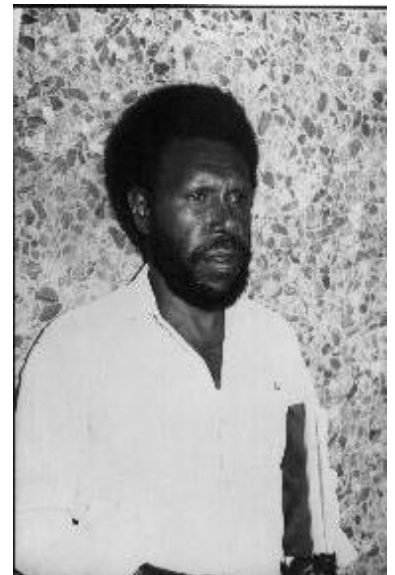


Figure 2 - Eddie Koiki Mabo. Brought about the recognition of Native Title and Indigenous Land Rights, plus the overturning of "terra nullius"

with the return of Liberal to power under Malcolm Fraser, "self management" was employed as the new policy towards indigenous Australians. It shared a very similar principle to self determination. During the period between self management's introduction and the establishment of the latest and current policy – Self empowerment, 1996 – a significant court case took place.

Eddie Mabo and a group of others campaigned and went to court for land rights for indigenous Australians. Native Title was granted to them, and through this, human remains, sacred sites and sites of historical or cultural importance to the indigenous Australians, were under the full control of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Thus, all collections had to be returned by museums, and control of the land was handed over too. Ultimately, the change in rights and freedoms for the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders during the post-war period was monumentally significant. They have definitely achieved more rights and freedoms as each of the policies were amended and altered.

The current push is now for reconciliation, a further benefit on top of self empowerment, which involves "accepting the history and culture of indigenous people" and "apologising for our past acts". The rights and freedoms of Aboriginal people in Australia have changed for the better – for them particularly – since the conclusion of World War Two, even if it took a great deal of effort and heart.

How have the rights and freedoms of Australian women changed during the post-war period?

During the post-war period, the rights and freedoms of Australian women have changed dramatically. This is mainly due to the persistent and tenacious actions taken throughout the women's liberation movement. While this movement was taking place, another famous anti-discriminatory movement was going on in America - the American Civil Rights movement - led by Martin Luther King. This, in a way, would have encouraged and compelled the women in their fight for their cause: women's rights and freedoms.

Firstly, a major figure in the post-war liberation movement for women was Germaine Greer. Greer organised many demonstrations aimed at achieving a variety of goals. Her influence on the movement was significant because it saw the eventual success of it. Her contribution to the changing rights and freedoms of Australian women was second to none, some may say.

One of the freedoms/rights passed by the federal government was the "sex discrimination act" which disallowed any forms of discrimination towards women.

Numerous other rights and freedoms were demonstrated and protested for, eventually being granted a lot of them. These included divorce laws, which became less discriminatory and more just towards the wife, and the improvement of health care ; this resulted in reduced infant mortality, and death during birth. Child care was also put in place to allow women to have jobs in order to accommodate with divorce or low earning husbands.

A key aspect of the women's liberation movement in the post-war period was the bid for "equal pay and equal value". This arose amid the onset of demonstrations against the fact that women -as citizens- had to pay tax and live under the government of their liking or not, could not receive equal pay while still paying full tax. Furthermore, they did not possess the privilege to vote (which was earlier granted as franchise to the suffragettes).

To conclude, the rights and freedoms of women in the post-war era took a drastic turn, for the better. This all resulted due to the visionary and compelled demonstrations and liberationists in the women's liberation movement for rights and freedoms.

No references are included as the extended response task was done under exam conditions, without the use of any sources, based on knowledge from the term's syllabus content.