

Bill Denny with a banner from the day governor-general Sir John Kerr dismissed Gough Whitlam as prime minister

EXCLUSIVE

TROY BRAMSTON
SENIOR WRITER

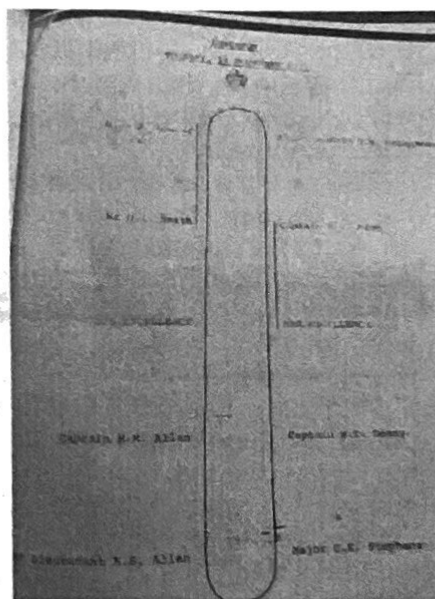
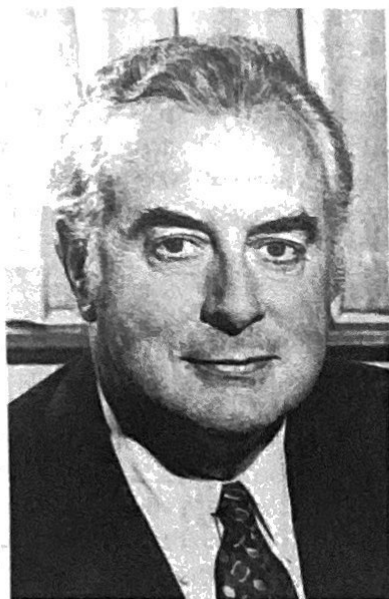
Lunchtime on November 11, 1975, was unusually busy at Government House. As governor-general John Kerr dismissed Gough Whitlam in his study and Malcolm Fraser, waiting in a room down the corridor, was sworn in as prime minister, three army captains sat in the drawing room.

Bill Denny, Rod Allan and Bob Aley were being interviewed for the position of aide-de-camp, staying overnight, and were having a drink before lunch with Lady Kerr in the drawing room opposite Kerr's study as the most dramatic day in Australian politics unfolded.

"Well, I've sacked your prime minister," Kerr said after Fraser left via the state entrance and re-joined the army captains. "I've put another one in his place. God help us all. And I think you better put another 100 police on the front gate."

The interviews with the army captains and other senior staff at Government House, several speaking publicly for the first time 50 years after Whitlam's dismissal, are revealed in a new biography of Gough Whitlam.

Mr Denny, who recorded an account of what happened shortly after, recalled that Kerr had a gin and tonic before seeing Whitlam and Fraser as the crisis over sup-



From left, former Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam; the seating plan for the lunch; and former governor-general John Kerr

ply reached its climax. Aide-de-camp Chris Stephens informed Kerr that Whitlam had arrived via the private entrance to see him.

The army captains kept chatting to Lady Kerr over pre-lunch drinks. A short while later, air force aide-de-camp Alf Allen entered the drawing room and said the governor-general had "sacked the prime minister" just moments before Kerr rejoined them.

Mr Allan remembered being "completely surprised" and in "shock" as they tried to make sense of the news. They wondered whether this meant that Frank Crean, the deputy prime minister, was now prime minister. Mr Denny remembered his reaction: "Surprise, shock, bewilderment, confusion."

After Kerr explained Whitlam had been dismissed and Fraser was now prime minister, he invited the army captains to lunch. They were joined by Mr Stephens, official secretary David Smith, air commodore D.W. Colquhoun, Miss J. Lester, Mr Allen and Lady Kerr. "Sir John seemed very pre-occupied," Mr Denny remembered. "One minute he would be discussing the dismissal in detail. Then he would suggest we change the topic. A minute or two later he'd raise it again only later to suggest we talk about something else."

Mr Allan remembered Kerr repeatedly asking what everyone thought of the dismissal. "He knew what he had done had consequences and that people would

be protesting against it," he recalled. "He asked how we thought our colleagues in the armed forces would view this action."

Kerr's mood swung from worry to relief, and he was silent during periods of the lunch, Mr Denny said. Kerr was "extremely concerned" about public reaction and "the decision was weighing heavily on him" yet there was also "a sense of relief" that the crisis over supply had been seemingly resolved.

During the lunch for 12, conversation turned to whether Buckingham Palace had been informed. Mr Smith asked if he should phone London. Lady Kerr said: "I think you should do it straight away, David."

At this point, Kerr was sitting

"quite silent" and "almost morose" Mr Denny recalled. The governor-general eventually said: "Yes, I think you better do that." As Smith prepared to leave, Kerr asked him to convey to the Palace that he did not tell the Queen in advance because "he did not want to involve her and wanted to be entirely responsible for his own actions".

This exchange confirmed to Mr Denny that the Queen did not know in advance of the decision, and therefore served to "debunk" any "conspiracy theory" about Palace collusion.

Mr Denny thought Lady Kerr "dominated" and "manipulated" her husband, and "fuelled his paranoia" that Whitlam might sack him first. In his record of the day, Mr Denny wrote: "(Kerr) had a desperate need to be a man of influence - to make his mark."

Meanwhile, protesters arrived at the Government House gates. A banner was seized and given to Mr Denny as a memento. It read: "Stay in Whitlam - out the Kerr - General Strike."

Mr Aley was appointed aide-de-camp. Mr Stephens continued in a senior role at Government House. Mr Denny later served as aide-de-camp to governor-general Sir Zelman Cowen.

Troy Bramston's Gough Whitlam: The Vista of the New is published by HarperCollins on October 28. Read an extract from the book in The Australian Weekend Magazine next Saturday