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Kelly, Paul & Bramston, Troy - *The Dismissal: In the Queen's Name*, Penguin Australia: Melbourne ISBN 9780670079209

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To coincide with the 40th anniversary of the ousting of an Australian prime minister by a governor-general, Paul Kelly and Troy Bramston released *The Dismissal: In the Queen's Name*, which claims to offer the definitive account of the saga. The words written on this dramatic episode of Australian political and history are as countless as the stars in the night sky, and Kelly himself has already written a book on the dismissal. Does this book add anything new that Kelly's own book *The Dismissal: Australia's most sensational power struggle* hadn't already told us? Is it the 'groundbreaking new history' that it claims to be? Could they perhaps have thought of a new title, and not just a new subtitle? The book does draw on previously unused primary source material, including a great deal of material from Kerr himself. It may not overturn established views on the matter, but it is well researched and can be seen as filling in some gaps.

Kelly and Bramston quite effectively highlight the deception at the heart of the 1975 crisis. Here they are on firm ground. It really is hard to describe Governor-General Sir John Kerr's actions as having been anything other than deceitful. He never offered a hint to Whitlam of his true thinking, let alone the opportunity to discuss a way forward. Nor did he offer Whitlam an opportunity to respond on 11 November 1975. Whitlam firmly believed that Kerr was on his side, right up until the fateful moment. The dismissal of Whitlam was devised in secrecy, in collusion with others, implemented by surprise and planned so that no recourse would undo it.

Kelly and Bramston do, however, have Kerr seeing such secrecy as necessary, that had Whitlam had an inkling of what he was planning, the Prime Minister would have sacked him. I'm sure he would have, but self-preservation is not the role of a governor-general. The other reason the authors give for Kerr's deception, (and this is the reason Kerr himself always stressed), is that he wanted to protect the Queen from involvement. That Kerr did not inform the Palace of his plans appears clear. The Palace was appreciative of *not* having been consulted, in the sense that it was not dragged into Australia's domestic politics. However the authors are again on firm ground in arguing the Queen would never have done in the United Kingdom what in Australia was done in her name, and that the Palace was more than happy to see Kerr leave the office when he finally go in 1977.

One important gap that the book fills is to establish fairly conclusively that Kerr forewarned Fraser of the pending dismissal in a phone call. Kerr always denied having warned Fraser, but the weight of evidence is against him here. The authors have uncovered a copy of a note made by Fraser at 10am on November 11th – three hours ahead of the dismissal – that leaves little room for doubt that he was warned. Fraser's role in encouraging Kerr to act should not be overlooked, either. In a November 6th meeting between the two, Fraser (according to Kerr) warned that not acting 'would be a grave blow to the powers of the Crown' which Kerr's failure to exercise would 'destroy forever'. Kerr also feared that Fraser would target him publically as indecisive.

The political message was obvious: if Fraser failed, he would blame Kerr. Kerr would be depicted as a weak governor-general who succumbed to Whitlam's intimidation and refused to do his duty. Kerr understood.

Kelly claims that in an off-the-record discussion he had with Fraser that same night, Fraser told Kelly he believed the Governor-General would sack the Prime Minister.

Kerr's dealings with Sir Garfield Barwick, Chief Justice of the High Court, and High Court judge Sir Anthony Mason, also come under scrutiny in the book. Extraordinarily, until 2012, the critical role Mason played in advising Kerr had been unknown – the attention here is thus welcome. However, Jenny Hocking beat Kelly and Bramston to this information in her biography of Kerr. The impression the authors give is that the role of these two eminent legal men in influencing and reassuring Kerr on his decision to oust Whitlam cannot be understated. Barwick's advice – Whitlam had told Kerr *not* to seek advice from Barwick – provided Kerr the legal cover he felt he needed. Mason's influence – again, it must be stressed, not publically known – can be summed up by the fact that he drafted the letter terminating Whitlam's commission.

The authors devote a chapter to dismissing the argument, put forward most stridently by journalist John Pilger, that the CIA had a hand in Whitlam's ousting. This was in the context of a crisis in the US-Australia intelligence relationship, centred on the status of Pine Gap, the giant vacuum that is America's most treasured intelligence asset in the southern hemisphere. I will defer to Guy Rundle's November 2015 article for *Crikey* (<https://www.crikey.com.au/2015/11/25/rundle-proving-the-cia-backed-conspiracy-that-brought-down-whitlam/>), to show just how sloppy and misleading this chapter of the book is. The final word on this matter, though, is as likely to belong to an Assange or a Snowden as it is to a Kelly, Bramston, Rundle or Pilger.

To Kelly and Bramston, the events of 1975 are above all, a clash of personalities. Personalities so peculiar, they stress, that their likes are unlikely to be seen again. But is this really the heart of the matter? Has the 'born to rule' attitude disappeared? Is the ambition of a Malcolm Turnbull really no match for a Malcolm Fraser? Can Tony Abbott really be said to have not believed in the illegitimacy of his political opponents just as fervently as Fraser's Coalition? Kevin Rudd was not removed by a governor general, but was his sense of betrayal no less real?

Paul Kelly has in recent years been fond of painting Australian politics as being in crisis. Without doubt, the Labor and Liberal parties have shown a frenzied lust for tearing themselves apart during this time. If there is a weakness in Kelly's commentary on such matters, then the same weakness appears in this book – its focus rarely strays from a few individuals with less concern for wider forces. A focus on the personalities of Whitlam, Fraser and Kerr alone will never explain the dismissal in full. In the same manner, neither will a focus on Rudd, Gillard, Abbott and Turnbull explain the current malaise at the heart of Australian politics.

Kelly's (and he's not alone here) perpetual criticism is that recent governments' key failure is having lost a focus on 'reform'. This reform, it should be noted, must only be reform that aligns with the stale old neoliberal orthodoxy – an orthodoxy accepted with religious fervour by Australia's political, economic and media elites for decades – and is therefore hardly 'reform' at all. That politicians face difficulties implementing such 'reform' perplexes the likes of Kelly for whom it can only be seen as a failure of personality. That the disenchantment of the populace with the Liberal and Labor parties might be a symptom of the nation's economy and society crashing ashore on the rocks of a decades-long failed neoliberal experiment, aggravated by globalisation, does not occur to Kelly. Neither does the idea that the failure of this neoliberal orthodoxy on a global scale might help explain the appeal of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, of Syriza and Marine Le Pen, and various independents and smaller parties in Australia. To Kelly, it is personalities that matter above all, in 1975 and four decades later.

So, if it is personality above all, positioned within a moral drama, what are the authors' verdicts on the key protagonists? To Whitlam they award a zero. In the words of the authors, he possessed not a skerrick of political intelligence, of emotional intelligence, nor a modicum of human understanding. He heard nothing and saw nothing, they assert. He should have been more open to Kerr. The authors condemn Kerr too, as secretive, as deceptive, as wanting to be written into history, and for various flawed judgements. The authors argue that neither Kerr, Whitlam nor Fraser can be seen positively in 1975. It must be said, however, that Fraser does not come under anything approaching the scrutiny of Whitlam and Kerr in this book. Nor, as they point out, did Fraser come under Whitlam and Labor's scrutiny to the degree that Kerr did.

With the passing of four decades, how does the significance of Whitlam's removal stack up now that key protagonists are no longer with us? Is it *the* defining moment in Australian politics that many have portrayed it as? After all, 20th century Australian politics had already witnessed a constitutional crisis and 'dismissal' – indeed, one that Kelly and Bramston argue with which Kerr was thoroughly familiar. In 1932, the premier of Australia's most populous state at a time when premiers had more power, was sacked by the NSW Governor. Looking back from the 21st century, was the removal of Jack Lang any less significant than the removal of Whitlam? Were the armed forces put on alert in 1975 as they were in 1932? Arguably, Lang pushed the boundaries harder than any Australian political leader of the 20th century. The divisions of 1916 too, were no less bitter than 1975, and in the long view probably make 1975 pale in comparison. None of this is to downplay the shock and drama of 1975, the rage that has indeed been maintained. For many of those who were witness to the events, the answer is 'yes' it was their defining political moment.

As I write this review, the opening salvos of a long election campaign are being fired. Labor Senator Stephen Conroy (now retired), in response to the proroguing of parliament to allow a double dissolution election,

thundered that:

... what we've had today is the ghost of 1975 revisited upon us. The long, dead arm of Sir John Kerr crawl out of his grave ... to participate in a travesty of democracy in this country... This is an absolute affront. We've seen today a governor-general overturn the will of this chamber, a democratically elected chamber. If the Queen had been asked to interfere in the British parliament in this way, there is no way on this earth this would have happened.

Whitlam, Kerr and Fraser are no longer with us, but clearly the passions aroused by 1975 still are.

About the reviewer

Dr. Rowan Day teaches history and politics in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University. His research interests include Australian social, political and economic history, and contemporary international relations. His most recent publication is *Murder in Tottenham: Australia's first political assassination* published by Anchor Books, Australia in 2015.