

“Palace letters” point to the plotting behind the 1975 constitutional coup in Australia

By Mike Head
17 July 2020

Further light has been shed this week on the constitutional coup involving the dismissal of the Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on November 11, 1975 and the acute political crisis leading up to it.

Tuesday saw the long-blocked release of the intensive correspondence between the British Queen’s Palace and the man who executed the coup, Governor-General Sir John Kerr. The letters revealed how closely Kerr conspired with the monarch and her top-level advisers in the British ruling establishment in implementing Whitlam’s removal.

Kerr was a US-connected ex-intelligence officer and judge, whom Whitlam himself had appointed as governor-general in July 1974. Kerr served as the instrument for the government’s removal precisely because the 1901 Australian Constitution preserves the “reserve powers” of the British monarchy, via the governor-general, to dismiss a government.

But Whitlam’s removal did not originate with Kerr, nor with the Palace. To understand the significance of their letters the events must be placed in their historic context.

The “Canberra Coup” was part of the response in the ruling class internationally to the global upsurge of the working class and potentially revolutionary struggles that erupted with May–June 1968 general strike in France. That was followed by the “Hot Autumn” in Italy in 1969, a general strike in Australia in May 1969, a wave of struggles in Britain, culminating in the bringing down of the Heath government in 1974, the downfall of the Nixon administration in the US in 1974 and the final defeat of the American military in Vietnam in 1975, and the ousting of dictatorships in Portugal, Greece and Spain in the period 1974–76.

Whitlam’s government was ousted because it had failed to stem the powerful movement of the working class that had brought the Labor Party to office in 1972, after 23 years of conservative party government, and because of related concerns in Washington over Labor’s ability to stem the popular opposition to the US military alliance, triggered by the horrors of the Vietnam War, and the presence of the key US satellite spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia.

Whitlam had led the Labor Party to electoral victory in 1972 on a program of limited social and economic reform. However, the formation of a Labor government sparked working-class demands for higher wages and better conditions. Whitlam called a referendum to hand the federal government the power to control prices and incomes, only to suffer a resounding defeat. The following year, 1974, saw the greatest levels of strikes since 1919, resulting in the largest wage rises in Australian history.

In the midst of this turmoil, and facing a disastrous defeat in Vietnam, the Nixon administration dispatched Marshall Green as the US ambassador to Australia. Green had a record with US-backed coups, including while he was the US ambassador to Indonesia during the CIA-backed coup of 1965-66.

There is no doubt that Green, the White House and the CIA had a hand in the destabilisation of the Whitlam government that preceded its dismissal. That included businessmen with various intelligence connections embroiling the government in a scandal involving overseas loans. This “loans affair” provided the pretext for the Liberal Party opposition to block the government’s 1975 budget in the Senate, depriving it of funds, which in turn became the justification for Kerr to sack Whitlam.

What the letters show

Between 15 August 1974 and 5 December 1977, Kerr exchanged no less than 212 letters with the Queen through her official private secretary, Sir Martin Charteris, a former high-ranking military officer. From Kerr’s side, they read like detailed intelligence briefings on the political turmoil wracking the Labor government, including the “loans affair,” complete with attachments such as newspaper clippings and press releases.

So sensitive is the correspondence that its contents were to be kept secret, on the instructions of Kerr and Buckingham Palace, backed by successive Australian governments, for many more years at least. To secure the letters’ release took a four-year legal battle by historian Jenny Hocking, all the way to the High Court, Australia’s supreme court, which finally overturned two previous spurious rulings that the papers were “private or personal records.”

Letter by letter, Kerr consulted with the Queen and her advisers on the use of the monarchy’s “reserve powers” to oust Whitlam. As early as September 20—three weeks before the opposition blocked supply—Kerr told Charteris that if Whitlam refused to advise an election in any future deadlock, “I may have to find someone who will.”

Charteris assured Kerr of the Queen’s support if Whitlam tried to head off his removal by asking her to dismiss the governor-general instead. Kerr had discussed this danger with the Queen’s son Prince Charles in September 1975. If Whitlam made such an approach, “you may be sure that The Queen would take most unkindly to it,” Charteris wrote.

A week before the coup, Buckingham Palace effectively gave Kerr a green light to proceed. In a November 4 letter, Charteris advised Kerr that the reserve powers “or the prerogative of the Crown to dissolve parliament” still existed. “I think you are playing the ‘Vice-Regal’

hand with skill and wisdom,” Charteris wrote.

Fear of the working class response

In the November 4 letter, Charteris warned Kerr that he should exercise those powers only once the political crisis had reached the point “when there is demonstrably no other course.” That caution was driven by two inter-connected concerns: the rising danger of a general strike, and the need to protect the institution of the monarchy from being publicly discredited.

A mass political movement of workers, students, youth and professional people had erupted against the Liberals’ blocking of supply, although the entire Labor and union leadership worked to stifle it.

Throughout his letters, Kerr referred to the threat posed by the working class, while reporting that Whitlam was doing his best to prevent a revolt. On October 17, for example, he nervously informed Charteris: “The prime minister [Whitlam] appealed to the trade union movement not to stage a general strike.”

The dismissal itself sparked days of mass strikes and huge protests. Once again, Whitlam and the unions, under the leadership of then Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Bob Hawke, worked to block demands for a general strike.

Kerr told the Palace on November 17: “The leaders of the Labor Party appear to want to cool things.” On November 20, he reported: “I believe the Labor Party is trying to keep street violence and other forms of unsavoury demonstrations at low ebb.”

Amid this upheaval, the Palace was anxious not to be seen as directly involved in the dismissal. “I was of the opinion that it was better for Her Majesty not to know in advance,” Kerr wrote on November 11.

After the coup, the letters from the Palace contain constant reassurances to Kerr that he had made the right decision. On November 17, Charteris wrote that “in NOT informing The Queen,” Kerr had acted “with admirable consideration for Her Majesty’s position.”

Charteris told Kerr that Whitlam had phoned Buckingham Palace soon after his dismissal to politely suggest that he be “re-commissioned as prime minister” now that the Senate had passed the budget.

Whitlam’s plea was promptly rejected. But it demonstrated his own loyalty to the ruling class, and his preoccupation with trying to head off the explosive strikes that erupted throughout the working class.

Whitlam’s acceptance of the coup was underscored in June 1976, when he and wife dined with Charteris and had an audience with the Queen. Charteris told Kerr that Whitlam “was in excellent form” at dinner and “remained sweet and reasonable, spoke warmly of the Queen, and at least conceded that it could be argued that you had acted in accordance with the constitution!”

Media whitewash

Throughout the corporate media worried efforts are being made to whitewash the contents of the correspondence, echoing Buckingham Palace, which issued a statement claiming that the letters proved that “neither Her Majesty nor the Royal Household had any part to play in Kerr’s decision to dismiss Whitlam.”

Most vociferous are the *Australian’s* editor-at-large Paul Kelly, who claimed the letters “explode” the notion of the Queen authorising Whitlam’s dismissal, and the *Australian’s* editorial on Wednesday, which declared that the correspondence put to rest all the “wild ghosts

and myths of the Dismissal,” including that it was “a conspiracy driven from the US by the CIA.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. The “Royal Household”—a euphemism for the British political-military-intelligence establishment—was clearly up to its neck in Kerr’s plotting. And it is inconceivable that these agencies would proceed without the closest consultation with their US counterparts.

Kerr himself retained intimate links with the Australian, British and US spy agencies, as well as with the US-linked Australian military forces, which he placed on alert during the coup. US intelligence whistleblower Christopher Boyce reported that senior CIA officials referred to the governor-general as “our man Kerr.”

Documents published in 2012 showed that in August 1974, US President Nixon ordered a secret study of American relations with Australia. Nixon asked officials to explore options for relocating US intelligence facilities elsewhere.

Whitlam was actually a loyal supporter of the US alliance, as well as the British crown, the parliamentary elite and the capitalist profit system itself. But the fear in the ruling class, both in Washington and Canberra, was that his government would lose control over the working class and the growing anti-US alliance sentiment.

Together with the military coup in Chile in September 1973, the Labor government’s dismissal was one of the first acts in what became an international counter-offensive against the working class, spearheaded by figures such as Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain. The craven acquiescence of Whitlam and the unions, like their counterparts internationally, encouraged the capitalist class worldwide to go on the attack.

Today, the situation is even more unstable than it was 45 years ago. The worsening COVID-19 disaster, ever-widening social inequality and mounting global economic and military tensions, are propelling youth and working people worldwide into battle against the deteriorating living conditions, the shredding of basic democratic rights and threat of war.

There is also intensifying pressure on the Australian corporate, political and military-intelligence establishment to align ever-more closely with the US as it steps up its trade war and conflict against China.

In these conditions, the tearing aside of the façade of parliamentary democracy in 1975 must serve as a warning of the readiness of the capitalist class to again resort to the reserve powers of the monarchy or other openly authoritarian measures to suppress the rising struggles of the working class.

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