

# MARGARET WHITLAM

## At last, her story



She was the PM's wife who has refused to live in her husband's shadow. **David Leser** talks to Margaret Whitlam about Gough, the Dismissal and growing old.

**FORMER AUSTRALIAN** Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his wife, Margaret, are arriving at the ultra-chic restaurant, Le Pre Catalan, in Paris' Bois de Boulogne garden district, for a lunch at which they are guests of honour.

The year is 1985 and Gough Whitlam is Australia's ambassador to the Paris-based scientific and cultural organisation, UNESCO. With them in the car are their daughter, Catherine, and a family friend, Australian writer Kathy Lette. The car has just pulled up outside the restaurant, where the head waiter and the maitre d' have been expecting the arrival of their distinguished guests.

"I don't know whether she [Margaret] had lost weight," Kathy recalls, "but as she got out, the elastic on the waistband of her skirt went and she was suddenly standing in a puddle of skirt and she was wearing these huge white step-ins, thigh-length down to the knees.

"We couldn't move. We all just stood there, open-mouthed. The maitre d' and his welcome party were frozen ... like Stonehenge monuments.

"We were all staring at Margaret, waiting for her cue, to see what she would do. Out

of the restaurant windows, the French elite are looking out at her, open-mouthed.

"I would have gone and jumped off the Seine Bridge, but Margaret just looked down and said, 'Oh, hello'. That's exactly what she did, she went, 'Oh, hello'.

"She turned around and – she must have done this on purpose – with her bottom facing the window, towards the upper-class French voyeurs, and bending from the waist, because she's not good at bending from the knee, she gave them the full view of the Whitlam posterior.

"Then she picked up the skirt, zipped it up, turned around and said, 'Onwards'. And onward we all cruised into the restaurant, as if to the chateau born. She was not fazed – not a blush, not a raised eyebrow from her. Nothing, just absolute calm. Gough was on the other side of the car oblivious to what had happened, but Catherine and I were in hysterics by then.

"And, of course, the French, being French, did nothing. They just kept their noses so far up in the air we were looking up every nostril. I thought, 'What a woman'. The French are supposed to be suave, but she out-suaved them."

**MARGARET WHITLAM** is sitting in her living room overlooking a glimmering Sydney bay, the slanting winter light dancing in her thick silver hair and in the pools of her Pacific-blue eyes. She is laughing at the memory of that French farce nearly two decades ago, but offering up her own important clarifications.

"It's true," she says, "I did [lose my skirt] ... but her description of my underwear is not exactly true. I was wearing the usual flesh-coloured tights, flesh-coloured pantyhose and flesh-coloured knickers on top."

And no, she doubts she ever gave them the *full* Whitlam posterior either, perhaps an oblique angle, and she certainly didn't say, "Onwards". She said, "*En avant*", which, in French, means roughly the same thing: "Let's go". A subtle, but important difference, she'll have you know.

Furthermore, as Margaret points out gaily, Kathy Lette is in no position to gloat over other people's misfortunes. After all, the Australian writer spent an entire evening with her and Gough in Paris once telling a French ambassador that his wife was "very frozen" (*très gelé*) when she'd meant to say, "very pretty" (*très jolie*).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY INGVAR KENNE. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY CRAIG BEAGLEHOLE. COURTESY OF MARGARET WHITLAM.



Margaret Whitlam, 86, at the Sydney home she shares with husband Gough, 90, Australia's iconic former prime minister. Above left: Attending a ball in the 1960s.



Margaret Whitlam gives a big belly-laugh at the thought of it and her eyes sparkle with mischievous delight. Her body might be crumbling from osteoporosis and spinal deterioration, but a lifetime with the Confucian figure of Gough Whitlam has refined an already natural gift for sharp ripostes and self-deprecating humour, not to mention warmth, kindness, curiosity and an absence of pomp or vanity.

And it is these qualities – among many others – that help explain why Australians have always loved this prepossessing woman and why their affections are likely to deepen as the details of a new book on her life become known.

**“I’M ON MY THIRD PACEMAKER. IT’S RIDICULOUS, ISN’T IT? WHILE I KEEP GOING, I’LL KEEP GOING.”**

Written by her friend, author Susan Mitchell, *Margaret Whitlam: A Biography* is a deeply revealing and, for the most part, sympathetic investigation.

After years of deflecting would-be biographers, Margaret, at the age of 86, has finally said yes to the idea of having her life chronicled. “For years, people have been asking me to let them do it,” she tells *The Weekly*, “or to encourage me to do it. But I just felt it was not my thing.”

So why now? “Because my daughter in particular, my kids in general, said to me: ‘They’ll do it when you’re dead and they’ll get it all wrong, so you might as well do it and say yes to somebody. You know Susie [Mitchell] writes well. You like her. She’s a friend.’”

Undoubtedly, it needed that kind of trust for Margaret to allow someone to go ferreting around in the dark and often-neglected corners of her psyche. Margaret actually took to calling it “phone sex”, the mention of which now sends her again into gales of laughter.

“We were both very, very busy,” she offers, “and we would really only have time to talk by the time we’d gone to bed ... She’d be in bed at her place and I’d be in bed at mine, and we’d have a natter on the phone.”

Certainly, a less secure person than Margaret would have stepped back from revealing some of the more intimate truths of a 64-year marriage – whether, for instance, she was able to have an orgasm on her honeymoon; whether Gough was, in fact, a good lover; and whether she ever fancied another man. On all three counts the answer is a resounding, “Yes”.

Not only was Gough a good lover, he actually read her poems by Keats, Shelley and Byron when they were in bed together. “I suppose you’d call it foreplay and I just thought it was lovely,” she was to tell her biographer, possibly during one of their “phone sex” sessions.

As for the man she took a shine to, it was none other than the world-renowned American-born conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, whom she met during his concert tour of Australia in 1974. “It was a bit like having a crush on someone,” she says. “He was so congenial and, at the same time, interesting. And the sort of music he played had never been my absolute favourite ... up till then. But since then ... wow.”

Would she have had an affair with him? “No, no, no. You know how you meet somebody new and you think, ‘I really like you ... you have all sorts of imaginings and then you move on. It’s a frequent occurrence, I would say, with everybody throughout life. It’s not a question of saying, ‘Oh, I like him better than my husband.’ It’s, ‘I like him, too.’”

Margaret Whitlam might just happen to be one of Australia’s more delightfully disarming public figures. The fact that she would scoff at such a notion only further proves the point. Yes, she is Gough Whitlam’s wife, but she is – and has always been – far more than that. She is the daughter of an upper-class Sydney family with a fierce sympathy for those less fortunate than herself. She is the shy and awkward teenager who became a social worker and, then, much later in life, international tour leader. She is the Cabramatta-based mother-of-four who became the much-loved and feted figure on the Paris diplomatic circuit. She is the pragmatist and the sensualist, the traditional wife and the latter-day feminist.

She is all these things and more – warm-hearted and sharp-witted, proud, but deeply modest, grateful for her good fortune, but not ready in the slightest, as *The Weekly* discovered during our two-hour interview, to loosen her grip on life.

“I’m on my third pacemaker,” she says, self-mockingly. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? While I keep going, I’ll keep going.”

**MARGARET WHITLAM** was Australia’s First Lady during one of the most tumultuous and divisive periods in this country’s political history. It was a time of lofty idealism and shattered dreams; a time of breathtaking social and political reform, and dubious economic management; a time of fleeting glories and suicidal mistakes – and it all came to a spectacular end on November 11, 1975, when the governor-general of the day, Sir John Kerr,

sacked the man who had appointed him.

For the past three decades, we’ve heard plenty from the men involved – Kerr, Malcolm Fraser, then leader of the Opposition, and, of course, Gough Whitlam himself. What we’ve not done, though, is hear from the wives of these men, in particular *this* wife.

We’ve never sat on the windowsill and eavesdropped on history in quite the way we can now. On the day of Gough Whitlam’s dismissal as prime minister, Margaret happened to be at Kirribilli House in Sydney, hosting a board meeting for the Commonwealth Hostels Association, of which she was a director. She was in the middle of lunch when the call came.

“He’s sacked me.”

“Who’s sacked you?”

“Kerr.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He can’t sack you, you’re the elected prime minister.”

“I walked into his office, he asked me whether I was going to agree to an election of the House of Reps. I refused. He said, ‘In that case, I have no alternative but to withdraw your commission’ and he handed me a sheet of paper.”

“How ridiculous, why didn’t you just tear it up?”

“Because, Margaret, it was a legal document.”

“So what? You should have torn it up. There were only two of you there. Or you should have slapped his face and told him to pull himself together.”

Margaret was ropeable. She knew their political enemies had always regarded her – daughter of a Supreme Court judge father and teacher mother – as well as her husband, as class traitors. Furthermore, they had always viewed Labor’s ascendancy as an unpalatable – but temporary – departure from the natural order.

She felt certain, too, that they were responsible for the scurrilous rumours that had long been circulating about their marriage – about how Gough would beat her, or how she was leaving the marriage, or how Gough was having an affair, or how Gough was gay, or all of the above. It was the Liberals’ time-honoured practice of playing the man (or woman), not the ball.

“I’d grown up in the eastern suburbs [of Sydney], which in those days was Conservative with a capital C,” Margaret says now, wrapping her black cardigan tighter around her shoulders and crossing her arms. “All these ridiculous things they would say about Gough, about his private life – about his properties, which were supposed to be so exotic and so numerous.

“And then it came back to me that if you couldn’t get him, get *her*. So they started to circulate all sorts of ridiculous things about me. This is the born-to-rule



Clockwise from top: Margaret sunbathing at Bondi in 1936; Gough and Margaret in 1973 with their first grandchild, Alexander; and, from left, son Tony, daughter Catherine, son Nick, daughter-in-law Sheena and son Stephen; Margaret and Gough with son Tony as a toddler in the 1940s; on a motoring holiday with son Nick in Cornwall, England, in 1967; Margaret off to the Melbourne Cup in the '40s with her parents, Wilfred and Mary Dovey; the Whitlams' wedding day at St Michael's Church in Vaucluse, Sydney in 1942.

COURTESY OF MARGARET WHITLAM.



Right: Margaret and Gough in the grounds of The Lodge in Canberra during his term as prime minister. Far right: Margaret used to take her knitting to Labor Party meetings.



bit ... They, the unthinkers, suddenly realised that there he was, somebody with a few ideas, with a way of expression that was theirs ... and they, oh – they behaved so abominably.

“And also the way the Dismissal was acquired was appalling. It was so ... I can’t think of the relevant word.”

Margaret scans the living room of her small apartment as she searches in vain for the words that might do justice to this epic moment in Australian history. When she finally returns her eyes to mine, still wordless, I notice for the first time what a truly exceptional, handsome face she has. If her face were a country, you’d want to go there for holidays, repeatedly.

I ask her whether she still feels angry about the Dismissal. “No, no ... can’t be bothered. If you ask me, yes, I *was* angry and, yes, I *was* angry for some time, and, yes, I felt that somebody had to be blamed other than us. He [Gough] wasn’t given a proper go because there was always this thing, ‘Oh, he’s just a fly-by-night’. And besides ... supply would have passed. Bill Hayden [the then Treasurer] was really getting [things] on track. It [would have been] a fantastic budget.”

**FOUR WEEKS** after the Dismissal, Margaret’s anger and surprise transmuted into deep hurt when the Australian people turned their backs on Labor in favour of a return to Coalition rule. When Margaret heard the election results, she walked into the butler’s pantry in The Lodge and sobbed. She was devastated for Gough, but also for Labor and for the country; for what Australia might have become had there been more time, more tolerance, or both.

During her three years as the prime minister’s wife, Margaret had torn up the rule book, much like her husband had done, although with far less drastic consequences. For a while, she’d had her own TV show called *With Margaret Whitlam* and her own column in the mass-circulation weekly, *Woman’s Day*. Despite criticisms in some quarters, she’d been lauded for her fresh approach.

She’d granted interviews to people such as Germaine Greer and made public

utterances on issues of the day, unlike, say, Patti Menzies, who’d preferred to keep her views private; or Zara Holt, who’d mainly confined herself to decorating The Lodge; or, indeed, Sonia McMahon who’d etched herself into the collective memory largely on the strength of the thigh-splitting dress she’d worn once to the White House.

Margaret Whitlam was a trained social worker and devoted mother. She was deeply committed to various issues – from her local library and swimming club to the wider issues of the arts, law, international women’s rights, adult education and social services. In fact, it was because of her that child-minding centres became known as child-care centres. After all, minding a child was hardly the same as *caring* for one.

Yet what most of us didn’t appreciate at the time was just how astute her political instincts were as well. She never thought, for example, that John Kerr was an appropriate choice for the governor-generalship and told her husband so. “He had a tinny voice,” Margaret says now. “I [also] never thought he was a suitable husband for my friend, Peg, his first wife, who did social work with me. But while he was never my favourite figure, he seemed harmless enough. I never thought he was a strong person.”

And did you tell Gough this? “I did. You see, I thought he was referring to John Moore [former head of the Arbitration Commission] because I’d hear him on the phone, saying, ‘Well, John, I must have you around’ and I thought, ‘Oh, that would be good because he’s a fine person and his wife was a good, fun girl.’ She wasn’t too stick-in-the-muddish. I was so stunned when it turned out to be John Kerr.”

Gough ignored Margaret’s judgment, on this and many other occasions. In late 1974, for example, the two were in the middle of a 13-nation visit when Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin. Margaret’s natural instincts were to return with Gough to visit the victims of the disaster. Gough preferred her to stay in Europe and keep to the schedule. Margaret’s people skills were sorely missed when the prime minister arrived in the devastated city.

Just over a decade later, when the two were based in Paris, former Labor leader Mark Latham came to stay with them at the Australian Embassy. Margaret was unimpressed. “I thought he had a long way to go before he was an acceptable politician,” she tells me. “He needed a bit of smoothing out. He was inclined to be over-familiar with people who were much older than himself. He had an aggressive approach to politics and political people where it wasn’t necessary.”

When he turned on his party and colleagues, did that surprise you? “It did, actually, because at first I thought he was taking the [2004 federal election] defeat quite well. But then he went berserk [in both the published *Latham Diaries* and subsequent public remarks]. When he got sick, I guess he became quite seriously ill, mentally and physically.”

I ask her whether Gough was very hurt by Mark Latham’s severing of ties with his former mentor and Margaret replies, softly, “Very, very, very hurt”.

**“[MARK LATHAM] HAD A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE HE WAS AN ACCEPTABLE POLITICIAN. HE NEEDED A BIT OF SMOOTHING OUT.”**

**MARGARET WHITLAM** would have probably made a formidable politician. Certainly, there are people such as John Menadue, former head of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Department under Gough, who believe Margaret’s “strength, warmth and excellent common sense would have made her a better politician than Gough”.

His views are backed by Dame Leonie Kramer, the politically conservative former chair of the Australian Broadcasting



Above: The Whitlams have "the longest prime ministerial marriage in Australian history" at 64 years. Right: Margaret at 18 months in her first swimsuit.



Corporation (ABC) and chancellor of Sydney University, who lauds Margaret for being a natural leader, far more balanced than Gough ever was. "She always reminds you that it's a good idea to be open-minded. She's got no prejudices about class – she wouldn't care if you were the boilermaker's illegitimate daughter. She's able to tune into the other person's wavelength."

(All except, perhaps, Janette Howard's, who Margaret disparages as "useless" in terms of her service to the community, not to mention discourteous, humourless and insulting to the people of Australia for not living in The Lodge.)

Margaret Whitlam has needed all her intelligence and composure to deal with her husband's temperament over the years – his giant ego, his intransigence, his legendary temper, his inability to forgive, although, it should be said, in later years, he would make a gigantic exception for Malcolm Fraser. ("Gough has sort of forgotten the hurt," explains Margaret now, "and he's getting on with the processes that he so believes in. They do have much more in common now.")

Richard Butler, one-time principal private secretary to Gough, saw first-hand how the Dismissal affected Gough and the role Margaret played in looking after him in the months and years that followed.

"Where he was rocky, she was stable," Richard says. "Where he would lose his grip on things temperamentally, she would remain equable. Where he would feel clearly that people hated him, she would love him more."

And this despite Gough's often lacerating tongue, his capacity to be both "marvellous and beastly". "Sometimes," Richard continues, "Gough would forget that I was in the room and he would give her a

tongue-lashing that was quite wrong." And Margaret would just say, "Oh, shut up, you silly old goat. Go and have a shower and cool off."

Bill Hayden, former Labor leader, recalls an occasion when he was governor-general and he invited the Whitlams to a function at Yarralumla, where Gough was invited to speak. "It was one of his bad nights and he went on and on and on. Eventually, Margaret said audibly, 'Will somebody tell that man to shut up and sit down?' When no one did as she had suggested, she started banging her walking stick on the floor until, finally, Gough sat down."

**FROM THE MOMENT** Margaret Dovey first met Gough Whitlam shortly after the start of World War II, she was smitten. The two of them were at a party hosted by Alice Jackson, then editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, when Margaret spotted Gough from a distance. At 193cm, she says now, "he was quite the most delicious thing I'd ever seen". At times, she still thinks this is the case.

Margaret Dovey was just what the marriage doctors might have ordered for a brilliant, imperious, fiercely driven man such as Gough. As a teen, she'd learned to overcome her aching shyness – due mainly to her imposing height of 188cm – and concentrate on the things she could do well, which was practically everything.

She could play the piano, sing, dance, act and, of course, swim. (In 1937, at 18, she'd become the Australian breaststroke champion.) Plus, over time, she would also learn the fine art of conversation, which, in combination with her natural warmth and unflappability, would prove, arguably, Gough's best political weapon.

Over the years, Margaret would sometimes hanker for her independence, so as not to feel like an appendage to The Great Man. That's why she chaired so many boards, committees and councils over the years in the field of social services, the law, opera, dance, international literacy ...

and why, at the age of 70, she started taking tour groups around the world – 18 trips to 24 countries. She wanted to contribute, to feel useful.

Besides which, how else could one survive 64 years with a man such as Edward Gough Whitlam? Despite all her tutelage over the years, he was less modest than she would have preferred, more prone to irritation, more dependent on her than ever and less accommodating of her wishes.

The purple cyclamens in the living room of their Sydney apartment are, today, a case in point. "He'd say they're a nuisance to him," Margaret says now, rolling her eyes. "If we're sitting here, he'll be sitting in that leather chair and he'll want to put books and papers up here on the table, and I say, 'Look, we can't have an office everywhere'. When he comes home in the evening, the cushions are thrown around, his attaché case is put on the sofa ... I've done without flowers in the bedroom forever because he always says they spill, but I say, 'Well, I'll put them on my dressing table, not on yours'. Doesn't matter. So I've done without flowers in the bedroom and I'm not doing without them here [in the living room]."

So this is what we can all look forward to after 64 years of marriage, I suggest? "Quite," she replies aridly. "A determination to have flowers."

Having said that, the far deeper truth of the matter is that Margaret has never been in any doubt that she gave herself to the right man. Nor, it seems, has Gough ever doubted his choice of wife and lifelong companion. "It's the longest prime ministerial marriage in Australian history," he offers. "Whenever we've talked about our marriage, we tell each other that neither of us could have done better. I think that we're both happy that we married and have stayed married."

"[And] if she goes before me, I've made arrangements for her to have a send-off in St Andrew's [Cathedral, Sydney], which ... will be big enough, as she's very well-regarded in her own right. What's amazing is that she has no enemies."

Ask him – as his wife's biographer finally does – whether he will speak at such an occasion, whether he can imagine his life without her, and this 90-year-old political colossus replies with brimming eyes, "I'd find it very difficult to speak at her funeral ... It would be very difficult without her ... I mustn't get maudlin, but let's just say ... I've grown accustomed to her face."

Indeed, as we all have. ■

Margaret Whitlam: A Biography by Susan Mitchell will be published by Random House on October 1.