Gough’s first day: let the fights begin

When the ministers in Gough Whitlam’s government — the first Labor administration in 23 years — sat around the cabinet table for their inaugural meeting on December 19, 1972, they got straight down to business.

There was no stirring oration by Whitlam to mark the historic occasion. No motion of tribute to soak up the sentiment. Instead, a brawl erupted over the spoils of office as rookie ministers sparred with veteran public servants and Whitlam became increasingly frustrated as he presided over a testing meeting.

The handwritten cabinet notebooks in which public servants recorded the abbreviated dialogue of ministers provided to The Australian by the National Archives of Australia reveals the Whitlam government pretty much began as it ended: in chaos and acrimony.

Opening the “informal” cabinet meeting (from Whitlam’s perspective, “high profile” appointments would be done by cabinet) — the first four ministers for public service, wanted to move “over” on hospital-funding and urgent matters “to get day’s business” (judiciously) quickly. Clyde Cameron, the minister for labour, asked the first question: how many staff would he get, when they could be appointed and what they would be paid. “What complement, what salaries … need decision now,” he said sharply.

Whitlam responded that departmental chiefs would advise in due course. After further debate about public servants, particularly about their “standing” and “salaries” Whitlam tried to refocus the meeting. “(The) sooner (it is) resolved, (the) sooner (we) get down to work,” he said.

But the debate continued for almost 90 minutes. A host of ministers, engaging in their first cabinet debate, piled in with their views on staff grades, their relations with departments and their salaries.


Finally it was agreed ministers would be provided with information about personal staff appointments by their departmental secretary. “Might I urge you (to) take advice on policy and press staff,” Whitlam barked. Don’t make rash appointments, he said. “Take advice. Press secretary (is) most important.”

December 1972, the first meeting of the new Labor cabinet. Prime minister Gough Whitlam at left centre.

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There was only a few decisions at the first formal meeting adopting alphabetical procedures, setting public duty and private interest, making several public-service appointments, agreeing to additional hours for public service and a policy on public-service employment award variations.

The 1972–75 cabinet papers are available for public access.

Troy Bramston's revised and updated edited collection of essays, The Whitlam Legacy, is published by The Federation Press.