

Gough's first day: let the fights begin

EXCLUSIVE

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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 at 11am, Whitlam said “permanent heads to be appointed — will be done by cabinet”. He flagged discussion of four weeks' annual leave for public servants, wanted to move “soon” on hospitals funding and urged ministers “to get dept's (making) decisions” quickly.

Clyde Cameron, the minister for labour, asked the first question: he wanted to know how many staff he would 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



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

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 relationship with departments and their salaries.

Whitlam's patience ran out. He snapped at the minister for overseas trade, Jim Cairns: “What information do you want?” Cairns responded: “As I stated”. Whitlam: “You know what you're entitled to. What extra information?”

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.”

In the previous 14 days there had already been a burst of en-

ergy and excitement as the two-man “duumvirate” government of Whitlam and his deputy Lance Barnard made many far-reaching decisions pivoting the country in a new direction.

The notebooks, written in cramped scrawl by public servants John Bunting and Peter Lawler, record that the Whitlam-Barnard “duumvirate”, sworn in on December 5, had “shared all (27) portfolios” in the ministry and held “no cabinet meetings”.

The first official full cabinet meeting was held at 11.10am on December 20. Press photographers were allowed in before the meeting to capture the moment.

Whitlam started with a “few things to mention”. He spoke about preparing cabinet documents. A committee system was agreed and ministers appointed to various committees. Whitlam read a statement on “personal interests and public duties”.

He next told them — with supreme irony given his dismissal in 1975 — to respect the governor-

general's role: “Etiquette on GG — Executive Council point. Constitutional point. It works.”

Whitlam said ministers must not act without “approval of caucus” for decisions. “We must wait until that (is) given”. Ministers had to be “personally responsible for documents” and keep them “confidential”.

There were only a few decisions at the first formal meeting: adopting cabinet procedures; noting public duty and private interest; making several public-service appointments; agreeing to additional leave for public servants; and a procedure for 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.

INQUIRER P22