

# Insensitive, naive, out of touch: what the mandarins made of Whitlam's government

## EXCLUSIVE

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After Gough Whitlam was dismissed in November 1975, and Labor was routed at a subsequent election, public servants undertook a confidential study to examine “the style of the Whitlam government” and concluded with a biting assessment of its systematic failures.

The report was ordered by John Menadue, the secretary the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to learn from “the problems that resulted” from a government that had little experience when it came to power and was

plagued by chaos during its three-year term.

The document found in Mr Menadue's papers at the National Library of Australia records how the public service sought to make sense of the whirlwind political activities, the landmark policy changes and the attendant dysfunction that defined the Whitlam government.

“Too little attention was paid to the workability of policies and to putting them to work,” says the report prepared by John Enfield.

“The ministry and the bureaucracy were insensitive to the impact of policies in the community. There was a feeling that the community did not appreciate the things that were being done for it.”

Ministers were determined to

## A spy's been found in the PM's office, Murphy told peers

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In 1973, Labor attorney-general Lionel Murphy told the cabinet that a paid spy, who was

implement their agendas no matter the cost or the impact, and frequently clashed in and out of cabinet, wrote Mr Enfield, who would later serve as deputy secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

supposedly working as a journalist, had been found lurking in Gough Whitlam's office. The Whitlam government's cabinet notebooks — the abbreviated handwritten record of meetings by public servants — reveal Murphy gave a briefing about the spying incident on January 10, 1973. “ASIO — will tell soon,” Murphy said. “Journalist in Gough's room when Gough L

“Ministers did not appear to acknowledge that they had a collective responsibility to cabinet,” the report said.

“The secrecy of cabinet was not respected and ministers publicly anticipated cabinet debates, pre-

of Op (leader of the opposition). Police looked into. Cld (could) have charges.” Murphy's briefing was recorded by Peter Lawler in his cabinet notebook, which has been provided to *The Australian* by the national Archives of Australia.

A more detailed account of Murphy's briefing is found in a separate notebook kept by John Bunting. “Journalist found in Whitlam's room (as leader of

sumably to pre-empt decisions.” He writes that no cabinet member had “any ministerial experience” and “few had any experience of administration or of public service”.

Ministers “did not have a full understanding of the resources

opposition) — no proper reason,” Murphy said according to Bunting. “Reason to believe a ‘spying’ exercise — very concerned ... this man is a paid spy ... need for members to be aware of this — there may be as many as six of them known.”

Murphy had met with Peter Barbour, the director-general of ASIO, on December 22, 1972, when he may have been briefed on the matter.

and structure of their own departments”, and tended to rely on “private advisers”, which sometimes produced “unfortunate results”.

A comparative study was undertaken with Malcolm Fraser's caretaker government, which ben-

efited from 12 out of its 15 cabinet members having previous ministerial experience.

The Whitlam government suffered from “poor co-ordination”.

Ministers were “unable and unwilling” to understand the “complex” nature of government and did not “co-ordinate” their work.

A committee established to improve co-ordination met once, in May 1973, but “did not meet again”.

A supporting paper written by Ian Mathieson highlights core failures as: the “complete inexperience” of ministers, “ideological over-enthusiasm”, “poor co-ordination” and “poor communications”. Labor sought change “more quickly than the Australian community could

tolerate or live with,” he argued.

The conclusion drawn by the public service about the performance of the Whitlam government is unforgiving but also understanding.

“All of the foregoing appears to be a harsh condemnation of the first Whitlam ministry,” Mr Enfield wrote.

“But we must recall the atmosphere of 1972, the expectations of economic stability, the run down of the previous administration, the length of time that Labor had been in opposition and the desire to get things done.”

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