

Queen was not warned of Australia PM's sacking

● Suspicion the palace played a direct role in Whitlam's ouster has long been cited by Australian Republicans

AFP | Sydney

Queen Elizabeth II was not informed in advance about the 1975 dismissal of Australia's prime minister by her representative in country, letters kept secret for decades and released yesterday revealed.

The British monarch's representative in Australia, governor-general John Kerr, sparked a constitutional crisis when he fired Gough Whitlam, the democratically elected leader of the centre-left Labor party.

In May the High Court ruled more than 200 letters between the queen's private secretary and Kerr -- including many addressing the controversial affair -- should be made public.

Although the correspondence shows the queen was not told immediately prior to Whitlam's sacking, it confirms Kerr had exchanged extensive letters with the palace for months about his powers to oust the prime minister.

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Gough Whitlam, pictured here in 2004, was fired in 1975 after leading Australia for three years



The queen, who is Australia's head of state, is supposed to stay above politics and make no decisions about government appointments.

tralian Republicans arguing the country should break with the monarchy.

Historians are now combing through 1,200 pages of the so-called Palace Letters to see if the UK government tried to influence events in its former colony and what role the queen, her son and heir Prince Charles, and top royal advisers may have played.

'Skill and wisdom'

One extract shows Kerr in-

formed the queen he had fired Whitlam shortly after taking the action on November 11, 1975.

"I should say I decided to take the step I took without informing the Palace in advance because, under the Constitution, the responsibility is mine, and I was of the opinion it was better for Her Majesty not to know in advance, though it is of course my duty to tell her immediately," he wrote.

The decision capped a pro-

tracted political stalemate after the opposition-controlled Senate refused to pass the government's budget, severely weakening Whitlam's position.

The letters confirm the palace knew Kerr had been considering the options available to him under his constitutional "reserve powers", which included dismissing Australia's leader -- an action no other governor-general has taken before or since.

"I'm also keeping my mind open as to the constitutional issues," Kerr wrote to Martin Charteris, the queen's private secretary, on September 12, 1975.

"If the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition get into a battle in which the Senate has

defeated the budget, the Prime Minister refuses to recommend a dissolution, my role will need some careful thought," he wrote.

Charteris later praised Kerr for his approach, writing a week before the dismissal he was "playing the vice-regal hand with skill and wisdom".

"The fact you have powers is recognised. But it's also clear you will only use them in the last resort, and then only for constitutional -- and not for political -- reasons," he said.

'Highly contested'

The palace said the release of the letters "confirms that neither Her Majesty nor the Royal Household had any part to play

in Kerr's decision to dismiss Whitlam".

"Throughout her reign, Her Majesty has consistently demonstrated... support for Australia, the primacy of the Australian constitution and the independence of the Australian people, which the release of these letters reflects."

But Professor Jenny Hocking, a biographer of Whitlam who took the case to court, said the political nature of the correspondence was "startling" given the requirement for the head of a constitutional monarchy to remain neutral.

Hocking said the discussion of reserve powers in particular was "scandalous" because its existence in Australia is "highly contested" by legal and political scholars.

After sacking Whitlam, Kerr appointed opposition Liberal leader Malcolm Fraser as interim prime minister, sparking chaos in Canberra and protests on the steps of parliament.

Fraser went on to win a landslide election victory later that year.

Australia became independent in 1901 but retained the British monarch as head of state.

A referendum on becoming a republic failed in 1999, but republicans hope recent royal scandals could help revive efforts to cut ties with the monarchy.

Ghislaine Maxwell denies sex crimes in Epstein case

● The alleged crimes occurred between 1994 and 1997

AFP | New York

British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell pleaded not guilty in a New York court yesterday to sex trafficking minors for her former partner, the late financier Jeffrey Epstein.

The 58-year-old denied



Ghislaine Maxwell is shown here with the late disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein

six charges related to alleged crimes committed by Epstein, a well-connected sex offender who killed himself in prison while awaiting trial last summer.

Maxwell appeared in a Manhattan federal court via video link from Brooklyn's high-security Metropolitan Detention Center, where she is being held following her arrest this month.

Prosecutors accuse Maxwell, daughter of the late newspaper baron Robert Maxwell, of helping Epstein "recruit, groom and ultimately abuse" multiple un-

derage girls. The alleged crimes occurred between 1994 and 1997, and relate to three women -- one of whom was just 14 years old when she was sexually abused, according to the indictment.

Maxwell allegedly befriended the girls with shopping and cinema trips, and later coaxed them into giving Epstein nude massages during which he would engage in sex acts.

Prosecutors say Maxwell sometimes participated in the alleged abuse -- which occurred at her London home and at Ep-

stein properties in Manhattan, Palm Beach and New Mexico.

They allege she "persuaded, induced, enticed and coerced" minor victims to travel across US state lines and abroad for the purpose of the illegal sex acts.

Maxwell has been charged with four counts relating to the trafficking, including transporting a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity.

She also faces two counts of perjury for allegedly lying about the claims during a 2016 civil lawsuit.

Third of Bangladesh underwater as monsoon drenches region

Biswambharpur | Bangladesh

Almost four million people have been hit by monsoon floods in South Asia, officials said yesterday, with a third of Bangladesh already underwater from some of the heaviest rains in a decade.

The monsoon -- which usually falls from June to September -- is crucial to the economy of the Indian sub-continent, but also causes widespread death and destruction across the region each year.

"This is going to be the worst flood in a decade," Bangladesh's Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre chief Arifuzzaman Bhuiyan told AFP.

The heavy rains have swollen two main Himalayan river systems -- the Brahmaputra and the Ganges -- that flow through India and Bangladesh.

Bhuiyan said about a third of flood-prone Bangladesh -- a delta-nation crisscrossed by hundreds of rivers -- was underwater, and at least 1.5 million people were affected, with



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village homes and roads flooded.

In north-central Bangladesh, the Brahmaputra river was al-

most 40 centimetres (16 inches) higher than normal and threatening to burst its banks, district

administrator Farook Ahmed told AFP.

Most villagers were trying to

stay near their flood-damaged homes, but some 15,000 had fled severely affected areas, officials said. With a 10-day forecast pointing to rising waters, Bhuiyan said if more rivers burst their banks some 40 percent of the nation could be flooded "in a worst-case scenario".

In the northern town of Biswambharpur, villagers said most of the houses were partly underwater after the Surma, a major river in north-east Bangladesh, burst its banks.

Farmer Abdur Rashid, 35, said he sent his wife and three children to a multi-storied village school that has been turned into a government shelter.

"My whole house has gone underwater. I have sent the rest of the family to the school, but I stayed behind to guard my properties," Rashid told AFP.

Twin challenges

In Assam, northeast India, more than 2.1 million people have been affected since mid-

May.

At least 50 people have died so far -- 12 in the past week as floodwaters surged -- with tens of thousands of mostly rural residents evacuated to relief camps, officials said.

Emergency services personnel wore head-to-toe bright-orange suits to protect themselves from the floods and coronavirus -- which has infected almost 17,000 people in Assam -- as they used boats to reach stranded villagers.

"We have two challenges here, one is COVID-19 and another is (the) flood," the head of a local rescue team, Abhijeet Kumar Verma, said.

In Nepal, at least 50 people have died in landslides and floods triggered by the monsoon rains, with homes swept away and roads and bridges damaged.

"We are distributing food and relief goods from helicopters to about 300 displaced families after the roads were blocked by floods and landslides," district official Gyan Nath Dahal said.