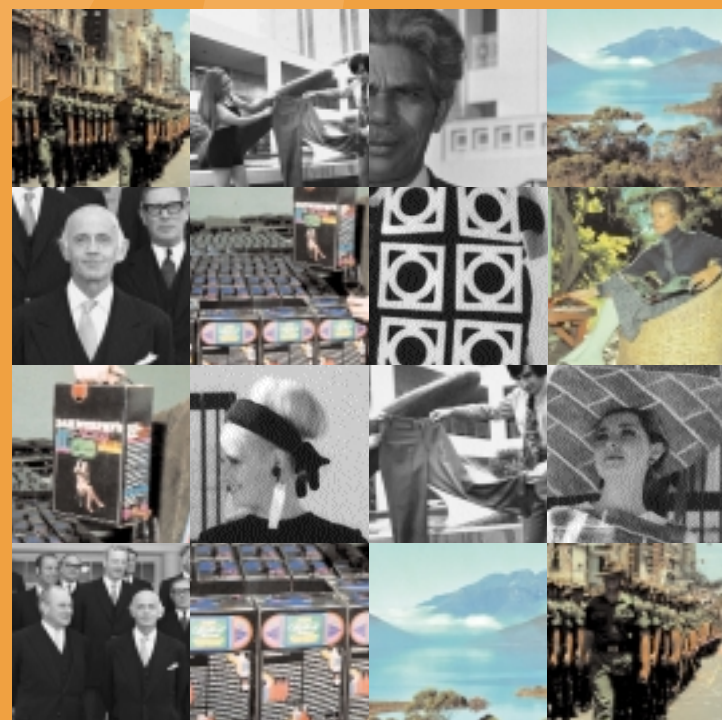


1971



↑ Lake Pedder, flooded, despite protest, to create the Gordon River hydro-electric project



↑ Sonia McMahon, wife of former prime minister Billy McMahon and mother of Charmed actor Julian!



↑ A commercial artist, fashion designer, advertising firm and home building organisation joined forces in Brisbane to create these hostess costumes

WINE CASKS, VIETNAM & SONIA MCMAHON

I've been involved with the annual release of Cabinet records for the last four years. We package these significant records in a way that makes them accessible to journalists and, through them, to the public. It's a collaborative project involving all areas of the archives, consultant historians and the media. Although lots of effort goes into the project and the last few weeks before the release can be hectic, it is very rewarding to bring our history to life, inform debate and publicise the work of the archives.

Cabinet records, like most other records of the Commonwealth government, are available for public access once they're 30 years old. Generally, the archives releases records on request, however, we've been releasing an entire year's worth of 30-year-old Cabinet records since the mid 1980s.

In the early days, we issued a press release to the media inviting them to view the Cabinet records four weeks before the records were released to the public. From the mid 1990s our marketing campaign brought

consultant historians and our new Public Programs section into the process. We recognised that by giving background information and context to the records, the media would be better equipped to understand the records and produce more informed reporting.

What makes these records so special? Cabinet is the peak decision-making body of the Commonwealth government. It has a role in determining policy on a range of issues, including Indigenous affairs, communications, defence, the economy, education, the environment, international relations, health, industry, migration, taxation, transport and social services. Cabinet records reveal decisions that affect all Australians.

In the 1971 Cabinet records you'll find decisions about the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and moves toward the recognition of land rights for Indigenous Australians, as well as decisions about the construction of airports and hospitals and in relation to overseas aid and pension rates.

Work on the 1971 Cabinet records began some 18 months before the headlines appeared on New Year's Day 2002. First we added nearly 550 submissions and over 850 decisions to the Archives Record Search database. Next our team of expert examiners carefully assessed each Cabinet paper to ensure that any sensitive information was withheld from public access. Often these decisions are made in consultation with the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade. This year a small amount of information was withheld from five submissions.

At the media briefing in our Canberra building on 4 December 2001, the 1971 Cabinet records were made available to the media under strict embargo. For the past six years, the archives has asked consultant historian Ian Hancock, a Visiting Fellow with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and recent biographer of John Gorton, to research the annual collection of Cabinet records and brief the media on Australia's political, social and economic landscape. >

Each New Year's Day, the National Archives of Australia releases Cabinet records to the public. Holiday-makers awaken to newspaper stories of government and political life from 30 years ago. This year the headlines revisited 1971 through Doug Anthony's reminiscences of Billy McMahon and evidence of political jostling in the lead up to recognition of the Peoples' Republic of China.

This annual ritual has become such a regular part of January that we hardly give it a second thought. But what is involved in preparing the records so they can become headline-size chunks for our morning news? Anne McLean, acting Director, Access and Information Services, at the National Archives shares the behind-the-scenes story ...



↑ *Neville Bonner, the first Indigenous person to hold a seat in parliament*



↑ *Cask wine was still a novelty in 1971*



↑ *Australian troops returning from Vietnam march through Brisbane*

Last year, Ian spent many weeks in our Canberra reading room working through the mountain of papers and files revealing the debates and key issues of 1971. At the media briefing Ian gave an overview of the highlights of the year and the flavour of the times.

Each year a senior bureaucrat, ministerial staffer or former government minister is also invited to provide an insider's view. In December 2001, Doug Anthony, deputy prime minister in the Gorton government, delighted the media audience with his lively commentary on 1971.

From 1 January 2002 the general public was able to access digitised copies of the released Cabinet documents, as well as Ian Hancock's briefing notes, through the archives website. Keen researchers could view the original records in the Canberra reading room from the first working day of the year. A series of public events spread the story of the Cabinet records further.

Work on the 1972 Cabinet papers is already well underway and regular visitors to the media briefing are keeping free dates in early December

for the next briefing. The Cabinet records of 1972 will reflect a major shift in Australian politics. The Australian Labor Party under the charismatic leadership of Gough Whitlam won government from the Coalition after 23 years in opposition. So watch for next year's headlines to find out what consumed the Cabinet in 1972.

Anne McLean
National Archives of Australia

FROM THE PRESS GALLERY

I have been a participant each December for the past four years in the embargoed release of Cabinet records to journalists. I have a special interest in the records, because I was a senior journalist in the Parliamentary Press gallery in the late 1960s and early 70s when Cabinet was making the decisions that we now see in their full glory.

I read the decisions, submissions and, where relevant, supporting Cabinet Office files, so that I can write news stories, features and commentary about what really happened 30 years earlier and why. But I do so while trying to put the records in the context of what journalists, and through them the Australian people, were told at the time of the events.

Before going into the archives I check some of the published memoirs, histories and newspapers

from the period, as well as trying to recall my own memories of the events.

Journalists write history on a day-to-day basis. What we publish influences the way history is written later about the events we report. It is sometimes exhilarating, sometimes very deflating, to compare what I wrote 30 years ago with the official version of what the government was actually doing.

But what appears in the records is not the only story. Why certain Cabinet decisions were made is often more fully explained by what journalists uncovered at the time about the personal and political inter-relationships of the ministers than by what is actually revealed in the records.

David Solomon, Courier-Mail, Brisbane