

# Margaret Whitlam: CIA was involved!

EARLY next month a tall, famous Australian will have to endure a familiar and humiliating experience at the hands of Sydney Airport staff.

Margaret Whitlam groaned in anticipation and rolled her eyes Heavenward.

"I said to whoever I was with last time you really would think the wife of a former Prime Minister was not going to blow up the country," she laughed.

"They said 'just be aware of it: they don't know who you are and if they did, it wouldn't mean a thing'.

"And it's right, they wouldn't. I don't mind but I'd like a bit better treatment. I think everybody else should have a bit better treatment."

The plot goes thus: Margaret Whitlam will throw her cane on to the conveyor belt at Sydney Airport,

and, on her own admission, "lurch" through the security detectors setting the alarm bells ringing wildly.

Next, she will be interrogated by security officers.

"Have you got anything in your pocket?" they will ask as she eyes them crossly.

"No," she will explain, "I've got metal in my hip". Then she will board the airliner, fly to China and meet her husband.

There, they will be recognised and treated with great respect as the guests of a country whose enhanced image in the West (at least pre-Tiananmen Square) it can partly attribute to the couple.

It is Gough Whitlam's final visit in his last year as chairman of the Australia-China Council and now that the post-Beijing massacre diplomatic wobbles have disappeared in a rush of official visits, Margaret Whitlam's presence was encouraged by Foreign Affairs.

"I wasn't going. But two delegations of Chinese here recently were very interested in my well-being," she said in reference to the Whitlam's 1990 China visit when, in the Qingdao Province, Mrs Whitlam fell and broke her hip and her wrist and had to be transported home.

"One of them, who I knew pretty well in China, said you *must* come. The department agreed with alacrity that I should go."

While the Chinese are rather more deferential to elder statespersons, together Margaret and Gough Whitlam can create a stir among the Australian public which still causes the former Prime Minister "to glow when he's audibly received".

"I think it's probably because a lot of people felt the benefit of his making tertiary education free," she said.

"People come up and say: 'My daughter's a doctor now and she might have been only a nurse - if she was lucky'.

"The reception is quite nice in lots of places."

That Margaret Whitlam on her own sometimes fails to be recognised is a fact which she compares favourably to the "goldfish bowl" of Federal politics.

By CANDACE SUTTON

She says she is deliberately not controversial any more, although the odd phrase drops from her mouth when particular political subjects come up.

Bob Hawke?  
"I'm not prepared to say anything bad about Bob... but it's difficult to find anything good to say about him right now. I think he's done a lot better than I expected. I thought he made a very good beginning, but then I thought Margaret Thatcher made a very good beginning."

Australians fighting in the Gulf?  
"I thought that was absolutely ridiculous, pathetic: 'Oh, there's going to be a war and let's get in it'. Stupid."

"I guess it was probably not a bad exercise for people in the Navy who had been lacking that sort of exercise. But really costly. A long way to go, a lot of fuel."

Sir John Kerr: Did she still feel bitter?

"When I think about it I do. I think about how impossible it all was. I still can't really believe it."

Did the Whitlams break out the champagne when he died? "No," she laughed, "I didn't bother. I regretted his descent into his miserable life because I'd known his first wife very well."

"Peg was the sort of woman who would have been fabulous for anybody. He shouldn't have taken that job in the first place. He knew she was dying."

Do you think the CIA was involved in Gough's downfall? "I do. He doesn't. As an old thriller reader I'm prepared to believe it."

Did Malcolm Fraser get his just desserts in Memphis?

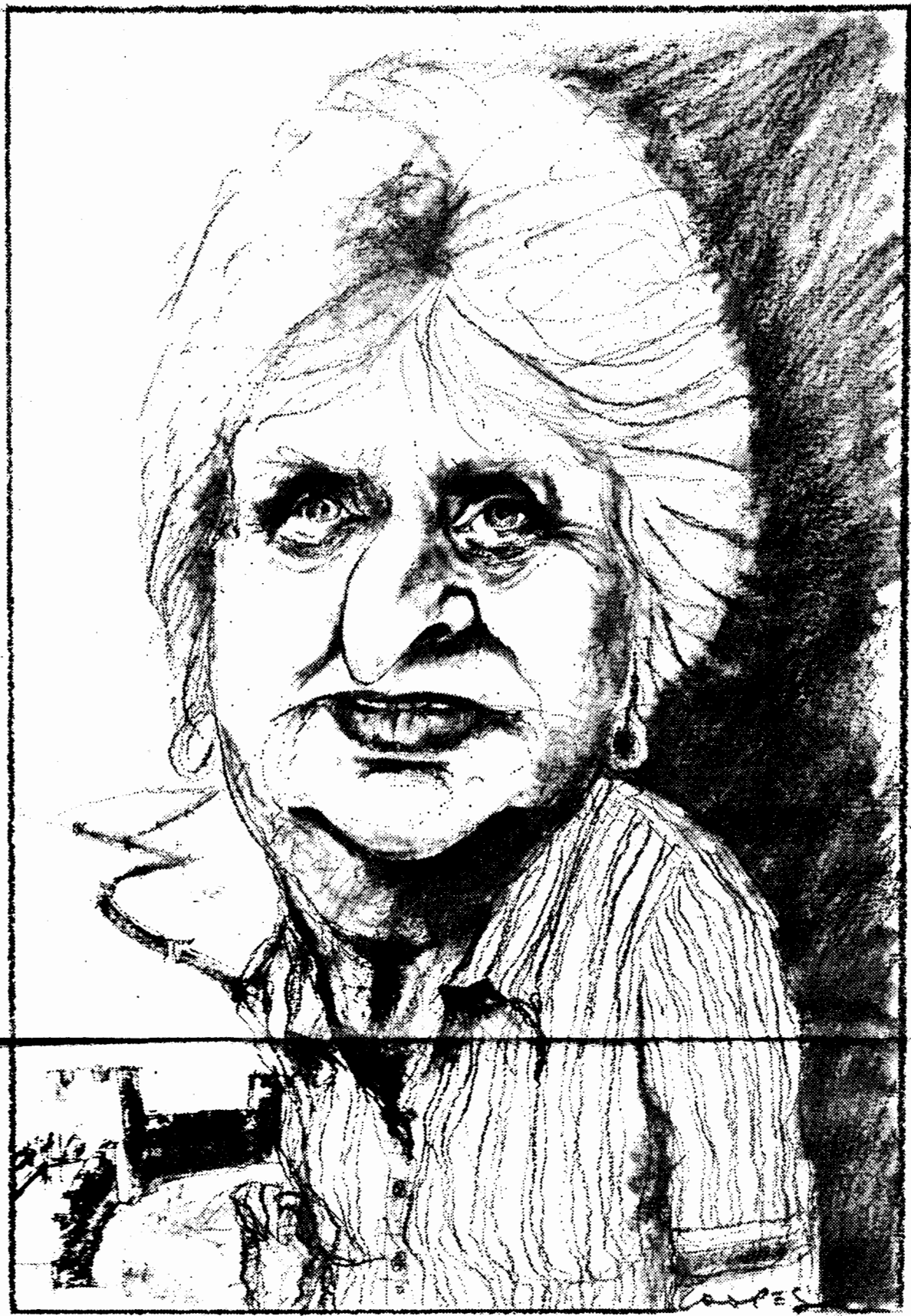
"I don't think that was just," she laughed, "it was interesting."

By comparison, particularly if one considers the scandal which has plagued other leaders, the Whitlams have remained relatively untouched.

There was a good reason for that, Margaret Whitlam said.

Even if Australia had a Kitty Kelley [author of the Nancy Reagan book], she suspected the author would be "damn lucky to find anything" interesting to write about.

"There were ghastly rumours," she recalled, "fortunately I didn't hear



MARGARET WHITLAM

Illustration: JENNY COOPES

most of them. But it's no use refuting rumours. It only extends them.

"Mind you, I enjoyed watching Frank Sinatra on the box. Still a good sound and I can understand anybody having an affair with him."

It is almost 20 years since the Whitlams first entered The Lodge and Margaret Whitlam recalls a kind of "a sort of ecstatic time".

"People showed an animation they'd never been able to show before," she said, "I think they reflected the suggestions that were being put forward... plans that were being made."

A flick through Margaret Whitlam's file reveals the early 1970s burgeoning women's movement, with Germaine Greer rushing to The Lodge to interview a woman described as the "liveliest Prime Minister's wife since Dame Enid Lyons".

Margaret Whitlam was credited with evaporating stuffiness from The Lodge, not least with her famous "hoo ha" quote about inflation, comments about Aboriginal rights and a suggestion that marijuana should be legalised which, she notices, governments are "still blundering on about".

"If it had been legalised then I don't think we'd have all this trouble with the harder drugs," she said.

When Mrs Whitlam looks back on that time, she thinks the Whitlam Government "would have gone on pretty well".

"Really, it was a fairly good Budget that time. The new Treasurer was Bill Hayden and they had a fairly good Budget organised. It had been difficult the last years producing something that was popular as well as necessary. But I think they'd have ridden it out."

"After that, he (Gough) was very frustrated for a while, very frustrated. But since then things have been piled on his plate and he's as busy as anything."

Now 71 and 74 respectively, Margaret and Gough Whitlam have little time to themselves.

Publishers keep badgering Mrs Whitlam to write forewords for books and, even more pressing, to write her autobiography.

"Everyone else has plans for me," she sighed, "the thing is you can't get on with your life if you're writing about what's been."

Two hectic years as chairman of the National Consultative Council

for International Literacy Year are just ending. This arose from her adult education work and her presidency of the Commonwealth Association for Education and Training.

"I find now I get offered paid jobs stints on television and radio, things I once would have sold my soul to do. Isn't it funny? I also do interviews for the Australian Opera on a fund-raising basis: singers, actors, lighting people and designers."

"And I go to the opera, Musica Viva, ballet, the Sydney Dance Company and the Sydney Theatre Company and I subscribe to all of them. Each requires separate time."

Later this year she will lead a group of 42 women through a College of Seniors tour of Europe. Despite her creaking hip, Margaret Whitlam plays golf (handicap "36 going on 54") and swims occasionally.

She thinks Australia is a more accessible and desirable place culturally and peopled - by airport security officers apart - by a more compassionate population.

Certainly the Whitlams' value to the country has appreciated.

Last year, when Canberra-Beijing relations were still strained, Margaret Whitlam's fall was considered not the only slip-up of their China visit.

This year, with the Government is falling over itself to strengthen diplomatic ties, Mrs Whitlam's addition to the tour is considered "a bit of a consolidation".

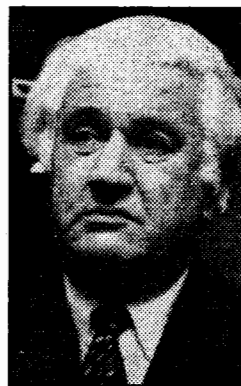
"The Chinese are very pleased," she said, "and it's supposed to be confidence-boosting for all of us."



BOB HAWKE



MALCOLM FRASER



SIR JOHN KERR