

How one strong woman changed the course of Australian history

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ALEXANDRA Hasluck's disdain for vice-regal life changed the course of Australian political history.

Had she consented to her husband remaining governor-general beyond 1974 - and he was keen to do so - the Whitlam government would not have been sacked in 1975. The acrimony that stained Australian politics for at least the next decade would most likely have been avoided.

The key role of Lady Hasluck was revealed in an interview with Hasluck 25 years ago that has been released only now by the National Library. If he had stayed governor-general "only for two years", Hasluck said, "probably the history of Australian politics would be quite different".

Hasluck told his interlocutor - former Whitlam minister Clyde Cameron - that Gough Whitlam had wanted him to continue at Yarralumla beyond 1974, and that he was keen to do so. But his wife wouldn't agree.

"I said to Gough, 'I would be prepared to serve for another couple of years if there is any difficulty in finding a replacement,' " Hasluck said. "... but my wife objected very strongly and wouldn't stay on. And when I conveyed that to Whitlam, that I couldn't stay on without my wife, he tried to persuade me to take just two years.

"But my wife was just adamant. She said, 'You told me you were getting out after five years. And you've got to get out after five years. I'm not going to stay here any longer.' And I just had to tell Whitlam that. My wife was a strong woman too and I just couldn't stay. And he was disappointed."

Lady Hasluck, author and social historian, was appointed the first of only two Dames of the Order of Australia in 1978. She died in 1993 aged 84, just five months after her husband's death.

Hasluck told Cameron in 1985 that he doubted he would have discussed with anyone but Whitlam the Senate's 1975 refusal to approve the government's money supply. This refusal led to a constitutional stand-off that ended only when Sir John Kerr - Whitlam's choice as Hasluck successor - sacked the government and appointed the opposition leader, Malcolm Fraser, as caretaker prime minister.

Hasluck said that Kerr probably erred in taking advice from Fraser.

"And although he has to inform himself, and take whatever steps are necessary to inform himself, I think the governor-general has to be careful ... the function of the governor-general is not to be the honest broker in political situations," he said.

"So, I just have some doubts in my mind whether there would have been any conversation between me and Mr Fraser at that stage of events."

Hasluck was a Liberal minister from 1951 to 1969 and governor-general from April 1969 until his retirement in July 1974.

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