

It's Time...
TO TALK RIGHTS

OUR
HISTORY

Colour m

SOME THINGS ARE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

A House Divided

CLARE HALLIFAX

Crisis

TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Belinda Bolliger

WALKER BOOKS

Introduction

FROM CLARE HALLIFAX

Every November, since the events in 1975, there is usually an article or two in the media about the shocking dismissal of an elected federal government by a Governor General. While fiction, this book draws upon my memories of growing up in Canberra, in particular with my uncle - who became my guardian when I was five, but more interestingly was Deputy PM Lance Barnard's Principal Private Secretary (think Chief of Staff) - and long-time friend of both him and Gough Whitlam and many others who were key players in this historic drama.

Growing up in that environment, it was perhaps no surprise that I found myself studying journalism and politics at university, and then was lucky enough to find myself working in the Parliamentary Press Gallery. Soon after that I became a book editor, specialising in Australian political histories and biographies, and later, a publisher and editor of historical fiction. All of those experiences coalesced into the idea of writing this novel. About ten years ago, I started a series of sporadic interviews with my uncle, and combing through as much research material as I could.

And now, as the 50th anniversary of the Dismissal approaches, the themes of that time, and this story, feel more resonant than ever. Gough Whitlam was only in power for three years, but his vision of a modern and multicultural Australia was the blueprint for the country we live in today. And in 1975, the functioning of government was overtaken by shortcuts and power struggles, some well-intentioned and ill-intentioned manoeuvrings, the exploitation of loopholes, and as ever in politics, the spectre of ambition. But democracy is bigger than the politicians, and we need to remind ourselves often that politicians are the servants of the people, and not the other way around.

Our vote empowers politicians to serve the Constitution, not themselves. Elections are our chance to ensure that is the case, and democracy lives and dies by the success of free and fair elections. Today, we are constantly reminded that democracy is fragile ... and valuable. And definitely worth fighting for!



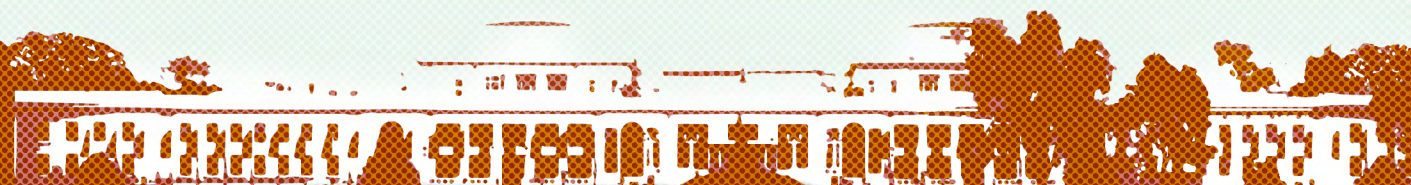
OUR HISTORY: A HOUSE DIVIDED
AUTHOR: CLARE HALLIFAX
ISBN 9781760658991 PAPERBACK
AUGUST 2025

ABOUT THE BOOK

Some things are worth fighting for ... A coming-of-age story, set against the Dismissal of the government in 1975 as battle lines are drawn, democracy is on the edge and all of it is far too close to home.

When a national crisis puts Juliet's family beach trip on hold, Juliet is disappointed, but not surprised. When your dad has a key job in the federal government, even faraway crises hit close to home.

Still the new year holds a lot of promise. It's Juliet's last year of primary school, and in 1975, the world is full of new attitudes, new opportunities ... as well as new friends. And as Juliet gets to know more about the people around her and the times that shape her, there are plenty of new surprises still in store. But politics is casting a long shadow over the country, and it seems nothing can save Juliet, her family, and her friendships, from the biggest crisis of all.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Hallifax has worked as a writer, editor and publisher for over thirty years. She has a degree in journalism, and has worked in the Canberra Parliamentary Press Gallery. After further postgraduate studies in Literature and Art, Clare moved into book publishing, specialising in books about politics, history and political history, before shifting to children's publishing in 2010 where she was publisher of the Omnibus imprint at Scholastic Australia, and then Walker Books. She has edited and published many award-winning titles, from picture books to YA and historical fiction. She is the author of *Never Forget* (2020), and a contributing author to *If It's Not True, It Should Be: writing creative non-fiction history for children and adults* (Paul Ashton, editor) (2024), and also moonlights as a ghost-writer for various fiction and non-fiction titles. She is now responsible for literary content acquisition at Audible in Australia.

THEMES

Coming of age/growing up; family and responsibility; politics and power; crisis and change; friendship and identity

CROSS-Curriculum PRIORITIES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures



Curriculum Links

English

Years 5–7 General Capabilities

Literature:

- Explore how characters change and develop in response to events (AC9E5LE03, AC9E6LE03, AC9E7LE03).
- Recognise and analyse themes, settings and character development in narratives.

Literacy:

- Interpret and evaluate texts that represent real and imagined worlds (AC9E6LY04).
- Engage with text purpose, audience and language used to position the reader.

Language:

- Investigate how vocabulary and grammar are used to influence readers (AC9E6LA07).

HASS – History & Civics

Year 5–6: History

Significant events that shaped modern Australia (AC9HS6K01):

- The Dismissal (1975) as a turning point in Australia's political history.

Changing roles of people over time (AC9HS5K02):

- Social and cultural changes in the 1970s, including family life and gender roles.

Years 5–6: Civics and Citizenship

Roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy (AC9HS6K07):

- Explore how individuals can make a difference in democratic processes.
- Understand civic decision-making, including elections and government accountability.

Laws and government processes (AC9HS6K06):

- How laws and decisions are made, and the roles of different branches of government.

General Capabilities Critical and Creative Thinking:

- Reflecting on political decisions, personal values, and community change.

Ethical Understanding:

- Considering fairness, consequences, and responsibilities in times of crisis.

Personal and Social Capability:

- Developing empathy, managing relationships, and adapting to change.

Teacher Notes ...

BEFORE READING

This is the second book in the OUR HISTORY series and is set in the mid-1970s, against the backdrop of the dismissal of the Whitlam federal government. What do you know about this time in Australia's history? As a class, brainstorm what you know and then do further research to answer the following questions:

Understanding the Dismissal

- Who was Gough Whitlam and what role did he play in Australian politics?
- What is the role of the Prime Minister in Australia? How is this different from the Governor-General's role?
- What happened on 11 November 1975 and why is it considered such an important event in Australian history?
- Why did the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, dismiss the Whitlam Government?
- What were some of the reasons people supported or opposed the Dismissal?
- What does the phrase 'constitutional crisis' mean and how does it apply to this event?
- How did people react to the Dismissal at the time – both politicians and ordinary Australians?
- How do historians and Australians today view the Dismissal? Is it still controversial?

Australia in the 1970s

- What were some of the major social and cultural changes happening in Australia during the 1970s?
Think about women's rights, Indigenous rights, immigration, education and fashion.
- How did the Whitlam Government try to bring about change in Australia?
Look into policies on health care, education, Indigenous rights, women's rights and the arts.
- What were some challenges the government faced in managing the economy during this time?
- How were children and young people affected by the changes happening in the 1970s?

Understanding the Australian Parliamentary System

Before reading *A House Divided*, it's helpful to understand how Australia's system of government works. Use the internet and your library to find answers to the following questions:

Parliamentary Structure and Roles

- What is a parliament and what is its main purpose?
- What are the two houses of federal parliament called? What is the role of each?
- Who is the Prime Minister? How is the Prime Minister chosen?

- What is the Cabinet and how does it help make decisions?
- How are laws made in the Australian Parliament? Can you explain the steps in the process?
- What is the difference between state/territory governments and the federal government?
- What are some responsibilities of the different levels of government (local, state, federal)?
- Juliet's father is the Defence Minister's Principal Private Secretary. What do these two roles entail?

Representation and Elections

- How are Members of Parliament elected in Australia?
- What is a political party and why do they exist?
- How does voting work in Australia? Why is voting considered important in a democracy?
- How do Members of Parliament represent the views of their communities?
- What does it mean to have a 'safe seat' or a 'swing seat'?
- What does compulsory voting mean and what are its pros and cons?

Democracy and Citizenship

- What is democracy and why is it important in Australia?
- How can young people (even if they can't vote) participate in democracy?
- Why is it important for laws and decisions to be debated in Parliament?
- How can people have their voices heard if they disagree with a law or government policy?
- What does it mean for Australia to be a constitutional monarchy? Who is the head of state, and what powers do they have?
- Why do you think Australia still has a King (or Queen) as part of its government system? What are the arguments for and against keeping the monarchy?
- How is the role of the British monarch different from the role of the Australian Prime Minister? Who makes the decisions that affect Australians' daily lives?
- Do you think Australia should remain a monarchy or become a republic?
- What might change if Australia became a republic? Hold a class debate on the topic with one side for remaining a monarchy and one side against.
- Create a visual representation of the structure of parliament during the 1970s when Gough Whitlam's party was in power. You might choose to design a timeline that visually represents the Australian Parliament during this time and highlights key moments during the Whitlam Government. Alternatively, you could design a flowchart to show how power and decision-making worked or a political 'family tree'.

Setting: Canberra

A House Divided is set in Canberra in the mid-1970s.

- Why was Canberra chosen to be the capital of Australia instead of Sydney or Melbourne? What was special or different about its location?
- What is the role of Canberra in Australia today? What kinds of important decisions are made there?

- What are some of the key buildings or landmarks in Canberra, and why are they important?
- What kinds of people live and work in Canberra? How might their jobs be different from people in other cities?
- How is Canberra different from other Australian cities like Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane? Think about its size, layout and what it was designed for.
- What do you think it would be like to grow up in Canberra? What might be interesting or different about living in the nation's capital?
- Find some images of Canberra from the 1970s and compare them to modern-day images of Canberra. What has changed? How do you think living in Canberra in the 1970s was compared to modern-day Canberra?

AFTER READING

A House Divided

- Have a class discussion about what the phrase 'a house divided' means. Where did the saying originate? Who first used the phrase in a political speech?
- **Quote:** 'But from Gran's point of view, the world was clearly divided. She believed that there were English and Irish; Protestants and Catholics; Labor and Liberal. There was right and wrong, and everything was black and white.' (pp 11-12). How does the phrase 'a house divided' relate to the novel? Do you think it relates to more than just the political events of the story? Think about the following:

Gran's points of view (see quote above)

Gran and Bridget

Bridget and her boyfriend Tim and his family

Juliet and Ness

Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser/the Labor Party and the Liberal Party

Rights for First Nations people and new Australians vs. the White Australia policy

- **Quote:** 'And we'll talk more about what unites us, and how it's so much more than what divides us.' (p. 192).

Do you agree with Mr Benjamin's statement? Find some examples that illustrate the way that unity is more important than division.

Characters

- How would you describe Juliet as a character? What are some ways she changes or grows during the story?
- What does the story show us about family and responsibilities? How does Juliet's father's job affect their everyday lives?
- Why do you think the author chose to set this story during a real historical event? How does it affect the mood and decisions of the characters?

- What do Juliet's friendships teach her? Have you ever had a friend who challenged how you see the world?
- 'Some things are worth fighting for.' What does this mean to you? What are some examples in the story where characters fought for what they believed in?
- How do you think young people experienced political events in 1975 compared to now? Would their understanding or feelings be similar or different?
- Do you think young people today face similar challenges to Juliet? In what ways are things different or the same?
- If you were Juliet, how would you have responded to the changes happening in your family and country?
- Juliet's grandmother and her sister Bridget often disagree with each other. What do you think of Gran? Why might the author have included her in the story?
- When Juliet interviews Gran, she comes to a better understanding of her. How would Gran's upbringing and experiences have shaped the way she sees the world? Interview an elder from your life or the community to gain insight into life in a different time to your own.
- Discuss the characters of Bridget and Meg. What role do they play in the story? What issues do their characters raise?
- Why did Juliet and Ness's friendship become so strained? Has this ever happened to you? How did you deal with the fallout?
- Do you agree that it's important sometimes to have 'uncomfortable conversations'? Write a story about a time you and a friend disagreed about something. How did you resolve the issue? You can create an imaginary scenario if you prefer.
- Where does Ness's family come from? On p. 158, we learn that her father helped build the Hydro-Electric Scheme. Find out more about what this is and how it changed life in Australia. Find some images of the building of the Hydro-Electric, including some images and information on the 'drowned towns'. (p. 160).
- What do you think it was like for Juliet growing up in Canberra? How do you think Robbie felt moving from Sydney's Bondi Beach to Canberra? Write a diary entry from Robbie's point of view expressing his feelings about the move.

Gough Whitlam

- **Quote:** 'Gough was the most important of them all. He was the Prime Minister – a big man with a big personality and a big sense of humour. He had a Santa Claus twinkle, though Juliet knew he was probably scarier than her school principal if you got into trouble!' (p. 11).
What sort of person was Gough Whitlam? Create a character profile or visual biography of Gough Whitlam. Your profile should show who he was, what he stood for and why he's remembered. Include topics such as major achievements, challenges faced, famous sayings, personal details such as family, height, appearance, legacy, and so on.
- Create a then and now comparison of one of Gough Whitlam's key policies (e.g. healthcare, education).
- Set up a role-play and interview Gough Whitlam with prepared questions and researched answers.

Themes

- **Quote:** ‘Going to university isn’t a threat to the family unit. And who says it’s a woman’s job to run the house?’ Bridget said. ‘Women have every right to be independent. Why shouldn’t women be able to stay employed after they’re married, or after they have a baby? Why shouldn’t they be able to get their own loans and mortgages? I think it’s amazing what Gough is doing for women. It’s too late, but it’s right on.’ (p. 62).
- **Quote:** ‘But now, thanks to our new government, we have an equal pay commission and rights for women, and we are being listened to. And until just a few years ago, Aborigines weren’t even counted as citizens. Now the government is advocating for their rights to their land. We now have free university. I could go on . . .’ (p. 91).

The 1970s were a time of great change in Australia. Gough Whitlam and his party introduced changes that had a positive impact on many Australians. The author lists some of these changes in her ‘Historical notes.’ Break into groups and find out more about the following:

- First Nations Australians (Vincent Lingiari and land ownership, p. 164)
- Migrants
- Women
- Healthcare
- Education

- **Quote:** ‘Just because we don’t all think the same, doesn’t mean that someone has to be in the wrong.’ (p. 197).

Do you agree with Juliet’s statement? Why is it important to have different opinions? Why is it important to listen to others, even when we disagree?

- Write a short paragraph about why you believe it’s important for people to have different opinions. What can we learn from each other when we don’t all think the same?
- Pair up with a classmate. Together, choose a topic where you know you might have different opinions (school uniforms, homework, favourite sports, etc.). Take turns sharing your opinion while the other person listens respectfully – no interrupting! Then swap.
- What did you learn? After your discussion, share the following with the rest of your class:
 - How did it feel to share your opinion?
 - What did you learn from listening to your classmate?
 - Did anything surprise you or make you think differently?
 - Why is it valuable to listen to different perspectives?
- As a class, create a ‘Respectful Conversation Tips’ poster with your ideas about how to listen, share and disagree kindly.

History

Timeline

- What were some of the other major events that happened in Australia in the 1970s (Cyclone Tracy, bridge collapse in Hobart, introduction of colour television, etc.)? Create a timeline that shows when and where these occurred.

Daily Life and Culture in the 1970s

- Break into groups and assign each group an aspect of life and culture in Australia in the 1970s to research. Some topics to consider:

- Fashion
- Music
- Food
- Popular sayings and language
- Movies and television
- Books
- Sport
- Games and events

- **Quote:** ‘It’s for school. I’m watching the news and making notes, cutting things out of the paper – it’s my 1970s Australian snapshot.’ (p. 56).
Create your own 2020s Australian snapshot.

Text Types and Narrative Devices

- Why do you think the author has included the Top 10 music charts and headlines from the time? What do they add to the story? Choose one of the Top 10 charts and listen to the music. Compare it to a current Top 10 music chart. How has music changed? Are there any songs that are similar to today’s songs? Do any of the bands still perform?
- Choose some of the news headlines included in the novel and find out more about the news stories behind them.
- Keep a diary for a month, making note of what you do and what is happening in the world around you, paying particular attention to the political news of the day (Australian or international). Include the music and headlines that are important for the month.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Then and Now: News Collage
Create a visual collage (paper or digital) comparing headlines from 1975 to headlines from today. Include a short-written response: What do these headlines tell us about how governments affect people’s lives?

Character Hot Seat

- One student pretends to be Juliet (or another character) and sits in the 'hot seat.'
- Other students ask them questions about how they felt during key events.
- Follow up with journal writing: If I were Juliet, I would feel ... because ...

Write a Letter to Parliament (persuasive writing)

- Imagine you're a young person in 1975. Something has happened that you care deeply about (for example, the beach holiday being cancelled, or a social justice issue).
- Write a letter to a Member of Parliament expressing your views and what you'd like to see changed.

Juliet's Timeline

- Create a dual timeline:
Top row: key national/political events from the book.
Bottom row: key moments in Juliet's life (friendships, family, school).
- Write a reflection: How did national events shape Juliet's personal journey?

Design a Protest Poster

- Choose a cause that a character in the book cares about.
- Design a protest poster (using slogans, art and persuasive language).
- Share and explain the poster's message to the class.

Mock Parliament Roleplay

- Divide the class into two groups: the House of Representatives and the Senate.
- Elect a Prime Minister, Speaker, Opposition Leader and party members.
- Create a bill (e.g., 'All students must do one hour of sport a day').
- Debate and vote on the bill, using real parliamentary language and process.

Create a Law

- In small groups, students draft a proposed law for their school or community.
What is the purpose of the law?
Who would it affect?
What might be the arguments for and against it?
Present the law to the class for a vote.

Who Represents Me?

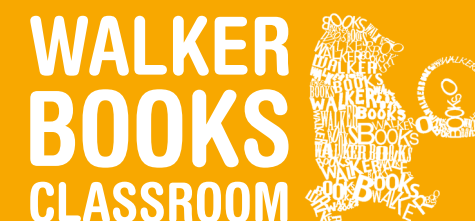
- Use the Australian Parliament House website or ABC Vote Compass to find your local federal MP and senators.
- Research their roles, party affiliation and what issues they care about.
- Write a letter or email to your MP about an issue you think is important.

Civics Quiz Game

- Run a quiz or trivia game based on Australian Parliament. It could be multiple choice, true/false or question/answer, e.g. 'Which level of government is responsible for...?'

Conclusion/Making Connections

- If something like the Dismissal happened today, how do you think the public would respond?
- How can learning about political history help us become more active or thoughtful citizens today?
- Do you think students should learn about events like the Dismissal at school? Why or why not?
- Hold a class debate: Was the Dismissal justified or not?
- Write a short fictional diary entry from a student living in 1975, responding to the event.



Free education resources written
to the Australian curriculum.

classroom.walkerbooks.com.au