

The Sydney Morning Herald

Billy our silliest PM, says Doug

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Sydney Morning Herald
1 January 2002

Sir William McMahon was at "the bottom of the ladder" of Australian prime ministers, according to his deputy, Doug Anthony, who says Sir William used to make him cringe when he appeared on television.

Mr Anthony, then leader of the Country Party, also revealed that he had been forced to ring the New Zealand prime minister to find out the date of the 1972 Australian election because Sir William refused to tell him.

His brutal assessment of Sir William was made at a briefing to mark the release of the 30-year-old records of the McMahon Government.

Sir William was widely ridiculed by the media and the public during his time in office, and the release of the cabinet documents will do little to improve his image or that of his government.

They reveal an administration that dithered on crucial policy issues in 1971 such as recognition of China, how to respond to the break from the Bretton Woods exchange rate system, and Aboriginal affairs.

They also reflect the venomous atmosphere within the Coalition after Sir William's toppling of his predecessor, Sir John Gorton, in March 1971.

But Mr Anthony's remarks represent the most scathing public assessment by one of Sir William's senior colleagues.

He recalled that he and the then Treasurer, Bill Snedden, were worried about the looming 1972 election, which looked set to be dominated by Gough Whitlam setting the agenda and "taking the headlines".

They concluded that the only way the Coalition could win was if the campaign was fought on issues rather than personalities since "McMahon would never stand up to Gough by comparison". They resolved to push Sir William to go straight to the polls after the Budget.

The two went in to put this position to the prime minister, but then "had to explain why", says Mr Anthony.

"Billy blew his top at us for downgrading him like that. He'd hardly talk to me after that."

Mr Anthony later asked Sir William what date he had chosen for the election. "I'm not going to tell you," Sir William said.

Mr Anthony protested that the Country Party needed the date to make campaign plans. "There's only three people who know and you're not one of them," was the reply.

Mr Anthony said had guessed the three were Sir William's wife, Sonia, his five-year-old daughter, Melissa, and the New Zealand PM, Jack Marshall, since the two countries had a tradition of sharing the same election timetable.

"So I rang up Jack and said, 'I was just wondering when you are having your election this year'." He replied: "The same day as you are having yours."

Mr Anthony says his party was horrified when Sir William was elected to replace Sir John Gorton, a prime minister whom Mr Anthony clearly admired. "I don't know how he ever got there. I just shuddered when it happened. If you ask Liberal Party people today they still wonder how they did it."

Mr Anthony recalls having "quite a good relationship with McMahon at the start of his period in office", but by the end of 1971 Coalition relations had deteriorated to be on the brink during three tumultuous days of cabinet meetings in December 1971 over the exchange rate.

Sir William had "tried to ride roughshod over the Country Party", Mr Anthony said, a recollection that does not sit comfortably with the ultimate surrender to the junior Coalition partner's demands.

Asked for his assessment of the three prime ministers he worked with as deputy Gorton, McMahon and Malcolm Fraser Mr Anthony said: "You'd have to put Billy McMahon at the bottom of the ladder."

The cabinet documents also include tense exchanges between Sir William and Sir John over negotiations in London on defence bases in Singapore, and cabinet's rolling of a proposal by Sir John as defence minister for a historic shift in Australia's defence strategy from "forward defence" to continental defence.

There were also cabinet attempts to smooth over a political disaster stemming from the failure of the defence minister David Fairbairn to tell Sir William and his colleagues of a decision to provide military training aid in Cambodia.