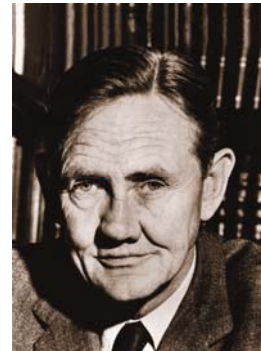


Sir John Grey GORTON, PC, GCMG, AC, CH

Prime Minister 10 January 1968 to 10 March 1971



- John Gorton became the 19th prime minister when the Liberal Party elected him after Harold Holt disappeared while swimming at Portsea, Victoria.
- Member of the Liberal and Country Party in the Victorian Legislative Council 1949, federal Liberal-Country Party Coalition 1949-1975, Senator for Victoria 1950-1968, Member of House of Representatives for Higgins 1968-1975.
- Minister for the Navy 1958-1963, Minister Assisting the Minister for External Affairs 1960-1963, Minister-in-charge of Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation 1962-1963, Minister for the Interior 1963-1967, Minister-in-charge of Commonwealth Activities in Education and Research under the Prime Minister 1963-1966, Education and Science 1966-1968, Defence 1971.
- Resigned as prime minister after dissent in the Liberal Party and the resignation of Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser from Cabinet 1971. Succeeded by William McMahon. Briefly Minister for Defence in the McMahon government 1971. Resigned from Liberal Party 1975.

Main achievements (1968-1971)

- Established National Film and Television Training School and Australia Council for the Arts. As Minister for Education and Science, laid groundwork for government assistance to independent schools.
- Initiated reform to Commonwealth law that led to decriminalising homosexual acts between consenting adults in private.

Personal life

- Probably born 9 September 1911 in Prahran, Victoria. At a later date his father told Gorton that he was actually born in Wellington, New Zealand (although no birth certificate has been located). Died 19 May 2002 in Sydney.
- Spent early years with grandparents in Port Melbourne. His parents travelled frequently for business. Family settled in Sydney 1916. His mother died 1920. He lived with his sister and father's wife whilst his father lived in Melbourne and rural Victoria.

- Educated at Edgecliff Preparatory School, Headford College, Sydney Church of England Grammar School and Geelong Grammar in Victoria where he represented the school in rowing, football and athletics. Graduated from Oxford University 1935.
- Married Bettina Brown in Paris 1935. Settled on father's farm at Kerang, Victoria
- Joined Royal Australian Air Force reserve 1939. Enlisted in RAAF 1940-1944 and sent to Singapore 1942. Forced to crash-land his Hurricane on Bintarn Island, Sumatra, seriously injuring his face. Rescued and left Singapore, his rescue ship torpedoed by Japanese submarine. Spent 24 hours on a crowded life raft. Rescued by HMAS *Ballarat*. Joined No 77 Squadron, sent to Darwin. Sent to Milne Bay, New Guinea, during United States campaign against Japanese occupation.
- Resumed civilian life on family orchard near Kerang. Served on Kerang Shire Council 1946-1952, Shire President 1949-1950. Member of Melbourne Club, Freemasons.
- Retired from politics after unsuccessfully standing as Independent candidate for the Senate in the Australian Capital Territory 1975.

Life after politics

- Regularly appeared on television and weekly radio 1978-1982. Supported legalisation of marijuana and providing heroin to addicts. Lived as recluse after death of wife, then married Nancy Home 1993. Re-admitted to the Liberal Party 1999.
- Guests at his 90th birthday gala dinner 2001 represented a broad cross-section of parliamentary and public life, and well-wishers included Queen Elizabeth and former world leaders including Lord Carrington, Lord Healey, Sir Edward Heath and Dr Henry Kissinger.

Character

- Notoriously difficult to typecast. Various described as a non-conformist, charming, indecisive, arrogant, stubborn, bold, flamboyant, unconventional. Recognised as a committed nationalist, 'Australian to the boot heels'. A radical reformer in some areas, staunchly conservative in others. *'Of all the non-Labor prime ministers, he was the one who reached out and touched ordinary Australians'* (Source: Ian Hancock, *John Gorton: He Did it His Way*, Hodder, Sydney, 2002)

Did you know?

- Gorton survived three flying accidents during the Second World War. He underwent facial surgery at Heidelberg Hospital in 1944 to repair his injuries.
- He is the only prime minister to be sworn in whilst a Senator.

Sources

Henderson, Gerard, 'Sir John Grey Gorton (10 January 1968-10 March 1971)', in Michelle Grattan (ed), *Australian Prime Ministers*, New Holland, Sydney, 2000, pp 298-311

National Archives of Australia: <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au>

Further reading

Hancock, Ian, *John Gorton: He Did it His Way*, Hodder, Sydney, 2002



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