

Chapter 5

The Dismissal of the Lang Government

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The dismissal of the Lang Government in 1932 by Sir Philip Game remains as controversial as the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975. Both occurred in times of political and economic upheaval. Both involved vice-regal representatives who took informal advice from judges and others who were not their responsible advisers. Both involved the dismissal of a Labor Government, which had been the subject of allegations of economic incompetence and mismanagement. Both involved the dismissal of a charismatic and controversial Labor leader who never regained power. In both cases, elections were held immediately after the dismissal and the Opposition won a substantial victory.

There were also, however, significant differences. Lang was warned by his Governor that he would be dismissed if he did not withdraw an allegedly illegal instruction, whereas Whitlam was not warned by his Governor-General of his impending dismissal or given the opportunity to take acts to avoid dismissal. Lang was dismissed on the substantive and narrow ground of persisting in an illegal act, whereas Whitlam was dismissed for failing to obtain Supply.

Both dismissals have been the subject of sustained criticism by political scientists and constitutional lawyers, although the reserve power to dismiss a Prime Minister or Premier continues to be recognised.

The extent of the Governor's powers and discretion in the States

When Australia was first settled, the Governors of the Colonies had significant legislative and executive powers. These powers gradually dimi-

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