

Harold Holt's disappearance

Harold Edward Holt, 1908–67

Harold Edward Holt was born in Sydney in 1908 and was elected to the Federal seat of Fawkner in 1935. He became Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party on the retirement of Sir Robert Menzies in January 1966. Holt's term as Prime Minister was characterised by strong support for United States' involvement in the Vietnam war, and a stunning 1966 election win on a pro-Vietnam platform. For further information on Holt's Prime Ministership please see *Fact sheet 83 – Prime Minister Harold Edward Holt*.

The disappearance – 17 December 1967

Harold Holt disappeared while swimming at Cheviot Beach near Portsea, Victoria on 17 December, 1967. His body was never recovered. Without determining the cause of Holt's death, a joint report by Commonwealth and Victoria Police, submitted in January 1968, concluded that, '... there has been no indication that the disappearance of the late Mr Holt was anything other than accidental'. The report (see copy on file [A1209.1968/8063](#)) found that his last movements followed a routine domestic pattern, his demeanour had been normal and despite his knowledge of the beach, the turbulent conditions (high winds, rough seas and rip tides) overcame him. The explanations put forward for a failure to find the body included an attack by marine life, the body being carried out to sea by tides or becoming wedged in rock crevices.

While a variety of theories have been expounded about Holt's disappearance, the Commonwealth Government did not deem a formal inquiry necessary, accepting the conclusions of the Police report.

Records relating to Holt's disappearance

The National Archives holds a range of records relating to the disappearance of Holt, and the events that immediately followed: the unsuccessful search for his body; the memorial services and the mourning at the loss of a national leader; the caretaker Prime Ministership of John McEwen; and the selection of a replacement for Holt. Examples of the types of records held are listed below. Unless otherwise indicated the records are held by the National Archives in Canberra.

Records of the disappearance and search

Among these records are the contents of Holt's briefcase, which provide an insight into his work at the time he disappeared, and a silent film made by the Victorian Police re-enacting the movements of witnesses at Cheviot Beach and the conditions that Holt encountered. A key Prime Minister's Department file ([A1209, 1968/8063](#)) containing police reports, correspondence, maps, photographs, press releases and documents suggesting a key witness withheld information, also provides a comprehensive coverage of events.

Records of sympathy and the memorial services

These records reflect the profound international reaction to the disappearance of Holt. They include condolence messages from the Queen and other world leaders, the planning for memorial services in Melbourne and London, and the itineraries of dignitaries such as US President Johnson, British Prime Minister Wilson and Prince Charles, who attended the Melbourne service.

Records of the political events following Holt's disappearance

These include personal papers of Country Party leader John McEwen, who was sworn in as caretaker Prime Minister on 19 December 1967, until the Liberal Party could elect a new leader. Papers of McEwen held in series [M58](#) deal with the critical questions arising from the death of a Prime Minister, the visit of President Johnson, and the meeting of Cabinet he attended while in Australia. For further information on records relating to John McEwen please see *Fact sheet 84 – Prime Minister John McEwen*.

Records relating to the disappearance of Harold Holt

Copies also in Sydney and Melbourne

* Held in Sydney

The disappearance and search

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Disappearance of Prime Minister	1967–68	A463, 1967/6732
Prime Minister Holt – disappearance and search	1967	A4940, C4711
Film (black-and- white, silent) re-enactment of disappearance #	1967	B6330, 1
Mr Holt's disappearance	1967–68	M58, 88
Mr Holt's disappearance	1967–68	M58, 153
Death of Mr Holt	1967–69	M1499, 51
Documents from the briefcase of Holt	1967	M1945, Item 1
Press conference Canberra – TV/radio statements	1967	AA1971/178, 12/1
Search for Mr Holt – Prime Minister and Cabinet	1968	A1209, 1968/8063
Indian mystic's claim to knowledge of body	1968	A1209, 1968/8146
Original manuscript of report of disappearance	1968	A1209, 1968/8570
Cabinet Minute – Abandonment of Portsea search	1968	A5840, 770/EC

Expressions of sympathy and the memorial services

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Visit of overseas dignitaries for memorial service</u>	1967–68	A446, 1967/73018
<u>Condolences – Heads of State, diplomats</u>	1967–68	A463, 1968/1195, Part 1
<u>Condolences – Heads of State, diplomats</u>	1967–68	A463, 1968/1195, Part 2
<u>Condolences – Heads of State, diplomats</u>	1967–68	A463, 1968/1195, Part 3
<u>Memorial service for Holt – financial</u>	1967–68	A463, 1967/6783
<u>Memorial service – representatives from UK</u>	1967	A1209, 1968/8027
<u>Condolence letters and books</u>	1967–68	M2655
<u>Photographs of Melbourne memorial service</u>	1968	A1200, L68652
<u>Photographs of Melbourne memorial service</u>	1968	A1200, L68543
<u>Photographs of Melbourne memorial service</u>	1968	A1200, L68653
<u>Memorial service – representatives from NZ</u>	1968	A1209, 1968/8045
<u>Holt memorial services – London</u>	1968	A1209, 1968/10013
<u>Lyndon B Johnson's arrival for Prime Minister Harold Holt Funeral (audio tape) *</u>	1968	C102, POO134
<u>Harold Holt Memorial Service – program file for radio and television *</u>	1968	C1986, Box 1

Political events following the disappearance

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Questions arising out of disappearance of Holt</u>	1967–68	A432, 1967/3407
<u>Personal papers of Sir John McEwen</u>	1967–71	M58, 176
<u>Personal papers of Sir John McEwen</u>	1967–71	M58, 415
<u>Personal papers of Sir John McEwen</u>	1967–71	M58, 470
<u>Outwards correspondence – Sir John Bunting</u>	1967	M319, 17
<u>Retiring allowances; establishment of Holt's death</u>	1968	A432, 1968/3035
<u>Facilities for Dame Zara Holt</u>	1968	A1209, 1968/8003
<u>Holt's disappearance – constitutional considerations</u>	1968	A1209, 1968/8004
<u>Removal and storage of effects of Holt from Lodge</u>	1968	A1209, 1968/10078