

John Robert Kerr, Governor-General of Australia, 1974–77

John Robert Kerr was born in Balmain on 24 September 1914. He studied law at the University of Sydney, and was admitted to the NSW Bar in 1938.

Kerr enlisted in the second AIF in 1942. He initially served on the staff of Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Thomas Blamey, but in late 1942 joined the Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs. He accompanied Blamey to the 1944 Prime Ministers' Conference in London, and acted as his personal emissary and representative in Washington and London. He left the post of Assistant Director of the Directorate in early 1945 to become Chief Instructor at the Land Headquarters (LHQ) School of Civil Affairs, Duntroon.

On demobilisation with the rank of Colonel in 1946, Kerr became Principal of the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Sydney (the civilian successor agency to the LHQ School of Civil Affairs). He was an advisor to the Australian delegation to the United Nations (1947) and Organising Secretary of the South Pacific Commission (1948).

Kerr returned to his legal practice in 1948 and was appointed a Queen's Counsel in 1953. He established a reputation as a specialist in industrial law and in constitutional work. He joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the 1940s, but resigned during the party split of 1955.

From 1966 to 1972, Kerr served as a Judge of the Commonwealth Industrial Court and of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory (1966–72), a Judge of the Courts of Marine Inquiry (1967–72), Deputy-President of the Trade Practices Tribunal (1967–73), and Chairman of the Commonwealth Administrative Review Committee (1968–72). He was appointed Chief Justice of New South Wales in 1972.

Kerr was sworn in as the 18th Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Force on 11 July 1974, succeeding Sir Paul Hasluck. His term as Governor-General is most notable for his dismissal of the Whitlam Labor Government, dissolution of the 29th Parliament and installation of the Fraser 'caretaker' Government on 11 November 1975. Less than two years later (14 July 1977), his resignation was announced with effect from 8 December that year.

On 9 February 1978, Kerr was appointed as Australian Ambassador to UNESCO in Paris. However, amid vocal opposition he resigned from the position (2 March 1978) before taking up his duties. John Kerr died in Sydney on 24 March 1991.

Records relating to John Kerr

Records relating to John Kerr held by the National Archives include a collection of his personal archives and records of a number of government departments, agencies and senior officials relating to his career and his period as Governor-General. Selected records are listed below.

The Governor-General's office correspondence files series ([A2880](#)) spans several decades. To identify records about John Kerr search the National Archives [RecordSearch](#) database for the series 'A2880' with a date range of '1974–1977'.

Selected personal records of John Kerr held by the National Archives

Collection references

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Papers relating to John Kerr's appointment as Lieutenant-Governor and Governor-General, press clippings relating to his resignation as Governor-General, and biographical notes	1936–77	M4535
Photographs of Sir John Kerr at official and private functions	1956–81	M4517
Photocopies of articles written by Sir John Kerr	1958–75	M4516
Addresses given by John Kerr	1960–74	M4525
Press cuttings	1962–95	M4511
Correspondence relating to John Kerr's appointment as Chief Justice of New South Wales in 1972 and knighthood in 1974	1972–74	M4534
Addresses given by His Excellency Sir John Kerr – includes index	1974–77	M3511
Sir John Kerr interview – 'This Day Tonight' (190 mm audio-visual reel-to-reel)	1974–83	M4538, 9

Selected Commonwealth and official records relating to John Kerr

Department of Defence

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Kerr, John Robert (WW II Army service file)	1939–48	B883, NX164481

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
John Robert Kerr (ASIO subject file)	1958	A6119, 436

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Appointment of Sir John Kerr as Governor-General –1974</u>	1955–74	A1209, 1974/6544
<u>Appointment of Sir John Kerr as Governor-General –1974</u>	1955–74	A1209, 1974/6545
<u>Swearing-in of Sir John Kerr as Governor-General – 1974</u>	1965–74	A1209, 1976/1889

Governor-General

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Correspondence files, multiple number series</u>	1912–97	A2880
<u>Correspondence files, single number series (comprises correspondence addressed to Sir John Kerr as Governor-General)</u>	1968–77	A10926
<u>Kerr, Rt Hon. Sir John Robert (documents relating to swearing in of Kerr as Governor-General)</u>	1974	A12689, 1974

Sir Clarence Harders (Secretary, Attorney-General's Dept)

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>The dismissal – Governor-General – discussions with secretary of Attorney-General's Department</u>	1975	M4081, 2/17
<u>The dismissal – reference material – Governor-General</u>	1975	M4081, 2/20
<u>The dismissal – reference material – speeches by Sir John Kerr</u>	1975	M4081, 2/21

Further sources of information

- *Fact sheet 216 - Edward Gough Whitlam*
- *Fact sheet 240 - The dismissal, 1975*
- *Fact sheet 242 - John Malcolm Fraser*