

The Sydney Salon

Peter FitzSimons AM and Prof Jenny Hocking on the Palace Letters

On Tuesday 16 February 2021, The Sydney Salon hosted a very engaging talk in its series of open forum discussions attended by some of Sydney's leading academic, media, political, cultural and business identities. February's event featured guest speakers Peter Fitzsimmons AM and Prof Jenny Hocking, who led an important discussion centred around the "Palace Letters".

Professor Hocking tuned in via Zoom due to an unexpected COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne and together with Fitzsimmons, provided insightful commentary, unpacking the significance of the Palace Letters in solving the 45-year mystery; was the Queen involved in the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam government by Governor General, Sir John Kerr?

"The letters are a stark reminder of how history can remain hidden," Hocking said, noting that the Supreme Court decision to have the documents made public was a triumph for the Australian public, making the point that Australian law prevailed over the wishes of the Queen.

Fitzsimmons and Hocking explored their concerns with the political tone of the discussions between Kerr and the Palace, two parties who are supposed to be apolitical. The letters revealed that the Palace assisted Kerr in his exploration of the Governor General's reserve powers and that Prince Charles even congratulated Kerr on his "courage" in executing these powers over the Whitlam Government.

"You could possibly forgive Kerr, he's new in the gig. The Palace has been doing this for 700 years," Fitzsimmons said.

They discussed the royal secretary, Martin Charteris, who was responsible for confirming the existence of the reserve powers and discussing their potential use with Kerr extensively over many months, including six phone conversations, one of which took place on the day of Whitlam's dismissal. This information, along with the understanding that the royal secretary only ever writes on behalf of the monarch, helped Hocking and Fitzsimmons to argue their case; that it was impossible for the Queen to have been unaware of the dismissal as she has maintained to this day.

In all, the discussion provided an insight into the complicated relationship between Australia and the British Monarchy, which is central to the Australian Republican Movement and the future of Australian democracy.