STUDY GUIDE

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time

**Jim Cairns**
1914-2003
Politician

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 7 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Jim Cairns**
**Director/Producer** Robin Hughes **Executive Producer** Megan McMurchy
**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1999
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Also in Series 7: Rosalie Gascoigne, Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, Charles Perkins, Bill Roycroft, Peter Sculthorpe, Victor Smorgon

A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

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## SYNOPSIS

Throughout the 1960s and 70s Dr Jim Cairns held a unique position in Australian public life as the intellectual leader of the political left. As a senior and influential member of the Whitlam Government, he was involved in many of its achievements and also heavily implicated in the circumstances that led to its overthrow.

In this deeply reflective account of his extraordinary life, Jim Cairns describes a career which took him from the Victorian police force, to the army, to university life, to involvement in the peace movement and finally into politics, where he was committed to a program of social and economic reform. The Vietnam War protest marches resulted in huge numbers of people turning out on the streets of Melbourne and it was during these rallies that Cairns demonstrated his great capacity for leadership and inspirational oratory.

Jim Cairns' intellectual views have been well examined elsewhere. The facts associated with his role as Deputy Prime Minister to Whitlam, his involvement in the loans affair and the Junie Morosi affair have been worked over intensely in the many recent examinations of that particular period of Australian history. However, in this interview, Cairns brings a new dimension to our understanding of his role in the nation's history by relating it to the broader motivations of his life. His revelation of the childhood secret which lay at the heart of many of his future frustrations, disappointments and vulnerabilities, is an exceptionally moving contribution to our understanding of the human condition.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Politics, Studies of Society and Environment, Australian Studies, English, Personal Development and Australian History.

## THE PASSAGE OF TIME

This **Australian Biography** program about Jim Cairns was produced in 1999. In 2003, Jim Cairns died. The previous year, 2002, he disclosed important information about his affair with Junie Morosi which contradicts a small part of the program. This new evidence is included so that you can decide if it affects your overall views about him as a person.

## CONTEXTUALISING LEARNING

It is difficult to look at Jim Cairn's life without knowing something about the political landscape of the 1970s. Almost three years after the Labor government was sworn into office, it was removed from power in an unprecedented action. Governor General, Sir John Kerr, decommissioned Gough Whitlam and replaced him with a caretaker prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, the then Leader of the Opposition. These were amazing days in Australia's political history and will be discussed for a long time. Although it is not the intention of this guide to focus on the political ramifications of the period, it is important that you know a little about the people Cairns refers to in the program so that you can better understand the man and his life.

## WHO'S WHO IN POLITICS?

### In the Labor Party

GOUGH WHITLAM: Prime Minister of Australia from December 1972 to November 1975, he was the first Labor prime minister since 1949. In the election, the Labor Party's winning margin was narrow. Whitlam's period of governance saw years of concentrated and wide-ranging change. His reforms departed radically from the policies of the previous Liberal government.

DR JIM CAIRNS: Deputy Prime Minister to Whitlam (12 June 1974-2 July 1975), Minister for Secondary Industry (19 December 1972-9 October 1973), Minister for Overseas Trade (19 December 1972-11 December 1974), Treasurer (11 December 1974-6 June 1975), Minister for Environment (6 June 1975-2 July 1975). He was accused of misleading parliament over the loans affair and sacked by Whitlam.

REX CONNOR: Minister for Minerals and Energy (19 December 1972-14 October 1975). He is mentioned in the program as part of the loans affair. He is said to have continued in secret negotiations to secure the US$4 billion loan through an international broker even after Whitlam abandoned the plan. He was finally sacked by Whitlam.

LIONEL MURPHY: Attorney-General (19 December 1972-10 February 1975). Minister for Customs and Excise (19 December 1972-19 February 1975). He is mentioned in the program as part of the loans affair.

FRANK CREAN: Deputy Prime Minister to Whitlam (14 July 1975-11 November 1975), Minister for Overseas Trade (11 December 1974-11 November 1975), Treasurer (19 December 1972-11 December 1974). He is mentioned in connection with 'the loans affair'.

AL GRASSBY: Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (19 December 1972-12 June 1974). He is mentioned in connection with Junie Morosi.

The above Ministers were all members of the Whitlam Cabinet.

- What is the political meaning of the word 'cabinet'?
- Who makes up a party's cabinet?
- What aspects of teamwork are implicit in a prime minister's cabinet? Discuss why each characteristic is important.
- Explain the differences between the federal executive council of a party, the party caucus and the cabinet of a party. Why does each body exist separately?
- Robin Hughes, the interviewer, refers to Cairns' strong support in caucus. Why didn't they stand behind him as Treasurer?
- Is the Attorney-General part of the cabinet? Why/why not?

### In the Loans Affair

TIRATH KHEMLANI is the Pakistani money lender who claimed he had access to enormous amounts of money from Arab sources. The Whitlam Government was negotiating with him for a loan of US$4 billion for 'temporary purposes'. This loan was not authorised by the official Loans Council and the Opposition claimed the government's action in seeking the loan was deceitful. This affair finally brought down the Whitlam Government.

- Why would parliament be nervous about borrowing such huge amounts of money from Arab sources?

GEORGE HARRIS from Melbourne is the Australian businessman referred to in the loans affair as the 'go-between'. Jim Cairns signed a letter authorising Harris to make inquiries about overseas loans and promising him a commission on the US$4 billion. In the program, when he is asked about the incident, Cairns defends himself by saying he 'was completely unaware' that this was one of the 50 or so letters he had signed at that time.

- Is this defence credible?
- What impact is added by including a readable copy of the letter in the archival footage?

## RELATIONSHIPS

At the end of the program, Cairns reflects, 'so many of my personal relations, I feel disappointed about'. Consider the quality of the following interactions in his life and for each one, note down those aspects that might have disappointed him most.

GWEN CAIRNS was Jim's wife. He speaks of the importance of their marriage as 'an active thing, a participating thing, not just a feeling, not just an affection, not something... emotional'.

- Find both verbal and visual evidence in the program that confirms his assertion that he loves his wife.
- Discuss the ways that their relationship might have suffered because of the Junie Morosi affair.
- How might the reality of Jim Cairns being such a public figure have put pressure on their marriage even before the complications of Junie Morosi?

JUNIE MOROSI was Jim Cairns' private secretary. She was born in Shanghai, China.

- What do you think Cairns means when he says Morosi was 'too sexually dangerous'?

There was intense scandal about their relationship, which was thought by most to be a sexual affair. When Robin Hughes asks Cairns about this, he skirts round the question rather than answering it directly.

- Does he answer any other questions by deflecting them?
- What do Cairns' responses tell you about him and about his relationship with Morosi?
- Would this type of affair have been more scandalous in 1975 than today?

Many times, Cairns and Morosi denied their relationship was sexual. Morosi successfully sued media over the allegations and won damages. In 1982, when Cairns was asked in the Supreme Court of NSW if he'd ever had an adulterous relationship, he replied 'No. Never'. However, much later, in September 2002, when John Cleary asked during an ABC interview, 'Did you go to bed with Junie Morosi?' Cairns replied 'Yes'.

- Activity. Draw up a three-column table with headings as below and note down your ideas.

| | |
|---|---|
| Column 1 | Possible reasons for Cairns' duplicity |
| Column 2 | Advantages of the lie |
| Column 3 | Disadvantages of the lie |

- Do you believe the fact that Jim Cairns lied about this relationship brings into doubt his credibility in other areas? Give reasons for your answer.

Cairns says that Morosi brought him an understanding of 'the formation of human character and behaviour'.

- What could he have meant by this? Cite examples of his greater astuteness concerning people after his relationship with Morosi.

HIS MOTHER's way of expressing love for her son seems to have created an emotional template which he followed for most of his life.

- Draw up a four-column table with headings as below and note down your ideas.

| | |
|---|---|
| Column 1 | Jim's memory of his mother |
| Column 2 | Emotional lesson learnt |
| Column 3 | Behaviour in adult years perpetuating this emotion |
| Column 4 | Behaviour in adult years countering this emotion |

Here are some suggestions for your first column. Add other ideas if you wish.

- Waving goodbye to his mother and aunt who worked at the mental hospital, knowing he would not see them for a fortnight.
- Shaking hands with his mother rather than hugging her.
- Knowing his mother was ignorant about the properties of her disease (syphilis) which she feared she'd pass on to her son.

HIS FATHER's behaviour is seen by Jim as 'a tragedy'.

- Why might his father have gone to Africa? What might he have experienced in the war which prompted his running away from responsibility?

The family didn't talk about Jim's father's absence. He learned the truth only in his late 30s.

- Consider the ways this silence might have affected Jim's childhood.

Jim says, 'My mother caught syphilis which she got from my father'.

- How did society view syphilis in the 1920s?
- Looking at Jim Cairn's body language as he reveals this information, decide how comfortable he himself is in talking about the subject. What emotions might he be feeling?
- How might this knowledge have affected his relationship with his mother and his memory of his father?

## PUBLIC LIFE

Although he felt disappointed about personal relationships, Jim Cairns feels 'pleased in all those impersonal relations, those distant, public...' connections.

- Consider the following events in his life and for each one, note down those aspects that may have given him the most satisfaction:
- The 'eight commendatory entries in five years' that Jim received as a member of the special unit in the police force known as 'the dogs'.
- The Melbourne University 'public lecture theatre full' of students who, for many years, heard his economics lectures.
- The enormous success of the anti-Vietnam Moratorium march he led.
- The success he achieved in opening up trade with China. He increased trade approximately fivefold.
- The influence of the Confests which Cairns estimates influenced 50,000 people.
- His output as an author. He has written more than 15 books.

## IMAGES

In the program, complete pictures of the man arise through visual and verbal metaphors. Examine the following segments and note down what you learn about Jim Cairns from each of them. As well, think of examples in his later political career which show the character trait seen in each story.

- His story about Murphy being placated by the extra pie Jim gave him.
- His reflection about his life mirroring the broad jump victory at Northcote High School: 'I've got somewhere on the strength of one single jump'.
- The closing visual image of him selling his books.

## VULNERABILITY

Risk creates vulnerability and requires courage. In each of the following events, decide what Cairns risked, assess his possible areas of vulnerability and comment on why courage was needed.

- Leading the Moratorium march in Melbourne.
- Employing Morosi even though other politicians would not have her on their staff.
- Being part of the Confests.
- Cancelling Whitlam's authority for Connor to borrow in the loans affair.

## IDEALISM

Idealism is defined as 'living according to one's notion of perfection'. In the program Cairns says, 'I over-rated the importance of being a member of a parliament and a minister, in what I can do to achieve what I thought should be done'.

- Do you think Cairns underestimates what he achieved as a politician?
- Was it more important for him as an idealist to try to fulfil his vision rather than assess the situation and realise it was too difficult?
- Is it possible to balance idealism and pragmatism? Suggest principles that might be followed in order to bring about such a balance.

## CONCLUSION

Jim Cairns made some big errors in his life; 'political miscalculations' was how his former colleague and friend Tom Uren described them. However, he also made many positive contributions to government policy; contributions which helped make Australia the strong nation it is today. Many people have benefited from his willingness to be vulnerable in defence of his ideals. No human being is either totally flawed or totally perfect. Perhaps history has focused excessively on Jim Cairns' errors to the detriment of his successes.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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