

Passing Conservatism in Australia: Malcolm Fraser and the Politics of Ruthlessness

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Life wasn't meant to be easy, my child; but take courage: it can be delightful. – George Bernard Shaw, Back to Methuselah

It is always tempting to view contradiction as transformation. If something disrupts what is perceived to be the order of things, something odd must have taken place to do so. In certain political cultures, disagreement is considered mildly seditious. With tribal cultures, the contrarian is a threat and must be exorcised – or at the very least castrated by ceremonial consensus.

Australia's late Malcolm Fraser through the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s could never be said to be a creature of the Left in any traditional sense. In Australia, he has been treated as having shed the leathery skin of conservatism, the hard covering that made him such a ruthless political calculator in 1975. Fraser was the blade of Australian politics, fashioned for the plunge.

His target was then prime minister Gough Whitlam, sanctified reformer and feted wunderkind, the god he slew. Fraser blocked supply in the Senate even after promising not to do so. Repeatedly, his aim was to asphyxiate the government of the day. "I was the terrible person who had brought him down. And [the press gallery] weren't going to forget that."^[1] Having been sacked by the Governor General Sir John Kerr on November 11, 1975, Fraser was called "Kerr's cur". He subsequently became prime minister, losing in 1983.

He was also deemed the more appropriate prime minister by the Washington establishment. Whitlam was uttering dangerous tones regarding the Pine Gap base, wanting greater control and threatening the possibility of non-renewal of the lease. One should not forget that Fraser was an ardent Cold War combatant, one who backed with considerable enthusiasm the Australian involvement in Vietnam. Whitlam, in contrast, was pushing Australia towards the Non-Aligned movement, opening ties with China, and withdrawing troops from Indochina.

Various Australian Labor prime ministers were quick to the tribute podium, finding their own progressive mirror in the works of a man which the Left down under historically reviled. "I honour Malcolm Fraser," tweeted Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard. "His brave stance against the evil of South Africa's apartheid helped change the world" (Mar 20). Bob Hawke sharpened his tribute to "one particular aspect" of his political career – that he "was impeccable on the questions of race and colour."

Hawke's position provides a nice point of contrast to Fraser. The man who won against Fraser in 1983 was a feeder to the US embassy, along with various figures of the more

conservative factions of the ALP. Fraser could, in other words, rely on his opposite numbers to sabotage their own chances and facilitate Whitlam's political assassination – after all, figures such as the union leader Paul Howes, or a young Bob Carr, Australia's future foreign minister, would see incandescent stars and feel pangs of ecstasy at the prospect of Washington's largesse.[2] While that condition has not changed within Labor party circles, Fraser went so far as to urge a disentangling of Australia from its unqualified embrace of Washington, while seeking greater understanding with China.[3]

The Fraser years brought with them stagnation and stultification, despite his record on Aboriginal welfare and such reform policies as freedom of information. Fraser's treasurer and a future prime minister, John Howard, proved lethargic in office. Such four years were also the mean years, ones which coincided with the Reagan administration in the United States, and Margaret Thatcher's bruising policies in Britain.

In his statesman years, Fraser gradually exhibited the wise reflections that said more of his party's transformation than his own. A man perceived to be aloof and heartless in office could still win over the bleeding hearts in retirement. There were the bread and butter causes of human rights – he opposed South African apartheid with uncompromising zeal; he set up humanitarian efforts. There was the environment.

His conservative Liberal Party, through the latter part of the 1980s, was undergoing a reactionary self-cleansing. It became clear when Labor was ousted from office by John Howard's coalition in 1996, what had happened. The progressives had been gradually muffled, banished to the backbenches by such groups as the "uglies" faction. The policies of neo-conservative reaction began to take shape, from refugee policies to the "liberalising" of industrial relations. Fraser was gradually being left out in the cold.

The points of fundamental disagreement with Fraser lay in areas such as refugee policy. Draconian and daft, Canberra's populist rubbish on the subject has infiltrated the global discussion on how worst to deal with human trafficking and unwanted arrivals. In the 1970s, Fraser took a gamble that did not sit well within many in his party – he would allow Indochinese refugees to find a home in Australia. Then, as now, individuals were seeking passage to Australia by boat.

It was subsequently hailed as a revolutionary move that augured well for Australian multicultural faddists, but was not something that Howard forgot. (It is worth noting that Howard was resoundingly opposed to allowing such "Asians", notwithstanding they had been allies during the Vietnam War, into Australia.)

Fraser's passing certainly brought the mirror of contemplation out for various members of a party he was a member of for over six decades. But it is 1975 that remains the great point of continuing reverence. It was Fraser that dealt Whitlam the final blow. Prime Minister Tony Abbott spoke of "those stirring days when he led the fight against what many of us thought was a bad government – the days of 1975". Howard preferred to focus on matters of "great integrity" and the record of the prime minister in areas such as federalism, but also remembered Fraser as the banisher of profligacy, having brought an end to the "excesses of the Whitlam government".

There are parallels, in a sense, with Britain's Tony Benn, who was said by Jimmy Reid to have had "more conversions on the road to Damascus than a Syrian long distance lorry driver." Deemed simultaneously a moderniser and infantile protester against it, Benn cut a

curious, non-conformist figure on the Labour benches, an aristocrat of the Left. In a political sense, it would have been hard to have imagined parliament, and British politics, without him.

Fraser likewise left his mark on Australian politics, exhibiting his own degree of non-conformism and infuriating contrarianism. He was a thorn in the bipartisan consensus. But he remained a ruthless, and at stages devastating politician. His furnished scabbard of political wisdom always came with a sharp blade of opportunism.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/malcolm-fraser-a-barnacle-on-the-body--politic/story-fnbcok0h-1227270851530>

[2] <http://larvatusprodeo.net/archives/2013/04/wikileaks-cables-the-alp-and-the-american-embassy/>

[3] <http://www.randomhouse.com.au/books/malcolm-fraser/dangerous-allies-9780522867688.aspx>

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