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Malcolm Fraser and the baby boomer lefties: who's changed?

By Noel Preston
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Twenty-seven Prime Ministers have led Australian Governments. Of the sixteen in my lifetime, the one who fascinates me most never received my vote. He left office when I was 42 years of age. He was 52, a year younger than when Robert Gordon Menzies commenced the longest period of Prime Ministerial tenure in Australia's history. Malcolm Fraser is now 80. His drive to make a contribution to society seems barely diminished and his views still provocatively engage public debate.

Recently, but yet again, his views on multiculturalism have stirred vitriol. In The Australian (Feb.21,2011) social commentator David Burchell scathingly tried to put the old man back on the shelf of history declaring, in something of a half truth: "Through it all, the consistent aspect of his political personality is this same talent – quite undimmed by age – for high-minded moral alarmism, to convince his fellow citizens that his guidance is indispensable to us". As if such a characteristic is unusual amongst the political class, or particularly deplorable for that matter.

Meanwhile, many of us who claim the social democratic tradition – it used to be called 'democratic socialism' – are cheering Malcolm. On matters of racism and human rights and minorities (like the first Australians or the most recent would-be Australians, asylum seekers) we ought to concede Fraser has an excellent track record. As an activist in the Bjelke-Petersen days I well remember how the people of Aurukun and Mornington Island and their supporters found significant sympathy from the Fraser government. Indeed, I recall being in the Cabinet room at old Parliament House one afternoon in 1978 when Fraser, Ian Viner and Neville Bonner conferenced with the elders of Aurukun and Mornington Island – an occasion which Viner maintains "had a profound effect" and was the first time the cabinet room was so used.

The memoir/biography published last year and authored by Fraser and Margaret Simons* certainly provides detailed evidence of the former PM's consistency on matters of racism and human rights across the decades. This text stirred in me a memory of that real leftie, Queensland Senator George Georges, saying to me in the early eighties: "Malcolm is good on these issues. I think it goes back to his time at Oxford when he got to know aspiring young African leaders studying there." (Though the Simons' text contains no confirmation of Georges' observation.)

Indeed, it is this memoir which has particularly stirred my fascination, a fascination at the convergence of conviction between a figure like Malcolm Fraser and many of those whose opposing political formation coincides with his period in Parliament. Surely this convergence is not easily explained by a tendency with passing years to forget what we once we rejected and to remember only what we increasingly embrace. What is clear is that, though the activism of past years has passed, the power of words, hopefully tinged with elder wisdom, remains.

Of course the memoir record and Fraser's addresses and papers of recent times, together with his latter day resignation from the Liberal Party, are dismissed, often angrily, by many who were colleagues in bygone days. Every public utterance in recent decades becomes evidence that "Malcolm has changed" and that he is rewriting history. At the same time, some (especially "the dries" among them) add a twist of their own revision, namely, that the record of the Fraser government on economic management was woeful.

A partial explanation of this critique and hostile rejection is the fact that Malcolm Fraser has been a divisive and alienating figure, and as a politician, calculating and driven by ambition. Certainly, there was more than a measure of ruthlessness (always self-justified of course) in the way he destroyed the leaders who stood in his way to the top job: Gorton, Snedden and Whitlam. I cannot gloss over the dismissal of Whitlam. Years on, many of us who maintained our rage after 1975, now see how shambolic the Whitlam government became, but we cannot accept the processes that caused its dismissal from office. Even on Fraser's own account the question arises as to whether he made dubious use of his influence over Kerr. That said, in the bigger picture, it is unjustifiable to dismiss the Fraser legacy because of "the dismissal".
Whatever the explanation for the convergence of views between liberals like Fraser and social democrats from the sixties and seventies like myself, the gulf between us nearly fifty years ago was a real one. Fraser, a pro-Santamaria, anti-communist shaped by the Cold War, helped prosecute Australian involvement in Vietnam as Minister for the Army and subsequently Minister of Defence. It was the Vietnam War as much as anything that converted many of my generation to left-wing politics. In addition, those of us in Queensland who came to political adulthood under the Bjelke-Petersen regime formed an understandable distrust of non-Labor governments in the Fraser era, reinforced by Federal policy questions of the time, such as uranium mining.

Undoubtedly, there are achievements of the Fraser government which, with hindsight and explanations in the Fraser memoir, deserved more credit from critics such as myself at the time. One area of pertinence to a researcher and commentator in public ethics (as I have been), is the attention given by Fraser to integrity in Government. Presaging developments in other jurisdictions, it was the Fraser Government which commissioned the Bowen Report (which outlined recommendations about Government ethics) and the Costigan Report (which explored matters of corruption).

One test of the character and vocation of senior politicians is what they do with their time and resources once they have left office. Too often the public impression is that they use their political legacy for self aggrandisement, and abandon a sense of public duty for personal profit. In contrast, Fraser's use of the post-prime ministerial years reflects great credit on him. These years demonstrate how he had a vocation for politics, to invoke sociologist Max Weber's categories. That is, Malcolm Fraser is one who "nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a cause".

The evidence for this judgement is his work on the Commonwealth's mission to South Africa in the latter years of Apartheid and his involvement with Care Australia and Care International. The account of these projects is underpinned by a passion, even righteous anger, with which ageing activists like me can resonate. The memoir supplements his ongoing commentary about Australia's international role as a friendly critic of the USA, human rights, the war in Kosovo, the Iraq war, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, and his defence of the rule of law with respect to Australia's terrorism legislation. On some matters he has clearly changed his mind such as the need for an Australian Bill of Rights and an Australian Republic. While there are intimations of a long-standing commitment to the natural environment, one senses it is in this domain that the former Prime Minister has not made the shifts these times demand.

So Malcolm Fraser insists he is "enduringly liberal" and laments, as do many of us, the disappearance from contemporary politics of politicians like Fraser's contemporaries, Fred Chaney and Ian McPhee (though another small 'l' liberal of his day, Don Chipp, doesn't rate the same affection from Fraser). One wonders who there is "left" for Fraser to vote for. He is not alone with that dilemma. As for me, I still question whether it is enough to be enduringly liberal, though it certainly is a solid basis for building common cause on the vital matters of social justice.

This article is partly based on M Fraser and M Simons (2010) Malcolm Fraser: the Political Memoirs, The Miegunyah Press, MUP.

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