



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Fraser, Rt Hon. John Malcolm, AC, CH

SPEECH

Monday, 23 March 2015

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Questioner
Speaker Dreyfus, Mark, MP

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Mr DREYFUS (Isaacs—Deputy Manager of Opposition Business) (12:06): I last saw the Rt Hon. Malcolm Fraser in May last year at the launch in Melbourne of Australians Detained Abroad, a humanitarian NGO that supports Australian families who have loved ones detained overseas. Fraser, towering above the crowd in his immaculate three-piece suit, downed a double scotch, neat, and addressed the room without notes for 40 minutes. Fraser seemed absolutely undiminished even well into his ninth decade. It is a deeply saddening shock to have lost him late last week. Another former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, summed it up well on Friday. He said:

I always thought Malcolm would be around a lot longer. I must say, I wished he had been.

I would like to express my condolences to Mr Fraser's family and loved ones. And, to my parliamentary colleagues in the Liberal Party, we on this side of the House know well the sadness of losing a hero.

I was fortunate, late in his life, to develop a friendly relationship with Fraser who I came to greatly admire and respect. I never confessed to Fraser that as a young student I had been a keen participant in demonstrations and rallies against him, but I learned a lot from him about government and about politics. I had some robust discussions with him, especially about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but our discussions were always respectful and he was always prepared to listen.

When reflecting on Fraser's life, I do not think it is possible to omit his role in the tumult of 1975 though it was, and is, divisive. Fraser was a great political warrior. It would diminish him not to recall his part in the most momentous crisis in Australian political history, but we are blessed to live in a country where political crises are resolved peacefully. We are blessed to live in a country where even the fiercest political contest does not tear us apart as a community and where we can respect and admire our staunchest opponents. Malcolm Fraser embodied that sense of decency. The friendship he came to share with Gough Whitlam should be an example for all of us in this place. I know that many on my side of the House are grateful for Fraser's advice and friendship over the years.

There has been a lot of commentary about Fraser's views and political commitments over the years, and debate about whether and how they changed. Fraser was a giant of Australia's Liberal tradition and it is for those opposite, the modern custodians of that tradition, to judge those matters. It is clear, however, that Fraser's most deeply held convictions endured throughout his life. A few of Fraser's achievements as Prime Minister give us an insight into those convictions. In 1981, fulfilling an election commitment, Fraser established Australia's first Human Rights Commission. He gave that body power to assess Australia's compliance with a range of international human rights instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons.

As we have heard from other speakers, Fraser embraced multiculturalism. He created the Special Broadcasting Service, SBS, to broadcast multilingual and multicultural programs. He denounced bigotry and he welcomed refugees.

On a different note, we should recall that Fraser ended commercial whaling in this country. The Whale Protection Act, Fraser's government passed in 1980, ended a practice which had taken place here since colonisation in 1788. Indeed, whaling had been one of Australia's first export industries. Fraser's act took whales from the purview of the industry minister and instead put them under the protection of the environment minister. The speed with which Australia shifted from being a whaling nation to a staunch international advocate of the protection of whales is in no small part due to Fraser's leadership on this issue.

Fraser carried on the work of his great foe Whitlam in securing land rights for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. In 1973 Whitlam had established a royal commission into Aboriginal land rights. Royal Commissioner Edward Woodward delivered his final report in 1974. Responding to Woodward's recommendations, the Whitlam government introduced its land rights bill into parliament in October 1975 but did not pass it before the government's dismissal. Fraser pressed on with this work. He passed a slightly modified Land Rights Act in

1976. As Noel Pearson noted in his eulogy for Gough Whitlam last year, Fraser's legislation would eventually 'see more than half of the territory restored to its traditional owners.' It is worth noting Fraser's courage here. He did not have to press on with land rights legislation and indeed he faced significant opposition for doing so. We should all be grateful that Malcolm Fraser made land rights a bipartisan project.

It is clear that for Fraser an abhorrence of racism and a commitment to racial equality were deep-seated convictions but he did not content himself with attending to these matters at home. Abroad, Fraser fiercely opposed apartheid in South Africa. He was a strong supporter of the Gleneagles Agreement in 1977, under which the nations of the Commonwealth agreed to impose a sporting ban on apartheid South Africa. Again, Fraser did not have to take up cudgels to fight racism across the globe. Doing so put him at odds with, among others, the ascendant conservative Prime Minister of Britain Margaret Thatcher. He did it nonetheless, because he knew it to be right.

No-one, whatever their political orientation, can doubt that Fraser had the courage of his convictions. The commitment to human rights, to tolerance and to human dignity, which lay behind many of Fraser's achievements in his time in office, reverberated through all of his later work whether in international organisations, civil society or as a private citizen. At the urging of Prime Minister Hawke, Fraser headed an international group of eminent persons to continue his work in opposing apartheid. He visited Nelson Mandela in prison and would later attend his inauguration as President in 1994.

Fraser continued to participate in our national life until the very end. It is a measure of the man that one can say that, even at 84, he had so much still to contribute. Australia owes Malcolm Fraser a great debt for a life of distinguished public service. We are the poorer for his passing.