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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Fraser, Rt Hon. John Malcolm, AC CH

SPEECH

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Speaker O'Dwyer, Kelly, MP

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Ms O'DWYER (Higgins—Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer) (18:02): I join with so many in this House, on both sides, to rise today to mark the passing of our 22nd Prime Minister, the Right Hon. Malcolm Fraser AC, CH, GCL.

At this time our thoughts are with his family: his children, Mark, Angela, Hugh and Phoebe; his grandchildren; and, in particular, his widow, Tamie. It is very important that we acknowledge their private loss and recognise that it is they who ably supported him during his 27 years in public life and, in particular, during his time as opposition leader and later as Prime Minister from 1975 to 1983.

Much has been discussed and debated about Malcolm Fraser, his service to our nation, his government's legacy and his continued engagement in public discourse—at times at odds with subsequent Liberal administrations. Upon reflecting on his life I suspect that Malcolm Fraser was in fact a great idealist.

In coming into parliament in 1956 at the age of only 25, Malcolm Fraser was the youngest federal parliamentarian at that time. From his first speech it is clear that he had great ambitions for our country and its place in the world. He had the foresight to predict that our population would grow exponentially from around nine million people to around 25 million people in his lifetime. He understood both the opportunities and the challenges for such a young country, sparsely populated and internationally remote. He was not afraid for the future but alive to the part that Australia could, and indeed would, play in improving the lot of both its own citizenry and those of the world.

He advocated strongly for economic development as a means of expanding our population and maintaining our standard of living. As a liberal he placed great faith in the power and importance of the individual, who he said would 'always reign supreme'.

A man of the land and a true conservationist, he was intent on leaving the world a better place than he found it. He placed value on our natural environment both as a productive asset and for its own innate worth to our planet and its inhabitants. He declared 36,000 kilometres of the Great Barrier Reef as a marine park; he placed five properties on the World Heritage List—the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu, Willandra Lakes, Lord Howe Island and South-West Tasmania; he ended the mining of mineral sands from Fraser Island; and he banned whaling in Australian waters during his time as minister. Concurrently, he also introduced a policy of uranium development—with safeguards—encouraged resource development and introduced world-parity pricing for local oil.

His government set about restoring prudent government and economic stability. In particular, he curtailed the rapid growth in government expenditure under the Whitlam government, addressed inflation and reduced tariffs. He did this in a difficult economic climate of unsettled world markets and the aftermath of the world oil shocks.

He had a strong sense of our place in the world as a nation, both now and into the future, as evidenced by his strong support of multiculturalism, Australia's migration program and acceptance of Vietnam refugees, who had been denied by the previous Labor government. His ambitions for Australia to be a respected voice internationally manifested in his using international platforms to argue ardently against apartheid in South Africa.

It is an unfortunate truth that the turbulent years of the Whitlam government, and the division that followed its removal, are to an extent, in current Australian popular understanding, synonymous with the prime ministership of Malcolm Fraser and his government. As they say, context is everything, and Malcolm Fraser's legacy has been mired in the context of this time.

There is a good deal of irony that a leader with strong ideals was forced to confront the reality of the chaotic Whitlam government. In this, perhaps his idealism was matched only by his resolve to serve the country for the nation's best interest and by his fortitude to take action where lesser souls would have wavered.

He said of the Whitlam government's removal:

There was one sort of trauma in having an election forced. There would have been another sort of trauma in having that government stay in power another six or seven months.

Indeed, while for some it was clear that there was a massive agenda of legislative change under the Whitlam government, it did in some respects overshadow the immense economic mismanagement that occurred at that time too, which saw spending increases of 40 per cent, soaring tax rates and a doubling of unemployment in only one year.

In my recent condolence speech for former Prime Minister Whitlam, I noted that Alan Mitchell of the *AFR* said it took '20 years and four prime ministers to get the budget back under control.' While there have been, and will be, many attempts to rewrite history, the fact remains that Fraser's decision to block supply was entirely endorsed by the people of Australia when they delivered to him the greatest electoral landslide victory in our nation's history.

Much has also been said of whether Malcolm Fraser's political views changed or whether the Liberal Party has changed since his time as leader. Whatever is the case, Malcolm Fraser was certainly forward thinking and dreamed large for our country and for the world. From outside the Liberal Party, much is made of the differences of opinion. However, this is mostly met with sanguine bemusement from those of us within. As a party, we understand that difference should be applauded. Difference challenges us to understand. It can innovate us and stimulate us. As a party, we understand that difference is not synonymous with lack of unity any more than same necessarily equals fair. Difference does not represent weakness, but compels us to test and argue our views and values on their merits, as we should.

I am proud that my local party within Higgins invited Malcolm Fraser as the guest speaker, not all that long ago. Over 250 party members attended the debate and, as always, it was informed and it was robust. While, in the end, our broad church has lost a great parishioner, we as Liberals and parliamentarians commend Malcolm on his unyielding service to our nation; his steely resolve to do what he believed to be in our nation's interest in spite of personal ramifications; his innate understanding that we must strive to leave to our children a better world than the one that we inherited; his commitment to people, their strengths and aspirations, both here and around our globe; and his ambition for a strong, prosperous and respected Australia.

After nearly 60 years engaged in the big debates still much of the 25-year-old new member remained. Ever thinking to the future he said of politics, 'You have to be an optimist. Why involve yourself in issues of public policy unless you are?' Vale Malcolm Fraser.