

March 2015

THE PASSING OF MALCOLM FRASER

(Published in "The Australian" on 21 March 2015, under the headline "Standing Tall on the International Stage")

Some Personal Memories (Tony Eggleton)

I was associated with Malcolm Fraser, in one role or another, for some fifty years.

We worked together in politics, international affairs and in the field of humanitarian aid. Sometimes he was my boss, often we were colleagues and, with the passing of the years, we were friends.

He was not everyone's cup of tea. He could be demanding, infuriating and sometimes too strong-willed for his own good. On the other-hand, Malcolm's strengths and virtues more than outweighed the foibles.

At heart he was a reserved and private man, and this often contributed to the false perception of an aloof and brusque personality.

He much enjoyed the company of family and friends, could be considerate and generous, and was loyal to those whom he respected.

He was much more than a long-serving Liberal Prime Minister and three-time election winner. Malcolm Fraser had a deep commitment to a better Australia and a better world, and was a champion of the oppressed, disadvantaged and the under-privileged.

He was determined to have his own firm hand on the helm in times of crisis, and this was illustrated at the height of the 1983 election when he gave personal priority to dealing with the bushfire emergency, regardless of the cost to his campaign.

He was never afraid to speak his mind and, in the pursuit of social justice and human rights, placed frankness above discretion, often to the discomfort of old Party colleagues.

On many social and international issues he was far more liberal and progressive than his contemporaries.

On the Australian scene he was a pacesetter in multiculturalism, was a strong advocate for indigenous Australia and was a champion of boat people and refugees.

Internationally, he played a prominent part in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, won the respect of Third World countries through leadership in the Commonwealth of Nations, and was outspoken in his assessment of Australia's international commitments and alliances.

In his early days as Prime Minister, attending his first Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in London, he quickly gained the confidence of the Third World leaders. It was revealing to see Malcolm Fraser walking down the ornate staircase at Lancaster House, surrounded by a laughing group of these leaders, one with a friendly arm around his shoulders. Early in the agenda, Malcolm had demonstrated that he was on their wavelength and, in many developing and evolving countries, this mutual respect endured for a life-time.

He stared down Margaret Thatcher over the independence of Zimbabwe, and became an influential figure in Commonwealth deliberations and initiatives.

In the years following his Prime Ministership he devoted himself to humanitarian causes, especially through his chairmanship of CARE Australia and CARE International. By way of CARE projects, and through rapid response to natural disasters and emergencies, he made a difference to the lives of tens of thousands of the world's poorest people.

He was meticulous and "hands on" in all that he undertook, and throughout his life he maintained an address book that many would give an arm and a leg for. He could, and did, know how to rapidly track down anyone from personal staff to Heads of State, and in the process called in many IOUs to assist the causes that he supported. Whoever you were, wherever you were, whatever the time of day or night, there was always the prospect of a call from Malcolm Fraser. In my own experience, it once took the form of a local policeman flagging me down on the road from Canberra to Sydney. The policeman had received a personal call from the Prime Minister requesting that he locate my car on the highway and get me to a phone (before the days of mobile phones!)

His determination sometimes translated into bloody-mindedness. I still smile when I remember Big Mal striding across the ballroom at the Savoy Hotel in London, convinced that he was taking a short cut to his suite. Despite the protestations of personal and hotel staff, Malcolm headed for a door and disappeared into the broom cupboard to the accompanying clatter of mops and buckets. Despite some loss of dignity, he managed to crack a smile.

Malcolm Fraser was his own man, uncompromising but compassionate. He did not dodge controversy and didn't place great store on personal popularity. But he was respected abroad, contributed much to Australia, and was highly regarded by those who had the privilege to know him well.

.....

