

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOHN MALCOLM FRASER, AC, CH — TRIBUTE

Statement by Premier

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [2.01 pm]: Malcolm Fraser was born on 21 May 1930 in Melbourne, the son of a pastoralist and grandson of Sir Simon Fraser, a protectionist and Liberal senator for Victoria from 1901 until 1913. Malcolm Fraser was educated at Melbourne Grammar School and Oxford University, returning in 1952 to the family property of Nareen, near Hamilton in western Victoria.

The Liberal Party selected the 23-year-old Malcolm Fraser to contest the seat of Wannon at the 1954 federal election. Despite an overall swing against the Menzies government, Malcolm Fraser came within 17 votes of unseating the sitting Labor member. At the subsequent election in 1955 he won Wannon with a majority of 7 600 votes and for the next 28 years held this previously marginal seat with comfortable and sometimes very large majorities. It was a considerable achievement to have entered Parliament as its youngest member aged 25. He served on the backbench for a decade and even at this stage of his career he made clear his condemnation of the apartheid regime in South Africa, when in the early 1960s many conservatives were equivocal on this issue.

From 1964 he was to be a strong and principled advocate of Australia's military commitment to South Vietnam. In 1966, Malcolm Fraser became Minister for the Army, and in 1968 he was appointed as Minister for Education and Science and Minister for Defence in John Gorton's coalition government. In March 1971, he resigned in a public dispute with John Gorton, who was then replaced as Prime Minister by William McMahon. From August 1971 until the defeat of the coalition in 1972, he was again Minister for Education.

Malcolm Fraser was a shadow minister until November 1974 when he unsuccessfully challenged Bill Snedden's leadership of the Liberal Party. In March 1975, he challenged for the leadership again and comfortably defeated Bill Snedden. The events of late 1975 remain controversial. In October Malcolm Fraser resolved on the blocking of supply with the unanimous support of the shadow ministry and maintained his resolve for four weeks amidst public anger and disquiet when Prime Minister Whitlam refused to call an election. On 11 November, he was appointed caretaker Prime Minister in order to take Australia to a double dissolution election.

In December 1975, Malcolm Fraser was elected with the largest majority in the history of the Australian Parliament. This majority was only slightly reduced from 55 to 48 when the coalition was re-elected in December 1977, and the coalition had a firm Senate majority until 1981. Throughout his leadership, Malcolm Fraser had an excellent working relationship with the National Country Party led by Doug Anthony and never contemplated governing alone despite the overall Liberal majority in the House of Representatives.

In the 1970s, both sides of politics were still basically committed to the economic model of tariff protection, government-run enterprises such as Trans-Australia Airlines and the Commonwealth Bank, and heavy financial regulation. This was a model that had appeared to work well in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Fraser government curbed overall government spending after the excesses of the Whitlam government, reducing an inflation rate of 17.5 per cent to bring back stability to the Australian economy. Commonwealth estate duty was abolished in 1978, putting an end to decades of injustice. The institution of the Campbell inquiry into the financial system was later to provide the basis of reform of banking regulation and the floating of the dollar in the 1980s.

Western Australians should remember that Malcolm Fraser was a federalist who gave self-government to the Northern Territory in 1976 and who handed back some offshore resources to the states. He was also prepared to hand them back a five per cent variation of the income tax band, which the states could either raise or lower. In 1982, Mr Fraser refused to override the Tasmanian government in the construction of the Franklin Dam, while offering \$400 million to dissuade it.

Malcolm Fraser had a strong commitment to Aboriginal Australians and in the pre-Mabo era initiated the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory—a bold step by a new Liberal government and a significant milestone in the recognition of Aboriginal rights.

As a consequence of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, the Fraser government decided on a generous intake of Vietnamese refugees fleeing from what was then harsh Communist rule. Australia took the lead in an international resettlement effort that prevented further journeys by boat. Out of 50 000 Vietnamese refugees, only 200 arrived directly by sea into Australia.

The Fraser government instituted the Federal Court of Australia, the Human Rights Commission, the Federal Police and the National Crimes Commission. The Special Broadcasting Service was the result of Malcolm Fraser's commitment to multiculturalism.

In 1980, after five years, the Fraser government won a third election with a majority of 23 seats but lost control of the Senate. In March 1983, Malcolm Fraser gambled on a double dissolution election in which the coalition

was heavily defeated, losing 24 seats. He took full responsibility for this judgement and resigned from the Liberal leadership and from Parliament.

In subsequent years, Malcolm Fraser remained active in community life. He worked with charitable institutions, notably serving as the president of CARE Australia. He served on United Nations and commonwealth panels investigating transnational corporations, commodities and other issues in South Africa. In 2006, he was appointed a professorial fellow in the Asia Pacific Centre for Military Law.

Malcolm Fraser has contributed to national debate, notably in foreign and defence policy, in particular, refugees, and in his support for the 1999 republic referendum. Malcolm Fraser was a great Australian who will be remembered by many for his personal commitment to the advancement of human rights, multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation.

Malcolm Fraser served Australia with integrity as our twenty-second Prime Minister for over seven years in a government that achieved much. We express our condolences to Mrs Tamie Fraser, and to their four children and their families.

Statement by Leader of the Opposition

MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham — Leader of the Opposition) [2.08 pm]: I join the Premier in paying tribute to life of Malcolm Fraser, former Prime Minister of Australia, who passed away early on Friday. Mr Fraser was born in 1930 in Melbourne and served in the federal Parliament from 1955 to 1983. Prior to his election to Parliament, he had grown up the son of a grazier in western Victoria and attended schools in Melbourne and western Victoria. After finishing his university studies in Melbourne, he went to Oxford University to undertake further studies. When he came back from Oxford, he ran for federal Parliament and was elected to Parliament at the age of 25—a very young age to become a member of the federal Parliament. He was re-elected at many subsequent elections up until 1983, when he retired upon the election of the Hawke Labor government. A by-election for Wannon was held in late 1983, or perhaps early 1984.

He served his first 10 years in Parliament as a backbencher as part of the Menzies government over a number of terms. Eventually, in 1965, as I recall during the Vietnam War, he became the Minister for the Army. Subsequently he served as Minister for Education and Science, then Minister for Defence. Upon the election of the Whitlam government, he served as a frontbencher in opposition, then opposition leader, then Prime Minister of Australia, and finally as a backbencher in opposition.

His time as Prime Minister is the most notable of his time in Parliament. He is known as the father of Vietnamese migration to Australia. The large numbers of Vietnamese migrants settling in Australia have contributed a great deal to our country generally and, indeed, to Western Australia. He played a large role in establishing a multicultural Australia and the Special Broadcasting Service—SBS as we know it—that plays a large role across Australia. Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke recently commented on Malcolm Fraser's life that he was absolutely impeccable when it came to questions of colour, race and creed. He was part of leading the charge, often against like-minded governments overseas, to oppose the apartheid regime in South Africa. He passed legislation in the Parliament drafted by the Whitlam government to provide land rights to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. He set up the Australian Human Rights Commission and established the Administrative Appeals Tribunal and the federal Ombudsman's office, and introduced the first freedom of information laws nationally. He is well known for his respect for and treatment of the first Australians. He had a special bond with Aboriginal Australians that I understand stems from some of his friends when he was a child living on the farm in western Victoria.

Malcolm Fraser had quite an extraordinary career. He was a very controversial Australian political figure. He was one of the most controversial Australian political figures of my lifetime—and probably the most controversial. The circumstances in which he came to office created much controversy that has lasted to this day. Indeed, Malcolm Fraser inspired very deep emotions for many Australians, both for him and against him. His eulogy is probably not the place to traverse all those issues, but it would be fair to say that some people loved him and some people had a pretty opposite view of him during the course of his life because of the events of 1975—but it would be fair to say that he was a consummate politician. As his colleagues attested, he was tough. John Gorton and some of his colleagues of that era said that he was very strong and very ruthless in seeking government. He was good at it; he won three elections in a row.

There has been much debate about his later life after retiring from Parliament, particularly the last 15 years or so. Instead of seeking to capitalise financially on his time in Parliament, he sought to do many good deeds. He was part of the major international charity CARE Australia. He was part of the Eminent Persons Group, which was established under the commonwealth. He worked tirelessly for charities, and indeed attempted to advance some of the causes that these days are very prominent, such as Indigenous affairs, a republic and refugees coming to Australia. He was a man of forthright views and forthright expressions. As I said, in the last 15 years, the debate has been about whether he moved or whether his party moved. I suspect it was a bit of both. As one gets older,

sometimes one's perspectives change. His perspectives clearly changed somewhat, in particular in relation to Australia's relationship with the United States of America. At one time, in the 1960s, he was regarded as a defence hawk. In recent times, for instance in the lead up to the last federal election, he went so far as to endorse a Greens senator. He changed his position and his views on some things, but he was very honest and he was certainly forthright about it. He did not hold back on explaining what he thought the true position should be in this country.

There is a generation of younger people who have certainly lauded Malcom Fraser for those events. There is a generation of older people on both sides of the fence who might not appreciate what he has done recently or what he had done back in 1975. Having said that, he was a very significant Australian and he did amazing things in his life. He was a very complex figure in this country over the last 40 or 50 years who devoted himself to public service for the entirety of his working life. For that we need to acknowledge the very significant contribution that Malcolm Fraser made to this country.

In closing I want to acknowledge his family—his wife, Tamie, who I think was one of Australia's favourite prime ministerial spouses, and his four children.

Statement by Leader of the National Party

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren–Blackwood — Leader of the National Party) [2.17 pm]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to this motion on behalf of the National Party. With the passing of Malcolm Fraser so soon after the passing of Gough Whitlam, it truly is the end of an era. In these two men we had two giants of Australian politics—two genuine Australian statesmen, two great combatants and, as it turns out, two great friends. It would be a mistake to let the drama and the acrimony surrounding the dismissal define either of them or their legacy.

From a National Party perspective, it must be pointed out that Malcolm Fraser was a farmer. He grew up on his family farm in western Victoria producing wool and beef. In 1955, aged 25 years, he was elected to the rural seat of Wannon—a seat he would represent with distinction for another 28 years. As Prime Minister, he was a strong supporter of the Liberal–Country Party coalition. Although the Liberal Party had a majority and could have governed in its own right, he retained the formal coalition with the Country Party—later with the National Party—and included luminaries such as Doug Anthony, Ian Sinclair and Peter Nixon in his cabinet holding senior portfolios. It has been said that many of Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Party colleagues thought the Nationals had altogether too much influence in the affairs of the government, but in a country in which the majority of the population lived in the cities, Mr Fraser recognised the need for strong representation for rural and regional areas. He is, in fact, the last Australian Prime Minister to represent a rural seat. When his political career ended and he was not busy with his international relations and charity work, of course he went back to the farm.

Malcolm Fraser has been described by some, in my view unfairly, as a “do-nothing” Prime Minister at the head of a “do-nothing” government. What he did was steady the ship, which is exactly what the country needed after the chaos of the Whitlam years. He also followed through with important social reforms that started under the Whitlam government, such as Aboriginal land rights and a commitment to a multicultural Australia. It is an important lesson for governments and oppositions of today that despite the extraordinary circumstances in which he came to power, Malcolm Fraser was still able to embrace certain elements of the Whitlam government's agenda because they were good ideas and the right thing to do. Fred Chaney was quite right in describing Malcolm Fraser as the moral compass of Australia. We are all poorer for his passing.

Statement by Minister for Corrective Services

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Corrective Services) [2.19 pm]: I want to make a brief contribution and pay my respects to the life of The Right Honourable Malcolm Fraser. In doing so, I want to recount that I was lucky enough to spend at least an hour with Mr Fraser about 20 years ago. In a previous life, I was dispatched to Sydney Airport to pick him up in my old Kingswood and drive him to the northern beaches of Sydney. Like any good political junkie, I thought about it for some time. I thought: here is an opportunity to get a bit of memorabilia. I printed out the *Hansard* for 11 November 1975 titled “Formation of Government”, and while I was out with Mr Fraser I asked him if did not mind autographing it. He said, “You know you are the first and only person who has ever asked me to sign that.”

I still have it framed in my electorate office today. We chatted for an hour, as would be expected of anyone who has the opportunity to talk to a Prime Minister, regardless of politics, and I asked him what he thought his greatest achievement was. It was a very obvious question that a pimply faced young man might ask someone such as Malcolm Fraser. He said that the thing he was most proud of was, without doubt, his ability to save the lives of South Vietnamese refugees by adopting a policy within his government that allowed so many of those people who were fleeing from genuine tyranny to start a new life in Australia. He was very proud of that.

He was, without doubt, a controversial figure in Australian political history, but he was also a man who had absolutely solid principles in his commitment to multicultural affairs. I think it is a lesson that we can all learn from his example. I pay my respects and pass on my regards to his family.

The SPEAKER: I ask members to stand for a minute's silence.

[Members stood and observed a minute's silence.]