



# THE CONVERSATION

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March 22 2015, 9.42pm EDT

## The evolution of Malcolm Fraser was a wonderful thing to behold

A U T H O R



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D I S C L O S U R E   S T A T E M E N T

Barry Jones is an uneasy member of the ALP.



Lunch with Gough and Malcolm as guests of Barry Jones in 2008. Brian Dawe, Author provided

What I came to admire, even love, in Malcolm Fraser was that as he aged, he became more open, more radical, more attracted to the universal, more outraged by opportunism, and more courageous. At 84 he was better than he had been at 64, and far superior to the 44-year-old prime minister. That evolution was a wonderful quality in him.

Born in Toorak, brought up in the Riverina, Fraser was educated at Melbourne Grammar and Magdalen College, Oxford, where his lecturers included Isaiah Berlin and A. J. P. Taylor.

Elected as MP for Wannon in December 1955, aged 25, he was the youngest future prime minister to enter federal parliament. Paul Keating, a few months older, came next.

Fraser's style and associations were patrician, something that the Melbourne-educated Robert Menzies aspired to, and the Oxford-educated John Gorton rejected. Gough Whitlam was patrician in style but not background, and John Howard was determinedly populist.

Going directly to Oxford from Melbourne Grammar was probably a mistake, isolating him from Melbourne contemporaries and contributing to his rather awkward manner. Fraser's marriage to Tamie (Tamara) Beggs in 1956 humanised him, and his children, in later decades, encouraged him to enlarge his range of issues.

He was always, as Bob Hawke **said**, impeccable on race. But in his early years in politics he was seen as hard right, influenced by the novels of Ayn Rand, with their heavy emphasis on individual freedom and opposition to state intervention, and – like Tony Abbott – attracted to the ideology of B.A. Santamaria.

These factors may have influenced Menzies to choose Billy Snedden and Peter Howson as ministers but not Fraser – a decision he came to regret.

During the Vietnam War, as army minister, Fraser began as a zealot, then became a sceptic, determined to resist Australian forces being subject to strategic deployment by the United States and doubtful that a victory by Hanoi would endanger Australian security in any way.

In 1992, he invited me to join the board of CARE Australia. We worked together closely for the next eight years. He drove himself and he drove the board, and he was increasingly appalled by contemporary horrors, especially Rwanda.

Despite the "late unpleasantness" of The Dismissal in November 1975, Whitlam and Fraser took common cause on many issues, and developed a mutual affection in their last decades.

Gough told me that he allocated responsibility for the dismissal as 70% John Kerr, 30% Fraser.

In May 2008, I organised a lunch for Gough attended by Malcolm, John Clarke and Bryan Dawe, Race Mathews, Graham Freudenberg and Julian Burnside. The rapport between Malcolm and Gough was obvious.

Fraser used to argue that he had not changed his political position, but everyone else had, with both the Liberals and the ALP moving from the centre to the right. He was deluding himself there. He had changed, very significantly.

He had become Liberal leader in March 1975 as a paladin of the right, defeating the moderate but ineffectual Billy Snedden.

He used to take conservative attitudes. He voted against the abolition of the death penalty (September 1973), abstained on Gorton's motion to decriminalise homosexual acts (October 1973) and voted with Howard and Ruddock on the Lusher motion proscribing medical benefits for abortion (March 1979).

He made a serious error of judgement in adding a new division, Knight (AK) and Dame (AD), to the Order of Australia in June 1976. Because these awards went mostly to people who were already knighted, including Menzies, Burnet, Kerr, Cowen, Stephen, Barwick, Cutler, and Syme, this aroused less controversy than Abbott's exhumation of the honour in 2014.

Strikingly, when he spoke at the Melbourne launch of my autobiography, *A Thinking Reed*, in 2008, he read with deep emotion from my chapter on the death penalty.

As prime minister from 1975 to 1983, he maintained much of the Whitlam "platform", including free universities, and was an ardent promoter of multiculturalism. He was a strong supporter of the "Yes" case in the failed 1999 referendum on a republic and became a patron of the Dying With Dignity organisation.

With Burnside, he was the outstanding advocate for reversing the cruel and dehumanising – but apparently electorally popular – policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers. He was strong on Indigenous issues.



*Carefree Wonder* (2007) – Malcolm Fraser. Author provided

Malcolm was a gifted photographer and I bought one of his pieces for my collection by donating to CARE.

During the 2007 election he would telephone me and say, “How are we going?” I would always reply, “Who is this ‘we’ to whom you refer? Is it the party that you used to lead?” And he would say – it was a kind of game – “Get stuffed”.

He became an enthusiastic tweeter and accused me of not keeping up with the times. On most issues, population excepted, we took a common view and he was certainly further to the left than anyone on the opposition frontbench in Canberra.

Malcolm was an extraordinary, often lonely, figure, and I shall miss him. The loss for Tamie, his family, his office staff, old friends will be profound and I send them my love.

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