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ASSESSING MALCOLM FRASER, THE  
ENIGMA – “LET NOT YOUR HEART  
BE TROUBLED, COMRADE”

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# **ASSESSING MALCOLM FRASER, THE ENIGMA - "LET NOT YOUR HEART BE TROUBLED, COMRADE"**

Michael Kirby

Malcolm Fraser is an enigma. His recent *Political Memoirs* lift some of the veils that hide the inner core of the man. But the centre remains a mystery. One suspects that this is the way he likes it.

Curious that it should be so. Very few people in the history of Australia have had such a long public life. Born in May 1930, he is now approaching his eightieth birthday. His first election to federal parliament was in 1954. At 24, he was welcomed to Canberra as 'the youngest MP ever'. And he has been part of national politics ever since.

Most Australians know the basic outlines of Fraser's life. He was born in Riverina New South Wales, into a family which boasted one of the founders of the Australian Commonwealth, Sir Simon Fraser. Eventually, the family moved to the western district of Victoria. His hopes to sit in the Menzies Cabinet were never realised. It was Harold Holt who gave him his first ministerial position. Fraser's disagreement with Holt's successor, John Gorton, led to a bitter parting of the ways which resulted in Gorton's own fall. His replacement by Billy McMahon virtually guaranteed the Whitlam victory for the ALP that followed in 1972. In 1975, he was made caretaker prime minister when the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, dismissed Whitlam as Prime Minister. His defeat, in 1983, at the hands of a resurgent ALP, belatedly led by Bob Hawke, resulted in Fraser's resignation from parliament. Since

then, he has been busy with many good works, national and international.

The basic questions presented by Fraser's life are whether Fraser's diagnosis of his positioning in the national political spectrum is correct. Have his values remained the same whilst those of the Coalition and the ALP in Australia have steadily moved to the right?

Fraser does not reveal much that is new about the dismissal of Whitlam. Perhaps now we know it all. I remember at the time considering that Kerr had undoubted legal power to do what he did. The issue was not power, but, in a sense, due process. Any error in what happened was, in the end, Kerr's. It was not Fraser's. This has always been the view that Whitlam has taken. It is why he describes his relations with Fraser as always civil, and growing in warmth as old men can do.

There is no doubt that the Fraser Government had many major achievements to its credit, in the field of human and legal rights. It implemented an astonishing range of laws to render federal government more accountable: He reversed Whitlam's antagonistic policy on Vietnamese refugees. He created an Institute on Multicultural Affairs. He also set up the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) for which any Australian with the slightest interest in news beyond the headlines must be eternally grateful.

The book candidly reveals Fraser's personality, which is one of the most of unusual to reach a top position in Australian political life. Throughout its pages, there are references to his apparent aloofness and unapproachability. But, Fraser was very steady, highly focused,

intensely hard-working and deeply interested in policy. Observers declare that Bill Clinton was the greatest 'policy wonk' to reach the presidency of the United States of America. Malcolm Fraser was of a like disposition. He was not in politics for the gain or the trappings. He was interested in values and decisions. Above all, Fraser had distain for the world of infotainment which, even in 1975, was beginning to surround Australian political leaders. He became a lonely voice over the past decade, criticising Australian tendencies to revert to racism, condemning the *Tampa* affair and refugee policy under successive governments and attacking anti-terrorist laws as extreme.

I cannot, however, accept the proposition that such an intelligent man as Fraser just stood still, emotionally and intellectually, whilst the rest of the world exited off to the right. In my view, Malcolm Fraser has maintained his commitment to his core values. But other values have changed, like his embrace of a republic and his commitment to a constitutional Bill of Rights to prevent the kind of abuses in Australian law and public life that he has seen and condemned in recent years.

In the deep pools of Fraser's feelings are to be found undisclosed waters of strong emotions and firm commitments. He himself accepted that in politics, realities deny even the chief players too many stands of principle. He says that, for himself, a resistance to racism was such a rock-solid principle to stand by. His memoirs reveal others.

When, in March 2002, a Senator from his own Party, misused parliamentary privilege to make false claims against me in Parliament, later withdrawn, Malcolm Fraser was only the second person on that strange morning to telephone me at the High Court to express his

abhorrence and disapproval: 'I do not believe that this would have happened during my time as Prime Minister'. Quite.

Last week, with perfect equipoise, I delivered the 2010 Whitlam Lecture in Sydney. After the lecture, Gough Whitlam telephoned me with words of thanks. With characteristic precision, he insisted that the record should be corrected to contain the exact words that he expressed to Fraser when he was criticised in the memorial service for their predecessor John Gorton: 'What I actually said' declared Whitlam, 'as I reached over to grasp his arm, was "Let not your heart be troubled, comrade"'.

Those who read Fraser's memoirs and who reflect on his long life and national contributions over such a long span of years, can take those words as an assessment of an old adversary and one time political foe. They seem likely to be the assessment of Malcolm Fraser by the Australian people, in the face of critics from within the political establishment.

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