
Malcolm Fraser – A Personal Reflection, by Gerard Henderson, Connor Court Publishing, 2025, pp 240 RRP \$39.95, ISBN: 9781923568068.

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It's probably inevitable given that we've just passed the 50th anniversary of the dismissal of Gough Whitlam's government, that we should see a number of reviews and assessments of this most tumultuous period in Australian politics.

Those 'of the faith' will still regularly drone on to anyone who'll listen about the travesty of those events in late 1975. One inconvenient fact that they often studiously ignore while waxing lyrical about their dear departed leader is that the Australian electorate so profoundly rejected the Whitlam government when they had the opportunity to do so. This rejection came with a resounding swing of 7.4%, reducing the ALP to little more than a rump Opposition for a time, and requiring the better part of a decade for them to recover to anywhere like their previous political stature.

Perhaps somewhat more surprisingly, the figure who brought about this momentous political bloodbath, Malcolm Fraser, has largely drifted from the political zeitgeist even though he arguably achieved the biggest political win in Australian history. Considering he was Australia's fourth longest serving Prime Minister, winning three elections and leading Australia through difficult economic and foreign affairs issues, he is not often remembered in discussions regarding the political life of this country.

Interestingly while Gough's loss of 30 seats to the Fraser led Coalition was the second largest seat loss in much of the last century, only narrowly surpassed by Paul Keating's 31 seat loss to John Howard, this loss was arguably the more damaging and more acutely felt, as Gough's supporters of the time would often be very keen to tell you about his overwhelming support

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from across the Australian nation due to all the great achievements of his undoubtedly tumultuous government.

If remembered at all in political discussions, Malcolm Fraser seems most commonly brought to mind for his 'Life wasn't meant to be easy' quotation or for his unfortunate escapade in a US girly bar some time after he had left office.

Gerard Henderson's *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection* is certainly not the first biography or autobiography of Malcolm Fraser, but the author does specifically approach the topic from the standpoint of his personal reflections, his recollections of having been involved in Liberal Party machinery and ministerial offices during Fraser's term as leader, and also as an academic, political commentator and a distinguished author.

From the perspective of someone who studiously follows Australian politics this is both a boon to the book but also presents somewhat of a challenge as the author introduces a great deal of personal and perhaps tangential information into the book at times.

The dismissal of the Whitlam government certainly occurs as a significant theme in many of the chapters of this book, with long and often painstaking analyses of who said what, when and to whom. There is a substantial amount of consideration of what or indeed whether certain things were said or written and at what times they were said and/or written. While possibly interesting from an historical viewpoint, I do doubt whether the authors detailed presentation and analysis would change the minds of those who already have fixed views stemming from their own historical political positions.

Pages devoted to somewhat acrimonious emails regarding the timing of documents relating to the Dismissal, while interesting in an eavesdropping way to get a glimpse of how authors and commentators speak to each other in personal emails, is also perhaps not particularly valuable in advancing the overall story.

One particularly telling point made by Henderson in reference to Malcom Fraser is that of his possibly feeling somewhat illegitimate in his Prime Ministerial role due to his participation in the events surrounding the dismissal. Much has been written and postulated about the events of November 11, 1975 (and the days leading up to it), and in particular Fraser's role in concert with the then Governor General Sir John Kerr.

Henderson goes on to postulate that Fraser's feelings of illegitimacy about his election possibly played a significant part in Frasers move to the left of the Liberal political spectrum leading eventually to his resignation from the Liberal Party. Having said this, Henderson goes to some length to 'prove' that Whitlam's dismissal was above board and in keeping with Kerr's legislative duties and also that the Governor General's discussions with both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader were appropriate to the events in questions particularly when considered against the tumult of Australian Federal politics at the time.

It is worth noting that Henderson shows Fraser's early politics to be of a markedly conservative nature. Fraser certainly came from an affluent and politically conservative business and rural

background, with his early days as the Member for Wannon in Victoria seeing him move from humble backbencher to junior Minister and even contesting battles for senior posts.

His famous 'life wasn't meant to be easy' quotation emanating from the 1971 Alfred Deakin Lecture at the University of Melbourne, possibly Fraser's most memorable utterance, rates its own chapter in this book, and shows Fraser to be a true political conservative at this point of his career. His words 'We need a rugged society, but our new generations have seen only affluence² and 'This is the high road to a national disaster' would sit very comfortably with the conservative side of Australian politics today.

The movement of Fraser from solid conservative to the small 'l' or even mildly left wing of Australian politics is well covered in this book with reasons for this change being already hinted at.

An important element that runs through this work could perhaps best be described as the dilemma of memory – most particularly that of Malcolm Fraser's. Many points of reference exemplify the difference between what actually happened and what Fraser recalled in later years. It is pointed out that Fraser was not a keen diarist and that while he felt he remembered certain issues clearly, in reality he would often defer to those who had written documentation of decisions, conversations and the like.

Fraser's memories therefore often stand in contrast to more verifiable facts and Henderson goes to some lengths to explain to the reader why aspects of his prior biographies and autobiography may reasonably be seen as not reflecting the true situation.

A number of chapters lead to an interesting, though often not very complementary assessment of Fraser the man. There is criticism that Fraser often sought advice which largely agreed with him rather than seeking out diverse opinions from his cabinet colleagues and advisers.

These also tend to show Fraser as a calculating politician – not in itself necessarily an unusual or even a particularly negative feature of many political leaders – though it also leads one to the view that Malcolm Fraser was perhaps a somewhat brittle character, prone to rudeness and abruptness.

There are many examples of Fraser being cold and unfeeling to his political compatriots, exemplified by the sacking of Philip Lynch while Lynch was still recuperating in hospital from an illness.

² Gerard Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, Connor Court Publishing: 2025, p. 21.

Again the issue of the dismissal and Fraser's legitimacy comes to the fore, with suggestions that this led to Fraser's inability to deal with his minister's missteps over often quite minor issues. Henderson quotes David Barnett, Fraser's Press Secretary 'What exaggerated his sense of propriety was the nature of his accession to office'.³

An interesting dichotomy in this book is between the authors obvious respect for Fraser (at least in his early years) moving to a more critical assessment of Fraser as he exhibited a distinct move to the left of Australian politics in his latter years.

While I understand the vehemence with which the Dismissal arguments have been fought over the years, and the endless debates over who knew what and when, I do believe that this book suffers from excessive documentation in this area. I certainly feel that many quotes could be cut shorter without impacting the effect of the statement. Indeed, the issues surrounding the dismissal have become lore on both sides with little chance of someone changing their views based on this book.

In telling this story of Malcolm Fraser, the author often resorts to what I might call somewhat excessive background materials. Almost tangential to the primary story, some of the material referenced and often reprinted in this work add to its volume without substantially affecting the outcome of the reading experience.

Henderson spends a significant amount of the book discussing deficiencies in previous Fraser biographers, most particularly that of Fraser and Simons *Malcolm Fraser, The Political Memoirs*.⁴ He spends many pages detailing a litany of 'howlers' in earlier biographies leading him to quote historian Ian Hancock – 'It's a pity that Fraser's memory and Simons' basic knowledge are so deficient.'⁵

I would have to say that Gerard Henderson's book left me firmly agreeing with one of his conclusions :

*It soon became evident that Fraser was running a competent government
but one which had no particular agenda for Australia.*⁶

Very much being damned by faint praise but an outcome which seems to match the evidence of the times.

³ Henderson, *Malcolm Faser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 254.

⁴ Malcolm Fraser and Margaret Simons, *Malcolm Fraser The Political Memoirs*, Miegunyah Press: 2015.

⁵ Henderson, *Malcolm Faser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 241.

⁶ Henderson, *Malcolm Faser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 223.

This idea is also borne out by Henderson quoting ex-Senator Graham Richardson's view, who, when pressed on Fox News to name the worst Australian Prime Minister immediately nominated Malcolm Fraser, specifically due to the fact that he had a substantial majority in both houses and that he didn't do anything with it.⁷ Henderson notes that 'This is a harsh but not uncommon judgement with respect to Fraser'.⁸ He goes on to say, 'The essential criticism of the Fraser Government is that it did not do enough economic reform' though quickly counters this with a further statement of '... it is fair to say there was no call for the reform....'.⁹

Further criticism by ex Treasury Head John Stone is quoted with him stating that that while the Treasurer and his senior adviser understood the need for economic reform 'regrettably, the same could not be said of the Prime Minister, nor ...of his private office advisers'.¹⁰

Indeed, John Stone is further quoted from a 1976 Quadrant article in which he counters statements that Fraser sought advice external from official sources but rather states that Fraser would prefer advice that accorded to "the course of action towards which he was already strongly drawn or upon which he had already decided".¹¹

One of the most telling statements by Henderson in the book is the opening line of Appendix B:

*The essential success of Fraser Government's early years is that it restored order after the chaos of the Whitlam years.*¹²

This in itself is not an insubstantial undertaking. Anyone alive and of voting age during the Whitlam years, whether you support his many and often hasty legislative changes or not, cannot deny that it was a dramatic period in Australia, with high inflation, rapidly rising unemployment, major change on multiple fronts at once, all accompanied by significant and seemingly ongoing political crises.

All of this combined to create an extremely challenging time for the millions of Australians owning or working in small businesses. While those in the federal public service and others in secure employment may have welcomed the change from what is often portrayed as the staid

⁷ Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 153.

⁸ Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 153.

⁹ Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 155.

¹¹ Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 161.

¹²Henderson, *Malcolm Fraser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 231.

Menzies era, the vast majority (as displayed by the 1975 election result) wanted some semblance of stability and surety in their lives.

It could be argued that Fraser delivered that. It is hard however to ignore the Richardson view that in the end, the waste of a solid majority, in both Houses of Parliament left Fraser looking lacklustre and perhaps even incompetent.

The book also deals with Fraser's views on immigration, with him moving from what was a quite common (at the time) view of being opposed to largescale immigration to being a supporter of much higher levels during his time as PM with the author spending some time detailing the events surrounding Fraser's grudging allowance of Vietnamese and Lebanese Muslims into Australia.

The Australian journalist Greg Sheridan, reacting to claims that Fraser was completely relaxed about unauthorised boat arrivals and courageously led the moral charge to resettle refugees, stated "This is just not true". Henderson goes on to point out that Sheridan's view tallies with his as a political staffer in the Fraser Government between 1976 and 1979.¹³

The closing chapters of this book, particularly the quite brief references to the part Fraser played in the attempted creation of a new Australian political party were perhaps one the more interesting portions of the book. As this is information of which I was not aware, I felt that some further explanation of this might have further clarified exactly how Frasers new political inclinations had developed.

I also note in closing that in the acknowledgements section of the book Gerard Henderson states that this book was originally to be included in the Connor Court Biographical Monograph series but goes on to state that this book "grew too large for this form of publishing".¹⁴ Perhaps with reductions in quote lengths, some simplification of structure and some tough editing that's where it should have naturally sat – some 20,000 words instead of the 40,000 in this book – and made an excellent addition to this ongoing study of Australian political figures.

Notwithstanding, this book offers substantial insights into an often overlooked era of Australian politics and offers the reader an insight into a period in politics when the still youthful character of Australia experienced great change, positive or negative, according to your political persuasion.

¹³ Henderson, *Malcolm Faser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 173.

¹⁴ Henderson, *Malcolm Faser, A Personal Reflection*, p. 258.
