

# MALCOLM FRASER'S MEMOIRS – THE FALLIBILITY OF MEMORY

Gerard Henderson

In the lead up to the 2004 election, Margaret Simons wrote a monograph on the then Labor leader Mark Latham. Titled *Latham's World: The New Politics of the Outsiders* (*Quarterly Essay*, Issue 15, 2004), the short biography indicated that its author was very much a supporter of Mark Latham and very much an opponent of the then prime minister John Howard. She described herself as belonging to the “middle-class Left” and wrote that “if Latham ascends to power, then it will be a signal of succession to our generation”. She added: “We will be in our prime. It will be our turn to run the place, and I'm sure things will be different.”

Ms Simons' only disagreement with the then Opposition leader turned on the fact that he had refused her many requests for an interview. Simons seemed to think that she had an entitlement to interview Latham and that he had a duty to respond to her queries.

Some years ago Melbourne University Press came up with the idea that the former Liberal Party prime minister Malcolm Fraser should write his autobiography. There had been two earlier substantial works on Fraser and the Fraser Government. Namely, Philip Ayers' *Malcolm Fraser: A Biography* (William Heinemann, 1987) and Patrick Weller's *Malcolm Fraser PM: A Study In Prime Ministerial Power* (Penguin, 1989).

Fraser supported the Ayers' biography – he gave numerous interviews and provided access to his papers and the book was very sympathetic to him. Fraser also provided access to his Cabinet and personal papers to Weller and put the author up at this home Nareen where he gave several interviews.

In March 2010 MUP released *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* under its The Miegunyan Press imprint. It is an unusual memoir since it has two

authors – Malcolm Fraser (the subject of the book) and Margaret Simons (who is described as the narrator).

In “A Note from the Narrator” at the front of the book, Simons depicts her roles as “being the curator of this account of Fraser's life and work” and “to intercede between the ‘I’ and the reader”. Throughout the book Fraser is described in the third person. The end of *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* contains a section titled “Additional Note by Malcolm Fraser” – which reads as follows:

**While I join with Margaret Simons in thanking all of those mentioned in the acknowledgements for their time, effort and support, Margaret Simons herself deserves a special mention. I was always reluctant to write, or to be involved in writing a book of this kind because it would have meant many hours and days, even weeks, trawling through archives of the life that I had led. So many contemporary histories are written too much from memory and without sufficient reference to the raw facts of what occurred at the time. Memories can be, as I know of [sic] myself, notoriously fallible.**

**Apart from being an author whom both Tamie and I believe has brought the pages of this book alive, Margaret has done not only the writing but also the assiduous research that the book required. She has done this with unflinching care to make sure the facts are right. This regard for detail is especially important since the book turns some current myths about my public life on their head. The collaboration with Margaret has been enjoyable and I thank her for the way in which she has devoted herself to bringing the book to finality.**

**Malcolm Fraser  
12 October 2009**

Malcolm Fraser's note reads like a disclaimer. He describes memory, including his own memory, as “notoriously fallible”. And then he implies that it was his co-author's responsibility “to make sure the facts are right”.

At Page 753 the authors write that “Professor Brian Costar read the entire manuscript”. Dr Costar is a professor at Swinburne University and is a published writer on Australian politics. Certainly Professor Costar should have been able to correct errors in the Fraser/Simons manuscript.

Aware that not so long ago Margaret Simons had demanded that Mark Latham should respond to her queries, I emailed her on 29 June 2010 – and again the next day – with the following query:

I have just finished reading *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* from cover to cover. I bought my own copy – thus making a personal contribution to the book's sales.

I plan to write about *MF:TPM* in the forthcoming edition of *The Sydney Institute Quarterly*. In order to be fair, I want to give you the opportunity to respond to the following questions:

1. Did Malcolm Fraser read the entire text prior to publication? I ask this because the autobiography has a number of significant factual errors which should have been evident to Mr Fraser.
2. At page 754, Malcolm Fraser writes that you had the task of making “sure the facts are right”. Does this mean that Mr Fraser handed over the fact-checking task to you?
3. At Page 753, you and Malcolm Fraser write that Brian Costar “read the entire manuscript”. In view of this, what responsibility does Professor Costar take for errors in the text?
4. In view of the fact that you have said that you knew in January or February that Malcolm Fraser had resigned from the Liberal Party, was any consideration given to placing a corrigendum in the book – when it was published in March – covering the several comments to the effect that Malcolm Fraser had retained his Liberal Party membership?

**Here's hoping for a response so that my assessment of *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* can be as accurate as possible.**

Margaret Simons declined to answer both emails. Her silence on this issue lends weight to the view that Malcolm Fraser did not read the book in its entirety before publication and that Mr Fraser expected Ms Simons and Professor Costar to act as fact-checkers.

*Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* is no easy read. Perhaps due to the fact that this book is the work of two authors, it is all over the place and is quite repetitive in places. The authors describe their work as “a thematic account of a government”. It's just that, on occasions, the themes keep re-occurring.

Take, for example, Fraser's long-standing claim that John Howard's stance on unauthorised boat arrivals in Australia in the early 2000s was akin to the anti-Catholic sectarianism engaged in by Nationalist Party prime minister Billy Hughes at the time of the conscription debates during the First World War.

The authors mention Hughes' divisive role in the conscription plebiscite debates at Pages 18-19, 176, 264-265 and 427. Also the fact that Fraser met Peter Carrington (who became a Cabinet minister in Margaret Thatcher's government) when he was Britain's High Commissioner in Canberra in the 1950s is mentioned at Pages 196 and 503. There are many such examples.

Since *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* is a significant book about an important figure in Australian history, the following list of errors, undocumented assertions and omissions is made in the interest of an accurate debate on Australian political history. Due to the messy structure of the book, it is most efficiently analysed in page order.

## HISTORICAL HOWLERS IN MALCOLM FRASER'S MEMOIRS

- Page 57. The authors claim it was Britain in the early 1950s “that inspired George Orwell's *1984* – a place where government control was total”.

In fact, 1984 was Orwell's chilling assessment of the communist totalitarian systems prevalent in the Soviet Union and parts of Eastern Europe when the book was published in 1948.

- Page 93. The authors claim that Catholic political activist B.A. (Bob) Santamaria advised Prime Minister Robert Menzies not to attempt to ban the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) since this “would split the opposition to communism and undermine the campaign to isolate them”.

In fact, Santamaria initially opposed the proposal to outlaw the CPA but then changed his mind and urged a “yes” vote in the referendum on this issue which was held in September 1951. Santamaria's change of mind is not mentioned by the authors.

- Page 134. The authors claim that, when Fraser became Minister for the Army in January 1966, the key decisions about Australia's involvement in Vietnam had already been made. They write: “Prime Minister Holt had announced the dispatch of Australian troops to South Vietnam”.

In fact, the decision to commit Australian combat forces to Vietnam was announced by Prime Minister Menzies (not Holt) on 29 April 1965. Menzies had previously announced his government's decision to introduce conscription for overseas service on 10 November 1964.

- Page 141. The authors claim that “China under Mao Tse Tung had invaded Tibet, entered North Korea and threatened India and Taiwan”.

In fact, China never invaded North Korea. Rather, China supplied troops and weapons in support of

North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1951. The Menzies Government committed Australian troops to the Korean War in July 1950.

- Page 163. The authors claim that "the contenders" for the Liberal Party leadership in January 1968, following Harold Holt's death, were Paul Hasluck and John Gorton.

In fact, the leadership was contested by four men. Namely – Leslie Bury, John Gorton, Paul Hasluck and Billy Snedden.

- Page 174. The authors claim that: "Before the Labor Party Split, it had been the left of politics, with its strong Catholic base, that had favoured state aid for non-government schools".

In fact, up until the 1960s, both the Labor and Liberal parties opposed state aid for non-government schools. The Liberal Party, at the Federal level, embraced the principle of state aid in the lead up to the 1963 election. Labor did not support state aid until some years later. The Coalition's support for state aid played an important part in the fact that the Menzies Government won seats from Labor at the 1963 election.

At Page 176, the authors claim that in the early 1970s the actions of opponents of state aid "included illegal occupations of Catholic schools by picnickers who were encouraged to swim in the pools and use the facilities...". This assertion is not supported by documented evidence. No specific illegal occupation is cited. What's more, only a very small minority of Catholic schools had swimming pools four decades ago – and few have them now.

- Page 321. The authors claim that the Fraser Government lost control of the Senate in 1980.

In fact, following the 1980 election, the new senators took their seats on 1 July 1981 – it was then that the Fraser Government lost control of the Senate.

- Page 329. The authors claim that, on coming to office in late 1975, Fraser gave positions in the outer ministry to "two talented men who had come into parliament in the 1974 election: John Howard was Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs and Ian Macphee was Minister for Productivity".

In fact, Macphee was excluded from the first Fraser Government. He was not appointed a minister until 8 November 1976.

- Page 329. The authors claim that Don Chipp "was also left out of the ministry following the 1977 election" and that "he resigned from the Liberal Party shortly afterwards".

In fact, Chipp resigned from the Liberal Party in March 1977, formed the Australian Democrats in

May 1977 and was elected to the Senate in the December 1977 election.

- Page 377. The authors claim that the Fraser Government "retained Medibank as a universal taxpayer-funded means of health insurance".

In fact, Medibank was gradually watered down by the Fraser Government until it completely disappeared in 1981. See R.B. Scotton and C.R. Macdonald, *The Making of Medibank*, (School of Health Management, University of New South Wales, 1993) and *Gerard Henderson's Media Watch Dog* (Issue 55).

- Page 524. The author's claim that "this book is the first time that Fraser has defended his government's record on financial deregulation".

In fact, this has been one of Fraser's constant themes during the past quarter of a century. Philip Ayers' biography, published in 1987, contains a full defence of Fraser's record in this area. There are many other instances.

- Page 557. The authors claim that Malcolm Fraser "has always believed that Australia can, and should, support bigger populations". This claim is made on several occasions in the book.

In fact, Fraser disagreed with the high immigration levels during the early period of the Menzies Government – when Harold Holt was immigration minister. Fraser has commented that, when a backbench MP, he "argued with Harold Holt on immigration". (See Gerard Henderson, *Menzies' Child, The Liberal Party of Australia*, HarperCollins, 1998 edition, pp 231-232).

- Page 593. The authors claim that Phillip Lynch's decision not to return as treasurer after the 1977 election "led to John Howard's promotion to that position".

In fact, Fraser made Howard treasurer before the 1977 election – following his decision to remove Lynch from that position. Howard became treasurer on 19 November 1977, the election was held on 10 December 1977 and Lynch was appointed Minister for Industry and Commerce on 20 December 1977.

- Page 629. The authors claim that by 1990 Bob Hawke "had now won four elections – the same number as Fraser".

In fact, only three Australian prime ministers have won four or more elections – and Fraser is not one of them. Of all people, Mr Fraser should know this. Robert Menzies who won on eight occasions (including 1940) and Bob Hawke and John Howard who won four elections each. Fraser won three elections – in 1975, 1977 and 1980. Two other prime ministers have equalled Fraser's record of winning

elections – in 1975, 1977 and 1980. Two other prime ministers have equalled Fraser's record of winning three elections – namely, Billy Hughes and Joseph Lyons.

- Page 722. The authors claim that John Howard “was a contender” for the Liberal Party leadership following John Hewson's decision to call for a vote of support in his leadership in May 1974. This comment is repeated at Page 724.

In fact, Howard did not contest this ballot. The contenders were John Hewson and Alexander Downer – and Downer won.

- Page 734. The authors claim that George W. Bush was elected “U.S. President in 2001”.

In fact, George W. Bush was elected in November 2000 and became President of the United States in January 2001.

## WHAT'S MISSING FROM MALCOLM FRASER'S MEMOIRS

The thesis in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* is that Malcolm Fraser has been a consistent genuine liberal – a small “I” liberal – throughout his political career. He regards himself as being in the tradition of Robert Menzies, the Liberal Party's founder.

In his memoirs Fraser fudges history, or declines to elaborate on matters which are inconsistent with his depiction of Menzies and of his own self-image. The authors overlook, or diminish, all evidence which queries their claim that Menzies and Fraser were ever anything than small “I” Liberals.

- Pages 61-62 and elsewhere. According to the authors, Robert Menzies, commenced the dismantling of the White Australia Policy.

In fact, Menzies resisted any significant watering down of the (then) bipartisan White Australia Policy. Menzies stepped down as prime minister on 26 January 1966 and was replaced by Harold Holt. In March 1966 Holt announced the first substantial reforms to the White Australia Policy and effectively dismantled it.

As Glenda Tavan documents in *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Scribe, 2005), Harold Holt, Immigration Minister Hubert Opperman and senior public servants set in place decisions to substantially reform the policy on the day after Menzies announced his resignation.

- Page 93. According to the authors, Robert Menzies “never had his heart in the legislation” to ban the Communist Party.

In fact, as Menzies' biographer Allan Martin has

documented, Menzies was a fervent supporter of the need to outlaw the Communist Party during the early years of the Cold War. Indeed, when prime minister during the early years of the Second World War, the Menzies Government did ban the Communist Party. This was at the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The authors also fail to mention the fact that in the mid-1960s the Menzies Government strengthened the provisions of the Crimes Act – i.e. the national security legislation – which was not the act of a small “I” liberal.

- Page 225. According to the authors, Malcolm Fraser's confrontation with John Gorton showed how far Fraser was prepared to go “to defend principle”.

In fact, the book acknowledges that Fraser leaked material to journalist Alan Ramsey designed to discredit Gorton. Also, Fraser's reasons in the book for taking the action that destroyed Gorton's prime ministership are remarkably thin. Especially since Gorton, in his time, was very much the type of small “I” Liberal whom Fraser now admires.

- Page 329. When Fraser was sworn in as prime minister of the caretaker government on 11 November 1975, Don Chipp was appointed Minister for Social Security. However, Chipp was dropped from the ministry when the first Fraser Government was commissioned on 20 December 1975. Chipp later left the Liberal Party and formed the Australian Democrats. The authors write: “Fraser says today that his omission of Chipp was not an oversight; he will not elaborate.” This is a significant omission – especially since Chipp, in his time, was very much the type of small “I” Liberal whom Fraser now admires.
- Pages 429-430. According to the authors, “the Lebanese and Vietnamese [who arrived in Australia after 1975] were refugees from particularly bloody conflicts”.

In fact, the Vietnamese were refugees because they exhibited a genuine fear of persecution following the communist victory in the Vietnam War. Fraser's treatment of Vietnamese refugees was both appropriate and generous.

However, the Lebanese who arrived in Australia after the Lebanon Civil War of 1975-1976 were not refugees in the accepted sense – since they were not in genuine fear of persecution.

Fraser's decision to extend the requirements to make it possible for the Lebanese to come to Australia under the refugee quota became known as the “Lebanon Concession”. As the authors acknowledge,

Fraser told Gerard Henderson in 2006 that he could not recall details of this decision – which has turned out to be one of the greatest policy failures in Australian political history. The issue is skimmed over by the authors. For details of what actually happened – based on an analysis of the Cabinet Papers for 1976 – see Gerard Henderson’s column in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 2009 and 16 January 2009. See also Gerard Henderson’s SMH column on 31 October 2006 and Gerard Henderson’s *Islam in Australia*, Policy Exchange, 2007, pp9-111

- On occasions, the authors just ignore some matters which were important to the Fraser Government. The Fraser Government effectively took over in December 1975 with a mandate to repair the economic problems caused by the grossly inefficient Whitlam Government and to cut back on expenditure which had blown out as a result of Whitlam’s policy of big spending supported by large borrowings.

In early 1976, several Liberal senators crossed the floor to defeat the Fraser Government’s proposed abolition of funeral benefits for pensioners – which Patrick Weller has described as a “small allowance that was expensive to administer”. Fraser immediately surrendered and reversed the decision. This was a very public sign that Fraser would not enact the necessary cuts and affected the entire term of the Fraser Government. But it does not receive a mention in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs*.

## MEMORY AS THE ONLY EVIDENCE

As previously pointed out, Malcolm Fraser concedes at the end of his memoirs that “memories...can be notoriously fallible”. The same point is made elsewhere in the book. Moreover, as Fraser told the ABC Radio National *The Book Show* on 9 April 2010, he did not keep a diary or contemporaneous notes of conversations.

Yet, in quite a few sections of *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs*, the authors rely completely or substantially on Fraser’s memory. For example at Page 201 the verbatim account of Fraser’s discussions with US officials in 1970 appears to be based entirely on Fraser’s recall some four decades later. Later in the same chapter, Fraser’s account of what he acted against is based on an aide memoir which is not dated and, consequently, it is not clear whether this is a contemporaneous note. There are many such instances where Malcolm Fraser’s memory is the only evidence for claims made by the authors. Some instances illustrate the point.

### (i) Malcolm Fraser, John Kerr and 11 November 1975

In her “A Note from the Narrator”, Margaret Simons reported that Fraser told her before the publication of the book: “If the headlines when the book comes out are ‘New Information about the Dismissal’, then in my view we will have failed.” But some of the headlines following the release of *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* did focus on the Dismissal. Why? Because extracts rights to this section of the book were sold to *The Australian*.

According to the authors (Page 304), at 9.55 am on 11 November 1975 Fraser received a phone call from the Governor-General Sir John Kerr which proved to be “one of its most momentous phone calls in the history of Australian politics”. According to Fraser, Kerr set the conditions which would cover a caretaker government following the dismissal of Gough Whitlam as prime minister. The Whitlam Government was dismissed at around 1 pm later that day.

Fraser first made this claim in Ayers’ biography in 1987. Kerr denied that such a phone call had taken place and produced a contemporaneous note in support of his position. Kerr always believed that Fraser had confused the phone call, in which he asked whether the Opposition was sticking to its decision to block supply, with the conversation which took place some hours later at Government House, when he commissioned Fraser as prime minister, following Whitlam’s dismissal.

Kerr’s case was documented by Gerard Henderson in *The Weekend Australian* on 7-8 November 1987 and 14-15 November 1987 and also in Gerard Henderson’s *Menzies Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*. The authors make no reference to Kerr’s position in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* – which is manifestly unfair to Kerr, who died in 1991.

One of the illustrations in the book is a photographic copy of the note which Fraser claims that he made at the time of Kerr’s phone call. The handwriting account of Fraser’s conversation with Kerr is in a different style and is significantly lighter than the bottom of the note which reads as follows: “9.55 11 Nov 1975 JM Fraser”. Kerr’s view was that any such note would have been made at the time that Fraser was sworn in as prime minister in the afternoon of 11 November 1978.

There is no independent record of when Fraser dated this note. We have to rely on his memory that the note was dated at the time he says it was dated –

# MALCOLM FRASER'S LIBERAL PARTY MEMBERSHIP

On 26 May 2010 *Australian Financial Review* journalist Laura Tingle broke the story that Malcolm Fraser had quit the Liberal Party. Interviewed that morning on the ABC2 *News Breakfast* program, Margaret Simons said that Mr Fraser had told her about his decision “in January or early February” but requested that she treat the information “in confidence”. Ms Simons told interviewer Michael Rowland that she and Malcolm Fraser “were both sure” that the news “would come out during the publicity tour for the book that we wrote together” and that they were surprised that this did not occur.

However, there is no reason why journalists should have asked Malcolm Fraser about his status with the Liberal Party – since Malcolm Fraser in *The Political Memoirs* makes it clear that he had retained his membership. See Pages 441 where the authors write that Malcolm Fraser and Tammie Fraser had “decided to stay” in the Liberal Party and Pages 714 and 716 when the claim is repeated. These comments were inaccurate at the time the book was published.

Margaret Simons has declined to reply to the query whether – in view of the fact that Mr Fraser resigned from the Liberal Party between the time the manuscript was completed and the time the book was published – *The Political Memoirs* should have contained a corrigendum about Mr Fraser’s status with the party he once led.

despite the evidently different writing style and darker colour. This in spite of the fact that Fraser concedes that his memory is “notoriously fallible”. This issue is covered in greater length in *Gerard Henderson’s Media Watch Dog* (Issues 46 and 47) and in Gerard Henderson’s article in the *Canberra Times*, 29 March 2010.

## (ii) Malcolm Fraser and Diem’s Assassination

According to the authors at Page 133.

**A key moment in Fraser’s reconsideration of his support for the Vietnam War was his reading of the former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s memoir *In Retrospect*, published in 1995. McNamara had been one of the architects of the war, and in his memoir he wrote a forensic dissection of the mistakes that had been made and his own part in them. Fraser learned for the first time that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US Government had been complicit in and indeed had initiated the deposing and assassination of the South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, in 1963, when Fraser had been an idealistic backbencher. The Americans had concluded that Diem could not effectively unite the South Vietnamese, but they had given no consideration to finding somebody to do a better job, and nobody did.**

In fact, it was widely known – as early as 1963 – that the US, via the CIA, was involved in Diem’s assassination. It is inconceivable that a well connected Liberal MP, like Fraser, would not have known about this at the time. As Philip Ayers commented when reviewing the book for *Quadrant* (May 2010): “It was common knowledge in the 1960s and there was plenty of evidence. I read about it back then”.

## (iii) Malcolm Fraser’s Thwarted 1976 Expenditure Cuts

According to the authors at Page 355:

**Fraser remembers that in January 1976, after cabinet had spent weeks pouring over programs and making cuts, the Secretary of Treasury Fred Wheeler told him that, in his view, the government had now identified enough cuts. Any more might be counterproductive. Fraser says, “I wanted to press on further with expenditure cutting, and Wheeler, not in [John] Stone’s presence, said that he wouldn’t do more: the country had had**

**enough shocks. He said, “The budget will be coming around and you will have plenty of time to have another go later”. Unfortunately, he persuaded me.**

In fact, there is no evidence to support Fraser’s memory. This claim was first made in Philip Ayers’ biography in 1987. As the authors acknowledge, Treasury officials do not recall giving this advice. Certainly no such advice was offered in writing – which was normal Treasury practice at the time.

Once again, the authors present Fraser’s recollections of a conversation which took place over three decades ago in direct quotes.

#### **(iv) Malcolm Fraser and John Howard’s Attitude to Vietnamese Refugees.**

Then there is Fraser’s claim about John Howard’s attitude to Vietnamese refugees in May 1977. According to the authors at Page 425:

**Fears about settling Asian refugees were not confined to the general public; there were people inside the government who were worried as well. Fraser remembers that at one of the first cabinet meetings at which the commitment to take large numbers of Indochinese refugees was discussed, John Howard sat silently through the debate, but “sidled up to me afterwards in a corridor and said, ‘We’re not going to take too many of these people, are we?’ And I just looked at him and said, ‘John, we have just had a debate in cabinet’. And he said, ‘Yes, but we’re not going to take too many of them, are we? It is just for show, isn’t it?’”**

**“I said, ‘Look, what you say to me in the corridor is meaningless. If you want to say something, you can say it in cabinet. If you want to re-open the debate, you can say it in cabinet.’ But he never did.” Fraser’s recollection of this encounter was first aired in January 2008, when the 1977 cabinet records were released to the public under the thirty-year rule.**

In fact, Fraser’s account of the [alleged] conversation was known well before the publication of his memoirs. For example, writing in the *Weekend Australian* on 16-17 November 2002, Phillip Adams wrote how “Fraser was telling anyone who’d listen how Howard had opposed his decision to grant asylum to a number of Vietnamese refugees” in 1977.

The authors’ account of this (alleged) conversation relies on Fraser’s ability to recall a conversation, in

direct speech, which took place over three decades ago. This in spite of the fact that Fraser admits to having a notoriously fallible memory.

Howard has denied Fraser’s account. For starters, when the conversation is alleged to have taken place, Howard was not in the Fraser Cabinet. Rather, he held a position in the outer ministry – as the Minister for Business and Consumer Affairs. It is inherently unlikely that a junior minister, speaking on a matter outside his area of ministerial responsibility, would have addressed so dominant a prime minister as Malcolm Fraser in this way. Moreover, if Fraser was so displeased with Howard’s position in May 1977 – why did he promote him to Cabinet when he appointed him Treasurer in November 1977?

Support for John Howard’s position on this issue comes from Ian Macphree, who is close to Fraser. Interviewed on the *7.30 Report* on 1 January 2010, Mr Macphree said that he did not remember Howard “ever arguing in Cabinet” about Vietnamese refugees in the second half of the 1970s.

#### **(v) Malcolm Fraser on Loyalty to Political Leaders**

Then there is the matter of Malcolm Fraser’s contradictory positions. According to the authors (Page 619), Fraser believed that John Howard was disloyal to the (then) Liberal Party leader Andrew Peacock in 1985.

Apparently Fraser “was shocked by this naked evidence of disloyalty”. But Fraser appears to have forgotten that he urged Howard to challenge Peacock on the eve of the 1984 election – advice which Howard rejected. See Michael Steketee’s article “The Night Malcolm Fraser urged Howard: got for it”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1985.

Also, in this context, Fraser overlooks the fact that he brought down John Gorton in 1971 and successfully dislodged Billy Snedden as Liberal Party leader in March 1975. Certainly Fraser was a better leader than Snedden. Yet Gorton was a better leader than his successor William McMahon, who led the Liberal Party to defeat in December 1972.

### **CONCLUSION – ON DEATH AND MAO**

In early 1975 I was invited, by Tony Stanley, to apply for one of two vacant positions in Opposition leader Malcolm Fraser’s office. I did not obtain the job – but in January 1976 took up a senior position in the office of Kevin Newman, a Tasmanian based member of the Fraser Government’s outer ministry. I remained in this position for four years.

In 1975 and 1976 Malcolm Fraser had a lot of appeal. He was much more substantial than such previous

# HOW MALCOLM FRASER SAVED NATO (ALLEGEDLY)

The only “big story” in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* turns on the claim (Pages 482-483) that Fraser’s intervention with (then) United States Vice-President George H.W. Bush was instrumental in the US’s decision to support Britain in the Falklands War in 1982 and that this, in turn, preserved the NATO Alliance.

Bush visited Australia in late April 1982. According to the authors, at a meeting at The Lodge, Fraser convinced Bush that the US should support Britain in the Falklands War. It was known at the time that Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, was sympathetic to Argentina. The line in *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* is that before his conversation with Fraser, Bush had not thought through the implications for the US-Britain relationship, and for NATO, if the US abandoned Britain. On hearing Fraser’s thoughts the following events took place:

**Bush looked at his watch. He said, “Malcolm, I think that I am going to have to disrupt your dinner party. The National Security Council is sitting down to examine this matter in three minutes’ time; I think that I better key myself in to the discussion. Have you got a telephone?” Fraser showed him to the office. Bush made his phone call and emerged about an hour and a half later, giving Fraser the thumbs up. Fraser asked him what would have happened if he hadn’t made the call. “Kirkpatrick would have won the argument in ten minutes” he said.**

On 23 February 2010, shortly before the launch of his political memoirs, Fraser was interviewed by Mark Colvin on the ABC Radio

*PM* program. The issue of the Falklands War was discussed in that part of the interview which did not make it to air – it was placed on the *PM* website. On 3 March 2010 Colvin made use of this for an article which he posted on the website of *The Drum* – titled “The day Fraser may have changed history”.

Colvin gave some credibility to Fraser’s assertion that his intervention in this issue “may have changed” history. He quoted from the full Fraser interview – where the former prime minister revealed that the National Security Council meeting on 30 April 1982 commenced at 7 pm Canberra time.

The problem here is that 7 pm on 30 April 1982 in Canberra was 5 am that morning in Washington DC. Fraser’s claim that he alone convinced Bush of the need for the Ronald Reagan administration to support Margaret Thatcher over the Falklands is far-fetched enough. But Fraser and Simons also want readers to believe that the National Security Council commenced its meeting at 5 am on 30 April 1982. This is possible – but most unlikely (see Gerard Henderson’s *Media Watch Dog* Issues 44, 45, 47).

Malcolm Fraser told Mark Colvin:

**[George H.W. Bush] said the National Security Council was sitting down at 7 o’clock our time to discuss this very issue. I know that turns out to be an odd time for the National Security Council to be sitting but we checked later and it was accurate.**

In fact, this statement is incorrect. No such checking occurred. Margaret Simons responded to doubts about Fraser’s claim in a piece she wrote for *The Interpreter* website on 17 March 2010 titled “Fraser and Falklands”. Simons produced no specific evidence to support the claim and conceded that there was some evidence which threw doubt on Fraser’s assertion. In conclusion, Simons wrote that there is a file in the Reagan Papers which may resolve the issue but added that “the budget for our book did not extend to the USA for me to go and see what’s there”.

Clearly this claim has not been adequately fact-checked and it remains to be seen whether any new edition of *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* will acknowledge that Mr Fraser’s memory has not been thoroughly checked.

leaders as John Gorton, William McMahon and Billy Snedden. He was an articulate anti-communist, having been one of the few Liberal MPs with the intellectual ability and political skills to defend the Australian commitment in Vietnam. Moreover, Fraser exhibited a sound approach to economics – being an able critic of the Whitlam Government’s program of big-spending financed by taxation and borrowing.

However, it soon became apparent that Fraser was not quite what he seemed. First up, there was his surrender on the pensioner funeral scheme benefit (which, for the most part, was not paid to pensioners). If the Prime Minister would not stand up to a few Liberal Party dissidents in the Senate – in which the government had a majority – it did not seem likely that he would have the courage to take really tough decisions. And so it proved to be.

And, then, the communist totalitarian dictator Mao Tse Tung died on 9 September 1976. Malcolm Fraser released a press statement mourning Mao’s death. Then on 14 September 1976 – with the support of Opposition leader Gough Whitlam – the Prime Minister moved a condolence motion in the House of Representatives.

Mr Fraser said that Mao had “secured the basic necessities of life to China’s people” and brought about internal peace within the country. This was the same communist dictator who had brought about the death of millions of Chinese in the forced-famine that was the Leap Forward. And this was the totalitarian leader who had purged one tenth of China’s population in the disaster which was the Cultural Revolution.

From an intercom in my office, I listened to Fraser and Whitlam proclaim the wonder of Mao. It was a dreadful moment. Later I learned that four backbenchers had had the decency – and courage – not to stand and pay their respects to Mao at the conclusion of the condolence motion. They were Liberals Bill Wentworth and Dr Kevin Cairns, the National Party’s Col Carige and Labor’s Dr Dick Klugman. From that day, I lost my admiration for Fraser. On the day after the Coalition defeat at the March 1983 election, I wrote a critique of the Fraser Government titled “Fraserism: Myths and Realities” – it was published the following June in *Quadrant*.

*Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* makes no mention of the Fraser Government’s backdown on the pensioner funeral rebate or Mr Fraser’s effusive praise of the murderous Mao. It’s that kind of memoir.



# ADVENTURES ON THE ROAD TO CLARITY

Shelley Gare

Harold Ross, the Colorado high-school drop-out who founded *The New Yorker* magazine in 1925, was to the pursuit of clarity what a bloodhound is to detective work.

He once looked over a short memoir by Vladimir Nabokov, which was to be published in the magazine in the early 1950s. It was called “Lantern Slides” and was about Nabokov’s idyllic childhood in pre-revolutionary St Petersburg.

The piece is rich with emotive moments: thirty human hearts beating; the local concord of summer birds; the hullabaloo of bathing young villagers ... There were “voices speaking all together, a walnut cracked, the click of the nut-cracker carelessly passed ...”

Ross read the passage carefully. The “the” with “nutcracker” bothered him. He wrote on the galley: “Were the Nabokovs a *one*-nutcracker family?”

Ross – whose magazine became one of the most respected of the twentieth century - mostly stood for all that was good in writing and clear communication. He was addicted to Fowler and adored its four-page discussion on the uses of “that” and “which”. He wanted his new magazine to be “a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life... It will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers. It will hate bunk”.

And yet, the in-house editing style at *The New Yorker* became so refined it could be as confining as bonsai. Nothing was to be left unexplained or up-in-the-air. No reader should ever have to fret their brow and wonder ... Ross’s editors, following the leader, were as busy as anteaters as they foraged through copy for missing details.

(The habit caught on in America. I once worked with an editor from Time Inc who, in a fury, threw out a colour piece about a Wild West actor because no-one could tell him the name of the man’s horse.)