Fraser’s Journey

Robert Manne

Malcolm Fraser

Common Ground:
Issues That Should Bind and Not Divide Us

Viking, $35hb, 296pp, 0 670 04020 7

When Malcolm Fraser was prime minister, he was generally thought of as a hard and ruthless man of the right. In part this was because of the role he played in the removal of Gough Whitlam; in part because of his fiscal prudence; in part because of his orthodox Cold War foreign policy. Following his defeat in 1983, an alternative picture of Fraser gradually emerged. Under Labor, Australia embarked upon a programme of economic rationalist reform. For his failure to anticipate this programme — to be wise or, as some would say, unwise before the event — Fraser was caricatured, especially by his former political friends, as a do-nothing prime minister. His time in office was ridiculed as Seven Wasted Years. After 1996 Fraser became one of the most influential critics of John Howard’s new brand of populist conservatism. The portrait of him was once more redrawn. The left saw him as a principled humanitarian; the right as an incorrigible Wet.

In Common Ground — an impressive, if unscintillating, collection of (mainly recent) speeches and added commentaries — Fraser is, characteristically, untroubled by this apparent problem of shifting political identity. According to him, his early reputation for ultra-conservatism was always misplaced. While his views have remained more or less steady, the political spectrum has lurched violently to the right. It is the world and not Malcolm Fraser that has changed. For my part, I do not believe Fraser’s self-interpretation fits the facts.

The most obvious and radical shift in Fraser over the past quarter century has taken place in the field of foreign policy. Here, the deep Australian conservative tradition has been one of loyal and predictable support for the strategic policy of one or other of those Sir Robert Menzies once called our ‘great and powerful friends’. During his active political life, Fraser was a typical Australian foreign policy conservative. Before 1972 he was an uncritical Cold Warrior and supporter of the Vietnam War. As prime minister, he sharply reversed the independent drift of the Whitlam foreign policy and restored Australia’s reputation as an ultra-dependable defender of the anti-Soviet containment policies of the USA. Only in the subsidiary area of the international politics of race was Fraser a conservative foreign policy innovator, who abruptly terminated the Menzies tradition of coalition sympathy for southern African white minority rule. Undoubtedly,
anti-racism — both at home and abroad — is the most important thread of continuity in Fraser’s long political career.

Even in the post-Cold War environment, the Howard government has maintained, and even exaggerated, the habit of unquestioning loyalty to the USA, as a form of long-term security insurance payment. Fraser, in the late 1990s, began travelling rapidly in the opposite direction. The single most important theme of Common Ground is hostility to the US foreign policy unilateralism. He was opposed to the US-led bombing campaign against Serbia in Kosovo, which he regarded as a breach of both the charter of the United Nations and the articles of the NATO pact. He is opposed to US-inspired post-Gulf War economic sanctions against Iraq, which he regards as a major humanitarian crime. He regards the post-Cold War USA as an arrogant and egocentric solo superpower, incapable now of consulting genuinely with its allies, involving itself productively in multilateral organisations, cooperating with the United Nations, or fostering the growth of the rule of international law. In his present incarnation, as an enthusiastic liberal internationalist, and as an opponent of US unilateralism, Fraser emerges from Common Ground as far closer in spirit to Dr Evatt than Sir Robert Menzies. This represents a major shift.

In the broad area of economics, Fraser has also shifted ground. In government, Fraser remained what one might call a fiscally cautious, strongly protectionist Keynesian of the moderate right. After he lost office, he challenged what he took to be the excessively ideological impetus of the Hawke–Keating neo-liberal reforms. During the 1990s the emphasis of his thinking once more changed. He was no longer so concerned with the domestic impact of economic rationalist reform as with the savage impact of the processes known as globalisation on the overwhelming majority of the population throughout the world. In recent years, Fraser has emerged as a critic of unfettered free-market capitalism; of the accelerating income gap between the developed and undeveloped worlds; and of the growing selfishness of Western societies, as witnessed in the steep decline in their foreign aid, or the hardening of their hearts to refugees. Fraser now believes that the division between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ poses a far graver long-term threat to world order than the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War ever did. He even entertains the politically incorrect but also, I think, oversimplified thought that it is from conditions of economic inequality and misery that terrorism is born. While the economic views of his former political friends have moved from Keynes to Hayek, Fraser has moved, in preoccupation and sympathy, towards some of the concerns of the anti-globalisation left. The only solution he offers, however, centres on the rather patrician hope that wise and selfless and responsible political leadership in the West will rescue humanity from its plight.

In one area — his conviction that it is the political culture rather than he who has shifted — Fraser is on stronger ground. Since its election in 1996, the Howard government has gradually turned its back on what is best understood as the post-colonial trajectory followed by every Australian government, including Fraser’s, since the election of Whitlam in December 1972 — multiculturalism, Aboriginal reconciliation, deepening engagement with Asia, republicanism in spirit and in law, and the transcendence of the cultural foundation of the British settler society. Unlike Howard and the coalition parties, Fraser has kept faith with this vision of Australia. And not only that. As Common Ground reveals, Fraser has become one of the most determined, passionate and clear-sighted opponents of the reactionary tendencies of recent years. When Hansonism emerged, Fraser understood quickly the danger it posed. As the spirit of Hansonism was gradually absorbed by the Liberal party, he understood that as well. Fraser knew precisely what Tampa meant. In the cultural politics of Australia, Fraser is now, as Common Ground reveals, one of the more important leaders of the weakened, but not yet quite silenced or defeated, anti-Howard camp. For this reason, I urge that his book be read.

There are two final pieces of evidence that Malcolm Fraser has changed. In almost all the photographs taken of him, while in office, there is in his demeanour and posture something aloof and stiff. The photograph on the cover of Common Ground is, by contrast, of a man wonderfully relaxed. Fraser might be out of temper with his party and his country, but he is now at least, apparently, perfectly at ease with himself. During Fraser’s prime ministership, the words most associated with his style of rule was the dour piece of Presbyterian folk wisdom, ‘Life wasn’t meant to be easy’. As the epigram for this collection, Fraser has chosen another, rather different, observation from the Scottish tradition, Robbie Burns’s robust reminder of our common humanity: ‘A man’s a man for a’that.’ It is Burns’s spirit that informs this book.