Malcolm Fraser, a leader who believed there is a moral compass in our nation's life

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Fri 20 Mar 2015 19.00 AEDT

Malcolm Fraser was one of the established figures in the parliament when I arrived in 1974. Bill Snedden was leader and I saw him as a middle-of-the-road Liberal. I saw Malcolm as a born-to-rule rural conservative. My natural political sympathies were with Snedden. Despite the ebbing of the party's confidence in his leadership, I remained a Snedden supporter and was disappointed when Malcolm succeeded in replacing him. But I was to become an early convert.

My reservations about Malcolm continued for some months after his accession to leadership, in the course of which I had at least one verbal altercation with him. It was a disrespectful altercation with the new leader on my part. I was soon to change my mind about him.

The beginning of the change was the parliamentary luncheon posted by the prime minister, Gough Whitlam, in honour of Helen Suzman, an independent anti-apartheid member of the South African parliament. Both Gough and Malcolm spoke. As was expected, Gough gave an
elegant and forthright speech condemning apartheid. The surprise for me and others was Malcolm's speech, which was even more forthright. It was my first intimation that we shared views on race, and it quickly became apparent that we had similar views on Aboriginal policy, race, refugee policy, and human rights issues generally.

It has often been said in more recent years that Malcolm changed after he left the prime ministership, that he moved to the left. It would be surprising if in the 40 years after he left parliament, none of his views had changed. He himself has recorded his shift in the area of foreign policy. But in that 40 years, as the whole political system shifted to the right, it would have been surprising if he had been in sympathy with many of the new policies of both sides of politics. My wife Angela, who I enrolled in the University Liberal Club on her first day at the University of Western Australia, has observed that the party I joined no longer exists. And of course you could say the same thing about the Labor party of that era and the Labor party today. But on the issues which led me to become a firm supporter of Malcolm he was extraordinarily consistent.

The essence of Malcolm’s politics seemed to come from a fundamental belief in the dignity and worth of the individual. Most people are able to recognise the worth of those who are like themselves. Many, if not most of us, find it difficult to recognise the worth of the other.

The great Australian tradition of mateship, a tradition we should treasure and preserve, was a selective tradition. In our post settlement history we showed an extraordinary capacity to admit new settlers from the motherland into the community of mates, as long as they were white. Notoriously, we did not include the first Australians. For Malcolm, Aboriginals and Islanders, refugees, and our diverse immigrants were all to be treated with respect, as part of the Australian community. If he had a Team Australia, it was a team we were all entitled to be part of.

This was not just a matter of him mouthing noble sentiments. Support for the Racial Discrimination Act from opposition, the enactment of land rights legislation and human rights legislation in government, and the commitment to multiculturalism are all markers of what Malcolm Fraser stood for. It was these things about him that commanded not just my allegiance but my affection.

At a time when there is such a sharp focus on the budget bottom line and when economic issues so dominate our political discourse, Malcolm’s death reminds us that, important as good economic policy is, there are other issues which define what sort people we are and determine how we behave towards each other.

Australia has lost a leader who thought that moral issues were part of what we should worry about.

We have lost a leader who believed there is a moral compass in our nation's life.

Malcolm Fraser’s vision of Australia was my Australia because it was built on a fundamental Liberal belief that everyone matters, everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity. His presence on the national scene will be sadly missed.

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