

ON THE DRY SIDE 186 FRASER ON HOWARD John Hyde

Back from tending Africa's problems Mr Fraser advised us on currency deregulation, airlines, and takeovers. The vehemence with which he has been repudiated was in part no more than a defensive move by Howard supporters but it also reflects a fundamental and important change in Australian attitudes to economic management. If Mr Fraser had accepted even as much liberalism as Labor leaders now insist upon, Australians would have been saved a lot of pain. The Heavens know that he was warned of most of the untoward economic events which have come to pass.

It may be that in his enthusiasm for attacking his once too-loyal lieutenant he gave the issues themselves little thought. They were merely vehicles to enter as King-maker upon the Liberal Party field. His swift and safe kick at Mr Howard reminds me of his attacks on Gorton, Snedden, Withers, Lynch and others.

It would be foolish to take Mr Fraser's economic advice too seriously, but I think he actually believes all (or most of) what he said. The arguments are too familiar for any other conclusion.

Discussion has ensued as to whether an ex-leader is entitled to enter current political debate. The answer is a simple "yes". Of course Mr Fraser is entitled to express whatever opinions enter his head. There are no laws to say he is not; neither are there any Liberal Party rules or practices which preclude it. In fact there is precedent. Sir William McMahon, after losing party leadership, made a practice of expressing opinions on all manner of things. John Gorton publically supported Whitlam in 1975.

Whether it is always wise or honourable to do so is another question. Nevertheless I am sure that Mr Howard would be the first to defend any Australian's 'right' to speak. Liberals should not make that an issue.

The real question is whether Mr Fraser should be taken seriously. The Liberals have correctly reminded us, discussing Justice Murphy, that circumstances demand their own standards. In Mr Fraser's case the only important issue is whether to accord him intellectual respect, and the standard by which that should be judged is the truth or nonsense to be found in his own utterances. If Mr Fraser is talking nonsense, as I think he is, he should be as irrelevant as the ghost of Louis XIV.

Mr Keating's defence of Howard against Fraser's attack was reported as "unusual tactics". Mr Keating and Mr Beale were described as "strange bedfellows" merely because they both said that Mr Fraser's contribution over the years lacked "political distinction." Someone unnamed was reported as saying that politics had "gone birko". There is nothing birko in cross-party agreement unless every action by a politician is a political tactic. Does it no longer even occur to reporters that simple respect for the truth might motivate politicians, making bed-fellows of people in opposing parties? Is everything political

to be reported as a catch-as-catch-can contest in which there are no over-riding values such as the national interest and truth? Politics has a lot to answer for but is not that bad. The assumption that it is, in matters far more important than Mr Fraser, tends towards self-fulfilment.

In fact, belated appreciation of the growing economic crisis has improved political debate. In spite of Labor traditions, and stealing Liberal clothing, Mr Keating has defended deregulation with impeccable liberal arguments because the economy demands deregulation. Mr Howard has just issued what is, I suspect, the most realistic, reasonable and fair economic assessment ever issued by an Australian Opposition. It was exceptionally well received, but, after the initial reaction, instead of debating it the nation's press has debated Howard. We deserve our problems!

Mr Howard's political dilemma is exemplified by the gyrations of tax policy. He is widely criticised for having made inadequate political capital of Keating's new taxes. He was forced by colleagues and receding popularity to attack them, but he knows that the next Prime Minister will face an all but unmanageable deficit which will have to take precedence over tax reduction. He, better than most, understands fiscal arithmetic. He knows that the Hawke government inherited an unsustainable deficit and made it worse. He knows that, if elected, he would inherit a worse situation than Mr Hawke did. He knows the problem is not really any particular tax but extravagant expenditure. He knows those among his own troops who criticise him for being slow to promise that some taxes will be repealed are hypocrites who will defend big-ticket expenditures. He knows the harm mindless head-kicking, mindless populism and mindless conservatism, whether the Melbourne Club or the ACTU variety, has done in the past. He knows: and knowledge is a hard brake on rhetoric for anyone who has difficulty lying.

Mr Howard has worn his association with Malcolm Fraser like an overly-dead albatross about his neck but has been too nice a guy to cut himself free of the past by disowning the actions of former colleagues. I am aware of the theory that only bastards make Prime Ministers but hope there is room for nice guys at the top. Perhaps Mr Fraser has just done Howard a favour by dissociating himself from Mr Howard. Perhaps Mr Fraser was really being very subtle, and generous to Mr Howard, when he attacked the latter's 'dry' policies! It is as if the albatross at last obligingly fell off and sank, 'like lead into the sea'.

When we choose our next Prime Minister there is one question which must be answered before any other: will the new incumbent, without political fear or favour to obstreperous vested interests, tackle our economic malaise? To satisfy me he must know where he wants to go, have an clear idea how to get there, and be able to keep his head in crises which are likely to be all too frequent and not of the artificial political variety. When that criterion has been satisfied, then the ability to inspire public support for a little blood sweat and tears would also

help. It is on these things that people should judge.