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THE ELECTION RESULT

The outcome of the Federal election was better than I, and I think many another, had dared to hope.

Although it is easy to point to serious flaws in the government's performance, like Medicare and the last needlessly extravagant budget, in other matters, like protection policy, the currency float, money supply management (made easier by the float) and maintenance of the American alliance, the government deserved the confidence which the electorate accorded it. That is not to say that these important matters were on every elector's mind; far from it. The government won because the Fraser years are still remembered and because it was able to claim credit for an upturn in the economy for which it had only minimal responsibility.

The good the Hawke government did in its first term was mostly long term - slow to affect the lives of Australians but enduring. For instance, by the time we experience cheaper and better cars the changes made to motor industry protection by Senator Button's guiding hand will have been forgotten. When the government is eventually defeated, brought low possibly by the antics of Senator Evans, or the ideological fervour of Dr. Blewett or the Left Wing, this good will not be interred within its bones.

Although on balance it deserved to be returned, it was important that on this occasion it should have lost some seats. I think the election has the following benefits for Australia.

First, and very importantly, the composition of the Opposition has been improved by the election of several people who have demonstrated both competence in the arts of politics, steadfastness of purpose, and a sophisticated vision of a National Future. Not least among these is the West Australian, Peter Shack. Since the Liberal Party still has some way to go in developing its ideology, policies and personnel, so that it is fit and ready to govern well when Labor eventually sacks itself, this is of vital importance for the quality of a future Federal Government. I have no confidence that the National Party will look beyond short run political advantage to contribute much to that quality and the loss of Steve Lusher will not have improved that party. However, it is essential that the next time the Liberals govern they are determined that they will govern for the long term, in the knowledge that the good they do will not be interred when they lose an election. The tragedy of the Fraser years was not defeat but failure in office to do the things which conferred long run benefits on society but none in votes at the next election.

~~Second, the better-for-the-Liberals-than-expected-result~~ has for the time being, in spite of the huffing and puffing of Premier Bjelke-Petersen, staved off a challenge to the Party's direction by reactionary right wing interventionists who use the rhetoric of free enterprise while practising big spending regulation. This group, sometimes referred to as "The Uglies", could have been influential within a dispirited Liberal Party or in opposition to it among dispirited supporters; as it is they will at least have to bide their time.

Finally, the campaign extracted three important promises from the Prime Minister: His government will not increase taxes, will not increase government expenditure at a faster rate than the economy grows, and will reduce the deficit. If Hawke is held to those undertakings the long-run benefits of the election will be considerable.