

PRIME MINISTER'S WEEKLY BROADCAST

THE RIGHT TO GOVERN

Sunday 21 September 1975

Once again the press has been full of noisy speculation about the Opposition rejecting the Budget and somehow forcing another election. It is important to put an end to this talk because it is ill-founded and damaging - damaging to the whole process of good government and administration, damaging to the stability and confidence of the entire community. I notice Mr Fraser was quoted as saying the other day that a bit of uncertainty about elections helped boost business confidence. You can draw your own conclusions from that sort of reasoning, but at least it helps to explain Mr Fraser's shameful silence on the basic issue.

First let me make the Government's position perfectly clear. I've spelt it out before. We were elected last year for a three-year term. We intend to serve out that term. Everything we have done, all our policies and decisions have been based on the assumption that the Government would complete the normal term allowed by the Constitution. So it's not the Government that is causing this uncertainty - it's the Opposition and its supporters.

From the way the press carry on you would think that Mr Fraser only had to snap his fingers and an election would follow. That's by no means certain - for a number of reasons. For a start, it's not clear whether the Opposition senators would all do as Mr Fraser tells them. Only this week Senator Jessop, a Liberal senator from South Australia stated publicly that he wouldn't have anything to do with blocking the Budget in the Senate. The independent senators, Senator Hall and Senator Bunton, have said the same thing. They have all taken the honourable and proper view that this isn't the Senate's function. But let's assume for the moment that the Opposition could force an election in this way. Let's consider how thoroughly destructive that would be to our whole system of government.

Once we accept the idea that the Senate can force a Government to an early election, the whole system breaks down. Once the precedent is established any future Government - not just this Government - would be at the mercy of vindictive senators, of a chance majority in a hostile Upper House. Mr Fraser knows this perfectly well. Every Government has its ups and downs - its spells of popularity and unpopularity. That's inevitable in politics. The Liberals went through these ups and downs when they were in office, and we've had more than our share of them ourselves. A Government contending with difficult economic conditions - with problems of inflation and unemployment shared by every other comparable country - a Government forced to take

difficult and sometimes tough decisions in the national interest - will be especially vulnerable to shifts of fortune and changing moods in the electorate. It would be monstrous to suggest that a Government in these circumstances should be forced to the polls whenever it suited the Opposition. No Government would be free to plan ahead, to take decisions for the future, to take tough measures when necessary.

I can best illustrate this point by reference to the Budget. The Budget we brought down last month was framed in the context of long-term planning, as the second of the three annual Budgets in the term for which this Government was elected. It was framed in the context of present economic problems, national and international. It is part of a steady, long-term attack on inflation.

The essential point is this: the Budget must be given a chance to work. No one pretends that it will work overnight. No Budget works overnight. Mr Fraser himself has said that there is no quick, easy solution to our economic problems. The overriding need is for a period of steady, stable government while the Budget takes effect. The next few months are crucial. Any interruption to the Budget strategy, any disruption to the process of recovery, any attempt to bring about a wholly unnecessary political crisis, would have disastrous effects on public confidence and economic planning.

The real question of course - quite apart from anything the Opposition might like to do - is what they could do. The Constitution says nothing on this point and there are absolutely no conventions or precedents to guide us. The Senate has never rejected a money bill or a Budget in its whole 75-year history - that alone will give you some idea of how irregular, how monstrous, the idea is. There is actually no provision in the Constitution or any precedent to suggest that an election must follow the rejection of a Budget at all. In fact there are good grounds for believing that the Senate's rejection of a Budget would be in itself unconstitutional. After all, the Constitution specifically lays down that the Senate may neither originate nor amend a money bill. It hardly seems likely that the founding fathers intended that the Senate should reject bills which they are forbidden even to amend.

Mr Fraser seems to be falling into exactly the same trap as Mr Snedden on this issue. Three weeks ago he said the Budget would be passed. He has more than once expressed the view that an elected Government must be allowed to govern. He stated this principle on the very day he was elected as Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, one of the reasons his colleagues elected him was to put an end to the constant speculation, the damage done to his party and the country by Mr Snedden's endless and irresponsible threats of an election. People were sick and tired of Mr Snedden harping on the subject. We saw what happened last year when

the Liberals knuckled under to Country Party pressure and the Senate threatened to reject supply. The people wouldn't wear it. I called an election myself on that occasion so that our Medibank bills and other important measures could get through Parliament afterwards. The people re-elected the Government. The Liberals turned to a new leader who professed some respect for constitutional principles, for political decency, for the rules of the game.

People shouldn't assume that just because there was an election last time the Senate abused its powers, there would necessarily be an election if they did it again. It's obvious that Mr Fraser is under exactly the same pressures as Mr Snedden. He's looking more like another Snedden every day. He knows the proper course; the question is whether he will stick to his guns. It takes a special sort of courage - real political guts - to stand up to the jackals in the Opposition and resist their demands. If Mr Fraser has any self-respect, if he has any shred of honour, he will make it clear, once and for all, that an election is just not on. He will show his party and the country that he really is the Leader of the Opposition and not a stooge of the Anthonys, the Courts, the Lynches, the Bjelke-Petersens and the various unscrupulous pressure groups that surround them. Every day he dithers on this issue adds to the nation's uncertainty, weakens our democratic system, and reinforces the impression that when the heat is really on, Malcolm Fraser is just as weak and compromising as his unfortunate predecessor.

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