

The Librarian
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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW GIVEN TO PETER COLLINS FROM SATURDAY WEEK

COLLINS: To what extent has your life changed since you became Prime Minister?

FRASER: I think it is difficult to define because there has been a fairly slow and steady change over a long period. As a private member I used to be able to spend a lot more time with my family but that was very nearly 10 years ago. As a minister, and as Leader of the Opposition, it has meant more and more time away from Nareen and, also, unfortunately, more and more time out of Wannon. Being Prime Minister just exaggerates all of that. This time of the year, I suppose, more than any other time I am here. It will be possible to get to Nareen at weekends occasionally, but probably not very often.

COLLINS: Do you try to seal yourself off here?

FRASER: Well its nice to be able to seal yourself off it you can. I think anyone who leads a fairly busy life needs some way of escaping. Fishing is one of the best ways, because there is no media, no television, no telephones and no newspapers. But a Prime Minister has to be accessible, and so we have telephones, there has to be a teleprinter put in so that if some sort of emergency arises a secure message can be got to you at a moments notice. You can't really do the job properly if you are out of contact for even 24 hours, and therefore the job has to follow you.

COLLINS: What has Nareen meant to you over the years?

FRASER: Well it's my home. It's the family's home. I haven't spent in recent years all that much time here but above all else it's home for the family and also sometimes a refuge from politics.

COLLINS: How do you think your style of leadership is going to differ from your predecessor?

FRASER: Well I don't think I'm the person to make a judgement about his style of leadership but from my government's point of view I think it is important to emphasise Cabinet responsibility, the relationship of Cabinet to the Party Room and the process of consultation with the States which has already started in a way which I don't think occurred on previous occasions, a relationship with the Public Service which I think is quite different. I trust the Public Service. I trust the Service's integrity. Sometimes I might want a bit of prompting to get outside additional advice and build that in to the advice that the permanent head gives to a Minister, but generally if there is a particular problem under consideration, especially if the Minister is keen to do that, and this can all be done harmoniously and not in the competitive manner that seemed to do so much damage to the Labor Government. I think establishing a framework that is predictable so that average men and women in Australia can know what is going to happen and not be worried about what the Government is going to do next is important.

COLLINS: Your critics accuse you of being uninterested in areas like aborigines, the arts and the environment - if you like, the trendy areas. Is that so?

FRASER: I don't think that is so. I don't think the facts really bear it out, because I was a foundation member of the Conservation Foundation long before it was a trendy or popular issue. I can remember having discussions with Francis Ratcliffe in his house in Canberra as to what ought to be done to try and get Australia concerned with conservation and environmental issues. This was long before there was any Conservation

FRASER: Foundation, long before you would find journalists writing much
CONT. about it in the newspapers, long before there was any real
public awareness of the importance of the issue. On other
issues, as Education Minister, again the record will show
my Department was concerned, and that I was concerned, about the
problems of education of aborigine children for example in the
Northern Territory. I don't think the record would justify
such a criticism.

COLLINS: Can I ask you a personal type question? How do you go about
setting goals. Do you set goals for yourself, and say I'm
going to achieve this by a certain time?

FRASER: No I don't think so. The only goal you can really set yourself
is to try and do whatever job you've got at the particular
time as well as you possibly can. Now there are many things
involved in being Prime Minister and many different facets
of government, many different policies, domestic and foreign
policies, economic policy, problems concerned with creation
of opportunities, helping the disadvantaged. I don't think
you can set yourself a positive goal, that you are going to
get to a point by a certain time. It's just a question of
doing the job as well as you can.

COLLINS: Were there ever times, for instance around about 1970 when you
were relegated to the back benches after the Gorton business,
when you wondered whether you'd just give up?

FRASER: I don't think for long. Somehow or other I don't think it
would have been right to just give up. If you believe in things
and if other people for better or worse happen to believe in you,
you have obligations to them. You have obligations to your
own electorate. You have a certain view of the kind of
political party that you believe the Liberal Party was and is
or ought to be. There was a great deal to work for.

COLLINS: Looking back on the past election campaign and the events leading up to it, to what extent were you able to plan things out, to map out the alternatives available both to you and to Mr Whitlam?

FRASER: I think fairly carefully. I think Mr Whitlam made a great error of judgement in assuming that under all circumstances the Governor-General would have to accept the Prime Minister of the days advice because, well, there's no need to revive history but I have always believed that there were circumstances in which there was an independent capacity on the part of the Governor-General in Australia, on behalf of the Queen in the United Kingdom. That proved to be correct. It was also not conceivable that the stale-mate should be allowed to continue throughout the summer months. It was never conceivable that a half Senate election was really a solution to the Constitutional difficulty that had arisen and that, if you like, was another miscalculation of Mr Whitlam's. We also thought that there was going to be difficulty until we actually got into an election. Once an election was on, I believed that people would focus on the economic issues, on the kind of government they had had for three years and that they would seriously ask themselves whether they wanted that sort of government for the next three years. So it could be thought through, and was thought through, fairly carefully. But you can never guarantee things in politics. It depends upon the judgement of a very large number of people.

COLLINS: 1975 has been a very spectacular year for you. What do you look forward to in 1976?

FRASER: I think a more predictable world for all Australians. We want a situation where people who have retired won't have their savings destroyed. We want to establish a situation where school leavers in the future are going to be able to get jobs, where university students are going to be able to use their skills. Now with what has been predicted and is still predicted as a result of past policies for this summer, there are going to be many people not in that situation, many school leavers, many university students who won't get the

FRASER:
CONT.

sort of job they basically want or seek. We want to establish a situation where people don't have to be worried about what the government is going to do from one day or one week to the next, where people know that the government is there to help them and not to hinder them achieving their own personal or family ambitions. We want to build a better Australia for everyone. It is a land of opportunity. The government has a significant part in achieving that. We can't make sure the people take advantage of opportunity that might be available, that is up to the individuals themselves. We can do a great deal to see that the opportunities are there. We have got to get confidence in industry and investment moving forward, or there won't be the jobs, there won't be the opportunities and we won't have the wealth provided for the sort of education we want for our children. We won't have the wealth that is necessary to be able to look after those who are disadvantaged in one way or another. I also want to see in 1976 the first significant moves towards the most far sighted changes in our Federalism system of government that have probably been introduced since Federation itself.

COLLINS: You mean give back special powers to the States?

FRASER: Well giving financial independence to the States in a realistic form and at the same time giving greater financial autonomy to local government. Local government used to look after roads and almost nothing but. They've had responsibility heaped on them by State Governments, by Federal Governments and, still in large measure, it is the rate payers who bear the significant burden. Now they need access to the general pool of taxation and that's been part of our policy. We've got to move some power, I believe away from Canberra. In a country that is as diverse as Australia and in a country as well educated as Australia basically is, we've got to see that more people participate in the decision making processes. This means making local government more independent. It certainly means making state governments more independent. We don't want people in Canberra monitoring both, and telling local government and telling state governments what they must do and how they must do it because we don't believe that these things should always be done in Canberra. We believe that very often state governments

FRASER: and local government know best what is necessary for their own
CONT. particular area so this is, I would hope, going to be a start
on a new basis of co-operation between local government, the
states and the Federal Government and the first meeting in
relation to these matters we hope will be on the 4th and 5th of
February. The Premiers have certainly been asked to come to
a meeting and I hope the dates suit them.

COLLINS: Do you think that Australians then can look forward to a happier
or prosperous year in 1976?

FRASER: Well I believe so but I have always said that it is going to be
hard and difficult to get out of the problems that have been
caused by Labor. The deficit over two years is very nearly
\$7,000 million. That has to be paid for, either by inflation
which is the process Labor was using, or by restraint on the
part of governments, or by increased production which brings
greater wealth and greater revenue consequently. We hope
and plan that it will be done by restraint, by getting
production moving again and the Commonwealth's revenue
increased - real revenue, not through the process of inflation.
We will work our way out of the deficit caused by Labor, but
it is not going to be easy. It is going to be difficult. The
hand-out mentality that Labor fostered so much has got to
become a thing of the past. One of the things they tried to
suggest was that the hand-out mentality was the same as doing things
for the disadvantaged but it is not. Doing things for the
disadvantaged is one thing, but the Labor Party shuffled money
around as though it were chaff. That is one of the reasons
we're in such a difficulty at the moment.