

# Looking back at ACT's first MP

Jim Fraser married Helen Whitten Rowland



A NOTABLE Canberra anniversary should not pass without comment. Fifty years ago tomorrow Labor icon Ben Chifley, who had opposed giving Canberra parliamentary representation because he feared its voters might choose a non-Labor Member, was confounded when **James Reay Fraser** was elected as the first federal Labor Member for the ACT.

Until his death from overwork in 1970 (when he was afforded a state funeral), **Fraser** was re-elected seven times. Apart from his debut in the April 1951 federal election, he never had to rely on preferences.

In the days before Canberra got self-government, **Fraser** was the supreme local Member. As Kim Beazley stated in last year's inaugural **Fraser** Lecture, he "played the role of mayor, ombudsman, state and federal MP". He was "an unaffected and accessible spokesman, mediator, and advocate for all those he represented".

Although in the ALP, **Fraser's** fortunes transcended those of his party. In the 19 years after he was first nominated, the federal ALP contested eight national elections and lost all of them.

**Fraser** was an outstanding Labor Member during two of his party's most dismal federal political decades. This impressive fact should surely have ensured his unassailability in his party, as well as among the electors of Canberra.

But surprisingly this was not the case. Both at the beginning and near the end of his career **Fraser** contested internal party ballots, and on each occasion his preselection experience was far from outstanding. Local party sentiment did not anticipate, or even mirror, community respect.



**Fraser's** parliamentary aspirations were first apparent in 1949 when the ACT, despite Prime Minister Chifley's opposition, gained representation after some crucial lobbying by *Allan Fraser*, the Member for Eden-Monaro. Allan wanted his brother James to seek ALP preselection for the new seat.

But it was soon clear that **Fraser** did not have the numbers to be the first nominated ALP candidate for Canberra. The Canberra Times reported that the president of the ACT Trades and Labour Council, Sidney Rhodes, was expected to win when the 50-or-so local ALP members chose their candidate.

Rhodes's nomination was not untroubled. When a few members' credentials were disputed, the NSW Labor executive (whose jurisdiction took in the ACT until the 1970s) suspended the preselection ballot.

When the ballot was finally held, John Burton, the youthful Secretary of the (then) Department of External Affairs, faced a united front of lesser-known local rivals. In the third ballot, 12 of **Fraser's** 14 votes went to Rhodes, ensuring his nomination.

In the federal election of December 1949, Rhodes, an unimpressive campaigner, was defeated by an independent, Lewis Nott.

In 1951 Robert Menzies, in a bid to wipe out a Labor majority in the Senate, engineered a double dissolution. There was no time for the ALP to arrange preselection ballots. The NSW executive chose from among the would-be candidates for the ACT, who this time included **Fraser** and Rhodes but not Burton. Believing Rhodes to be a loser, it picked **Fraser**.

**Fraser** went on to unseat Nott: pre-election graffiti near the Australian War Memorial, which sought to link the ALP with the Communist Party, having no effect. Assiduous constituency work soon fixed **Fraser** in the public mind as Canberra's "Mr Fix It".

The close relationship was not threatened until 1968. With the Vietnam War having shaken up federal politics, **Fraser** faced his first preselection contest since the one he lost in 1949. The late Gordon Walsh was nominated by a faction widely described as "left-wing" the bulk of whose support came from students and academics at the Australian National University, where Walsh was a manager at one of the halls of residence.

In October, **Fraser** lost by four votes in a preselection ballot of 108 members. (After 20 years and a burst of recruitment, party membership had only doubled although the electorate had more than quadrupled.)

The defeat shocked the ACT's voters, many of whom seemed not to have realised that the career of even the most responsive and dedicated Member could be cut short by preselection machinations.

The national capital went feral. A petition supporting **Fraser** was signed by thousands of Canberrans, and the letters pages of The Canberra Times attracted a barrage of protest.

An internal complaint about the conduct of the preselection caused the right-wing NSW state executive to swing into action. A second ballot was ordered in which a half-dozen local party members were disqualified. The same chief returning officer who had just taken part in a tough preselection ballot involving the young Paul Keating was despatched from Sydney.

In the second ballot **Fraser** defeated Walsh by seven votes. The outcry that had greeted the first vote had absolutely no impact on the party faithful. They failed to listen. Walsh lost because some of his supporters were no longer in Canberra and because of the convenient number of disqualifications. There was no mass desertion.

Walsh later joined the Australian Democrats. **Jim Fraser** died five months after he was re-elected in 1969. In the subsequent by-election Labor's primary vote was halved.

These events of long ago are still relevant. The media these days are full of modish commentators bemoaning the gulf between ordinary, potentially volatile, electors and the divergent priorities of aspiring political power-brokers. This dichotomy is treated as if it were an alarmingly recent development generated by heartless economic policies and an over-use of the latest media techniques.

Yet decades ago in supposedly simpler times **Jim Fraser** had to contend with much the same problem. The striking contrast between his appeal to the wider community and his shaky level of internal party support is instructive. A grating divide between insiders and outsiders has long dogged Australian politics. The disruptive complaints of One Nation and like-minded populists merely represent a new and unimaginative variation on an old tune.

There is a further sobering thought. **Jim Fraser's** ultimate saviour on two occasions the unlovable NSW state executive is no longer a factor in ACT Labor politics. Now devoid of its earthy presence, the local ALP has tended on occasions to succumb all too readily to fits of political unreality. As is so often the case, the removal of undesired outside control is not always an unmixed blessing.

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## **Fraser, James Reay (Jim) (1908–1970)**

by C. J. Lloyd

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This is a shared entry with *Allan Duncan Fraser*

*Allan Duncan Fraser* (1902-1977) and **James Reay Fraser** (1908-1970), journalists and politicians, were born on 18 September 1902 at Carlton, Melbourne, and 8 February 1908 at Derby, Tasmania, sons of Donald Fraser, a Victorian-born surveyor, and his wife Constance Marie, née Hadrill, from Denmark.

*Allan* spent much of his childhood in Tasmania in circumstances which he subsequently described as of 'modest comfort'. His father preached the economic philosophies of Henry

George in the Hobart Domain and supported the Australian Labor Party until 1916 when he became an adherent of W. M. Hughes's National Labor (later National) Party. Allan was also strongly influenced by the social principles set out in Robert Tressell's novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London, 1914), which he read at the State High School, Hobart.

Leaving school at 17, *Allan Fraser* joined the Hobart Mercury as a cadet journalist and built close contacts with the A.L.P.'s Tasmanian branch. He moved to Melbourne in 1922 as a political reporter for the Argus, then to Canberra in 1929 as head of the Sydney Sun's bureau. At the Presbyterian Church, Glebe, Sydney, on 31 March 1931 he married a sculptress Eda Kathleen Bourke. In 1933 he was based in London, working as a cables sub-editor for The Times. Back in Australia, he had another brief stint with the Sun before editing This Century of Ours (Sydney, 1938), a history of the Dangar family. *Fraser* resumed journalism in a junior position with the Sydney Daily Telegraph. Active in the Australian Journalists' Association, he had been secretary, treasurer and president of the Victorian district between 1926 and 1929, and was treasurer of the New South Wales district in 1937-38.

In 1938 *Fraser* was sacked by the Daily Telegraph. He accepted the post of secretary to R. J. Heffron who led the breakaway Industrial Labor Party opposed to the State A.L.P. leader J. T. Lang. *Fraser* acted as publicity officer for Heffron's party and was credited with helping to formulate the strategy which eventually overturned Lang's political machine. Following a term as news editor and leader-writer for the Daily News, he returned to the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery in 1940 as political correspondent for Ezra Norton's Truth, and was engaged in lobbying activities for his employer. When Norton's Daily Mirror began publication in 1941, *Fraser* became its political correspondent. He was president of the Canberra sub-district of the A.J.A. in 1941-44.

Defeating Jessie Street, in 1943 *Fraser* gained pre-selection as A.L.P. candidate for the Federal seat of Eden-Monaro, a large rural electorate in south-east New South Wales that adjoined the Australian Capital Territory. Although Eden-Monaro had a consistent history of returning non-Labor members, he won it through a combination of 'vigorous personal electioneering' and the national swing to John Curtin's Labor government at the 1943 elections.

*Fraser* quickly established a reputation for political competence, but his prospects were impaired almost from the start by his independence and a disposition to criticize his own party.

His maiden speech emphasized the threat to individual freedoms posed by wartime controls and led to his chairmanship (1944-46) of the national security regulations advisory committee.

Yet, he was said to have been the first Labor back-bencher to declare his support for Prime Minister J. B. Chifley's controversial bank nationalization proposals in 1947. *Fraser* was elected to the executive of the parliamentary Labor Party in 1951 and was Opposition spokesman on social security.

In that year he joined the A.L.P.'s Federal leader H. V. Evatt in an energetic and ultimately successful appeal to the electorate to vote 'No' in the referendum—initiated by (Sir) Robert Menzies—to give the Commonwealth powers to outlaw the Communist Party of Australia. This close relationship with Evatt did not last, with the party leader antagonizing *Fraser* by pledging in 1954 that a Labor government would abolish the means test on pensions within three years of its election. *Fraser* had reminded the party of the dangers of rash promises on social security matters and Evatt had not consulted him before announcing the policy.

After Evatt issued a statement in October denouncing disloyal elements in the A.L.P., *Fraser* made a highly critical radio broadcast, warning that Evatt's actions 'could split the party from end to end. It has happened before and thrown the party into the political wilderness for years. He believed that Evatt should have taken his charges to the A.L.P. federal executive and federal conference instead of 'wildly flinging allegations' about in the press.

*Fraser's* conduct brought him into an alliance with anti-Evatt elements of the federal caucus, although he had reservations about the implications for civil liberties that might stem from the virulent anti-communism of the industrial groups. In 1955 he clashed with his party as a whole over the gaoling by parliament of Raymond Fitzpatrick and Frank Browne for breaching parliamentary privilege. Defying a caucus directive not to debate the case further, *Fraser* moved in the House that the two men be released from prison. His brother Jim was the only A.L.P. member to support him.

Following Labor's defeat at the 1955 elections, on 13 February 1956 *Fraser* opposed Evatt for the leadership, but was defeated by 58 votes to 20. As a consequence he lost his high ranking in the caucus executive, obtaining only the ninth of ten posts balloted next day.

As his years as a parliamentarian progressed, *Fraser* became increasingly interested in foreign affairs, particularly the emerging conflict in Vietnam. From the beginning, he opposed the sending of Australian forces to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and, as spokesman for foreign affairs, had some influence in shaping the A.L.P.'s policy for the 1966 election campaign. The party was decisively beaten at the polls and *Fraser*, who had made the withdrawal of Australian troops the dominant issue in Eden-Monaro, lost the seat which he had held for twenty-three years. He won it back in 1969, but did not seek a place on the caucus executive and retired at the end of his term in 1972. In 1974 he was elected to the A.C.T. Legislative Assembly as an Independent. The A.L.P. had refused him pre-selection because of his age, and the A.C.T. branch expelled him from the party for technically opposing its endorsed candidates. He was appointed C.M.G. in 1977.

A reticent man who found social gatherings an ordeal, *Fraser* had developed into an attractive politician, making extensive and innovative use of radio broadcasts to cultivate support in his sprawling electorate. He was a resonant speaker with distinctive articulation who brought a luminous intellect and a passionate disposition to the practice of politics. His effectiveness, however, was tempered by the assertion of an unqualified independence which kept him at odds with party discipline and cost him the sustained support of his colleagues, much as they admired his gifts.

Late in life he bleakly remarked: 'To a very large extent, my career [in politics] has been futile'. Survived by his wife and son, he died on 12 December 1977 in Canberra and was cremated.

**Jim Fraser** was educated at Launceston High School. He worked as a chainman and axeman in his father's surveying team, and as a teacher in Victorian state schools in 1927-35. Carrying his swag to New South Wales, he found a job as a journalist at Glen Innes. On 29 January 1942 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and served twice with New Guinea Force, first in the 2nd/1st Field Regiment, Artillery (1943), then in the Public Relations Field Unit (1945). Promoted sergeant on 29 May 1945, he was discharged on 25 March 1946. He was employed as a journalist in the Department of Information, Canberra, in 1946-48, and as press secretary and private secretary to Senator N.E. McKenna in 1948-51.

Because the A.C.T. did not have a seat in Federal parliament until 1949, Jim helped his brother *Allan* who had agreed to represent the interests of Canberra people. Gradually, Jim took over the bulk of the work, becoming a member (1949-51) of the A.C.T. Advisory Council and winning the A.C.T. seat in the House of Representatives in 1951. As member for a Territory, **Fraser** had limited voting rights until November 1966. He combined Federal and what was in effect State and local government representation with the duties of unofficial ombudsman in a rapidly growing constituency which mingled both urban and rural interests, and still found time to serve on parliamentary committees and participate in parliamentary debates.

A big, forthright man with a gregarious manner, Jim lacked the rich political talents of his elder brother, but commanded respect for his effective and conscientious performance of one of the heaviest representative responsibilities ever imposed on an Australian politician. On 1 August 1959 at St Andrew's Anglican Church, South Brisbane, he had married Helen Whitten Rowland, a bookseller.

He died of cancer on 1 April 1970 in Canberra; accorded a state funeral, he was buried in Canberra cemetery with Presbyterian forms. His wife and son survived him.

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