PRESS STATEMENT:

MALCOLM FRASER:

PARTY ORGANIZATION

May 5th, 1963

Recent debates in the Commonwealth Parliament have shown up the importance of Party political organization and of the power that outside organizations can have over members of Parliament. Today, I want to set down firmly and clearly the differences between the Liberal Party and the Labour Party in these matters.

All political Parties have a common base of Branches spread throughout the community. Branches elect delegates that go periodically to State Conferences and these State Conferences formulate policies and rules for the guidance and conduct of their political organizations in the different States. So far as this is concerned, there is some common ground between the two Parties. The essential difference occurs in the relationship between the Liberal Party organization and its members of Parliament and the Labour Party organization and its members.

For example, the Federal organs of the Liberal Party, which are composed of representatives of the State organizations, have a duty to advise Liberal Party members or Ministers on any matters that they think fit. The important word is, of course, "advise". Advice can always be given and there is an obligation to consider it but having considered it, members may reject it.

This word is used deliberately because the Liberal Party recognises that members of Parliament are responsible first of all to the Parliamentary institutions and through Parliament to the people of Australia. In a true democracy, nothing should come between members and the people. This relationship is supported by all political Parties in the United Kingdom, including the United Kingdom Labour Party.

It is worth noting the words of Herbert Morrison, a noted Labour Party Leader of the war-time era, and of Mr. Attlee's post-war Government. He is a person who has the respect of political friends and political opponents.

Speaking of the relationship in the United Kingdom of the Cabinet and its Labour Party supporters and of the Cabinet and the Labour Party organization outside Parliament he said:--

"Neither the Party Executive nor the Party Conference claims the right to instruct a Labour Government while it is in office. Nor is there anything in the Party Constitution giving the Conference or the Executive power to instruct the Parliamentary Labour Party when in opposition."

A few lines further on he continued:--

"The British people expect from their M.P.'s a general sense of electoral responsibility and that their Government shall be answerable to the elected House of Commons.

In Communist countries things are very different. There the Political Bureau ( or whatever new title it may have) of the Communist Party is, in fact, the body that determines Government policy. If in our own country committees of political parties could instruct the Government of the day, we should be losing our system of parliamentary democracy and moving towards single-party dictatorship."
These are words which we should not toss lightly aside. In Australia, the Labour Party Parliamentary members are subject to precisely this kind of outside instruction from a largely unknown political committee of the Australian Labour Party. The supreme policy-making and governing bodies of the Australian Labour Party under their own rules are, firstly, the Federal Conference of 36 members and, secondly, the Federal Executive of 12 members. Both these bodies have the authority and the right to instruct Australian Labour Party members of Parliament and such instructions, under the rules, are binding on the members of Parliament.

It is easily seen therefore that there are two bodies outside the Parliament that owe no responsibility to the Parliament or to the electors of Australia, both of which can and have told Australian Labour Party members what they should do.

It is worth weighing this position with the words of the British Labour Leader, Mr. Herbert Morrison.

On a matter that is vitally important to Australia's future - on the question of our relationship with the United States over defensive arrangements, we have seen the present Leader of the Labour Party asking for a special Conference to be called and asking for instructions as to what should be Labour Party policy. This is not a way national leaders should act.

We should recall that the Australian Labour Party Conference supported the Radio Communications Centre at Western Australia by only one person - nineteen to seventeen. If one of the unknown members of this Conference changes his mind, Australian Labour Party policy on this vital question could be altered because a drawn vote is a negative under the rules. That vote would not be cast by somebody in Parliament. It would not be cast by Mr. Calwell, the Leader of the Opposition. It would be cast by a person of whom few Australians have ever heard.

This procedure represents the very denial of democracy. The whole principle on which our system is built is that members shall be elected by the people to Parliament to execute their own judgment so that they may act in the nation's best interests. They shall be responsible to the people who elect them and to the Nation as a whole. The people are their judges.

Our political opponents do not work like that. They are sent to Parliament by Australians voting in general elections. Then, within the rules laid down by the Party Conference which most Australians have never heard of, they must do what the Party Conference tells them. Under present circumstances, electing Australian Labour Party members to power would be equivalent to placing the power of control of the nation in the hands of the Australian Labour Party Conference of 36 silent, nameless men unknown by and not responsible to the Australian people.

These rules are not so important when you have a strong Parliamentary Leader who is prepared to emphasise and fight for the rights of Parliament against the power of the outside organisation. When you have a weak Parliamentary Leader who is not prepared to make his stand and who has shown a willingness to go to the outside body to take orders then you have distortion and corruption of democracy.

The only fortunate matter arising out of these recent happenings is that Australians have been shown Mr. Calwell's weakness while he is in Opposition and cannot basically affect Australia's policies. Australian democracy, however, tragically needs an Australian Labour Party Leader prepared to support the authority of the Parliamentary Party against outside control.
Library Digitised Collections

Author/s: Fraser, Malcolm

Title: Labor Party organisation

Date: 5 May 1963

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/40072

File Description: Labor Party organisation

Terms and Conditions: Copyright courtesy of Malcolm Fraser. Contact the University of Melbourne Archives for permission requests.