CONFLICTING DUTIES OF A FEDERAL MEMBER

By: Malcolm Fraser, Member for Wannon.

In this initial article I want to tell you something of my own movements and how I believe I can best serve you the electors of Wannon as your Federal Member.

Last year I started off in the first Session leaving my home on Monday morning, coming into the office in Melbourne, flying up to Canberra on Tuesday morning, flying back from Canberra on Friday morning, spending a few hours in the office in Melbourne and then motoring back to Wannon to attend some function on the Friday night and very often on the Saturday as well. Quite frankly, it is not possible to keep up this schedule and at the same time make any real contribution to the government of the country.

Let us have a look at the hours and see how they were spent. Nareen is five hours from Melbourne by car if I go direct with no stops and making no calls on the way. If I go out of my way to attend some function it can hardly mean a journey of less than 280 or 300 miles and, in addition to this, I must stop on the way which makes the journey a very long one.

During the Session last year I was spending seldom less than 14 hours a week behind the wheel of my car and four hours a week in aeroplanes. I would spend 6 hours in my office in Melbourne divided between Monday and Friday.

In Canberra itself we arrive on Tuesday at lunch time and the House sits from 2.15 until 11 o'clock.

On Wednesday there are Party meetings from 10 in the morning until 12.30 and the House meets again from 2.15 until 11.30 at night with the usual 2 hours off for dinner between 6 and 8. On Thursday the House meets at 10.30 to 12.30, from 2.15 to 6 and 8 to 11 - making a total of about 22 hours each week. Travelling time, time spent in my office in Melbourne and time when the House was sitting through last year were accounting for 46 hours in each week which is slightly more than an average working week.
However, a politician's work is not finished with these duties. If any real contribution is to be made to the debates of the House or to the great and important problems confronting the development of this country and to the social questions which continually arise in a changing and dynamic society then a great deal of research and reading must be done. In addition to this, there are Parliamentary Committees which meet outside the times in which the House is sitting and which extend the working period for Members by many hours.

I am not writing this to try and say that Members of Parliament are over-worked. But there is a definite limit to the amount of work that any person can do in any one week - to put it this way, the more time I spend attending functions in the electorate, the less time I spend in research and in reading which are the necessary part of the life of any politician. The more time I spend in research in preparation for some debate, the less time I can spend in this great electorate of Wannon. It is sometimes thought that it is merely the work in the electorate that brings a Member support in future elections. It is my wish not to merely hold this seat but to make some positive contribution, in the future, to the government of this country in a way which may be of lasting benefit to every section of the community. If I can do that, it will be of lasting benefit to every person in Wannon. I believe that you, the electors of Wannon, will appreciate this and will realise that it must of necessity place some limit on the amount of time that I can get about this electorate. Already I have had to refuse several invitations because I am on a Committee that is meeting over the week-ends of the 22nd and 29th. I hope the people who ask me to attend these functions will understand and that it will not deter people from asking me on future occasions.

I have decided, where possible, when the House is sitting to spend as much time as I can on the Parliamentary side of my duties in study and in research - without which a reasoned view on any problem is not possible. To do this, will mean that I will stay in
Canberra throughout this Session unless some important function
makes it necessary for me to return to Wannon.

When the House is not in Session, I will be getting
about the electorate as much as I possibly can, attending to the
other and vital half of a politician's job, which is keeping in
close touch with the people he represents.

While I am in Canberra, as always I will be available
to attend to the needs and to the problems of the people in this
area. In fact from Canberra, if you get in touch with me I
can very often contact the Ministers more quickly and get a
quicker answer to your problems than if I am coming back to
Wannon each week-end.

I have placed these thoughts squarely before you
because I believe this problem of the two duties of a Federal
Member, when the distance that must be travelled is great, is a
difficult one to solve. I believe the plan of action, together
with the definitive definition of functions, which I have
tried to set out in this article is the best one to make it
possible for me to serve you the people of Wannon and through
you, Our Australia.

19th March, 1957.
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