

Peter Fraser at War

Talk given at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage Seminar, 6 April 2011

No-one would have forecast that Peter Fraser would be a great war leader. Apart from brief service in the Seaforth Highlanders as a young man in Scotland he had no military experience whatever, a lack which later perhaps discouraged him from interfering with his generals – a temptation which Churchill, the former battalion commander, could never resist.

Fraser instead was a convinced socialist whose great contribution in the nineteen-thirties was as Minister of Education, and though not a pacifist himself he was the deputy leader of a party which had strong pacifist inclinations. In that decade New Zealanders resolutely averted their gaze from the signs of approaching war, as indeed did all the democracies. After the tragic losses of the earlier war it seemed hard to accept that it would have to be done all over again. As we recovered from the deepest depression in our history there was little taste for diverting scarce funds to defence. Busy with social reform, the new Labour Government declined to rearm and despite the growing weight of evidence to the contrary went on hoping that the League of Nations could somehow preserve the world from the dictators. The strength of the regular army fell below 600 and the Territorials withered.

Yet by one of those frequent paradoxes of public opinion, the country had no difficulty accepting that if war came we would fight. The body of Christian pacifists in the Labour Party (Walter Nash had been one of them) were opposed to any war, and after Hitler's pact with the Soviet Union a vocal group of Communists denounced the prospect of a 'capitalists' war'. But as the newly-established British High Commission reported, no New Zealand Government that failed to go to war would have stood for a day.

War was declared in the middle of the night on 3 September 1939. Despite the persistent myth, New Zealand was not the first country in the Empire to declare war. In fact bad radio reception of Chamberlain's announcement led Cabinet to hesitate for several hours. It would have been awkward if New Zealand turned out to have gone to war on a burst of static. When the doubts were cleared up, war was declared in a dignified proclamation which had overtones of Abraham Lincoln. The war, it said, was "inevitably forced upon the British Commonwealth if the cause of justice, freedom and democracy is to endure in this world".

The mood though was resigned rather than uplifted. In August 1914 the Governor-General had proclaimed war from the steps of Parliament, surrounded by his Ministers and members of Parliament and in front of a crowd that had enthusiastically cheered his words. Now he signed the proclamation in a small room in the wooden Government Building, in the early hours of the morning, without ceremony, speeches or cheers.

That night saw the first appearance of Peter Fraser, still simply Minister of Education, as New Zealand's war leader. Michael Joseph Savage, the much-loved Prime Minister, was terminally ill with cancer. A sweet-natured optimist, he had difficulty coping with the harsh implications of the approaching war. His bafflement was expressed in a broadcast: "To think that our friends of yesterday should be our potential enemies of today – and without having exchanged one cross word or having the faintest understanding of what it is all about". It was clear at least that Savage had little idea of what it was all about. Carl Berendsen, who

worked for him as the head of his department and admired him, said, "Savage was the most Christ-like figure I have ever known, and an absolute ninny".

Fraser was the obvious replacement. Though he was not the unanimous choice of his party, the lottery of politics managed, as in Britain, to give New Zealand the leader it needed. He was never loved as Savage was and has not entirely won the admiration of subsequent generations. He was no crowd-pleaser, a shy man, with a dour manner which won no devotion and a speaking style which aroused no excitement. He could be vindictive and a bully – by no means unique as a Prime Minister in this – and his untidy managerial habits were said to have given Berendsen a duodenal ulcer. He was unable to start meetings on time or keep to an agenda. Throughout the day he would stop and talk at length to anyone who wandered in, and then keep everyone standing about while he worked late into the night.

On the other hand, he was a Prime Minister, not an office manager. The real test of his leadership was not a tidy desk or model work habits, but his judgment on the big issues and his care and skill in bringing Parliament and the country along with him when the big decisions had to be taken. All this he did superbly for he was a combination less rare than might be thought – a strong-minded autocrat who was deeply democratic.

In the judgment of Churchill and many others he was a great man - I think the greatest Prime Minister in our history. He had that infallible mark of greatness, the ability to rise to any challenge with courage and good judgment. Berendsen, who worked for him faithfully but admired him only intermittently, said that when faced with the shock of bad news "he rubbed his great nose, thought it over for a minute or two – and just carried on". His partnership with Berendsen, the head of the Prime Minister's Department, was an unlikely one. Berendsen, who had overcome a poverty-stricken childhood, disapproved of Labour's welfare reforms and was regarded by many as an arch-Tory. Fraser was indifferent to this because they were completely at one on how to deal with the outside world, where Fraser's fast-developing judgment was underwritten by Berendsen's knowledge. Together they shaped New Zealand's wartime policy, managed relations with our allies and had a major influence on the post-war world.

In November 1939 Fraser, still standing in for his dying leader, went to Britain. His most pressing task was to choose a military commander for the forces now being hastily trained. There was no-one suitable at home – it was thought at one stage that a decade's neglect of the army might require the New Zealand Division to rely on British officers. The name of a recently-retired British major-general called Bernard Freyberg had been mentioned and Fraser summoned him to a meeting at the Savoy Hotel.

Freyberg interviewed well. He impressed Fraser with his care for the welfare of troops and even more with his less conventional military insights. This war, he stressed, would be quite different from the last. Trench warfare would be replaced by mobility, and air power and armour would dominate the battlefield. Fraser did not hesitate and New Zealand had found its military leader as well.

Freyberg sailed from Wellington with the first echelon of his new division in January 1940. The division was to train in Egypt and then, it was assumed, would move on to France as in the earlier war. But six months later the fall of France shattered that assumption and radically reshaped the nature of the conflict. London newspapers could be jaunty – one headline said 'France Surrenders, We're in the Finals' – but Britain was suddenly in direct

peril. It could no longer hope to win the war. It could however still lose it, by doing a deal with Hitler, as some in the British Cabinet were suggesting.

New Zealand's security was also shaken. Hard-pressed at home, Britain said it could no longer spare the battleships to defend Singapore if, as expected, the island was attacked by the Japanese. Like Australia New Zealand had clung, though with growing doubts, to the hope of Fortress Singapore as its main protection in the Pacific. Now at a stroke this defence policy had collapsed, leaving New Zealand with no troops, no guns or weapons with which to arm them and no fighter aircraft. With its British protector in imminent danger of invasion and the United States resolutely neutral, there was nothing left to counter Japanese aggression in the Pacific.

Fraser, Prime Minister since April 1940, showed his largeness of character. He sent Churchill a personal message to say that if, as he hoped, Britain chose to fight on New Zealand would stay with it to the end, but if it was felt necessary to seek a peace with Germany then New Zealand would stand by it in that event also. He ended with words which Walter Nash was not the only person to find moving: "Whatever decision the British Government took in the difficult circumstances in which it found itself it would be understood, accepted and supported by New Zealand to the very end".

Churchill and Fraser barely knew one another at that point. Indeed, with very different backgrounds and temperaments the Scottish socialist and the duke's grandson were not soul mates, but Churchill never forgot that message which established Fraser's steadiness in his mind. He later commented to a colleague, "New Zealand has never put a foot wrong from the start".

The fall of France also had the unexpected effect of turning our training ground in Egypt into a theatre of war, surrounded by half a million Italian troops in Somalia and Libya and by potentially hostile Vichy French possessions in North Africa and Syria. But the New Zealand Division first went into battle in the doomed effort to halt the German invasion of Greece. Since Britain had pledged its support for Greece in 1939, Churchill thought that despite Britain's meagre resources some military support was essential. Fraser unhesitatingly agreed: a properly-ordered world depended on pledges being kept.

Only three divisions were available out of the ten the planners thought essential, and no soldier thought the intervention was militarily feasible. Freyberg however failed to warn Wellington of this, reporting seemingly by coincidence that the division was now ready for battle. This was less than frank, since after the disaster Freyberg admitted to Fraser that he had never thought Greece could be defended with the troops available. It caused the only coolness that ever arose between the general and his Prime Minister. Fraser and Berendsen had seen the risks themselves with some clarity but, given their stern emphasis on international morality, they never wavered over the need to support the Greeks, even after the inadequate number of British and Dominion troops were overwhelmed and had to be plucked from the Greek beaches.

In the confusion of the evacuation two-thirds of the New Zealand Division ended up on the island of Crete, along with a mixed bag of British, Australian and Greek troops. Freyberg was appointed to command the defence. There had been no resources to fortify the island and German air superiority meant it could not have been held for long. It might have been

held for longer than it was, but not by the random force of brave but ill-equipped troops. In the end it was lost by the New Zealanders when the airfield at Maleme was lost.

Alister McIntosh, Berendsen's successor and my first boss, used to say that Fraser had the knack of turning up in the most surprising places. He now turned up unexpectedly in Cairo, to be told that the navy's crippling losses meant that the evacuation from Crete would have to be halted. He went straight to Alexandria to plead with Admiral Cunningham, the British naval commander, arguing passionately and at length that the thousands of troops still in Crete were virtually New Zealand's whole war effort.

When he finished there was silence in the room, broken by the admiral saying, "Mr Fraser is right. It takes the Navy three years to build a new ship. It will take three hundred years to build a new tradition." He would ignore his orders from the Admiralty, telling Fraser that if the cruiser *Phoebe* returned that night he would send her back for one last try. Fraser and Berendsen waited anxiously on the dock in the darkness. It was nearly midnight when *Phoebe* ghosted in through the gloom and at dawn it sailed again for Crete. Almost miraculously it made a safe round-trip and brought back 1400 New Zealanders – though the cruiser sent out to help her was sunk. Admiral Cunningham, in Fraser's heartfelt words, was "beyond praise".

No-one else was and the row over Crete went on for months. Indeed it goes on still. Freyberg as commander clearly bore some of the responsibility for the defeat. Fraser had no wish to refight lost battles but he believed he had to be accountable to the New Zealand people when things went wrong. He asked some pointed questions, especially about the lack of air cover, and could not help wondering whether he had chosen the right commander.

He sought opinions on Freyberg's performance from the top British commanders. They were warmly favourable, General Wavell saying that if New Zealand did not want Freyberg he did, and he was recommending him for a knighthood. Fraser was satisfied and his faith in his general was never shaken again, although it took Churchill a year before he recovered his romantic admiration for the soldier he liked to describe as that "battle-scarred warrior". Freyberg for his part learnt the need to keep his government fully informed and for the rest of the war the two managed the inherently difficult relationship between generals and politicians with exemplary skill. They set a model which I hope will be remembered in future emergencies. Fraser was never tempted to interfere in tactical or operational matters; Freyberg ensured that his Prime Minister was fully informed on the state of the division and the tasks planned for it.

While these disasters befell the allies in the Mediterranean the situation in the Pacific was also darkening. With Egypt looking as if it might be lost and the German armies at the gates of Moscow, Japan began to move south. When it took over Vichy French bases in Vietnam Wellington and Canberra became worried. It would be a nightmare if Japan also obtained bases from the Vichy Government in New Caledonia and Tahiti. New Zealand resorted to some unorthodox diplomacy, sending Berendsen and the cruiser *Achilles* to ensure that a Gaullist, pro-British government was firmly installed in Papeete. The change went off smoothly with the help of a shipment of much-needed flour from Auckland but it had its farcical side, ending with the new Governor giving a farewell party for Berendsen in what appeared to be a brothel.

The United States was now the only hope of effective protection for New Zealand and Australia. The two southern Dominions discovered a new interest in it. Earlier suspicions about its claims on South Pacific islands were buried in effusive speeches praising America as the last hope of the democracies. A Labour Member of Parliament even wondered if New Zealand should seek to become an American colony – he could, he said, think of worse alternatives.

Despite this, Fraser could not make up his mind about opening an embassy in Washington. The need had been obvious to Wellington since the fall of France. The problem was to find someone who was able and completely trusted. Fraser dithered for months. He felt it had to be a Cabinet Minister but, as the American consul-general reported, the country had a two-man government, Fraser and Nash. There was no-one else of the necessary ability. He half-promised the job to Frank Langstone, a former fish-and chip shop owner and a champion of easy money theories. When McIntosh pointed out that his credentials were hardly suitable, Fraser said that he would rather have Langstone in Washington than in Wellington, a thought which has been echoed by more than one Prime Minister since.

The relationship with America, however, was clearly going to be critical. At the end of 1941, the Prime Minister accepted the inevitable and chose Nash, provoking an epic row with Langstone who threatened to pull the Prime Minister's nose. Since Nash was also essential at home, he combined his diplomatic role with that of Finance Minister. The new ability to cross the Pacific by flying-boat made it just possible for him to do this.

He arrived in Washington as Pearl Harbour was attacked. For the first time in New Zealand's short history it found its vast oceanic moat controlled by a hostile navy and its independence was directly threatened. Churchill in Washington told Commonwealth representatives that he rejoiced over the Japanese attack; however long it took victory was now inevitable. Wellington, however, was far from rejoicing and its fears brought a fundamental change in the country's outlook.

The change was set out in a lengthy cable sent by Fraser to Churchill in January 1942, as the Japanese armies raced through South East Asia. When the war was in Europe, he said, New Zealand had been content to leave the conduct of the war largely in Britain's hands. Now that the war had moved to our doorstep, "we feel that we must have an eye, an ear and a voice wherever decisions affecting New Zealand are to be made". What it wanted urgently was arms, to play its part in the Pacific fighting, and a voice in Pacific strategy.

This last was not entirely welcome to either Churchill or President Roosevelt. Neither was keen to give the smaller allies a major role in managing the Pacific war. The President hoped that Churchill could manage the dominions in London while he managed the war in Washington. Churchill liked this too – speaking for Britain *and* the Commonwealth would give him a stronger voice in Washington.

This was not acceptable to either Australia or New Zealand and an argument started which went on for longer than it took Japan to conquer all of South East Asia. It ended with the establishment of the Pacific War Council which met in Washington from April 1942. It was not the decision-making body Fraser would have liked – Roosevelt had no intention of sharing the direction of the war with the Council. But the Council enabled the smaller allies to bring their concerns direct to the President and the talkative Nash made frequent use of these opportunities. And in the first anxious months of the Pacific struggle the weekly

meetings were a helpful reassurance to the public in Australia and New Zealand that their needs and fears were known in Washington.

Cooperation between Australia and New Zealand, however, remained intermittent. Though they shared the same aims and anxieties, the two remained strangely aloof from one another for more than half the war. There was no joint planning and occasional proposals to establish an Anzac force were greeted with the polite respect that the Anzac spirit demanded, but they were never followed up.

Even more curiously, neither felt it worthwhile to be represented in the other's capital until halfway through the war. New Zealand did not establish a High Commission in Canberra until the middle of 1943, long after it had done so in Washington and indeed in Ottawa. Clearly two independent nations had developed since Gallipoli, with significant differences of outlook.

These differences were dramatically revealed in the deep and damaging rift which developed between the two countries over the part New Zealand was to play in the Pacific war. As the struggle went on, it became clear by the end of 1942 that the country could not sustain a full division in both the Mediterranean and the Pacific and still meet the demands of food for our allies. These demands were increasing at an almost geometrical rate. By the last year of the war New Zealand was feeding half a million American troops in the Pacific as well as itself and the British home front.

The need to make a choice first surfaced after the victory at El Alamein when Australia brought its remaining division home. Parliament decided that for the time being the New Zealand Division should continue its hot pursuit of the enemy. But when the North African campaign was over in May 1943 the question was back on the table and Prime Minister Curtin in Canberra made it clear that the relationship with Australia depended on our coming up with the correct answer. In several rather shrill messages this depressive man outlined his deep fears that the huge losses from malaria and other tropical diseases might cause Australia's effort in the Pacific to collapse and all its sacrifices to be in vain. Surely a sister dominion would be willing to help.

Fraser however thought that the division, now described by General Alexander as "the best division the world has ever seen", should stay for the Italian campaign, and with considerable skill brought a doubtful Cabinet and Parliament round to agree. He was said to have "almost wept over the distress" this would cause Curtin and he was right. Berendsen had just been sent as the first High Commissioner in Canberra and it was his unhappy task to convey the news. He was rudely received and Curtin's response was bitter. Australia, he said, was exporting its diminishing manpower to defend New Zealand. His anger was lasting, in no way lessened by a surprisingly tactless message from Fraser noting that the Mediterranean was healthier than the Solomons and that in any case New Zealand now felt safer in the Pacific.

Australian wrath was not confined to the Prime Minister. Many in Canberra were angered by what they saw as New Zealand's lack of a Pacific consciousness and its desire, in the words of a senior official, to be "the curly-headed boys of the Empire". More than a year later, when the time came to consider Australia's post-war defence, General Sir Thomas Blamey wrote twice to the Prime Minister to point out that New Zealand was unreliable. It would always feel safe as long as Australia was there and therefore could not be relied on to

cooperate in defence and should not even be consulted. These suspicions have outlasted the wartime emergency.

The Australians' distrust was only partially offset by the unexpected partnership which developed in the last two years of the war between Fraser and Herbert Evatt, the Australian Foreign Minister. Leaders like Churchill and Roosevelt were both mindful of the way in which their countries had been caught unprepared by the sudden end of the earlier war. For the first time in the history of great conflicts, the allies from late 1943 began to turn their thoughts even as the fighting continued to the shape of the post-war world and the international institutions which could safeguard it. Both the forceful Evatt and the more careful Fraser had some clear ideas about the future and they came together to ensure that their countries' concerns were not overlooked.

At a meeting in Canberra in January 1944 they signed the Canberra Pact. Largely drafted by Evatt, it was the first international agreement made by the two countries. Reflecting Evatt's less than tactful approach, it served notice to the world and especially to the Americans that changes in the Pacific could not be made without the agreement of the two southern countries. This annoyed the Americans and then, at a follow-up meeting ten months later in Wellington, they managed to annoy the British as well – Fraser declaring in public that some form of international supervision was essential for colonial development.

The Fraser-Evatt alliance was brief but it played an important role in shaping the new international organisation, the United Nations. Indeed, outside the Anglo-American team which prepared the first draft, Fraser and Evatt influenced the Charter more than anyone else. They managed to widen the international agenda to add colonial administration and economic and social cooperation to the traditional concerns with war and peace.

The New Zealand delegation at the San Francisco Conference was tiny – seven compared with fifty-six for Australia alone – and had trouble covering all the committees. Its American liaison officer noted that “being keenly interested in the work of the Conference, they have little time for outside activities” – unlike the Panamanian delegation next door whose younger members were reported to have “an exclusive preoccupation with drinking, horse races and women”. The one excursion made in a stay of nearly three months in San Francisco was a day trip to Yellowstone National Park – a six hundred mile dash by car for Fraser who liked being driven at speed.

The work was hectic. Fraser hurried from committee to committee, shamelessly used his status as a head of government to get the floor, make his speech and dash off to the next meeting. The success he and Evatt had in mustering support was a bother to the British and American delegations. The British confessed they had given up trying to influence the dominions; an American senator told his colleagues that unless something was done to counter their efforts to block the veto “we would get the hide kicked off of us”.

All the same, it was the Americans who put Fraser forward as chairman of the committee on colonies: “Mr Fraser is all right”, President Truman was told. Fraser began by announcing that he would run the committee according to the rules of the New Zealand House of Representatives. This gave him considerable freedom since no-one else knew what the rules were.

His committee became the show to visit at the conference. It was partly to see a tough-minded old parliamentarian at work, cajoling and even bullying the committee (someone said) as if it were the New Zealand Parliament. But the ideas being tried out and the controversies they aroused also drew in the passersby. Compared with the familiar issues of diplomacy in other committees, it was sounding a new theme in international affairs. The future of the whole colonial world was on the table.

Fraser was even more passionate about the need to safeguard small states from the aggressions that had marked the thirties. His passion was heightened even while they were talking by the sight of another state, Poland, being abandoned by the world. It led him to take perhaps his most courageous decision of the war. Marshal Tito's Yugoslav partisans were pushing north to seize the district and city of Trieste from Italy. Churchill and Truman asked if the nearby New Zealand Division could move into Trieste and forestall the takeover. Fraser, who was then in San Francisco at the conference drafting the United Nations Charter, agreed unhesitatingly, saying that if New Zealand did not respond, "all that we have won during five and a half years of fighting will be lost."

Back in Wellington, his colleagues were not so sure. New Zealand might find that it had triggered World War III. How would a war-weary public react to the news that its soldiers might have to fight again? Cabinet shuffled its feet, suggesting to Fraser in the time-honoured phrases of escapism that surely men of goodwill could get together and reach an agreement on Trieste.

This woolliness turned Fraser incandescent. He sat late into the night drafting a reply himself. He was "disappointed and dismayed" by the view of his colleagues. New Zealand could not be a passive spectator while all it had stood for in international affairs was undermined and destroyed. He acknowledged that public opinion might not understand but declared in one of his great Fraserisms, "in a crisis public opinion must not be feared, it must be met." The Division moved into Trieste and after some days of acute tension the Yugoslav troops withdrew.

Fraser's deepest conviction was that the post-war settlement would have to avoid the weakness of the thirties in dealing with would-be aggressors. His hope was that the new international institution would be powerful enough to extend secure protection to any state threatened by aggressive neighbours. His battle at the San Francisco conference therefore came to focus on the risks involved in giving the great powers a veto over the actions of the new peace-enforcement body, the Security Council. He told Churchill's private secretary that the new World Organisation was wrongly conceived. "Once the Big Three fell out, as they assuredly would, the United Nations would be just a meeting place for airing the grievances of the small nations".

The campaign he and Evatt waged against the veto in San Francisco was so vigorous that the final vote was in doubt. Paradoxically Fraser then abstained. The reality was that without the veto the Soviet Union was unlikely to join and the Charter might not have got through the American Senate. As he later told Parliament, better the Charter with a veto than no Charter at all.

The Charter is perhaps Fraser's greatest legacy. For all the battles and compromises over its drafting, it established a workable international system. In over sixty years no member has left it and none has yet been able to improve on it. Among the smaller nations only Evatt

contributed as much to the shape of the Charter and it is in no small part owing to Fraser's intervention that the United Nations was able over three decades to promote and oversee the astonishingly radical process of worldwide decolonisation.

The confident diplomacy that Fraser displayed at San Francisco was based on his experience over five years in working with allies. Underpinning it was New Zealand's record in the war. At San Francisco New Zealand was one of the inner circle of victorious powers, one of the even smaller group which had fought from the beginning to the end. The influence this gave inevitably waned over time as more states joined the world community. But Fraser's effectiveness also came from his lifelong insistence on starting from principles and pursuing their application with patience and perseverance. At the start of the war Berendsen had written to Savage, "I do not believe that anything that is morally wrong can ever be politically right". Fraser never needed to be reminded of this, and it would not be a bad motto for any country's diplomacy.

Gerald Hensley