Do former prime ministers wield influence after they leave office?

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Katherine Ring

An Intern with the Australian National Internships Program

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Executive Summary

This report aims to examine whether, and to what extent, former Australian prime ministers continue to wield influence after they have left office. The research aims to make headway in to an area of prime ministerial study that has only been minimally scoped to this day, and to attempt to draw tentative conclusions about what influence ex-prime ministers might be expected to wield in future decades. This research has examined a combination of primary source materials (letters, speeches, contemporary news articles), and secondary sources (autobiographies, biographies, recent journalism and academic articles), and has discovered that former prime ministers often continue to contribute to public life in three key ways: through connections with serving parliamentarians, activities and appointments, and political commentary. Not only is this contribution well received by the Australian public, the forms of influence exerted by former leaders are continuing to expand over time.

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INTRODUCTION

In the space of little more than a century, the Office of Australian Prime Minister has seen a total of 28 different occupants. The position, as the highest minister of the Crown, leader of the Cabinet and head of government, is the most powerful political office in Australia and places the highest of demands upon its appointees. Although the national Constitution does not mention the office, it has become politically dominant, because the holder of the office is, or claims to be, "leader of so many organised social groupings: initially the individual; then faction; party; parliament; ministers; cabinet; government; and culminating with nation"[1]. For this reason, a "good" prime minister must, according to former Prime Minister John Gorton, have….

> "[A]part from the givens of intelligence and integrity, … a good constitution for long, hard and stressful work. He needs stamina to keep going. He must have a deep love of this country – its institutions, its values, its idiosyncrasies. […] Politics is a demanding business. Political leaders come under the kinds of pressure that few people experience in their professional lives. […] [T]o make a difference to people's lives in a positive way, Prime Ministers need to grab opportunities when they arise."[2]

They must apply their experience to discern which of the many doctrines and projects they are presented with are most fit to be made the basis of wise legislation. "Their

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[1] John Uhr. 'The Language of Leadership: Prime Ministers as Political Institutions', Discussion Paper No. 90, Canberra: Australian National University, 2001.
[2] Address by the Right Honourable Sir John Gorton GCMG AC CH, 'Prime Ministers on Prime Ministers Lecture Series', Old Parliament House, Canberra, 12 November 1997.

function is to commend the best of these to the people, not waiting for demands, not seeming to be bent merely on pleasing the people, but appealing to reason."[3]

The role of prime minister in Australia has only grown in influence and power since it was created. There is little doubt that political leaders across Commonwealth nations have become more politically important over the past half century: leader images are now as widespread as party symbols during election campaigns, and governments are routinely labelled after the leader, not the party.[4] Much of this change is attributed to the growth of the electronic media, which find it easier to disseminate visual and oral information through a familiar personality rather than through a document or an institution.[5] Broader changes in political behaviour across the liberal democracies have also furthered this change. Extensive partisan and class de-alignment in almost all of the liberal democracies has meant that voters have weaker (and in some cases non-existent) loyalties to the major political parties and to the major social groups within the society.[6] In the absence of partisan and social ties anchoring them to specific parties, voters are more politically volatile and, as a result, more susceptible to the influence of a political leader with whom they can identify. By nature this extends the accountabilities of a prime minister. Now, not only must they shape and chair cabinet, lead the government in the House of Representatives, deal with state premiers, they must also present as likeable, charming and engaging individuals, to campaign effectively in elections and to present their case in the media and overseas.[7]

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[3] James Bryce, *Modern Democracies*. London: Macmillan, 1921. Volume Two, pg. 615.
[4] Ian McAllister. 'Leaders.' In *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, eds L. LeDuc, R. Niemi and P. Norris. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996.
[5] Theodore Glasser, and Charles Salmon. *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*. New York: Guilford, 1996.
[6] Russell Dalton, and Martin Wattenberg, eds. *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
[7] Patrick Weller. 'Administering the Summit: Australia.' In *Administering the Summit:*

Over the century of Australian constitutional government, successive prime ministers have used the office of PM to chart a policy course and to institute an evolving framework for national affairs. Just as important, in so doing they have contributed to the institutionalisation of the prime-ministerial office. But no measure of institutional growth can substitute for the personal authority of the leader. "Intelligence, imagination, nous, stamina, guts – these are what it takes to handle this unique job successfully – and, usually, a dash of luck."[8] These leaders are united by "the nation's most exclusive club"[9], an office more all-consuming of time and energy than any other in the country. As former Prime Minister Menzies articulated to Prime Minister-elect Whitlam in 1972, "You have been emphatically called to an office of great power and great responsibility. Nobody knows better than I do what demands will be made upon your mental vigour and physical health. I hope you will be able to maintain both…"[10]

Prime ministerial leadership is a complex phenomenon. Political analysts attempt to make sweeping judgements of success or failure, but this ultimately a challenging task. Perhaps the greatest challenge is comparing leaders of different times who faced different problems. A second challenge is disentangling the leaders' reputations from their actual performance. Texts such as *Australian Prime Ministers,* edited by

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Administration of the Core Executive in Developed Countries, eds B.G. Peters, R.A.W. Rhodes and V. Wright. London: Macmillan, 2000, pg. 60.

[8] Michelle Grattan, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010, pg. 21.

[9] Michelle Grattan, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010, pg. 8.

[10] Exchange quoted in Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government, 1972-1975,* Melbourne:Viking/Penguin, 1985, pg. 13.

Michelle Grattan[11], and the earlier *Mr Prime Minister* by Colin Hughes[12], stress the importance of the prime ministership as a central political institution, and serve to scope the breadth of occupants the office has seen. Patrick Weller[13] has worked to chart the external dimensions of the prime ministership and compare Australian developments with other parliamentary systems, and has also examined the development of the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, and of the Prime Minister's Office, over time. Paul Strangio[14] outlined the way in which the role of prime minister has grown in prominence and power over time to outstrip its office, party and PM&C. Graham Little[15] has mapped the internal curiosities of Australian prime ministers and written to demonstrate how leadership institutions depend on leading individuals.

However, it seems that very little work has been done to scope the activities, relationships and influence of prime ministers *after* their time in office has come to a close. Newspaper articles as early as the 1940s documented the activities of ex-leaders, such as *The Australasian*'s 1941 piece 'Homeric Hughes is Still A Force'[16]. Some recent journalism complains about the cost of former primer ministers on the public purse, such as an article in the Sunday Telegraph in 2010 claiming that "[t]he

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[11] Michelle Grattan, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010
[12] Colin Hughes. *Mr Prime Minister: Australian Prime Ministers 1901-1972*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976.
[13] Eg: Patrick Weller, *First Among Equals: Prime Ministers in Westminster Systems*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985; *Malcolm Fraser PM*. Penguin, 1989; Patrick Weller ed. *Menzies to Keating: The Development of the Australian Prime Ministership*. Melbourne University Press, 1992.
[14] James Walter, and Paul Strangio. *No, Prime Minister: Reclaiming Politics from Leaders*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007.
[15] Eg: Graham Little, *Political Ensembles: a psychosocial approach to politics and leadership*. Oxford University Press, 1985; *Strong Leadership*. Oxford University Press, 1988; 'The Two Narcissisms: Comparing Hawke and Keating' and 'Malcolm Fraser', chapters 2 and 4 in Judith Brett ed. *Political Lives*. Allen and Unwin, 1997.
[16] "HOMERIC HUGHES IS STILL A FORCE: Age is Former Prime Ministers Handicap." *The Australasian,* 3 May 1941.

offices of Australia's former prime ministers are costing more than $50,000 a week to run on top of an annual pension bill exceeding $1 million"[17]. Another body of journalism reflects positively on the ability of former political adversaries to find a middle ground outside of the parliamentary arena. A number of articles across the different media outlets documented the "conversation" shared by former PMs Bob Hawke and John Howard at the National Press Club's 50th anniversary in June of this year, and noted the "refreshing" nature of the dialogue they were able to share as "formers"[18]. As early as Geoffrey Robinson's article for *The Conversation*, 'Life after the prime ministership: a trek through history' is perhaps the only work to begin to truly examine this area of prime ministerial life. He notes the tendency for political parties to encourage former leaders to move on to "enable a clear run for the party's new leader"[19], but also the nature of political careers to commence increasingly early in life, such that prime ministers "face political defeat in middle age, with decades left to participate in public life"[20]. Robinson cites as the most important determinant of a former prime minister's political 'afterlife', the "viability of the political project that they represented"[21].

This essay aims to further scope the afterlife of our nation's leaders, and to examine the extent to which these temporarily *greatly* influential leaders continued to wield influence in the years following their stint in politics' most influential office. As mentioned, a total of 27 men and one woman have occupied the office of Prime

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[17] Simon Kearney, "Former Prime Ministers costing us millions." *The Sunday Telegraph*, 31 October, 2010.
[18] Michelle Grattan, "John Howard and Bob Hawke find a lot to agree on." *The Conversation,* 4 June, 2014.
[19] Geoffrey Robinson, "Life after the prime ministership: a trek through history." *The Conversation,* 9 October, 2013.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] *Ibid.*

Minister of Australia since Federation in 1901. For the purposes of this research project, only four of these possible candidates have been chosen as case studies, namely Billy Hughes, Sir Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser: a necessarily small sample group. However, together they represent both major parties of the modern day, and include evolutionary parties in the early decades of Federation. All chosen PMs spent more than two years in office, and together they span a total of 66 years of Australian prime ministerial history. Together they illustrate not only varying degrees and forms of post-prime ministerial influence, but also demonstrate a range of different *factors* that influence activities, connections and public prominence in life after office.

This essay will examine three different manifestations of 'influence': a) influence within politics, with serving parliamentarians and previous or subsequent prime ministers, b) influence in broader society by way of activities and appointments after office, and c) influence with the nation's public as political commentators. It will also attempt to draw tentative conclusions as to the factors that influence how and why prime ministers seek (or not) to remain engaged in public life. These measures are by no means exhaustive, and the conclusions by no means conclusive in and of themselves, but seek to make modest headway into an area of research that has not yet been adequately investigated.

CHAPTER ONE: *Connections between former prime ministers and serving parliamentarians*

The journey out of the prime minister's office is almost always an involuntary one. Three prime ministers have died in power (Lyons, Curtin and Harold Holt), but of the rest, almost all were thrown out unceremoniously, through defeat in elections or by parliamentary vote, party coups or pressure, or ill health.[22] The only PMs to exit of their own choosing were Menzies, Barton and Fisher, although "debates could be had about the latter two"[23]. These leaders leave their roles often with a deep investment in their party, with years of experience in a job few others can fully comprehend, and with strong personal relationships with serving parliamentarians. Some remain in Parliament, continuing to serve as leader of their party, or as ministers in subsequent governments, while others take this opportunity to retire from politics entirely.

The dismissal of Gough Whitlam from the prime ministers office in 1975 brought to a close a prime ministership that didn't even survive a full term in power. Despite this blow, Whitlam remained leader of the Labor party until the next election in 1977, only stepping down after a subsequent electoral defeat. These humiliations, which to his detractors were sound punishment for his failures in office, didn't dampen the reverence with which the Labor party treasured Whitlam, even following his resignation from Parliament. He maintained strong connections with subsequent Labor prime ministers, especially Hawke, who appointed Whitlam as Australian Ambassador to UNESCO in Paris. There was friendly humour to the phone call in

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[22] Michelle Grattan, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010, pg. 10
[23] *Ibid.*

which Hawke offered the position. "He thought I might enjoy the position which Kerr had been offered by Fraser"[24], Whitlam recalls. Using a generous historical reference, Whitlam told Hawke that he would call him back, "after I have consulted Josephine"[25]. Later, Hawke would launch Whitlam's 'magnum opus', *The Whitlam Government*[26] on 11 November 1985, although their relationship would grow strained over the next few years as policies of the Hawke government seemed to directly contradict those Whitlam had championed during his time in the PMs office. Whitlam developed a strong personal friendship with Labor leader Mark Latham, and firmly supported Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, for which he and Margaret returned to Canberra in 2008. When Margaret Whitlam passed away in early 2012, Prime Minister Julia Gillard offered the family a state funeral, rarely offered to the partners of prime ministers.

When Fraser lost the 1983 election to Hawke in March, he stepped down as leader of the Liberal party, and resigned from parliament by the end of the same month[27]. In a letter to his friend, and Chief Justice of the High Court, Garfield Barwick, he wrote:

> "My dear Gar,
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> The liberal Party is a slightly different one from your day. There is no option but for me to stand down. If I did not, I have little doubt the party would have torn itself apart gnawing over my bones, and I was not inclined to allow that to happen… Ex-

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[24] Jenny Hocking. *Gough Whitlam: His Time, Volume II.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012, pg. 424
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Gough Whitlam. *The Whitlam Government, 1972-1975,* Melbourne: Viking/Penguin, 1985.
[27] Malcolm Fraser, and Margaret Simons. *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pg. 608

prime ministers, in my view, should get out of the way and make room for their successors."[28]

This was a view held by many in the Liberal Party, and subsequently, Fraser maintained surprisingly few personal connections within his own party. He articulated prior to his resignation that "[e]ven an ex-PM who does not speak at all would find himself being reported approving or disapproving things that were being done, and I could so easily become a source of difficulty and division"[29]. Instead the relationships Fraser formed and maintained after office were just as often on the other side of politics. His incredibly influential positions as co-chair of United Nations and Commonwealth bodies charged with attempting to advance the end of apartheid in South Africa, and as founder of CARE Australia were "helped and encouraged"[30] by Bob Hawke, and Fraser unexpectedly found much common ground with his former adversary Gough Whitlam, the two appearing together in support of such causes as media diversity and republicanism. His estrangement from the Liberal party hit breaking point when Tony Abbott won the party leadership in 2009. Fraser resigned his life membership, saying that the party was no longer a Liberal party, but a Conservative party, and that he no longer recognised it.[31]

Billy Hughes' election defeat and subsequent resignation as Nationalist Party leader in 1923 seemed to many of his contemporaries to be the perfect opportunity for retirement to "the comfortable and dignified background reserved for ex-Prime

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[28] Malcolm Fraser, letter to Barwick, 30 March 1983, MFC 107/29 [1] A-C
[29] Malcolm Fraser, letter to Dot Grimshaw, 27 March 1983, MFC 107/29 [3] G-H
[30] Malcolm Fraser, and Margaret Simons. *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pg. 612
[31] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 167

Ministers"[32]. However, Hughes had only just turned 58. Instead he became a backbencher in the Bruce government, "cultivated his public persona as a "colourful, sometimes even outrageous, super-patriot, never missing an Anzac Day parade"[33], and spent the rest of his life plotting to regain power. For this reason, he maintained a wide variety of parliamentary relationships, some friendly, some not. He left the Nationalist Party after Bruce's election loss and stood as an independent, later worked to form a new United Australia Party, and even later left the UAP to join Menzies' new Liberal Party: he made new friends as quickly as he made old enemies.

Despite being perhaps the only prime minister to resign the office of his own choosing, Sir Robert Menzies didn't leave without some reservations. Upon leaving the prime minister's office, he was asked in an extensive press conference for the reasons behind his departure. He articulated that he was "71 and tired", that an election was due late in 1966 and even if he won it he could not promise that he would serve out the full ensuing term.[34] He emphasised that he was looking forward to new writing, reading and travel, and made "great play of having withdrawn *totally* from politics"[35]. Perhaps he couldn't help himself, or perhaps some of the unexpected changes of the next few years were too concerning to such a deeply conservative man. He pursued strong connections with serving parliamentarians on both sides of politics in his retirement, nominating Harold Holt as his successor, and later, upon Holt's untimely and tragic disappearance, privately throwing his support behind Paul Hasluck as successor to the Party leadership and to prime ministership, writing on

[32] Frank C Browne. *They Called Him Billy: A Biography of the Rt. Hon. W. M. Hughes, P.C., M.P.* Sydney: Peter Huston, 1946, pg. 167
[33] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 57
[34] A. W. Martin. *Robert Menzies, A Life: Volume 2, 1944-1978.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999, pg. 543
[35] *Ibid.*, pg. 546

several occasions in something of a mentor capacity[36]. He wrote to congratulate

Whitlam upon his election in 1972[37] (as cited earlier), but approved of his later

sacking by Kerr, and wrote to congratulate the Governor-General for his "proper"

conduct[38].

When Fraser had won leadership of the Liberal party on March 21, 1975, Menzies

sent a telegram with "Warm congratulations and good wishes. You now have a

wonderful opportunity to render outstanding service to our country."[39] Fraser replied:

"Delighted to get your telegram. I appreciate your encouragement and look forward to

the challenge of steering the party into the eighties. It's a proud day for me to be the

leader of the party that you founded. I shall certainly be doing my best to uphold your

high standards of service."[40]

Menzies subsequently took to advising Fraser on "everything from election tactics to

the improvement of his television appearances"[41]. He wrote to congratulate him on

several occasions, notably following his "absolutely splendid performance last night"

on national television on April 22[42], and his "fine" budget speech on August 27,

1975[43]. He wrote to Fraser's wife, Tammy, once the post-dismissal election got under

way and asked her not to "let Malcolm be too modest about it all": "In my opinion, he

will have the same amount of persona, authority and prestige as I always hoped for in

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[36] E.g., Menzies to Hasluck, 21 November 1966, made available by courtesy of Mr Nicholas Hasluck.
[37] Exchange quoted in Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government, 1972-1975,* Melbourne: Viking/Penguin, 1985, pg. 13.
[38] Menzies to Kerr, 19 November 1975, NLA, MS. 4936/1/17/150
[39] Menzies to Fraser, 21 March 1975.
[40] Fraser to Menzies, date unknown.
[41] A. W. Martin. *Robert Menzies, A Life: Volume 2, 1944-1978.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999, pg. 563
[42] Menzies to Fraser, 22 April 1975.
[43] Menzies to Fraser, 19 November 1975, NLA, MS.4936/1/12/105

my own case… This is, in my opinion, the most *vital* Australia *election* in my own time"[44].

With Menzies being the notable exception, there does seem to be a tradition, as articulated by Dr. Norman Abjorensen, that former Labor prime ministers are more respected and revered by their party than former Liberal PMs[45], and hence tend to maintain stronger relationships with serving parliamentarians within their own party. A recent example of this is the vastly different ways in which Whitlam and Fraser participate in and are remembered by their respective parties. Both were political antagonists in the most dramatic political episode the country has ever seen, but where Whitlam continues to be honoured by the Labor party, Fraser has not only been sidelined, he's become disenchanted enough to resign his membership from the party in 2009. Some of his strongest political friendships exist outside the Liberal party, and he was recently ridiculed by one Liberal frontbencher as a "frothing-at-the-mouth Leftie"[46].

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[44] Menzies to Tammy Fraser, 10/12/75, NLA, MS. 4936/1/12/105
[45] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014
[46] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 167

CHAPTER TWO: *Appointments and causes taken up by former prime ministers*

With prime ministers' political careers often reaching their peak at middle age, and often (though not always) only enjoying a few years in office, many feel forced into something of an early retirement when the prime ministerial rug is pulled from under their feet. These leaders, elected to a position of great physical and mental demand, often seek to carve out a secondary career once the task of running the country comes to an end. The activities they pursue after their time in office are as varied as the individuals themselves, but are very often extensions of political projects they did not get to see through whilst in office, or international and/or diplomatic appointments that use the skills and experience gained from working in such a unique position.

The dismissal of the Whitlam government in November 1975 is a defining moment in Australian political history, and the most humiliating prime ministerial exit the country has ever seen. Whitlam remained leader of the Labor party, and leader of the Opposition, but his subsequent defeat at the 1977 election was yet another embarrassing failure, and finally in July 1978 Whitlam resigned from his parliamentary seat. While most Australians remember these moments as those that defined Edward Gough Whitlam's career, his long public life saw a great number of achievements outside of the prime minister's office: a secondary career perhaps designed to attempt legitimise his controversial prime ministership. The sheer breadth

of this secondary career leads Dr. Norman Abjorensen to declare that Whitlam invented the position of 'Prime Minister Emeritus'[47].

Whitlam became the first national visiting fellow at the ANU in 1978, and subsequently held visiting professorships at Harvard University in the US in 1979 and at Australian universities. He was appointed to Australia's Constitutional Commission in 1985, a logical progression from the many constitutional inquiries on which he had served during his parliamentary career. He was appointed by the Hawke government as Australia's Ambassador to UNESCO in Paris in 1983, served on the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues and the World Heritage Committee, was made a Member of Honour of the World Conservation Union in 1988 and chaired the General Assembly of the World Heritage Convention in 1989. From 1986 to 1991 Whitlam was chair of the Australia-China Council, and from 1987 to 1990 he was chair of the Council of the National Gallery of Australia. This impressive list of achievements, many of which are extensions of policies Whitlam promoted or projects he supported whilst in office, is often sidelined by the dramatic nature in which his parliamentary career was ended.

It is also clear that the causes Whitlam supported, and the appointments he accepted, are for the most part closely aligned with those policies he promoted whilst in Office. His position as chair of the Australia-China council was a culmination of a relationship with the People's Republic that began when he first advocated Australian recognition of the Communist Government in China in 1954. In his first major speech on international affairs in the House of Representatives in August, he said: "A still

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[47] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014

more serious phase of our policy is that we say not only that the Communist

Government of China is not, and should not be, the Government of China. […] When

we say that the government should be the government of China, we not only take an

unrealistic view, but a menacing one."[48] In 1971, Whitlam's "purpose" and "hopes"[49],

that "the Australian people should come to terms with the realities of our situation and

our future in this region"[50], and that "hang-ups out Chinese communism" should be

abandoned in favour of "mutual goodwill"[51], finally began to take form when, as

Opposition Leader, he led an official ALP delegation to China that marked Australia's

establishment of diplomatic relations with the country.[52] In 1973, Whitlam travelled

to the People's Republic again, the first visit of an Australian Prime Minister to

communist China, symbolising "the successful ending of a generation of lost contact

between Australia and the most populous nation on earth"[53]. Whitlam's government

"established new perspectives"[54] in Australia's foreign policies towards China, and

Whitlam maintained this diplomatic relationship in a personal capacity throughout his

post-prime ministerial career. As chair of the Australia-China Council, he made a

two-week visit to the nation every year for over a decade from October 1986, and was

always "welcomed with extravagant deference as the political leader who had

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[48] Graham Freudenberg. 'For the Record: Gough Whitlam's Mission to China 1971', Sydney: Whitlam Institute, 2014.
[49] "My Mission to China, Gough Whitlam's First Exclusive Report on His Journey to Peking", *The Sunday Australian*, July 4, 1971
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] "China and the U.S., 'I see no irremovable obstacles towards improved relations', Exclusive Report by A.L.P Leader Gough Whitlam on his visit to Peking", *The Sunday Australian*, July 18, 1971
[52] Jenny Hocking. *Gough Whitlam: His Time, Volume II.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012, pg. 121
[53] Gough Whitlam, 'Ministerial Statement: Visit to Japan and China', 7 November 1973, Whitlam Institute E-Collection.
[54] Gough Whitlam, 'The Whitlam Government's First Year's Achievements: Ministerial Statement', *Hansard*, House of Representatives, 13 December 1973, pg. 4732-4733

established relations between China and Australia"[55]. Perhaps Whitlam hoped that the eventual success of his international policies would serve to dwarf those aspects of his economic policies that were less successful.

While no where near as dramatic as the constitutional crisis that effectively ended Whitlam's political career, Malcolm Fraser's departure from the leadership in 1982 was also crushing, when he suffered a massive defeat by Hawke's Liberal government at that year's election. He resigned from the party leadership soon afterwards, but says today, "I was only fifty-two. I certainly wasn't ready to retire."[56] Much like Whitlam, Fraser attempted to carve a secondary career after office, but discovered that even in the 1980s, Australia still didn't know what to do with former prime ministers who still had energy and talent to offer.[57] As discussed in the previous chapter, the Liberal Party doesn't tend to seek the counsel or assistance of former prime ministers, and Fraser failed to find consultancy work that adequately utilised his extensive experience. As a result, he spent his career after office pursuing a range of overseas causes that mirrored his policy goals whilst in office. In particular, Fraser was appointed to the Eminent Persons Group to help manage transition in South Africa[58], a logical progression from the work he had championed prior to and during his prime ministership to end apartheid. He sent several letters to Hawke upon learning of the true nature of apartheid on a trip to South Africa in 1985:

    "My Dear Prime Minister,

[55] Jenny Hocking. *Gough Whitlam: His Time, Volume II.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012, pg. 457

[56] Fraser, Malcolm, and Margaret Simons. *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pg. 612

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 167.

When we met in Melbourne I undertook to drop you a note after my visit to South

Africa. […]

Even though I was aware that apartheid was pervasive throughout the whole South

African community, reality was worse than I had imagined. […]

I have sent this to you only but you may use it in any way you wish."[59]

Fraser later helped to found CARE Australia, part of CARE International, the

international federation of aid agencies. He became "one of the most significant

Australians in international affairs"[60], and pursued with determination his belief that

Australia should make the most of its influence and position.

It has also been suggested that the way in which Fraser obtained the leadership in the

first place, being first made caretaker prime minister, and later winning an election off

the back of the nation's largest constitutional crisis, fed his fears of illegitimacy.[61]

Perhaps Whitlam and Fraser shared much more of the fallout from those months than

anyone thought.

By contrast to almost every other prime minister, Menzies left office at a time of his

own choosing, and at the ripe age of 72: "well beyond normal community retirement

age"[62]. He articulated that it was perhaps "the greatest feeling in [his] life"[63] to walk

away from the office, and refused several attempts by his party to talk him out of

retirement after Harold Holt's disappearance. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote in

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[59] Malcolm Fraser to Bob Hawke, 16 September 1985
[60] Malcolm Fraser, and Margaret Simons. *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs*.
Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pg. 612
[61] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014
[62] Alan Martin, 'Sir Robert Gordon Menzies', in Grattan, Michelle, ed. *Australian Prime
Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010, pg. 204.
[63] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014

the month following his stepping down that even "[t]he severest critic of Sir Robert Menzies must admire the manner of his going. […] No one can doubt that, if he wished, he could remain in power for many years yet and fight at least one more election with success." He is one of the few ex-PMs to all but disappear into a quiet retirement, spent largely at his home in Melbourne. He emphasized his desire to spend his days writing, reading and travelling, "which the release from the cares of office would make possible"[64]. He travelled briefly Britain, where he was installed as Constable of Dover Castle and Warden of the Cinque Ports[65] and later the same year took up a scholar-in-residence position at the University of Virginia, where he gave a series of lectures on the growth of power of the federal government in Australia. In a letter to his daughter Heather in November 1966, he wrote "… I must confess that I have not missed politics since I retired. Even the smell of the battle hardly reaches my nostrils. This is one of the great advantages of keeping the mind busy on other matters"[66]. He published two volumes of memoirs, and died in Melbourne on 15 May 1978.

There is a strong argument to suggest that those prime ministers that leave office under circumstances of humiliation, embarrassment, or simply electoral defeat, seek to use their post-prime ministerial career to legitimise their time in office. For this reason, many of the activities ex-PMs pursue or causes they support are extensions of political projects they worked on whilst in the leadership. The clearest example of this would be Whitlam, a man who suffered deep humiliation when he was thrown out of

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[64] A. W. Martin. *Robert Menzies, A Life: Volume 2, 1944-1978*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999, pg. 546
[65] Alan Martin, 'Sir Robert Gordon Menzies', in Grattan, Michelle, ed. *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2010, pg. 200.
[66] Heather Henderson, ed. *Letters to My Daughter: Robert Menzies, letters, 1955-1975*. Millers Point: Murdoch Books, 2011, pg. 129

office, and perhaps felt a strong need to carve a legacy for himself that was not defined by that single event. He endeavoured to continue, in some form or another, policy goals that he had implemented whilst in office, and in his writings he sought to construct his own version of historical events. By contrast, Menzies' departure from office occurred on his own terms, and hence in his retirement he relished the chance to step firmly out of the political sphere, and pursue personal pleasures. It should be noted as well that in Menzies' day, the tradition was mainly for former-PMs to accept diplomatic postings overseas, perhaps to write their memoirs, and lecture at universities. By the time Whitlam and Fraser retired, the opportunities had increased dramatically, perhaps partially the result of globalisation, of Australia's changing position internationally, and growth in technology: they were able to pursue political projects of their own, with or without an appointment from the government.

CHAPTER THREE: *Former prime ministers' activities as political commentators*

Once the pressure of obtaining, or maintaining, an *elected* position of leadership is removed, former prime ministers are often given, directly or indirectly, an opportunity to speak publicly on issues of personal concern, without the consideration of public approval. While many ex-PMs echo the sentiments they cited whilst in office, others use the freedom to state their own opinions as separate from that of their party. In both cases, these leaders offer valuable opinions, with the experience of the prime ministers office to give weight to their words.

The tendency for former prime ministers to participate in public debates following their time in office is perhaps the most difficult sphere of influence to draw firm conclusions about. PMs from both major parties, from different decades, with very different policy focuses, have chosen to be active (or not) as public commentators for reasons that seem disconnected from any of the aforementioned major factors.

Billy Hughes' somewhat over-activity as a political commentator following his departure from the PMs office supports a strong argument that it is the personality and disposition of the prime minister him(her)self that factors most heavily on their activities in public debates. Hughes was renowned for his "forthright"[67], borderline outspoken manner, and it was perhaps his inability to refrain from weighing in on public debates that contributed to his failure to secure a subsequent term in office.

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[67] MacCallum, Mungo. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 58

While serving in Lyons' ministry in 1935, Hughes' 1934 book *The Price of Peace* was republished as *Australia and the War Today*, including a reference to sanctions as "either an empty gesture, or war"[68]. This statement was a direct contradiction of government policy and Lyons was forced to withdraw Hughes' portfolio. In 1936, Hughes was allowed to return to Cabinet, becoming Minister for External Affairs in 1937. At the time, Government policy was firmly set against antagonising emerging European dictators, but when a reporter asked for Hughes' views on Adolf Hitler, he replied: "I'm only Minister for External Affairs – I'm not allowed to say anything, so therefore I cannot comment. I will, of course, say that if you paved the way from here to Broken Hill with bibles and that man Hitler swore an oath on every one of them, I wouldn't believe a goddam bloody word he said."[69] These sorts of controversial, divisive statements were part of Hughes' nature, unlikely to be a direct product of either his time or his part(ies). He held strong opinions on a variety of political issues, including, notably, conscription, and refused to be restricted by the policy lines of those (several) parties he was a member of. It was for this reason that, in the words of Alfred Deakin, "[i]n his hands, at various times, have rested the banners of every party in the country. He has proclaimed them all, he has held them all, and he has betrayed them all…"[70].

Gough Whitlam, though no where near as fiercely outspoken as Hughes, also held firm political views that followed him after his departure from the prime ministers' office. He appeared on the same stage as his former adversary Malcolm Fraser to

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[68] Fitzhardinge, L.F. "Hughes, William Morris (Billy) (1862–1952)". Australian Dictionary of Biography. Australian National University.

[69] Quoted in Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 58

[70] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 52

support press diversity and republicanism. He remained a determined campaigner for Australia's adherence to UN human rights, environment and heritage instruments, especially following the constitutionally revolutionary cases of *Koowarta* in 1982 and *Tasmanian Dams* in 1983 that left the door open to implementing international agreements in Australian law. He was critical of the ALP for failing to press for change to four-year terms for both houses of Parliament, but appeared in support of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in parliament for the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, with former prime ministers Fraser, Hawke and Keating.

It could be argued that ex-Labor leaders are granted greater freedom to pursue a more public post-prime ministerial career than ex-Liberal leaders, along the same logic that suggested former Labor PMs were afforded greater opportunities to participate in political life than their Liberal counterparts.[71] The striking exception to this theory of course would be Malcolm Fraser, who has not only been publicly outspoken on a number of debates, but has done so on occasion in strong opposition to the Liberal party line. He not only appeared on numerous platforms with his old adversary Gough Whitlam in support of such causes as media diversity and republicanism, he further became increasingly critical of his party over such issues as the conduct of the Iraq war, the imprisonment in Guantanamo Bay of Australians David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, and the government's treatment of asylum seekers[72].

In 2012, Malcolm surprised many by being invited to deliver (and perhaps also by accepting) the Gough Whitlam Oration at the Whitlam Institute. His speech, entitled

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[71] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014
[72] Mungo MacCallum. *The Good, The Bad & The Unlikely*. Collingwood: Black Ink. Books, 2014, pg. 166

'Politics, Independence and the National Interest: the legacy of power and how to achieve a peaceful Western Pacific', addressed not only his personal and political relationship with Gough, but also a number of contemporary political concerns, including but by no means limited to: relations with China, relations with the United States, Indigenous Rights, multiculturalism in Australia, immigration policy and refugees, and the need for independent media. Very recently, Fraser has been in the news for adding his signature to an open letter urging the Abbott government to call off its crusade against ANU[73], and also for warning against the merger of ABC and SBS[74], the latter being a network Fraser's government created.

Perhaps Fraser's defiance of the Liberal party tradition is the reason for his public prominence post-office. However it is difficult to suggest that a tradition exists at all, considering that of the former Liberal leaders serving between Menzies and Fraser, only two lived to see a post-prime ministerial career, and neither Gorton nor McMahon maintained friendly relationships with the party after their exit from office.[75] John Howard has commented in the time since his prime ministership that he things former PMs "should adopt a low profile and keep their opinions to themselves"[76], and has as such "resolved … to really stay out of the public spotlight"[77]. It will be an area for further study to see to what extent he holds to this, and to what extent subsequent Liberal prime ministers do the same.

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[73] Heath Aston, "John Hewson and Malcolm Fraser blast Liberals over ANU divestment backlash.", *The Age*, 13 October 2014.
[74] Matthew Knot, "Merger with ABC means death of SBS, warns Malcolm Fraser." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2014.
[75] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014
[76] Jane Cadzow, "John Howard speaks exclusively to Fairfax about life after politics", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 2014.
[77] *Ibid.*

In contrast to Fraser, Menzies for the most part avoided public commentary on political issues after his resignation from the prime ministers office, choosing instead to communicate his opinions with the political players themselves. A notable exception would be a statement Menzies released on the issue of the Constitutional position of the Senate in 1975, in support of the Opposition's withholding of supply. Menzies' addressed both his reluctance to comment, and the 'nonsense' that forced him to do so:

> "As is well-known, I have, for a long time, abstained from entering into any current political controversy. But the circumstances today are such as to compel me to break that silence. For, quite simply, I think more nonsense is being talked about the Constitutional position of the Senate than I can comfortably listen to, or read."[78]

Apart from a comment on the nation's greatest constitutional crisis, Menzies' otherwise pursued a comfortable and gentle retirement, in keeping with the political climate of his years in office.

A dramatic change in media technologies has also influenced perhaps the volume and proliferation of political commentary, and access to political debates by former prime ministers. The 24-hour news cycle means that comments and replies can be issued with near immediacy, with no need for a physical debate to occur. In the early decades of Federation, Hughes' feisty comments had to be published in the next day's newspaper, whereas Fraser's recent comments about SBS were published online nearly immediately. Even more recently, former PM Kevin Rudd has taken to other

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[78] Statement by Sir Robert Menzies, re: Constitutional position of the Senate, 22 October 1975.

forms of social media like Twitter to convey his views. Further, proliferation of film and photography technology mean that former PMs remain visible on our television screens, and in online media outlets for much longer.

It seems that former prime ministers offer political commentary mainly when they feel they offer particular expertise, but perhaps also enjoy the freedom of expression that comes with being able to state their opinion independently of any particular party line. Noting the "reasonableness" that emerged from the conversation shared by Hawke and Howard at the Press Gallery this year, Michelle Grattan suggested that perhaps this was a "luxury confined to 'formers'."[79]

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[79] Michelle Grattan, "John Howard and Bob Hawke find a lot to agree on." *The Conversation,* 4 June, 2014.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It seems clear, from the case studies considered in this paper, that there is a strong tendency for prime ministers to continue to wield influence, in many different forms, after they leave office. The most common manifestations of influence appear to be serving in a subsequent ministry, diplomatic postings, independent international projects, writing (both of an autobiographic nature, and other) and public political commentary. These forms of influence, and the extent to which they are exercised, appear to be influenced by a number of factors, including (but not limited to): manner of retirement, personality of individual, which party the prime minister belongs to, the time period in which they served, and finally, the nature of the political projects they pursued whilst in office.

The volatile nature of political life, and the inherent insecurity in the position of prime minister, means that more often than not PMs are removed from office long before they would elect to leave. When this is the case, leaders are reluctant to retire, and instead desire to carve out a secondary career, hopefully using the rare set of skills they have acquired in one of the nations most demanding jobs. When the exit from office was particularly sudden or embarrassing, this is magnified, and prime ministers will attempt to legitimise what was perhaps a controversial term in leadership. Two clear contrasting examples of this factor are Menzies and Whitlam. Where the former retired at a time of his own choosing, with cheers from his supporters and surprise from the nation, the latter was sacked by the Governor-General in a constitutional twist that surprised and embarrassed him and his government. Menzies spent a quiet retirement writing and lecturing, whereas Whitlam spent his years after office fiercely

pursuing political projects he had initiated in leadership, perhaps attempting to prevent his defining moment being political humiliation.

While many external factors play a role in the amount and type of influence that prime ministers seek after office, the personality of the individual leader plays an incredibly large role. Naturally, as a group, prime ministers share many personality traits: strong work ethic, dedication to politics, firm views on a variety of political issues, etc. However, the tenaciousness and dedication of some outstrips others. Hughes was renowned before, during, and after his time in office for his firm political views, and his cunning political scheming. For this reason it seemed unsurprising perhaps that he pursued such an extensive career in parliament following his departure from the prime ministers' office. Menzies, by contrast, was seen as more measured and conservative and his time in government as comfortable and generally prosperous. It made sense then, that when he left office, he was happy to enjoy the quiet of retirement, and didn't actively seek a political platform or attempt to remain involved in the activities of parliament or of his party: he was much happier to provide private support for those individuals he chose.

There is a suggestion that Labor leaders enjoy the support of their party, and the benefit of continued parliamentary relationships and opportunities, to a far greater extent than Liberal leaders. It does seem that where former Labor PMs are celebrated and emulated, former Liberal PMs are encouraged to move on from public life to make room for their successors. The Liberal party seems to live predominantly in the present, and to be far less interested in their own history than the Labor party is.[80]

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[80] Norman Abjorensen, Personal Communication, 2 October, 2014

Whitlam is the strongest example of this: a polarising leader, thrown out of office amid controversy and embarrassment, however subsequently revered by his party, offered a range of opportunities in his retirement, and continues to be invited to represent his party at public events. By contrast, Fraser's post parliamentary career has been predominantly carved out by his own initiative, with some support from subsequent Labor prime ministers. His disjoin with the Liberal party grew so large that in 2009 he resigned from the party entirely.

However, it must be noted that while the tradition of reverence for former leaders more clearly exists within the Labor Party, it is difficult to prove that the opposite is true of the Liberal party, with a much smaller group of ex-PMs to choose from. This particularly would be an area of research that demands further investigation over the next few decades.

While Australia is a relatively new federation by global standards, our prime ministerial system stretches over a century: plenty of time for cultural, economic and technological changes to have a significant impact on the behaviours of prime ministers in and *out* of office. Perhaps the most influential change has been the proliferation of social media, and the 24-hour news cycle, which has not only rendered prime ministers something of B-grade media personalities, but has allowed them to remain visibly public figures and has given them a platform on which to participate in active debate. In addition, globalisation has meant that former PMs have a much greater role to play on an international scale, with or without the official backing of the current government. While Whitlam's work with UNESCO was in the

official capacity of Australian Ambassador, Fraser's formation of CARE Australia, and his position as chairman, and later president, were roles of his own making. In the early decades of Federation, it was more common for ex-PMs to accept international diplomatic roles at the behest of the government, with High Commissioner in London being a popular choice for many former leaders.

The nature of the political projects prime ministers pursue whilst in office influences the viability of these projects to be continued by ex-PMs without the resources of the leadership behind them. One of Hughes' largest projects whilst in office was his support of Australia's participation in WWI, and his championing of the introduction of conscription. Once out of office he was unable to pursue the latter goal, but did persist in his support of Australia's participation in WWII, leading a huge recruitment drive for the Australian Defence Force from 1938, and later sitting on the Advisory War Council at the cost of his UAP membership. Whitlam's pioneering of diplomatic relations with the Communist government in China had continuing relevance after his time in office, and his position as chair of the Australia-China council was the ideal use for an ex-prime minister with time to give and plenty of specific experience. By contrast, the grants the Whitlam government gave to local councils, and the funding provided in order to abolish university fees, were not projects he could continue without the resources of the prime ministerial office.

Implications

It seems, in following with the conclusions drawn in this paper, that there are a number of conventions in the process of forming around the role of former prime ministers. The first is simply that ex-PMs will not continue to serve in Parliament after the cessation of their term in office. This was notably defied by Kevin Rudd in the last Labor government, however the extraordinary circumstances at play would suggest that this is simply an exception to the rule. This convention was notably not present in the earlier decades of Federation, when several PMs served multiple terms, however it seems that most modern leaders do not wish remain simply as a member of parliament after the end of their prime ministership.

In addition, there is an emerging convention that former prime ministers will re-engage in public life in some other way, shape or form. This may be the case purely because most leave office with plenty of working years left, and perhaps because the intense nature of prime ministerial work creates in its office-holders an inability to sit still. However, the commentary about the cost of ex-PMs to taxpayers as cited earlier, suggests that there is an expectation by the public that for such a sum, former leaders should continue to contribute to Australia in an ongoing fashion.

Finally, there is a very newly emerging convention that former prime ministers' be expected to put old rivalries and political rhetoric to bed in their retirement. There has been great public response to friendships formed and conversations held between former PMs, *especially* those who at one time or another were political adversaries. Howard and Hawke's conversation at the Press Gallery garnered a sold-out audience and much commendation for the friendly, "reasonable"[81] nature of their conversation, and Whitlam and Fraser's joint support for issues like an Australian Republic and the

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[81] Michelle Grattan, "John Howard and Bob Hawke find a lot to agree on." *The Conversation,* 4 June, 2014.

Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples has lent a sort of legitimacy by virtue of being supported by two national leaders from two opposing political backgrounds.

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