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TOMORROW COMES THE SONG

A LIFE OF PETER FRASER



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siding too enthusiastically with the reactionary and recently defeated conservative elements in Italy. To do so would probably encourage, rather than dissuade, the communist forces, which must be checked.⁵⁵ It was a heartfelt message from an old social democrat with a lifetime behind him of fighting communists; sadly, it was not one the Americans were in a hurry to hear.

Details about Fraser's efforts in San Francisco were well received at home. On 6 July 1945, when, at Whenuapai, he stepped off the large silver RAF Transport Command plane that had crossed the Pacific in a fast 24 hours, airport workers cheered him. As he entered Auckland Town Hall that night there were cries of 'Good old Peter', and vociferous applause when he stood to speak.⁵⁶ Fraser would never enjoy the emotional warmth the public had extended to Savage, but he was becoming a reassuring institution in New Zealanders' lives.

The conflict in Europe had concluded while Fraser was away, and it was only a few weeks before Japan would surrender. This brought to a close a war in which 205,000 New Zealanders had served, 11,625 of them losing their lives. It had cost £640 million.⁵⁷ But there was much uncertainty in the air: the great powers were beginning to squabble amongst themselves; Roosevelt was dead; Curtin died the day before Fraser got home; Churchill was heading for defeat in a political earthquake that brought Attlee's Labour Party to power on 26 July; and weapons of mass destruction were being tested that would alter international conduct in the years to come. Fraser offered stability in an uncertain world, and over the next few weeks crowds flocked to hear him talk about the conference and his assessment of future prospects. Support for his efforts was bipartisan. The conservative mayor of Auckland, John Allum, praised his achievements in San Francisco, while the *Auckland Star* commended his 'earnestness' and claimed that his negotiating abilities had 'gained for him a prominence quite disproportionate to the size of the country he represented'.⁵⁸ The *Otago Daily Times* applauded his 'shrewdness and dignity'.⁵⁹ The Chief Justice, Sir Michael Myers, spoke so warmly of the Prime Minister that a few conservative diehards complained he was meddling in politics. Myers' own efforts to secure the new International Court of Justice, with compulsory jurisdiction over all disputes of a legal or justiciable character, failed to win Great Power support. But he believed Fraser to have been 'a real force' at the conference: 'Every New Zealander whatever his political opinions would be gratified to know that wherever one went in conference circles one found the Prime Minister held in the highest esteem.'⁶⁰

San Francisco was the apogee of Fraser's career. It led one diplomatic historian to observe many years later that Fraser was the only New Zealand leader 'with a plausible claim to be recognised as an international statesman'.⁶¹ The fact that Fraser had played a key part in such a momentous conference won recognition at a testimonial function in Wellington Town Hall on 10 July 1945. Walsh formed a small committee of union and political friends who prepared and circulated a simply worded eulogy to shops and offices, inviting signatures. He

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Catholic bishops of Wellington, the moderator of the Presbyterian the chairman of the Wellington District Methodists, the testimonial er's 'outstanding . . . statesmanship' as he led the New Zealand with distinction to yourself and our country. You never faltered in the secure justice for all Nations. Your wisdom was clear, steady and e. We are proud of your service as the Leader of New Zealand. . . . You for our country the esteem of the World.' Several thousand signatures pended.⁶² A Maori welcome, items on the Town Hall organ, a pipe-band nance and a short film covering the conference were interspersed with es and followed by an address from the man himself.

Fraser never craved personal publicity, nor did he feel comfortable about hymns raise. As he saw it, he had simply done his best to improve the Dumbarton s Proposals. 'We failed in many of our major efforts, but we succeeded in e,' he told Parliament when the Charter of the United Nations was debated 24 July 1945.⁶³ Some believed him too modest. Geoffrey Cox, who served on reyberg's staff in Greece, Crete and Italy before a substantial career in British television, thought Fraser and Trygve Lie of Norway the outstanding small-power representatives in San Francisco.⁶⁴ An unnamed American watching Fraser at the conference observed to a *Weekly News* reporter several years later that 'if your Mr Fraser had had as good a publicity machine as some of the others, he would have been shown, correctly, as perhaps the most outstanding statesman at San Francisco'.⁶⁵

Fraser alone determined Labour's foreign policy, rarely consulting his colleagues. He often failed to inform the Cabinet of major decisions he had made. It was a practice that led one foreign diplomat to describe New Zealand's foreign affairs as akin to a dictatorship.⁶⁶ However, domestic matters could not be dealt with so easily. In the spring of 1945 Labour was facing a countrywide conversion to peace after six years of war. Some manpower controls were lifted in June, then more in September 1945. The War Cabinet met for the last time on 9 August 1945, Sullivan calling it 'a political miracle' that it had worked so well. Most members regretted the inevitable return to partisanship.⁶⁷ By this time the National Party was campaigning hard with the 1946 election in its sights. It appointed several paid organisers; the *Standard* grizzled that Labour's opponents seemed to possess 'unlimited funds'.⁶⁸

Fraser was indisposed for a couple of days in San Francisco and confined to his room with an infected leg. On his return home he took ill again, and was away from his office for several days. He then developed another carbuncle in October 1945, from which he recovered only slowly.⁶⁹ However, the pressure was on as ministers constantly sought to involve him in issues relating to the gradual reconversion of the economy to peacetime. Fortunately the shortage of shipping meant New Zealand's troops were returning only slowly from abroad. This facilitated their steady reabsorption into the economy.⁷⁰