

& young restless

Story Trent Dalton Photography Russell Shakespeare

To some he's a premier-in-waiting, to others a boy doing a man's job. But the state's youngest minister, Treasurer Andrew Fraser, has no time for doubters.

"It takes a particular personality to be Treasurer; a stable, secure, no-nonsense personality; totally focused, without any distractions. Most important of all, you need to project stability."

— Beatrice Booth, president, Commerce Queensland

The Treasurer's press secretary, Chris Taylor, reads a text message on his mobile phone and mouths an expletive. "I gotta get him out of here," he says. "They're waiting for him at the office."

"Who's waiting for him?" I ask.

"Anna Bligh."

Taylor rushes toward his minister but a sweet-faced schoolboy in a drawstring hat blocks his path. The boy stands as high as Taylor's thighs. He carries a plate of biscuits his mother baked for Rainworth State School's Anzac Day memorial, featuring guest speaker Andrew Fraser, 31, state Treasurer and local member for Mount Coot-tha. The boy, squinting in the sun, tilts his head back to make eye contact with Taylor. "Excuse me, would you like a *biss-ke?*" "No, thank you," says Taylor, eyes fixed on Fraser. The treasurer's being mobbed. His memorial speech at the school in Bardon, in Brisbane's inner west, was too inspiring for its own good. It was his own work, wordy and sincere, formed, like everything important Fraser utters, deep within his Labor-red heart. He spoke about his grandfather from Proserpine,

a World War II prisoner of war, and the 11-day journey Jim Fraser made to Sandakan, north-east Borneo, below deck on a cargo ship with 1500 men, eating bowel-clogging slop and avoiding Diggers driven to insanity. So intense was the speech that a sobbing grade three girl had to be escorted from the school parade ground.

Now, near the toilet block, under sprawling trees and a clear blue sky, everybody wants a piece of him: mothers, teachers, Diggers, councillors, students bearing biscuits and sponge cake. Two blonde P&C types flank Fraser under an army-green marquee. "Do you have kids?" one asks. "I have a three-year-old and a two-year-old," says Fraser. He follows with an anecdote about doggedly door-knocking the local area during his 2004 election campaign. There's no real humour in the tale but the women laugh effusively, matching the exuberance of the telling. A former soldier clutches Fraser's shoulder and praises his speech. They talk about times past, reflecting on the going down of the sun and threatening to talk until it does. No rush, it's only the premier waiting.

"Watch him talk," says Taylor, clearly a fan. "If he's talking to bankers he'll talk like a banker. If he's talking to an old lady he'll meet her on her level." He whispers into Fraser's ear: "We have to go."

"Just a second," says the treasurer. He scurries to the fundraising table of Craig Newport, a part-time lawyer and scoutmaster. The two met through Newport's wife Julie, whose optometry business is ▶



near Fraser's electorate office in Bardon. He'd met Julie when he was a candidate and she sent him an email saying, "Your glasses are all wrong for your face". And he has been a hero to the local scouts since he organised for 120 of them to watch the RiverFire fireworks from Parliament House.

Fraser's connection to his electorate reaches beyond vote-raising. Watching him give two-handed handshakes to grandmothers and gleefully accepting fairy cakes from giddy schoolkids, you can't help but think he is genuinely having a blast. He buzzes.

It took Jeanne Fraser just two hours to give birth to him in September 1976. So eager was he to be in this world that he swallowed a bellyful of gunk on his way out and spent three days in intensive care. Everybody except Andrew thought he wasn't going to make it. Now he smiles. He hugs. He flits. He flies. He confounds. A man his age should not be this interested in lamington drives. He wants to talk to every single person in this school. He wants to change lives, cupcake by cupcake. He's a Radiohead fan but also president of the Brisbane West Senior Citizens Centre and patron of the Mellwraith Croquet Club. On weekends he volunteers for Meals on Wheels and the Red Hill Bushcare Group's Ithaca Creek restoration project. Heck, he's patron of the African Violet Society. While studying at Griffith University, which he attended on a scholarship, he spent six months working on Peter Beattie's election campaign while forging the kind of law-commerce grades that won him the University Medal.

On graduating, he landed a job as an adviser to former treasurer David Hamill and later worked as an assistant in several ministerial departments. By 2004, aged 27, he was an MP; the following year he was parliamentary secretary to the premier and treasurer. By 2007 he was local government minister, a gun-slinging deputy overseeing sheriff Beattie's controversial council amalgamations. It made his name. On September 13, 2007 he was sworn in as Queensland Treasurer, at 30 the youngest person to hold the office since 1915.

Everything Fraser has done in his working life since the age of 16 has been in the service of what he earnestly described in his maiden parliamentary speech as a "nobler, more hopeful pursuit than the quest for survival alone". "I believe in the obligation of this parliament to create an island of justice for Queenslanders in the sea of injustice in which we find ourselves," he said in all seriousness.

They once called him the boy sent to do a man's job. But he's very much a man. He's Superman. Focused. No-nonsense. Stable.

FRASER'S DIARY IS OPEN ON A LAPTOP IN HIS Parliament House office. The white blocks are meetings. The green block – there is only one and it's the width of a pencil – is free time. Yesterday was standard: wake at 5.30am at his Bardon home; get breakfast for the kids, Angus and Eleanor; say goodbye to wife Therese, an occupational therapist whose career is on pause so her husband's can be on fast forward; drive to Redcliffe for community meetings at 8.30; then pre-Cabinet; then Cabinet; then a stand-up lunch at 1pm; then a 3 o'clock meeting with Deputy Premier Paul Lucas; caucus at four; presenting community awards in New Farm at 5.30; then a business dinner at 6.45; then home at



You can't be losing your hair at my age and still be answering questions about being too young for the job.

My brilliant career ... Member for Mt Coot-tha Andrew Fraser is sworn in as Treasurer at Government House in September last year (above); in a rare moment of down time (right).



9.30 to prepare for Parliament the next morning; asleep at 10.45pm. Today is like yesterday except with a thick block for parliament and a thin block for lunch with the Austrian ambassador. Times and dates jump off the screen, but there's only one date on the treasurer's mind: next Tuesday, when he hands down his first state Budget. "I don't think there's any question that putting together this Budget was a harder job than might have occurred in the last few years," he says, reclining in a chair at his big wooden desk as his staff buzz about. "We've enjoyed a great period of prosperity. Everyone rolled up each year and said, 'Here's my shopping list'. Well, it's not Christmas time with this Budget. That's the bottom line."

Creating the Queensland Budget, Fraser says, is like creating a household budget. "You start drawing on a piece of paper what you want, then work out how much it all costs and you go backwards from there." He started with health, then education. "I'm a bloke who went to a state school in Proserpine," he reminds me (and it won't be the last time he mentions the Whitsunday Coast town where his now-retired father Peter ran the local Ford car dealership). He followed education with infrastructure, "water and transport specifically", and anything else he could do to halt the growing housing crisis. It's a heavy load for young shoulders. And not everybody thinks his economic skills are up to the task.

"You don't get a chance to prepare with these jobs," he says of his budgeting experience. "Anna asked me to be treasurer on the Tuesday and I was sworn in on the Thursday. You don't get a lead time." He forms a pyramid with his hands then uses them to take hold of an invisible ship's wheel. "You've got to have a view," he says. "Not just fiddling with the margins but actually driving the ship." He rubs

his palm through a head of hair that, he's the first to tell you, is thinning prematurely. "You can't be losing your hair at my age and still be answering questions about being too young for the job," he laughs.

"If you could have picked a quarter to become treasurer," he continues, "then you wouldn't pick the fourth quarter of 2007. It's when the world started changing. No-one had heard of the US sub-prime crisis. No-one had heard of growth figures doing what they're doing."

I've heard this before, in a speech he made at a Sofitel Hotel Media Club lunch last month. "What we do right now matters," he'd said. The most interesting part of the speech was a joke about bankers that fell flat – "that's bankers with a 'b'" – and a reference to his biggest political gaffe to date: when, at Bligh's first media conference as premier, Fraser described himself as a "future-focused premier". "Ah, sorry, a future-focused treasurer," he corrected, but the Freudian horse had bolted.

"I fundamentally believe Anna is and will be a great premier for at least ten years," he told the media later. "I don't know anyone who needs to worry about that question anytime soon and I don't intend to talk about it in the next ten years after today."

At his desk, Fraser adjusts the bridge of his glasses with his forefinger. "It's a big job and it takes a little bit out of you," he says. "But it takes a bigger toll on the family. My wife's a professional in her own right. She's put her career on hold. But there will be quid pro quo in that arrangement."

Jeanne Fraser, a Proserpine school teacher for some 30 years, says her son "wants to be the best father to his kids and the best husband to his wife and the best minister that he can be".

"I've always thought, even now, that he's going

to burn himself out," she says. "It frightens me how far he's gone. I think, holy heck, how far are they going to push him before he's gonna burn out?"

Ben Fraser, an assistant manager at the Metropole Hotel in Proserpine, says the only time he's seen his older brother cry was when he lost the school captaincy election in high school. It's gentle ribbing from a deeply loving sibling (he also has a younger sister, Catherine) but it's also insight into Fraser's drive. "He'd hate me for saying this but I'm sure his little quip about being a future-focused premier of Queensland ... well, not for a long time yet, but I'm sure he will go further in politics."

The treasurer wants to be seen as a normal bloke (even agreeing to go barefoot for our photographer in one picture, bound in rope for another – although he had second thoughts about the rope). And he downplays his ambition as much as he downplays his intelligence and cunning. He tells you how his other great ambition is to become a Formula One driver. At home, he says, he pretends his bathtub is a Formula One car. The hot and cold water taps are the pedals and he's "imagining it going at 300km/h". But Sir Leo Hielscher knows him better than that. Chairman of the Queensland Treasury Corporation, Hielscher has served under 15 treasurers. He knows a premier when he sees one. "I have no doubt he's going to be the premier of Queensland," he says.

At his desk, Fraser smiles. "I won't be doing this forever," he says, enigmatically. A bell rings. MPs have four minutes to take their seats in parliament.

In the chamber, Fraser sets his laptop beside Lucas. He straightens a bundle of papers. Perfect. The Opposition members take their seats. "I get the feeling they'll try to go him today," Taylor says. "They try to interject [on] him all the time. He gets 'boy' a lot." And worse. Fraser was named by the Opposition, during amalgamations, as the only person more hated than the looters of flooded Emerald. I suggest some politicians might resent that he's come so far so fast. "Of course they do," Taylor says. "I mean, look at them."

Opposition stalwarts Lawrence Springborg, Jeff Seeney and Ray Stevens trundle into the chamber. They look like the front row of a rugby scrum and Fraser, readjusting his glasses, looks like the sand boy.

It's not just the Opposition that resents him, says shadow treasurer Bruce Flegg. "There are still factions within the Labor Party. Fraser was hand-picked by Beattie and given a passage I don't think has been all that justified. I think the number one person who would be frustrated by that would be Paul Lucas. But there are a number of other ambitious people in there who might be watching him closely. You'd have to throw [Transport Minister] John Mickel in there."

"I'm sure not everyone in the Labor Party's my fan," says Fraser. "They don't have to be. If you're doing something and you're moving forward, then you're always going to find people who are defenders of the status quo."

In the House, he sits upright with his fists folded ▶

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politicians.

on his knees, as if sitting for a portrait. While fellow Labor MPs breeze about Fraser writes himself notes, highlights paragraphs on papers and whispers suggestions to Bligh. Focused. No-nonsense. Stable. He gives a speech about inflation figures in which he accuses the Opposition of possessing a “Dark Ages” economic policy. Should they ever manage to “drag their knuckles” across the chamber with their “abacus”, he says, “Lord help the Queensland economy”. It’s the sort of creative flight of fancy his writers are always trying to delete from his speeches, but Fraser – a man who cited Hermann Hesse and William Faulkner in his maiden parliamentary speech – can’t resist. And the Opposition fires no shots in return. “Flegg doesn’t ask him questions,” Taylor says. “He’s always ready to answer questions. He’s extremely well briefed. I think that’s why they stay away from him.”

Back in his office, Fraser ponders the last time the shadow treasurer asked him a question in the chamber. “No ... I don’t know how long it has been.”

“Why is that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says, a wry smirk filling his face. “You’ll have to ask them that.”

DURING QUESTION TIME TWO DAYS LATER, THE Opposition isn’t returning shots – it’s lobbing grenades. Springborg asks Fraser about Labor’s interest debt on the government’s \$31 billion in borrowings. Fraser replies that there is no *net* debt in the Queensland Budget, using a financial technicality to mask the fact that Treasury’s 2007-08 Mid-Year Fiscal and Economic Review showed an interest bill of \$1.78 billion this year alone. He is fired three more questions on the same theme. It’s hunting season. The day ends with Fraser being referred to parliament’s ethics committee, accused of providing misleading information. The Opposition thinks it has found its kryptonite.

“The Treasurer falls down in his unwillingness to be transparent,” Flegg tells me that afternoon. “You cannot credibly stand in the middle of parliament and say we have no net debt, which is a little smoke and mirrors joke on the people of Queensland. His body language was uncomfortable. Anna Bligh had to interject quite loudly to give him some assistance on an answer. He was evasive, and evasiveness suggests to me someone who is not on top of his portfolio. I don’t think his natural bent is toward business and the economy and I would think that’s the way business views him.”

Flegg’s the second person I’ve heard criticise Fraser’s transparency, or lack thereof. The first was Councillor Bob Oakes, the former mayor of Nebo who saw his beloved Central Queensland shire amalgamated. “He’s an arrogant little bastard,” Oakes said. “His persona is one of aloofness. He’s very quick to respond in a way that makes you feel as though you’re asking too much.”

But Beatrice Booth, president of Commerce Queensland and one who has traditionally been critical of the state’s treasurers, says that as far as the business sector is concerned, Fraser’s the right man for the job. “I think Andrew’s a very introspective person,” Booth says. “He’s obviously a very deep thinker. He would not make a decision without due consideration of the facts. We’ve been following his performance closely in the past year or so and I must say we have been



Fiscal restraint ... Fraser says the changing world economic climate means next week’s state Budget won’t be “Christmas time”.

impressed. If you look at the Queensland Government as a business that runs Queensland, then I think of all the Labor representatives in parliament, he’s the best person to have in the position of treasurer.”

That night, I ask Jeanne Fraser to tell me about the man behind the sharp suit and tie. Andrew was a working-class kid in a working-class neighbourhood, she says. He grew up in the house his parents still live in, a four-bedroom fibro home next to Proserpine State Primary School, with a sewing room where Jeanne made most of his clothes. He was beyond his years, “three going on 13”. On a Year 11 school trip to Parliament House in Canberra, he wore an \$80 Lowes suit with a series of ties pre-knotted by his mother. He wrote about the trip in the 1992 Proserpine State High School yearbook: *“I discovered I was incognisant to much and this made me only more determined to quest for the knowledge that I did not possess.”*

He works best under pressure, Jeanne says. “I was diagnosed with cancer when he was in grade 10. I had to go to Brisbane for six weeks’ radium. He knew what it meant; how serious it was. But he still slogged away and he got Junior Dux that year. It seems to me that when the pressure’s on he doesn’t fall apart. It makes him work harder.”

She starts to describe what she considers the lowest point in his life. “He was actually staying at his grandmother’s house ...” She pauses. “Ummm ... I don’t know if I should say it because he probably doesn’t want to make it public record.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY FRASER IS IN HIS ELECTORATE office, his press secretary shuffling about an adjoining lounge area. “Did you see Parliament yesterday?” Taylor asks me. “It all went to hell in a handbasket.”

Fraser chimes in: “I thought you must have told them to ask me more questions,” he laughs, sitting at his desk. I tell Fraser that Flegg thinks he lacks transparency. “That’s an easy thing to say from the Opposition,” he says, shaking his head. It’s the first time I’ve seen anger in his eyes. He looks tired. He hasn’t had a chance to properly absorb yesterday’s session. After the usual meetings, he went from Parliament House to a cocktail party and then a business dinner. “After a session like that you enter this heightened state of awareness,” he says. “The minute the day stops, you just feel this overwhelming wash-through of total fatigue.”

Fraser’s bookshelf is stacked with political biographies. There are five copies of *True Believers*, the oft-quoted history of the Labor Party. He tells me about that school trip to Canberra, the first and

only time he met his hero, Paul Keating. “We had a conversation about Asia,” he says. Talk turns to one year before that trip, to his mother’s breast cancer. The word makes him lean forward. He rests his head on clenched fists, elbows on the desk. Then he leans back into his chair, coughing to clear his throat.

“It was probably the loneliest time, ultimately,” he says. “It was pretty scary. I think ... ummmm ... gee, I haven’t thought about this a lot since the time, frankly. I remember ... you just ... you just lose all the anchor points. It was ... ummm ... the first time ... I mean, this is not unique ... I grew up pretty quickly on the spot.” He stares at the wall over my shoulder. It feels like he’s processing a raw memory right there in the chair. I’m wondering how much time a politician really gets to process anything.

“It’s the country town ethic,” he says. “For me, growing up, the overwhelming guiding light was that you, you know, get on with it.”

I tell him his mother was going to tell me about the lowest point in his life but stopped. He considers his response. Ten long seconds go by. “That was when I was studying ... I used to go and stay with my grandmother,” he says. “My grandfather had been sick for quite some time with cancer and ... he just ... the phone rang early on the Tuesday morning to say that things have just happened overnight ... they’d been married for 40 years or so ... umm ... she fell apart on the spot ... and all of a sudden ... you know, it was five in the morning ... I’d turned 18 in September and I was driving into Mt Olivet [hospital, in Brisbane’s Kangaroo Point] ... ummm ... and I had to ring my mum.”

Fraser’s face turns red. Tears flood his eyes. He turns to his side so he’s staring out the window. He puts his forefinger under his glasses and wipes his eyes, but that seems to prompt more tears. Taylor stands up: “You want to take a minute?” Fraser nods. Taylor closes the door, blocking off the junior staffers.

They are heavy tears now, the kind you have to suck up to halt their progression. Fraser lets it all out and sucks it all up right there in his seat. He could disappear, if he chose, into the adjoining kitchen. He could wash his face in private. But he doesn’t. He pulls himself together in full view. It is what it is.

He breathes deeply. “He died at four o’clock that afternoon,” he says. “Mum got there just in time. And I reckon making a phone call like that to your own mother ... nothing compares to it.”

He wipes his face with the cuff of his shirt. He has a meeting with a constituent in two minutes.

Her name is Susan. She’s from Food Q, a network of food manufacturers promoting Queensland foods. “I’ve never actually lobbied before,” she says, nervously. “That’s okay, because I’ve been lobbied many times,” the treasurer says, notepad in hand.

“I’m told the Parliament House chef is controlled by the Speaker?” Susan says. Fraser nods his head, bracing himself for the pitch. “Do you think,” she says, “we could have a word with the Speaker to encourage the chef to use Queensland produce?”

Fraser smiles. “Well, an army marches on its stomach,” he says. Susan smiles and puts a hand on his shoulder. He writes her suggestion down.

Focused. No-nonsense. Stable. He’s everything Susan could expect in a treasurer. She would never believe what happened in this office just now, when he wept at his desk; when this politician truly opened up, when he was so completely transparent. ■