


1987 Cabinet Overview

1987 Cabinet Minutes, Queensland State Archives

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The year 1987 started much the same as every other year since 1957 with the National Party dominating the politics of Queensland. The National Party's hegemony was seemingly assured after its eleventh consecutive election win in a row, seven under Bjelke-Petersen's leadership. The election of 1986 was the first won without the help of its former coalition partner, unlike after the 1983 election when the Nationals had needed Liberal defectors in order to hold power.

In a year that began strangely with the Joh for PM campaign, 1987 would end as something of a watershed year for the State, its politics and for public administration. Bjelke-Petersen's self-declared 'assault on Canberra' proved a distraction that deflected the Premier's attention away from the community he served and the Party he led. When *The Moonlight State* on the ABC's 4 Corners aired, unveiling police corruption many had long suspected, but now had graphic proof, he was caught off guard. The year would end under a cloud of scandal as the Fitzgerald Inquiry unfolded and the resignation of Joh Bjelke-Petersen after a 17 year term as the State's premier ensued. In reality some of the churn and change seem less surprising and years in the making.

Queensland's demography contributed to the challenges faced by a government rooted in the past. The state's population was growing quickly with census data recording a population of 2 624 600 in 1986. People were less religious, exemplified by the 40% increase of marriages conducted by civil celebrants compared with only 10% in the early 1970s. More striking were the differences between the average Queenslander and the average Cabinet Minister. Of the 18 members of the 1987 Cabinet, half were farmers or graziers, while 78.9% of Queenslanders identified in the 1986 census lived in the cities. Queenslanders were also becoming more educated. Retention rates for Year 12 had risen from 34% in 1976 to 58% in 1986. Tertiary educated Queenslanders were becoming more commonplace. This generation's aspirations were in stark contrast to the Premier who had stated he had learned more living alone in a cow bail for fifteen years than if he had taken a degree at Oxford. These facts all point to how Queensland had a government that no longer reflected the people they represented.

Middle-class aspirations were not helped by the parlous state of the Queensland economy. In 1987, with national inflation at 9.3% and Queensland's unemployment rate the highest in the country at 11 % in March, the government turned to privatisation as a salve, with the Gateway Bridge, Loganholme toll road, sale of the Fish Board and Q-Net all sold off.

Cabinet set a gruelling pace with a large number of submissions heard each week and over 2811 submissions taken to Cabinet throughout the year. Often Cabinet heard in excess of 50 submissions at one meeting. However, on close examination many of these could arguably have been dealt with at a departmental level. The pattern of oral submissions (a favourite of the Premier) and submissions being deferred continued. Oral submissions meant no background information has been supplied to ministers before Cabinet, who were already at a disadvantage as many departments had been frozen out of the process due to a 1984 edict prohibiting Ministers from consulting with their Departmental Heads regarding the Cabinet bag. The only public servants on the circulation list for submissions and decisions were the central agency heads, all of whom reported to and consequently briefed the Premier. As Peter Coaldrake noted in 1989, this reduced 'cabinet's deliberative capacity, concentrating authority in the hands of the then premier and his deputy, and institutionalising a system of near monopolistic reliance for advice on the premier's own central agency permanent heads'.

The Cabinet Minutes of 1987 reflected the same concerns which had engaged the National Party over the past 20 years. The minutes show how policy priorities remained largely unchanged with development being among the most discussed issues in Cabinet. The urge to rip down, build up bigger or extract from the ground was not isolated to the capital, but observed across the State from the beaches on the Gold Coast, the dunes on Stradbroke Island or up in North Queensland where the rainforests and Great Barrier Reef dominated a significant proportion of the Executive's time. Agrarian policies went hand in hand with industry policy – for certain sectors at least – while law and order continued to be a high priority matter.

Readying the State for EXPO 88, and ongoing brinkmanship with the federal government were all features of the 1987 minutes. Social policy was not high on the National Party's agenda although some important issues were submitted to Cabinet during 1987, including the results of the introduction of a random breath testing trial, and the wearing of seat belts. Cabinet also approved legislation that set up an adoption contact register, and implemented a task force to investigate the problem of domestic violence.

Of lasting impact were two inquiries, chaired by Sir Ernest Savage, which contributed significantly to public sector reform. Their legacy was sustained into the Goss Labor years. The first Savage Inquiry was focused on business regulation and measures to systematically cut red tape. The *Regulatory Reform Act* was passed in March 1986 and there were reviews of subordinate legislation affecting business underway in all departments in 1987. Savage also chaired the Public Sector Review Committee investigating opportunities for improving the productivity of the administrative machinery of government. The focus was on public sector reform with an emphasis on strategic planning, program management and performance improvement. The Committee's recommendations provided a blueprint for the modernisation of the Queensland public service, including merit based promotions, increased autonomy for departments, transfer of some public service functions to the private sector, refocusing the role of central agencies, including removing the Coordinator-General's Department from the Premier's department and creating it as a separate agency. Many of these recommendations were only fully implemented with the creation of the Public Sector Management Commission under the Goss Labor Government.

The year's stand out issue – although hard to detect from a reading of the Minutes - was the calling of the Fitzgerald Inquiry – which became the catalyst for the overthrow of the National Party government in 1989. For those interested in gaining more knowledge regarding this tumultuous time in Queensland history, the minutes do not tell us much. Cabinet continued to discuss an array of topics leading up to Bjelke-Petersen's removal from office. Some dealt with matters directly related to the Fitzgerald inquiry – including who would bear the cost for Minister Don Lane (implicated via the testimony of corrupt police officer Graeme Parker and later imprisoned) and Judge Eric Pratt's legal representation at the Inquiry. Cabinet agreed taxpayers would cover this cost. Other submissions included a restricted submission considering whether superannuation could be withheld from officers found to be corrupt. There was no indication by the last submission presented by Bjelke-Petersen that his rule was nearly at an end. At the meeting on 30 November, a day before he resigned, his oral submission discussed what to do with the surplus funds left over from Queensland's unsuccessful bid to host the Olympic Games – an ignoble end to what had been a long and controversial career.

