

Background report: 1990 Cabinet Minutes

Dr Chris Salisbury

1990 heralded a new decade with momentous change and significant events unfolding internationally and at home in Queensland. German reunification was achieved following the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in turn declared their independence from the Soviet Union. Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years of imprisonment in South Africa, and Margaret Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom after more than 11 years in office. British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee created the first web server and web browser, and the Hubble Space Telescope was launched from the space shuttle 'Discovery'.

The Australian Labor Party's federal election campaign was launched in Brisbane in early March before Prime Minister Bob Hawke's government was returned later that month for a historic fourth term. Andrew Peacock resigned the leadership of the federal Liberal Party after the election defeat and was replaced by Dr John Hewson. Earlier in March, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was founded. The inaugural Cape York Aboriginal Land Conference took place at Lockhart River in September, leading to the formation of the Cape York Land Council.

The nation's first women Premiers were sworn into office this year, firstly Western Australia's Carmen Lawrence in February followed by Victoria's Joan Kirner in August. On the day of Kirner's swearing in, the Hawke government announced Australia would join the international naval blockade of Iraq in the Persian Gulf. A specially convened ALP national conference in September endorsed the privatisation of Qantas and other assets, ahead of deregulation of the domestic aviation market in November. Near that month's end, Treasurer Paul Keating declared Australia was enduring "the recession we had to have".

In contrast with the political upheaval seen in the last few months of 1989, the Goss Cabinet remained settled throughout 1990. There was only a minor portfolio rearrangement in November, transferring responsibility for Regional Development from Treasurer and Cairns MP, Keith De Lacy, to Business and Industry (formerly Manufacturing and Commerce) Minister and Townsville MP, Geoff Smith.

By-elections took place on 28 July for two state seats vacated by former party leaders, after both the Liberals' Angus Innes and former Nationals Premier Mike Ahern resigned from Parliament in May. Innes was replaced as Liberal Party leader by his deputy, Denver Beanland. Both by-elections were won by the Liberals: David Dunworth retained Innes' Brisbane seat of Sherwood for the party, while Joan Sheldon surprisingly gained the Nationals-held seat of Landsborough ('Ahern's old seat goes in blow to Nats', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July 1990).

In September, the Elections Tribunal overturned the 1989 state election result in the seat of Nicklin owing to scores of disputed votes. The Liberals' Bob King had initially won the seat held previously by the Nationals' Brian Austin. King's appeal against the recount verdict was dismissed in November, confirming the Nationals' Neil Turner as the winner and new Member for Nicklin.

After Cyclones Nancy and Ivor caused moderate flooding in coastal rivers in February and March, further heavy rainfall in April across inland areas brought severe flooding to towns in central and western Queensland. Charleville on the Warrego River was particularly devastated; evacuation of most of the town's residents prompted disaster relief from the government for it and other inland communities (Decisions 319, 336, 337, 343, 358, 390; 'Refugees face epidemic', *Courier-Mail*, 23 April 1990).

Premier Wayne Goss began the year as he signalled after sweeping into office at the December 1989 state election, leading his government very much from the front as it set about its reform agenda. This first full year of Queensland's first Labor administration in over three decades was marked by gradual if sometimes landmark (and mostly popular) reform; an absorbing period in which "the new government enjoys a long honeymoon and appears to offer much promise. But along with the enthusiasm there are also high expectations" (Wanna, p359).

A focus of reform for Goss' administration, while not based on Fitzgerald Report recommendations, was the structure and organisation of Queensland's public service. Cabinet deliberated several times on amendments to public sector structures reflecting the government's favoured machinery of government changes (Decisions 431, 433, 458, 705). The intent of some changes appeared to be a 'centralising' of control or authority in the Premier's Department with an increased policymaking capacity very much an ambition. To this end, when the Public Sector Management Commission (PSMC) was established in April, its rigorous departmental reviews underscored that ambition and focus – although not always welcomingly so from the perspective of departmental bureaucrats.

As later described, "Goss was a Premier who wanted to be in control ... For the Premier and his department, the crucial questions concerned the level of ongoing policy advice that the Premier would require and whether the department as constituted could provide that level of advice. ... [Goss' office] proposed a new Policy Coordination Division with three branches – Resources, Welfare and Development – to give policy advice across all government activities" (Scott et al, pp172-173).

Many state public servants had greeted the December 1989 change of government as an opportunity for renewed purpose and direction in policymaking. Upper ranks of the public service were put on notice, though, when early in the year the government sacked some senior bureaucrats and replaced statutory board appointees perceived as 'too close' to the former Nationals administration (Decisions 518, 519; 'Night of the long knives', *Courier-Mail*, 30 January 1990; Stevens and Wanna, p90).

With economic impacts of the early 1990s recession being felt in Queensland, the government balanced expectations of increased spending on services with sustaining employment levels while

also keeping government expenditure in check. The administration, and particularly Treasurer Keith De Lacy, was mindful of state election promises to not increase or introduce new state taxes (Stevens and Wanna, p136).

Departments' budget allocations were subject to restraints and 'efficiencies' imposed by the Cabinet Budget Review Committee ahead of the government's first budget in September (Decisions 139, 187, 488, 594). Meanwhile, hospital upgrades – or openings, in the case of the new Logan Hospital south of Brisbane – along with south-east Queensland transport infrastructure projects and regional Queensland mining venture approvals continued to be a focus of Cabinet attention (Decision 250, 284; Decisions 623, 745, 809, 858; Decisions 57, 304, 447).

The two main accountability mechanisms to stem from the Fitzgerald Report's recommendations, the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) and the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), were fully constituted this year, with the appointment of Commissioners and members of the Parliamentary oversight committees finalised (Decisions 204, 228, 400). It was observed that, with the Commissions' reviews underway, "in effect, the government was forced to cede control of a large part of the reform agenda to agencies each of which heralded a desire for independence from the government" (Stevens and Wanna, p108).

Both agencies commenced important reviews and delivered reports throughout the year; probably the most significant of these investigated changes to the state's electoral boundaries and system as well as giving guarded recommendations regarding the government's proposed introduction of gaming machines. Cabinet was kept apprised of the progress of both Commissions' activities, noting an information paper mid-year on the 'implementation of Fitzgerald reforms' (Decision 432).

From early in its first term, the government faced pressure from various interest groups to meet its pre-election commitments regarding environmental protections. Premier Wayne Goss announced in January a public inquiry into the land management – principally concerning logging operations – of Fraser Island (K'gari), appointing Tony Fitzgerald, QC to lead that investigation (Decision 189; 'Goss seeks a green peace plan', *Australian Financial Review*, 13 April 1990). Interestingly, while the government was criticised for allowing logging to continue during Fitzgerald's inquiry, Cabinet late in the year considered a discussion paper on establishing a comprehensive Queensland conservation strategy (Decision 802).

Among several new, amended or repealed pieces of legislation this year, a new Industrial Relations Act was crafted after the lengthy Hanger Inquiry into Queensland's industrial relations framework. The government went further than the inquiry's recommendations, repealing the 'Continuity of Supply' laws introduced by the Bjelke-Petersen government amid the mid-1980s SEQEB workers' dispute. Voluntary Employment Agreements (with particular reference to the electricity supply workforce) were also removed in favour of collective bargaining provisions (Decisions 125, 356, 379).

Significant changes in social policy settings arose during the year, notably in priority areas for the government such as increasing educational opportunities and improving the status of women and Indigenous people. Arguably the standout social policy reform this year was the decriminalisation

of homosexuality, thus fulfilling a government pre-election commitment. An amendment to the state's criminal code was passed by Parliament in late November, after a CJC review recommended that consensual sexual activity between males should be made legal (Decisions 506, 886).

Late in the year, Cabinet discussed recouping the superannuation entitlements of former MP Don Lane, who in October was the first of the one-time National Party Ministers convicted of misappropriating public funds following revelations at the Fitzgerald Inquiry (Decision 825). Lane was sentenced to twelve months in prison, as was Leisha Harvey and then Brian Austin (who received a fifteen-month sentence) later in November ('Ex-ministers in gaol, kisses in Parliament – that's Queensland', *Australian Financial Review*, 3 December 1990).

References

Joanne Scott, Ross Laurie, Bronwyn Stevens and Patrick Weller, *The engine room of government: the Queensland Premier's Department 1859-2001*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001.

Bronwyn Stevens and John Wanna (eds), *The Goss government: promise and performance of Labor in Queensland*, South Melbourne: Macmillan Education, 1993.

John Wanna, 'Wayne Keith Goss: the rise and fall of a meticulous controller', in Denis Murphy, Roger Joyce, Margaret Cribb and Rae Wear (eds), *The Premiers of Queensland*, 3rd ed., pp. 357-386, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003.

