

Amanda Acutt, 'Bjelke-Petersen: Villain or Martyr?'

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'When you lift an old piece of tin you are likely to find a dead cat or an angry snake'¹ said former Premier Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen in response to the decision to initiate the Fitzgerald Inquiry into systemic political corruption in Queensland. The commencement of the inquiry saw Bjelke-Petersen's twenty-year grip on power slip, creating a breeding ground for ambition and insurrection to arise within the Queensland National Party and eventually resulted in the downfall of the National Government.²

Extensive scholarly research is available on the Bjelke-Petersen years and the Fitzgerald Inquiry. The aim of this article is to offer some personal reflections from those who were intimately involved in Queensland politics at the time. It draws primarily upon three of the interviews conducted by the Centre for the Government of Queensland for the *Queensland Speaks* oral history project. The Fitzgerald Inquiry had a significant impact on the institution of the Queensland Police Force, (now the Queensland Police Service). However, as these interviews will reveal, the inquiry, combined with Bjelke-Petersen's loosened grip on power, contributed to the end of National rule.

In 1987, former Deputy Premier of Queensland Bill Gunn, (who was also a former Police Minister), commissioned the Fitzgerald Inquiry in Bjelke-Petersen's absence, in an effort to settle ongoing concerns about police corruption, particularly in relation to racketeering in the vice industry. The inquiry sought to rid the police force of institutionalised corruption, to bring into existence a more ethical climate for police officers and to foster a new police culture where service to the community was a major motivation for police work. Tony Fitzgerald, QC, was appointed to head the Royal Commission, but little was expected to come out of the inquiry.³ Fitzgerald's team of investigators combed through cabinet documents and police official records, cracked the code of the Police Commissioner's diary and mined the records of witnesses who decided to tell all, gradually filling in the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of networks of corruption, and abuses of power. In effect, Fitzgerald's investigations became an inquiry into the modus operandi of a government.⁴ High profile police, businessmen and government ministers were charged with various crimes and found guilty. Bjelke-Petersen, though investigated for corruption, was charged with perjury.

¹ Chris Masters, 'Moonlight Reflections', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

² *ibid*

³ Julianne Schultz, 'Disruptive Influences', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

⁴ *ibid*

Interestingly, the case against the former Premier was abandoned in 1991 when the jury was split with one of the two dissenters being a member of the Young Nationals. However, a later Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) inquiry found that the jury had been manipulated by background players in Bjelke-Petersen's legal team.⁵ Consequently, the overarching question remains: was Bjelke-Petersen corrupt?

Four Corners reporter Chris Masters contends that as far as political corruption goes, Bjelke-Petersen was 'as crooked as they come'.⁶ However, not everyone agrees. In his interview for the *Queensland Speaks* Project, former Health Minister, State Treasurer and Liberal Party leader Sir Llewellyn Edwards put forward the view that 'he was just too kind a man who thought he existed to change the world'.⁷ Others have asserted that Bjelke-Petersen held power with 'an iron fist mix of bravado, patronage, and tunnel vision wrapped in folksy "don't you worry about that" certainty'.⁸ In contrast, Edwards recalls that Bjelke-Petersen appeared to have never read a cabinet paper; he would just be briefed by his officers and, despite popular belief generated by the newspapers, 'he rarely thrashed a hammer over the cabinet'.⁹ Edwards goes on to state that Bjelke-Petersen was definitely more influential on a day-to-day basis, when friends would bring various issues to his attention. On numerous occasions, Bjelke-Petersen would order his ministers around, but they knew how to deal with him; they would not ignore the request, but the direction, and Bjelke-Petersen would never think of the matter again – he would consider it had been addressed. Edwards attributes the success of the National government at the time to Bjelke-Petersen's unequivocal absolute commitment to Queensland. 'He drove his people crazy', but nonetheless he was 'a man whose mind was running around everywhere. As long as we kept the State moving as he wanted he wasn't difficult to work with'.¹⁰ His weakness was his relentless anti-intellectual vanity and his championing of common sense ideas.¹¹ As he became more successful, the more difficult it was to tell him he was wrong. He preferred positive people who could find a way to get things done.¹²

⁵ Chris Masters, 'Moonlight Reflections', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ 'Llew Edwards', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/llew-edwards>, 2009

⁸ Julianne Schultz, 'Disruptive Influences', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

⁹ 'Llew Edwards', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/llew-edwards>, 22 September 2009

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Chris Masters, 'Moonlight Reflections', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

¹² *ibid*

Though Edwards admits that a review of practice and procedure was needed, the Fitzgerald Inquiry appears not to sit all too comfortably with him. He instead emphasised the need for an upper house, stating, 'Fitzgerald made us all wake up but it was said that some people paid a big price, were ruined for life, probably because the systems weren't there and in the current system there was allowed too much flexibility'.¹³ In his view, public inquiries are unnecessary. Parliaments under the traditional system should be able to manage themselves well enough; believing that traditional parliamentary mechanisms should be sufficient to hold the government to account.

Bjelke-Petersen did, in the end, succumb to pressure from Liberal backbenchers for a series of parliamentary committees, but they were unfortunately given little power or information. The authority of ministers was rarely questioned, and there was little oversight. Overall, Edwards laments that it was a sad time for Queensland politics that one party, with extreme views in some cases, should have been allowed to run the State, to have total dominance, for as long as it did.

Former National Party member Craig Sherrin entered politics during Bjelke-Petersen's premiership, and vividly recalls this period in his political career, first as a public servant and then as a National Party member of Parliament. Sherrin recalls that Bjelke-Petersen assisted in the launch of his campaign, but he says 'as far as sitting and having a conversation with him I was never able to do that, nor was I of the view that he would probably do it'.¹⁴ In his interview, Sherrin describes Bjelke-Petersen as 'a man with fixed views'¹⁵ and remarked that some aspects of the way Bjelke-Petersen ran government caused him some discomfort. He began to form the view, when Bjelke-Petersen began demanding the resignation of many of his ministers that the National Party needed to undergo some sort of transformation if it was going to get anywhere in the future. Sherrin is critical of the fact that areas such as infrastructure were over-emphasised, while softer, below the line issues were neglected. Yet Sherrin does acknowledge that Bjelke-Petersen was 'good for democracy'¹⁶ in that he made sure he was accessible to the public. Citizens could ring him directly with issues. Voices were seen to be heard and people felt engaged.

In the 1986 election the National Party won an extra eight seats, a massive victory for the former Premier. Bjelke-Petersen was a clever political operator who in twenty years doubled his party's

¹³ 'Llew Edwards', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/llew-edwards>, 22 September 2009

¹⁴ 'Craig Sherrin', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/craig-sherrin>, 26 October 2010

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

vote. Despite the popular belief that it was the notorious gerrymander system that won Bjelke-Petersen his victory, Sherrin contends that had the Labor Party not been so dysfunctional, it could easily have won; they were far too comfortable in Opposition. Moreover, Bjelke-Petersen's political guile had given him hero status within the conservative right, and grudging respect among Labor opponents, State and Federal.¹⁷ He preferred the extreme right of his support base; this was his source of inspiration for wanting to become the Prime Minister (which accounts for his absence when the Fitzgerald Inquiry commenced).¹⁸

Sherrin was also involved in politics during the unique transition of the National Party from what some might call autocratic rule to a party that espoused more contemporary ideals. He recalls that Bjelke-Petersen's successor, Mike Ahern's style of leadership and the way he ran cabinet was in stark contrast to that of Bjelke-Petersen: more open, inclusive, and advice could be sought from him. Needless to say, the duration of the Fitzgerald Inquiry was difficult for Ahern and the Nationals. Sherrin remarked that Ahern often said 'There's another pin out of the hand grenade and it's rolling around on the cabinet table'.¹⁹

As former Director-General of the Department of Premier, Economy and Trade Development, Erik Finger stated in his interview for *Queensland Speaks*, the 'fall out' from Fitzgerald became such an overwhelming issue that it impeded Ahern's ability to 'make his mark during his premiership'.²⁰ Ahern certainly promoted the accountability agenda, and asked the Department to draft the Ministerial Code of Conduct and the Cabinet Handbook. However, Finger indicates that these reforms didn't really materialise until the early years of the Goss Government. Former Police Minister Russell Cooper eventually superseded Ahern. Yet the Fitzgerald Inquiry had caused irreparable damage to the National Party's electoral prospects, and it was well understood by members that they were inevitably going to be overthrown. Sherrin asserts that Ministers were supported individually, but there was widespread disappointment in the National Party – a disappointment that saw the fall of the Nationals after thirty years on the Government benches.

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¹⁷ Chris Masters, 'Moonlight Reflections', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ 'Craig Sherrin', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/craig-sherrin>, 26 October 2010

²⁰ 'Erik Finger', Centre for the Government of Queensland, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/erik-finger>, 25 February 2011

Further Reading

Queensland Speaks Interviews:

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Craig Sherrin, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/craig-sherrin>, 26 October 2010

Erik Finger, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/erik-finger>, 25 February 2011

Chris Masters, 'Moonlight Reflections', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

Julianne Schultz, 'Disruptive Influences', *Griffith Review*, 21, Spring 2008

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