

# ‘Oral history evidence and the literature gap in researching contemporary political history’

Chris Salisbury



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## **Abstract**

In the research of contemporary historical episodes, a researcher is often faced with the dilemma of too little supporting literature or inaccessible documentary evidence. In the study of recent state political history in Queensland, which has suffered through a dearth of academic discourse, this dilemma is acute. Fortunately, a recent surge of interview-based research projects has created some extensive oral history evidence pertaining to the contemporary political period. The *Queensland Speaks* ([www.QueenslandSpeaks.com.au](http://www.QueenslandSpeaks.com.au)) project represents the most ambitious study among this burgeoning data collection. The interviews, accessible through the project website, provide first-hand source material upon which my PhD research relies. As a member of the project’s researching and interviewing team, I have actively participated in generating additional oral history evidence to further support my own research. Such activity brings into sharp focus just what interview data can – and sometimes cannot – provide that is not typically covered by the available literature. This paper highlights the utility of oral history evidence gained through selective subject interviews addressing the shortfall in (and sometimes outweighing) the established literature and available documentary sources of Queensland’s contemporary political era.

## **Known unknowns**

This paper arose from methodological musings about my thesis research. Basing much of my research on ‘non-traditional’ historical material, in the form of oral history evidence as much

as the written records, prompted me to question how I should justify such a methodological approach. This is especially critical given past criticisms of oral history material as too subjective and historically unreliable. In short, I am writing a study of the Queensland state government's 'Smart State' strategy during the years 1998 to 2007, a time that has come to be called in Queensland, 'the Beattie era'. As far as epochal periods go it was relatively short-lived, but no less significant a time of change and reinvention (at least as far as Queensland is concerned) than the more familiar Whitlam or Menzies eras before it. This period in the state's political history marked a time of Labor's political dominance – as well as the dominant leadership of Premier Peter Beattie – and mirrored the nationwide hegemony of ALP governments where at one stage every state and territory was governed by Labor. Yet, more than anywhere else, the Beattie government sought to transform the political, economic and even cultural landscape of the state through an innovative reform agenda that quickly came to be branded, 'Smart State' (much to the amusement of outsiders and the bemusement of many Queenslanders themselves). My study aims to uncover the extent of Beattie's willingness to engage with the university and research sectors, and the reasoning behind his government's unprecedented commitment to fund ground-breaking life sciences research and to diversify the state's economic activity, ushering in a so-called 'knowledge-based' economy.

Thus, my study focuses on political figures, policies and events that are quite contemporary and accessible (in research terms) through documentary and other primary source avenues. But this 'proximity' with the key actors and print records of this period brings into question the availability and reliability of any supporting secondary literature sources to underpin my thesis research. On further investigation, it is apparent that this body of written analysis is somewhat threadbare, being comprised largely of standard texts in the field of Australian political history as well as topical media coverage from the time. Despite Queensland boasting a proud record of expertise in this field – for those familiar with it names such as Colin Hughes, Paul Reynolds, Ross Fitzgerald and Ken Wiltshire readily come to mind – specifically state-based historical analysis of politics and governance has lately suffered from a dearth of academic discourse and research (not unlike many other areas of the humanities and social sciences). By virtue of its contemporary topic, my thesis traverses this gap in the literature and so is heavily reliant on the available documentary material and whatever other primary sources of evidence I can uncover. It is important to note, too, that certain documentation relevant to my enquiry is inaccessible, due to lengthy terms of embargo and confidentiality requirements placed on Cabinet papers, departmental records and the like. If I was to wait another twenty years or so until embargoed government documents were finally released, I suspect my supervisor would have a quiet word of advice about that.

Rather than be dissuaded by the scarcity of supporting literature, I elected instead to adopt an approach that works within these limitations while making use of alternative sources of evidence, such as oral accounts of these events. I am not by any means a pioneer of such an approach; indeed, it is a well-established practice of historical enquiry, given serious

standing even by some of its lesser-known adherents. By recognising that, after assessing the literature, there are things that I do know and things that I still do *not* know, I am freed somewhat to pursue the 'missing' information – that is to say, the gap in the literature, or the 'known unknowns' – by other means. Now, when Mr Rumsfeld discovered a gap in the written evidence about possible WMDs in Iraq, he didn't throw his arms up in the air and turn away from the hard task of justifying an invasion of that country. No, instead, he took a different approach – he talked to some accommodating people in the American intelligence community. And we well remember how convincing an argument he made after that.



## The Rumsfeld Theorem

...there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.

Similarly, when approaching my research task it became clear that there would be great benefit in talking to the people involved in the events of this time, making connections with those who could fill in some of those historical 'unknowns'. Oral history evidence, through interviews with well-informed and well-placed figures, would come to the rescue and bridge that gap in the existing literature or the available documentation. Like Mr Rumsfeld, I am fortunate enough to have at my disposal an 'intelligence community', albeit of a different kind. In my case, it is the long list of former state politicians and senior bureaucrats who accepted invitations to be interviewed for the *Queensland Speaks* oral history project at the University of Queensland, in addition to the project team itself (some of whom belong to this cohort of former political 'insiders'). The project's recorded oral histories reveal the decision-making processes, typically hidden away from public view, at the senior levels of

Queensland's government over the last forty-odd years. To this point I have conducted over 30 interviews – two dozen of these for *Queensland Speaks* – with key individuals, including former Premiers, Ministers and departmental heads, and even a former state Chief Scientist.

### Digital revolution

Oral historian Alistair Thomson, who was to be on the panel today, wrote some years ago of a 'digital revolution in oral history', the last in a series of paradigm shifts over the last 30-40 years in how oral history is both undertaken and perceived. This revolution Alistair spoke of heralded a new technological phase in the development of oral history, where digital audio recordings would be readily available and searchable (although not necessarily transcribed) online in an advent that American oral historian Michael Frisch called 'returning aurality to oral history'. Well, that revolution has well and truly arrived in the shape of the *Queensland Speaks* project, and yes, this revolution will be televised (or at least broadcast via the project's website). The fact that the project interviews are quite deliberately not transcribed, but rather indexed and keyword-searchable alongside the embedded audio files, means that researchers are compelled to listen to and interpret the testimonies themselves. This feature has, according to feedback from some participants, encouraged interviewees to be more relaxed and forthright in providing their testimonies, knowing that accounts of contentious past events will not be reproduced verbatim on the project website.



Even before the impact of technology on the field was apparent or appreciated, oral history was considered a boon to the researcher of contemporary figures and events. Writing almost thirty years ago, American archivist James Fogerty described how oral history

augmented and enlivened 'traditional' documentary or archival research. I'll quote from him (excuse the gender partiality):

Few manuscript collections contain thorough documentation of all phases of a subject's life, especially of those important phases during which his impact was most clearly evident. Even those periods of a subject's life that appear best documented will usually be found wanting; the documents seldom adequately reflect the considerations that contributed to key decisions and very rarely betray his candid opinion of events and people with whom he interacted ... In these and related instances oral history seems a necessity rather than the luxury it often appears to be. Without properly conducted interviews, the papers of a politician [for instance] may lack highly significant perspectives that do not appear on paper. Oral history interviews can document current events in a manner that traditional archival collecting cannot.

Certainly, the considerations, opinions and perspectives gleaned from interview data add much-valued context to political decision-making, in ways that plainly presented and often sanitised government records do not.

As a number of interviewees have attested, Beattie's 'Smart State' strategy did not simply materialise out of nowhere. Beattie himself, known as something of a political performer and policy conjurer, avowed that he hadn't simply pulled the strategy out of a hat. It is a significant part of my research task to trace the history, as it were, of this policy agenda that became the catchphrase for the Beattie era. By identifying policy decisions over a set period of time, in enough detail to show a causal link between them, one can recognise the political conditions and policy environment that allowed the latter decisions to take effect.

Government documents, or at least the ones that are accessible, certainly help identify those policy milestones; rarely, though, do they convey what the political conditions were like at the time or the thinking of political figures behind key decisions – this is where the oral history resource of interview data comes to the fore.

### **A pint or three of Guinness**

Through the combined and shrewd use of documentary material and interview evidence, the researcher can study and highlight government decision making at a more nuanced and perceptive level. The researcher should take care, of course, not to let the process of documentary research 'decontextualise' the issue under study, for fear of 'losing the big picture'. Rather, one should maintain a sense of the macro political environment and not get dragged down into the micro decision-making process – here, the oral history interviews provide that 'bigger picture' context (and sometimes even the smaller, often overlooked detail) to flesh out the documentary evidence. When told in more than one interview that the first fruitful meeting between Brisbane's Lord Mayor, the Vice-Chancellor of the state's biggest university, one of the state's leading medical researchers and a billionaire American

philanthropist took place in Brisbane's Irish Club over a pint or three of Guinness, one gets a distinct sense of the extent that compatible personalities and converging agendas can help shape the course of subsequent political decisions and events. Such detail is rarely recorded with such 'intimate' recollection in the established literature.

While the interview recordings present some information that presumably does not exist in any written evidence, it is important also to recognise what details the interviews do *not* readily provide. I'll play an interview excerpt from former Premier Wayne Goss, where he reflects on the calibre of his various Cabinet Ministers [[www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/wayne-goss](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/wayne-goss), 01.30.48-01.30.57]. The next excerpt is from one of his former Ministers, Anne Warner [[www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/anne-warner](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/anne-warner), 01.06.51-01.06.59] – and that about a Premier elected on a platform of reform and modernising change! While these excerpts may reveal what the Premier thought of some of his Cabinet colleagues and, in turn, how they perhaps viewed him, interview material like this obviously does not reveal the political context or the public sentiment of the time in its entirety – and this makes clear the importance of intensive, qualified background research of available contextual evidence, both for the interviewer and the subsequent researcher. One would, for instance, need to listen to Anne Warner's interview in greater depth and to consult the print media records of the time to better appreciate why she was merely repeating someone else's joke at her former Premier's expense.

This fact is evident in many of the interviews; another excerpt is from former Speaker and Beattie government Minister Mike Reynolds, reflecting on the not-so-long ago regard for education in Queensland [[www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mike-reynolds](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mike-reynolds), 00.27.30-00.27.43]. And another from former Premier Beattie in a similar vein [[www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/peter-beattie](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/peter-beattie), 00.27.50-00.28.00]. Without an appreciation for the political, economic and social contexts that underlie these comments and make them significant, they seem merely superficial. And finally, an excerpt from former Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Jim Soorley, discussing his views on the city's fire-fighters [[www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/jim-soorley](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/jim-soorley), 00.21.08-00.21.32]. This comment, on its own just good for a cheap laugh at fire-fighters' expense, is given more meaning when combined with some knowledge of Councillor Soorley's 'history' with the United Fire-fighters Union in Queensland. With regards to my own research, the interviews do not uncover, for example, anything as esoteric as the definitive genesis of a knowledge-based economy taking hold in Queensland, and only suggest that in prior governments some well-placed individuals gave the idea of strategic economic diversification 'some serious thought'. Searching through oral accounts for that perfect piece of evidence, the 'smoking gun' if you like, is often fruitless; successful historical enquiry requires a broader approach. In this respect, the interviews underline – as much as any oral accounts will – just what can and sometimes cannot be gained specifically from oral history data, and how the researcher should avoid overreaching their aims of enquiry or embellishing the data simply to further their own agenda.

## Truth and accuracy

Equally critical, so far as verifying the interview material, is identifying those instances where there may be discrepancies between the oral history evidence and the established literature or documentation. It is surprising, and no doubt telling, to hear apparently contradictory accounts of particular episodes that in some cases can be traced back to 'hard' evidence. As an example, interesting conclusions about parochialism and competitiveness (especially in light of the renowned 'friendly' rivalry between Peter Beattie and former Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks) can be drawn from Beattie's assertion that his government took little notice of events external to Queensland when formulating the Smart State strategy. Yet this claim is contradicted somewhat by his former head of the Premier's Department at the time (who said, 'absolutely we watched what was happening in Victoria'), not to mention by another account of bureaucratic teams being tasked with preparing reports on just what initiatives the Victorian government was pursuing! The researcher has to place a measure of faith in the relative truthfulness and accuracy of the oral account, while still being aware of the surrounding context and other existing documented accounts, written or otherwise.

It also helps to understand, as British oral historian Paul Thompson asserted, that the subjectivity often present in oral history is common (in varying degrees) to the formulation and creation of *all* historical records. Criticisms of oral history as an overly-subjective, unreliable source of historical evidence are not reason enough to reject its usefulness in bridging the printed literature gap – even when the oral accounts in question are provided by political figures, who suffer at the best of times from a poor reputation as regards truthfulness, let alone the ability to be self-reflective. Invariably, the interview material demands rigor and a degree of preparedness that perhaps attend most acutely to the practice of oral history research. It is important to ask – how is the interview data affected or changed depending on who is asking the questions in an interview? If another interviewer, for instance, asks 'Smart State' questions on my behalf, are the answers different to those given if I'd done the asking? As well, do I necessarily interpret those responses differently to those that are provided directly to me? Such concerns are mitigated somewhat, with regards to my research, by several interview subjects being happy for me to follow up with additional or more specific questions – even if I was not in the original interview – to get those different responses or interpretations.

To conclude, owing to the contemporary nature of my thesis topic, and due to a decline in academic discourse around Queensland political history, the printed literature in this field is not as substantial or even as current as it might otherwise be. But oral history recordings, based on well-grounded research and interpreted with due contextual thoroughness, can provide the historical material that would otherwise be missing. It is hoped that my study – enriched by the oral history evidence of research interviews – will go some way towards rectifying this shortfall and bridging that literature gap in academic analysis of the state's recent political history.

## Bibliography and notes

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