

Background

1985 Cabinet Minutes | Queensland State Archives

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In 1985 the world could be a frightening place for some. Iran and Iraq attacked each other's capital cities with missiles, and civil war continued in Lebanon. Terrorists captured a cruise liner in the Mediterranean and held large groups of passengers for ransom. Bombs exploded. More than 2000 people died worldwide in aircraft crashes and disasters. Industrial conflict continued in England, and the death rate from AIDS steadily increased.

De-regulation of Australian banking and economic systems under Hawke and Keating continued, as manufacturing declined, and 'structural' changes affecting employment led to more casual positions, especially for women. Technology and digital communications expanded in Australia. Computer manufacturer Commodore advertised their '5 millionth' machine, inviting consumers to 'trade-in' their 'old computer' (CM, 19/5/1985:11). Telecom Australia offered a 'computer-phone', which 'combined telecommunications and computer technologies into one unit' for \$3000 (CM, 15/7/1985:22). Telecom also provided monthly subscription users with Viatel, a pre-internet 'computer access service' to 'listed service providers' (CM, 5/11/1985:28).

Bread prices in Queensland rose midyear by three cents to 77 cents per loaf, and petrol prices were just below 53 cents per litre. The cost of a local phone call rose to 16 cents.

In 1985 the Bjelke-Petersen Government's long-running battle with unions came to a head during the dispute with SEQEB (the South East Queensland Electricity Board) when the government swiftly enacted new laws designed to crush union strikers. Unionists, political campaigners and university students demonstrated about the Premier's knighthood and his honorary degree from The University of Queensland. But Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was unperturbed. After leading the National Party to government in their own right, without the Liberal Party to hamper him, he wasn't remotely concerned about 'rent-a-crowd' protestors. 'The main battle has been fought and won', he said (CM, 4/4/1985:7). The Liberal Party were now a 'minor' Opposition party.

Sir Joh and his Cabinet colleagues confidently moved to counter the land claim lodged by Eddie Mabo and others, and to obstruct any efforts at securing Native Title. Financial resources sometimes seemed to be allocated, not on the basis of need, but of location or political importance. Yet even that assumption could prove unpredictable. An emergency grant of \$100,000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service was, despite a recommendation from the Health Minister (with 'savings from subsidies to Senior Citizens Centres'), rejected by Cabinet members. (Dec 47771)

Members of Cabinet arrived at decisions that would have implications for decades, on subjects such as future gas pipeline routes, and the commissioning of new coal-fired power stations. The names of now-notorious 1980s entrepreneurs and developers (such as Alan Bond and Christopher Skase) appeared in both the Cabinet records and the daily newspapers.

The 'official misconduct' later uncovered by the Fitzgerald Inquiry was in full swing. Peppered throughout the Cabinet Minutes are what appear to be undeclared conflicts of interest between ministerial decisions and ministers', or ministers' friends' companies and enterprises. For example, in September 1985 Cabinet members agreed to 'correct' the purchase price of land for a Gladstone shopping centre (from \$300,000 to \$170,000) and to refund the difference to the developer (Dec 47155). Yet as the Fitzgerald Report was to later point out, 'Frequently there was no disclosure, and the attitudes and practices adopted inside and outside Cabinet effectively obstructed the details from becoming generally known. (Fitzgerald Report, 1989:91)

Planning for facilities and the management of 'World Expo 88' at South Brisbane were other important topics of discussion (various Decisions). Three new railway stations (Central, Roma Street and Toowong) were approved, and work on the Roma Street Transit Centre commenced. Plans for Southbank and other parts of Brisbane's CBD were also considered.

The biggest local stories of the year were the SEQEB dispute and the forced resignation of Sir Edward Lyons, the Premier's 'most valuable adviser', from the chairmanship of the TAB (CM, various dates). The SEQEB dispute, which began when talks broke down in January, escalated into power rationing and led to new 'tough' power laws being passed by Parliament in March. Protest continued till mid-year.

The Premier and senior politicians believed that Queensland was being 'short-changed' by Canberra, denied funding and starved of resources in a way that was completely 'out of synch' with the state's emerging status as one of the major thermal coal-mining and exporting regions in the Pacific (Dec 46063; CM, 17/4/1985:3).

The greatest enemy of the Queensland Government - apart from the unions - was the Commonwealth Government, regardless of whichever party was in power. Even promised co-operation was always likely to become a potential source of complaint. Conflict with the Commonwealth flowed into unforeseen areas. A compromise was reached after the military services seemed set to become trapped between the Commonwealth's new national anthem, 'Advance Australia Fair', and the Queensland Government's preference for the Royal Anthem, 'God Save the Queen' (CM, 30/4/1985:11; Dec 46003).

Funding for capital works and infrastructure to encourage the mining boom was obtained from Commonwealth grants, where possible, or by borrowing, and from the many government fees and charges, most of which increased by about 10 per cent in 1985. In contrast, miners and farmers often enjoyed favourable treatment.

For the government, the rural sector (and consolidating the National Party vote in South East Queensland) took priority. Drought continued to ravage farmers and graziers in central and western districts, and world sugar prices remained poor. Dairy, poultry and other primary industries were experiencing major structural changes. Mining, especially for coal, was the only expanding sector. Trial shipments of Queensland coal to Asian and European customers were approved, and more export infrastructure was planned.

A bright star on the horizon was World Expo 88 at Southbank, and approvals for contracts and agreements just kept in front of the demolition, road closures and construction. At the same time, work was proceeding on the first Gateway Bridge, and on the Queensland Cultural Centre and the State Library of Queensland. The Cultural Centre, billed as 'the beginning of a new entertainment era', was officially opened in April.

The year 1985 was a tumultuous one, for Queensland and for the world.