

Queensland 1980 – Background Document

Background to the release of the 1980 Queensland Cabinet Minutes

Released to the public 1 January 2011

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Social and economic data

In 1980, the year-end population estimate for Australia was 14,807,370 people. At the same time, Queensland's population had risen to 2,301,702 (an increase from 1979 of 51,164 people, or 2.3%). Brisbane's population was estimated mid-year at 1,063,300, which represented 46.9% of the state figure; the next largest centre was Gold Coast City with 112,900 residents.

For the 1979-80 financial year, Australia experienced GDP growth of 3.4% while Queensland's economy grew by 11.3% (a higher rise only than South Australia's). Over the year, the standard variable housing loan interest rate rose on five occasions, increasing from 9.13% in January to 11.5% in December. ["Interest up: steep rises from today", *Courier-Mail*, 3 Dec., p. 1]

Industrial disputes continued to trouble both the state and federal governments in 1980. Over the whole year, Queensland experienced 253 major work stoppages involving 136,200 workers; across the nation, there were 2,429 strikes affecting 1,172,800 workers. These strikes resulted in 618,700 lost working days in Queensland, equating to \$32,393,000 in lost wages.

The state's unemployment rate decreased from 7.0% at the start of the year to 6.6% (or 74,101 jobless) in December, averaging 6.0% over the year. This compared slightly favourably to a nationwide average jobless rate of 6.2%. ["Unemployment gets worse", *Courier-Mail*, 4 Jul., p. 3]

Mid-year, the state weekly basic wage was \$86.80 for males (a rise of \$3.70 from the previous year) and \$69.90 for females (up \$3.00), which also attracted a remote area allowance of up to \$3.25 per week. The guaranteed minimum state weekly award wage was \$135.50, an increase from the year before of \$11.10, or 8.9%. For the 1979-80 financial year, the state average male weekly earnings were \$234.40 (up \$17.00, or 7.8%), compared to \$247.90 nationally.

Several public sector wages rose over the course of the year, with first-year police constables being paid \$448.40 per fortnight (or \$11,696 annually) after a 12.9% pay increase. A \$5 per week increase awarded mid-year meant that first-year registered nurses were paid \$183.70 p/f (\$4,792 p.a.). Teachers' wages were subject to more than one decision of the State Industrial Commission – which in October awarded a 6.5% pay increase rather than the 12% claimed – not to mention the effects of a series of strikes prior to the state election. Ultimately, for the time being at least, first-year school teachers were paid \$348.40 p/f (\$9,086 p.a.).

For the 1979-80 financial year, the Consumer Price Index in Brisbane rose by 9.7%, slightly less than the weighted average of all state capital cities for the year at 10.2%. Mid-year, the national inflation rate rose to 10.7%, thanks in part to the continuing world energy crisis. ["Fuel increases push inflation to 3-year high", *Courier-Mail*, 25 Jul., p. 3] In Brisbane, average retail prices for staple items included: bread at 57c a loaf (reflecting 'fairer' pricing after the prior year's bread industry legislation); sugar at 44c/1kg packet; butter at \$1.07/500g tub; milk at 30c/600ml bottle; eggs at \$1.32/doz carton; meat at \$5.88/kg for rump steak; draught beer at 54c/285ml pot glass; and petrol at 30.6c/l by the year's end. Earlier, the *Courier-Mail* had slated likely increased travel fares and other living costs owing to oil shortages; the newspaper itself did not evade the trend, increasing from 12c to 15c a copy. ["Up they go in wake of fuel costs", *Courier-Mail*, 1 Feb., p. 1]

Weather patterns

After a 'quiet' start to the cyclone season, northern Queensland was drenched early in the New Year as Cyclone 'Paul' tracked across the Gulf country, bringing flooding rains to Bowen and areas along the Don River particularly. ["Worst flood since '46 sweeps cattle 30km and out to sea", *Courier-Mail*, 8 Jan., p. 1; "Floods a disaster: Official", 9 Jan., p. 3] Next month the wild weather continued when a low pressure system reformed off the central Queensland coast and quickly developed into Severe Tropical Cyclone 'Simon', battering coastal areas and several islands over three days. ["Simon slows, but islands are lashed", *Courier-Mail*, 27 Feb., p. 3]

Despite reasonable summer rains in northern and central districts, elsewhere the state suffered ongoing drought conditions in a continuing cycle of below-average rainfall. In affected areas of southern Queensland, rainfall levels were on average almost 50% below the norm; in several places, this represented the worst rainfall deficiencies in over 50 years. As a result, increased stock mortalities and crop failures were widespread across the state's south. These drier than usual conditions were exacerbated by a summer heatwave, in which the same affected areas experienced mean maximum temperatures 1-2° higher than average. ["Only 'big hearts' can beat this drought", *Courier-Mail*, 9 Feb., p. 4]

Notable events

In the sporting arena, the first 'state of origin' rugby league game between Queensland and New South Wales teams, in which representatives were selected by their place of birth, was played at Brisbane's Lang Park on the night of Tuesday, 8 July. The Queensland 'Maroons', led by Arthur Beetson, won the game 20-10. ["... And down went the Blues", *Courier-Mail*, 9 Jul., p. 1]

Mt Isa-born Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from her family's camping ground near Uluru (or Ayers Rock as it was then known) on the night of 17 August. The two-month-old was reported missing by her parents, Lindy and Michael, who told police that their daughter had been taken from their tent by a dingo. The police investigation and subsequent coronial inquest into Azaria's disappearance received intense media attention and unprecedented live television coverage. ["No trace of killer dingo", *Courier-Mail*, 19 Aug., p. 1; "'Dingo baby' inquest", 15 Dec., p. 1]

Former Premier Vincent Gair died in South Brisbane on 11 November, coincidentally the fifth anniversary of the Whitlam Government's dismissal. Gair was no stranger to controversy in his 44 years in the political arena; when, as Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, he was recalled by the Fraser Government early in 1976, he promptly retired from public life (but not from the annals of Queensland and Australian Labor history). [*Courier-Mail*, 12 Nov., p. 4]

Political events

In 1980 Queenslanders anticipated both a state and federal election, so public and media focus understandably turned to the performance of the political parties over the long lead-up to the polls. Paradoxically, the behaviour of party politicians on the whole reflected anything but stability or reliability, with bitter in-fighting between the Coalition partners and ongoing divisions within the ALP being the norm. What also captured observers' attention, as much this year as in any before, were some provocative decisions and actions emanating from the State Parliament.

Chief among these was the debate over revisions to the state's abortion laws. The anti-abortion argument was this year taken up by Don Lane, Liberal Member for Merthyr (and member of the 'Right to Life' Association), who in March read a motion in Parliament calling for government action to prevent Queensland children being 'killed by abortion'. The protracted parliamentary and joint party room debates drew as much criticism from inside the government as outside. ["Abortion plan condemned", *Courier-Mail*, 11 Mar., p. 16] The draft version of the Pregnancy Termination Control Bill that resulted from this long and rancorous deliberation was notably described to the media by the Liberal Member for Salisbury, Rosemary Kyburz, as "the most frightening piece of fascist legislation I have ever seen in my life." [*Courier-Mail*, 17 Apr., p. 3]

The legislation was finally put to the House in late May but was ultimately defeated, by 40 votes to 35. In all, 19 Government MPs crossed the floor and voted against the Bill – 15 Liberals (four of them Ministers) and four Nationals; two other National MPs abstained from the vote, while Ed Casey changed his stance at the last and opposed it (his colleague Keith Wright, Member for Rockhampton, was the one Labor MP to vote with the government). [*Courier-Mail*, 22 May, p. 1] The Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, played down talk of Coalition disunity, instead insisting that matters had been 'put to bed' behind closed doors and "the Liberal Ministers who voted against the Bill have learned their lesson." ["Coalition moves to defuse row", *Courier-Mail*, 23 May, p. 1]

Casey's Labor Party faced its own similar discord in this election year. Financially, the Party's condition was unsound, so much so that early in the year advice was received suggesting that the ALP shed part of its holding in the Brisbane radio station, 4KQ. The station had become a drain on Party resources, but moves to reduce its stake were met with strident resistance from reform groups in the ALP opposed to the Party's hierarchy. ["Move to court on 4KQ sale offers", *Courier-Mail*, 8 Jan., p. 8] This episode did little to allay fears at the national level that the state ALP was floundering in a crucial election year. [*Courier-Mail*, 6 Feb., pp. 1, 2]

The mid-year resignation of Ron Camm, Minister for Mines, Energy and Police, initiated intense jockeying for vacant Cabinet posts. Making this situation more urgent was Camm's position as Deputy Leader of the National Party; suddenly looming large in the Party leadership stakes was the aspiring young 'veteran', Mike Ahern. Bjelke-Petersen was wary enough of the university-educated Ahern to deter him from leadership aspirations with his first Cabinet post. Vic Sullivan, whose Primary Industries portfolio went to Ahern, assumed the Deputy Leadership. [*Courier-Mail*, 23 Jul., p. 2; 24 Jul., p. 4] Camm continued to play his 'part' for the government, when he was soon controversially appointed chairman of the Queensland Sugar Board by the Premier. ["Sugar post is Camm's birthday present", *Courier-Mail*, 23 Jul., p. 3]

From mid-year attention turned more to the looming elections, and tensions within the Coalition camp approached breaking point as questions were raised as to the viability of the two parties remaining in partnership. Interestingly, the Liberals' State Director, Stephen Litchfield, raised the notion of the two parties merging to form a single political entity (for which he was ridiculed by Nationals' State President, Sir Robert Sparkes). [*Courier-Mail*, 31 Jan., p. 9] In June, the Liberal Party held its annual convention at which a new State President was elected: Brisbane surgeon, Dr John Herron. Almost immediately, Herron set about calling for the Liberals to contest every

seat at the state election and to make a play for Coalition seniority, as well as joining the chorus of calls for electoral redistribution as a prerequisite for continuing in the Coalition partnership. [“‘Fight’, says new chief of Liberals”, *Sunday Mail*, 15 Jun., p. 1; *Courier-Mail*, 16 Jun., p. 4]

Tensions continued to rise for the remainder of the year, neither Party giving ground as further differences emerged. Chief among them was the declared intention of the Liberal Party to field election candidates against sitting National MPs, including Ministers. The routine response to these so-called ‘three-cornered contests’ was open hostility. [“Joh warns Libs on poll battle”, *Courier-Mail*, 16 Jun., p. 2; “‘War’: Joh warns the Liberals”, 4 Jul., p. 1] Yet again, the separate Senate ticket issue for the federal election raised its head, this time with added interest after the top spot on the Nationals’ list was awarded to the Premier’s wife, Florence Bjelke-Petersen. The prospect of her appointment to a Senate position was met with a confident equanimity by state and federal Liberals. [“Libs happy with Flo’s No. 1 spot”, *Courier-Mail*, 26 Jul., p. 3]

On 29 November, Queenslanders headed to the state polls and duly returned the government with its 16-seat majority intact – Labor in fact gained two seats at the expense of the Liberals (amid talk of the Premier making preference deals with Labor candidates in Gold Coast seats), which did little to enhance the Liberals’ junior standing in the Coalition partnership. Russ Hinze described the Liberals’ electoral performance as “a disaster”; the Premier advised Liberal MPs to ‘improve their attitude’ in government. [“Joh all the way”, *Sunday Mail*, 30 Nov., p. 1; “Hinze: They’re sinking”, *Courier-Mail*, 1 Dec., p. 1] Feverish negotiations ensued to finalise the make-up of the Coalition Ministry, with the Nationals again holding the upper hand in the still shaky arrangement. [“Coalition pressure on Libs”, *Courier-Mail*, 2 Dec., p. 1; “Liberals to join Joh in Coalition again”, 6 Dec., p. 1] Notably, the revised Ministry threw up a surprise elevation in Terry White, who took the post of Welfare Minister only 15 months after his election as the Liberal Member for Redcliffe. [“State’s new team at top”, *Courier-Mail*, 23 Dec., p. 1]