

Queensland 1977– Background

Background to the release of the 1977 Cabinet Minutes

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Queenslanders went to the polls twice in 1977. A State election was held on 12 November and resulted in the return of the National-Liberal Coalition Government, with a reduced but still very large majority of 59 of the 82 seats in the Legislative Assembly.

Four weeks later the Federal Coalition led by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser was returned to office in an equally convincing victory, the Coalition winning 86 seats to Labor's 38, a result little different from that in the 1975 elections, held after Sir John Kerr dismissed the Whitlam Government.

At the end of May Gough Whitlam won a narrow vote of the Labor Party Caucus to retain the ALP leadership, 32-30, against challenger Bill Hayden. Three weeks after the December elections Whitlam retired and Hayden became leader, unopposed.

In July, Governor-General Sir John Kerr resigned his post and University of Queensland Vice-Chancellor Sir Zelman Cowen was nominated as his successor, to take office in December.

Phillip Lynch resigned as Federal Treasurer shortly after the opening of the Federal election campaign, following allegations about his family's business dealings. He was replaced by 38-year-old John Howard. After the elections Lynch returned to the Ministry as Liberal Deputy Leader and Minister for Commerce and Industry.

One of the new Ministers was Queensland Senator Glen Sheil, whom Fraser nominated as Veterans Affairs Minister. Sheil was sacked before he could be sworn in because of an "inappropriate" pro-apartheid statement.

Former Liberal Minister Don Chipp resigned from the Liberal Party in March and formed a new party, the Australian Democrats. The Democrats won 11.1 per cent of the vote, and two Senate seats (including one for Chipp), in the December election.

Malcolm Fraser decided not to accept a knighthood, in the Order of Australia, according to *The Courier-Mail*, 15 July.

The state of the economy dominated politics, particularly at the national level. Inflation was very high – about 15 per cent at the beginning of the year – wages were increasing at an annual rate of about 14 per cent, retail sales were falling in real terms, by around 7 per cent, and unemployment was over 6 per cent and increasing.

A special Premiers Conference introduced a Wages and Prices Freeze for three months, while the Federal Government continued with policies introduced the previous year that cut government spending (particularly on some Whitlam Government programs affecting the States, such as transport and sewerage) and Public Service employment.

In Queensland a policy introduced in 1976 to require most public servants to travel economy class was extended indefinitely. [Sub. 24252, Dec. 27202, 17 October] And the Premier obtained Cabinet permission to drastically reduce the invitation list for the Premier's Christmas Party, guest numbers having increased from 66 in 1956 to four times that number in 1976. [Sub. 24344, Dec. 27319, 15 November]

The Queen and Prince Phillip visited Australia for 23 days as part of the celebrations for her Silver Jubilee year. She spent three days in Brisbane.

The State Budget included funds for a feasibility study for a tunnel under the Brisbane River, linking the Queensport and Eagle Farm areas of the city. The proposal, floated earlier by Main Roads Minister Russ Hinze, was favoured by Government engineers as an alternative to a bridge.

Estimates ranging from \$100 million to \$200 million were suggested. The tunnel would be built by private enterprise, and financed by a toll on motorists. It would be completed by 1985 (according to the Treasurer) or even in time for the 1982 Commonwealth Games. (*Courier-Mail*, 19, 24 July, 23 September, 30 October) Mr Hinze also promised to take to Cabinet a submission for a bridge to Stradbroke Island. (*Courier-Mail*, 1 September)

In Brisbane, protest marches against what effectively was a Government ban on protest marches continued to mount. One "right-to-march" demonstration in September resulted in 418 people facing charges. Four further clashes between demonstrators and police occurred over the next six weeks.

At a demonstration on 3 December, 300 police dealt with 300 demonstrators, arresting 197 people, bringing the total number of arrests over the period to nearly 900. (*Courier-Mail*, 7 September, 17 October, 23 October, 24 October, 26 October, 4 December).

Health Minister Dr Llew Edwards began studying a report by Brisbane pathologists recommending that pedal cyclists be compelled to wear safety helmets. (*Courier-Mail*, 23 January, p.1)

Brisbane City Council adopted regulations requiring the fencing of domestic swimming pools despite receiving almost 3,000 objections. (*Courier-Mail*, 15 April, p.9)

Legislation was approved to change the name of the Church of England in Australia to the Anglican Church of Australia, while another law endorsed the creation of the Uniting Church in Australia, formed from the Methodist Church and elements of the Congregational Union and the Presbyterian Church. [Sub. 23234, Dec. 26048, 14 March; Sub. 23145, Dec. 25942, 22 February]

Australia's population in mid-1977 was estimated at 14,074,000, and Queensland's at 2,138,600. The State basic wage was \$72.70 for men and \$58.50 for women, while average weekly earnings for men stood at \$192.30.

There was a significant decline in the number of strikes in 1977, the number of working days lost falling from 426,000 the previous year to 240,800.

A national poll in May resulted in the choice of *Advance Australia Fair* as the national anthem, though it was not formally proclaimed as such until 1984. In June, following an oral submission by the Premier, the Queensland Cabinet decided "that the Department of Education notify the Principals of all State Schools that they are to comply with the instruction issued previously with regard to the playing of the National Anthem – *God Save the Queen* – at school assemblies". [Dec. 26638, 21 June]

Australia won the Centenary Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in March. In the second half of the year Kerry Packer launched World Series Cricket. He persuaded most of the world's best cricketers to sign contracts with WSC, brought them to Australia and then redesigned one-day cricket to meet the needs of television.

Packer changed the way the players dressed and the way the game was played. As well as coloured clothing, he changed the colour of the ball (to white) to aid another innovation, night cricket. He pioneered the use of helmets and drop-in cricket pitches. He also paid players as professionals, at a rate about twice what they were previously receiving.

Brisbane had its driest year for 20 years in 1977, registering only 660mm of rainfall, barely half the annual average. A contract was let for the construction of the Wivenhoe Dam. (*Courier-Mail*, 31 December, p.5; 25 November, p.7)