

1989 Cabinet Minutes: Background report

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1989 was a momentous year, for both Queensland and the world. Revolutionary protests swept Eastern Europe, leading many to believe that the 'Iron Curtain' and the 'Cold War' had finished. The last Soviet forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan. Margaret Thatcher's government introduced a Poll tax in Scotland. Chinese protestors were crushed in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June, and conflict in the Middle East erupted again, in Lebanon and Syria.

Two million people joined hands across the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Berlin Wall checkpoints were opened in November, leading to German reunification in 1990. In Alaska, the Exxon Valdez spilt oil in Prince William Sound. The first internet service providers began operations, the first dial-up internet connection was made and the first GPS satellite was placed in orbit.

Bob Hawke was Prime Minister. John Howard replaced Andrew Peacock as the Federal leader of the Liberal Party, and Bond University opened on the Gold Coast. A stock market crash in October 1987 continued to affect Australian businesses, and the Bond Corporation was declared bankrupt in 1989 with the largest debt in Australian history. Hearings for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADC), which began in 1987, continued. The Wet Tropics rainforests of North Queensland were finally inscribed on the World Heritage list on 9 December 1988 after more than a decade of opposition by the Queensland Government.

The possible establishment of five casinos, including one as part of Roma Street's \$150m redevelopment, were mooted in September ('Mr Ahern's Casino Gamble', *Courier Mail*, 5/9/1989). The post-Expo 88 landscape of South Brisbane began to emerge when the South Bank Corporation's Convention and Exhibition Centre was announced ('Taxpayers to Foot Bill for \$200m Convention Centre', *Courier Mail*, 7/11/1989).

This is the only year in Queensland politics, to date, with Cabinet Minutes that included three Premiers, three Cabinets, two different Governments and one momentous election result. Mike Ahern, elected as National Party leader after Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen resigned in 1987, was in turn defeated by Russell Cooper in a September leadership 'stoush' ('Sparkes' Silence Speaks of Second Leadership Challenge', *Sunday Mail*, 3/9/1989; 'Ahern Will Go By Tomorrow', *Courier Mail*, 21/9/1989; 'Cooper Claims the Title', *Courier Mail*, 23/9/1989). Wayne Goss, who led the Labor Party to a landslide victory in the December election, proclaimed the Labor win 'marked the end of the Bjelke-Petersen era' ('Goss the Boss', *Sunday Mail*, 3/12/1989).

Fitzgerald Inquiry Report

In July 1989 the Fitzgerald Report (the 'Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct') was publicly released in Brisbane ('The Beginning of a Fresh Start' and 'Findings Contain a Lesson for the Future', *Courier Mail*, 4/7/1989). The Fitzgerald Inquiry, which began hearings in June 1987, resulted in a massive indictment of both official corruption and electoral manipulation in Queensland.



The first public witness was Sir Terence Lewis, the Commissioner of Police, who was stood down in September 1987, subsequently dismissed (his position was 'declared vacant') and eventually imprisoned and stripped of his knighthood ('The Lewis Dilemma Haunting Ahern', *Courier Mail*, 11/2/1989; 'Bitter Lewis Attacks Government Over Sacking', *Courier Mail*, 22/4/1989; 'Sir Terence Remains Defiant, Unrepentant', *Courier Mail*, 4/7/1989). Fitzgerald noted that 'the only missing Cabinet notes over a period of many years relate to the Cabinet meeting dealing with Lewis' appointment as Commissioner' (Fitzgerald Report, p46; 'Lewis Years: Bush To The Battleground', *Courier Mail*, 6/2/1989; 'Banished To The Bush, Then A Chat With Joh', *Courier Mail*, 6/2/1989).

Commissioner Fitzgerald stated in his summary that the corruption in Queensland revealed by the Inquiry was entrenched, systematic and widespread:

The most important thing about the evidence before this Commission is not the truth or falsity of any particular allegation, or the guilt or innocence of any individual, but the pattern, nature and scope of the misconduct that has occurred (Fitzgerald Report, p357).

As historians Scott et al noted, 'the revelations of the Fitzgerald Inquiry dominated Queensland politics' throughout the late 1980s (Scott et al, p168). The media and the Opposition constantly attacked the Government, fracturing the normal business of government: 'On virtually every sitting day of parliament, Labor asked questions about the progress of the Fitzgerald investigations and what the government was doing in response and what it planned to do' (Wanna, p608). Ministers and the two National Party premiers, 'overwhelmed' by party politics, experienced 'horrendous' workloads (Scott et al, p168). Two important pieces of legislation, recommended by Fitzgerald, eventually emerged from the Inquiry: the Electoral and Administrative Reform Commission (EARC) Bill and the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) Bill ('Electoral System Examination Seen As The First Step', *Courier Mail*, 4/7/1989).

A number of politicians and other high-ranking officials were adversely named at the Fitzgerald Inquiry. The Member for Merthyr, former police officer Don Lane, said that 'large amounts of unexplained additional income' had come from 'misusing his ministerial expenses', but claimed such practices were 'widespread in the ministry' ('Don Lane: An Enigma to the End', *Courier Mail*, 31/1/1989; 'All Eyes Look To Merthyr', *Courier Mail*, 4/2/1989; 'The High Stakes For Merthyr', *Courier Mail*, 26/4/1989; Wanna, p611). He resigned with a \$460,000 superannuation payout. Lane was later imprisoned for twelve months for 'falsifying expense claims'. A second Minister, Leisha Harvey, was demoted by Ahern in January and later removed from the Cabinet. Defeated in the 1989 Election, she was convicted of misuse of funds and also received a twelve months prison sentence. Two more ministers, Brian Austin and Geoff Muntz, who also resigned in 1989, were subsequently charged with 'dishonestly applying public funds to their own use' ('Austin: A Political Exit That Won't Be Mourned', *Courier Mail*, 27/10/1989; 'Another Blow To Nationals', *Courier Mail*, 3/11/1989; 'Five Former Ministers Face Court Today', *Courier Mail*, 12/12/1989).

Fitzgerald specifically referred to Cabinet in his report:

In Queensland Cabinet has become involved in the detail of administration. This can mean that the boundary between formulation and implementation of policy can become blurred. When Cabinet formulates policy, political considerations can legitimately be taken into account, but such considerations have no place in making decisions which implement policy. Cabinet secrecy can be used to prevent the disclosure of information unfavourable to the Government (Fitzgerald Report, p358).

Scott et al described the Cabinet process during this period:

Cabinet briefings were often rushed. On Fridays the Cabinet bag was delivered to the executive floor and put in the 'bull pit'. It could contain some fifty or sixty submissions with no formal formatting requirements for submissions. Some were lengthy, others consisted of only one page. Section head from different parts of the department ... went through the bag and decided who would write a billet doux [a 'love-letter'] of advice to be pinned to the submission as a brief to the Premier (Scott et al, pp169-170)

Fitzgerald noted that the amalgamation of the Departments of the Attorney-General and the Minister of Justice had 'led to a greater risk of partiality in the exercise of the Attorney-General's powers', limiting the Government's access to unbiased and critical legal advice (Fitzgerald Report, p138, p359). He recommended the 're-establishment of the independent role of the office of Attorney-General' (Fitzgerald Report, p371).

References

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