

1986 Cabinet overview

In 1986, Queensland's National Party Government was at its most powerful. It faced an election in November 1986 which saw it returned with a nine seat majority. Though the Government looked unassailable, a careful reading of the Cabinet record for the year showed evidence of practices which would become the focus of enquiries by the Fitzgerald Commission, and in the longer term, lead to criminal charges.

Cabinet had a full and busy year with an average of 50 submissions considered at each meeting. Though the volume was large, much inconsequential and low level administrative issues were discussed at each meeting but despite that, a number of key themes emerged throughout the year.

A large proportion of submissions were about development, from parcels of land in the CBD to major tourist resorts from the Gold Coast to Port Douglas. Proposals from all the big players of the 80s were prominent including Alan Bond, Christopher Skase and Mike Gore. Queensland was open for business and the passing of enabling legislation to allow these projects to proceed was common.

The economy in 1986 was struggling. The current account deficit was rising as imports were increasing at a faster rate than exports and Australia's AAA credit rating was downgraded to AA1. In Queensland however this economic reality didn't seem to be a priority and there were no strategies considered by Cabinet to address this downturn. In 1986 the big two revenue areas were agriculture and mining. Agriculture was still highly regulated and the Queensland Government was open to pleas for special assistance for rural industries such as the sugar industry. Industry assistance was also offered for the Greenvale Nickel project in Townsville, whose viability then was doubtful.

The State Budget was under pressure. There had been a freeze on the number of public service positions since 1975 which meant there had been no growth in public services and all departments were under strain. A number of Departments made submissions to Cabinet during the year seeking additional funds and positions so that new services such as new hospitals could be staffed and opened. They were usually refused or asked to reapply as part of the budget process.

The Hawke Labor Government had been elected in 1983 and as they progressively introduced their agenda, frequent conflict arose with the Bjelke-Petersen government. Queensland was quick to engage in High Court challenges on any issue where they thought the Commonwealth was impinging on State's rights or didn't have jurisdictional responsibility to implement their proposals. Queensland frequently refused to contribute to Commonwealth initiatives and strongly opposed Commonwealth encroachment in areas such as an increased involvement in the conservation of rainforest in Far North Queensland.

Social policy was not often a focus of Cabinet deliberations. However, a number of issues affecting Indigenous Queenslanders were considered by the Cabinet. Legislation was passed in 1984 to establish the Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) communities run by Indigenous councils and there were a number of submissions about the consequences of this policy and how the transition would happen. Allied with this was the issue of paying award wages to Aboriginal workers, with the Government continuing to be reluctant to implement this basic right and unwilling to fund the additional cost to Government.

Compared to contemporary Cabinet practices, the processes around the 1986 Cabinet deliberations were often chaotic. Most submissions had limited circulation and Ministers attended Cabinet without the benefit of Departmental briefings. Because of this lack of process, submissions bounced in and out of Cabinet, were often withdrawn or decisions deferred. The Premier (although not confined only to him) frequently presented oral submissions at the end of a meeting where he gained a decision on an issue without any attendant paperwork.

Again, unlike contemporary practice, the work of Cabinet did not stop during the caretaker period in October 1986. Cabinet continued a full schedule of work, for example considering 68 submissions at the meeting of 27 October, breaching the caretaker conventions of making decisions which commit an incoming government.

Cabinet met weekly throughout 1986, not stopping even for the election campaign, usually in Brisbane, but occasionally in regional centres also. The weight of work was heavy, but before the days of a Cabinet Handbook, the Government didn't have the administrative capacity to support this workload and to ensure considered decision-making. Conflicts of interest were not registered and the Cabinet often considered submissions with which they had a direct conflict, such as the redevelopment of the National Party Headquarters in Spring Hill. Some Ministers fought against the tide. Industry Development Minister Mike Ahern worked hard to bring proposals to Cabinet about broadening Queensland's economic base through advanced technologies and new industries, but without making much headway. Community Services Minister Bob Katter also worked to ensure Indigenous communities got a better deal when transitioning to DOGIT communities and continuously brought forward the need to pay Indigenous workers award rates. Again it was difficult to gain traction with his peers.

A reading of the full Cabinet record for 1986 shows a Queensland which was a reluctant moderniser and with a Cabinet with a limited number of economic interests and an absence of strategy. This stasis encouraged the Hawke Labor Government to seek to intervene in areas such as the environment where it was felt Queensland was not doing enough to protect their unique assets. However, at this stage the power of Premier Bjelke-Petersen was undisputed and his control of Cabinet absolute.

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