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Editorial

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Editorial

Paul D. Williams

At the close of 2011, it seems virtually certain the Queensland Labor government, in office for all but two of the previous 22 years, will be defeated at an election due in early 2012. A series of opinion polls indicating record lows in Labor support strongly indicates that, after five successive defeats and fourteen years in the wilderness, the non-Labor forces — amalgamated since 2008 into a single Liberal-National Party (LNP) — will dominate the Legislative Assembly with a huge majority.

Such a result will continue an apparent national trend. With West Australian, Victorian and New South Wales voters also rejecting the Labor brand in recent years, the demise of the Queensland Labor administration appears to be part of a natural electoral cycle.

Yet two points must be made. First, despite any national trend, the factors driving Queensland's change of government were very much germane to Queensland alone. While these included an increasing perception of a tired government grappling with financial woes, public policy failures and bureaucratic blunders, a comparatively united LNP opposition led by popular former Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman must also be considered. The ever-present 'It's Time' factor is therefore insufficient to explain Labor's defeat alone.

Second, changes of government are rare in Queensland, and elections tend to confirm government incumbency rather than change it. For example, in the past 104 years — since the beginning of Queensland's modern party system in 1908 — government has changed hands on just seven occasions. This equates to an average term of fifteen years, or five electoral cycles. When we remember that two of these governments enjoyed single terms of less than three years, the average term becomes longer still. Compare this to national politics where, since the beginning of the federal party system in 1909, government has changed hands on thirteen occasions. Indeed, Queensland's domination by one side of politics for extremely long periods can be described as comprising just three political hegemonies. In the first, Labor controlled the state for almost 40 years from 1915 until 1957 (with a brief interregnum from 1929 until 1932), with the Country (later National)–Liberal Coalition (then National Party alone) ruling a second for 32 unbroken years, from 1957 until 1989. The third hegemony, and Labor's second, can be mapped from 1989 to 2012 (with a short interruption in 1996–98). To say that Queensland enjoys a history of stable governments is therefore a mammoth understatement.

The prospect of a change of government in 2012 therefore provides us with a unique opportunity to reflect upon how far Queensland has travelled — economi-

cally, socially, culturally and, of course, in terms of politics and governance — since the iconic Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987–89) that, after decades of maladministration from both sides of politics, established new ground rules for clean, transparent and accountable politics and public administration. After two decades of Labor domination, Queensland — so often lampooned by southern communities as a conservative backwater — has changed beyond recognition.

With the state's population burgeoning from just 2.8 million in 1989 to 4.6 million today, and with an increasing proportion of those living in the state's south-east, there is little doubt that urban congestion and concomitant strains on hospital, education, transport and law and order infrastructure — not to mention soaring utility costs — have made life harder for many Queenslanders. Yet, notwithstanding the devastating 2011 floods and ballooning state debt, the mining industry continues to provide economic momentum, with 'smart' industries promised as successors to the 'farm and quarry'.

A cultural transformation of the state has also occurred. Immigration has made Queensland's face genuinely multicultural, and the state easily attracts major international sporting, economic and cultural events. Women, too, have cracked glass ceilings, and the 2009 re-election of Anna Bligh as Premier of a state once infamous for its bucolic, masculine values is especially notable. Each Budget also sees increases in education expenditure, with Queensland now in line with other states in terms of NAPLAN testing, a Prep year, six high school years, and the teaching of Asian languages.

While elements of Queensland's uniquely distinctive political culture remain — with a predilection for regionalism and strong leadership among them — it is clear that Queenslanders no longer tolerate political corruption and authoritarian decision-making. Freedom of Information (FOI) (now Right to Information, or RTI) legislation, a Crime and Misconduct Commission (formerly the Criminal Justice Commission), fair electoral boundaries and transparent party political donation laws — in addition to a restructured public service, parliamentary committees and routine Cabinet procedures — have today sensitised a generation of Queenslanders to a core ethical standard of what is expected — even demanded — of governments.

This special edition of *Queensland Review* therefore takes full advantage of a rare juncture in Queensland's history to explore the past two decades in the state's political, policy and cultural life. Articles and commentaries were invited from leading scholars and contemporary figures, and the articles range widely across politics, economics, industry and social policy. Importantly, the articles identify where Labor has succeeded during the past 22 years, and where it has failed.

Wayne Goss, Queensland's Premier from 1989 until 1996 and the man handed the onerous responsibility of implementing the Fitzgerald recommendations, opens the edition with a personal reflection on his time as the first Labor Premier in 32 years. Goss notes his excitement at the challenge, but also his dismay at those areas in which Queensland lagged the nation — especially education, the environment and women's affairs. Goss also writes candidly of unfinished business. In health, for example, he notes 'a gap between theory and practice meant significant expenditure did not go to the sharp end but to the bureaucracy' — a lament equally applicable today. Goss also regrets the introduction of poker

machines, and believes that the contentious Logan Motorway — which ultimately cost him government — remains a necessary piece of infrastructure.

A second commentary, by a former editor of the *Courier Mail* newspaper during the Fitzgerald years, Greg Chamberlin, canvasses another contemporary topic: the often fraught relationship that governments and media share in an age of political ‘spin’. Chamberlin reminds us that it was current affairs reporting that sparked the Fitzgerald Inquiry at a time when government threats of defamation were common. Yet, for Chamberlin, perhaps the greatest disappointment is the undermining by successive governments of the original 1992 FOI legislation to the point where any number of sensitive documents could be exempted as Cabinet-related — a crisis in accountability not addressed until Anna Bligh’s own RTI initiative. Nonetheless, Chamberlin argues that despite RTI, the government still controls information so tightly that the public often becomes aware of a crime only after details have been authorised for release by the Police Media Unit.

The scholarly articles begin with my analysis of the factors behind Labor’s electoral success since 1989. I argue that low levels of education and a malapportioned zonal electoral system explained previous political hegemonies; however, in the post-Fitzgerald era Labor’s domination is attributable to four factors: Labor Premiers’ ‘strong’ leadership; successive governments’ championing of ‘big-picture’ policy and, equally critically, the capacity to remain flexible in delivering that policy; adroit public relations and effective management of the daily news media cycle; and oppositions that, for much of the previous two decades, remained unprepared, disunited and led by unelectable party figures unrepresentative of crucial Brisbane electorates. Together, these factors led to a perception that Labor was Queensland’s ‘natural party of government’.

Bradley Bowden begins the policy examination with a close look at the rise and fall of one of these ‘big pictures’ — Peter Beattie’s “Smart State” initiative — and its decline as Anna Bligh’s own strategy, ‘Towards Q2’, assumed primacy. Bowden argues that ‘Smart State’ initiatives continued a long tradition in Queensland politics that championed economic growth, and notes that Q2 emerged against a backdrop of the global financial crisis, asset sales, deficits and massive state debt. Yet Bowden also argues the economic problems Bligh faced owed more to a ‘fundamental unravelling of both the “Smart” and “Green” state visions’ and a reliance on the extractive industries at the expense of biotechnology.

Chris Salisbury broadens the economic discussion by tracing the evolution of Queensland’s economy since 1989. He asks just how far Queensland has travelled down the ‘Smart State’ path, and concludes that, in contributing about 10 per cent to Gross State Product (GSP), mining is not as economically dominant as some assume. Yet Salisbury also finds that the economic diversity the ‘Smart State’ was designed to bring has hardly changed in the past two decades: agriculture still comprises just a few percentage points, with manufacturing declining only marginally. Interestingly, at well over 70 per cent, services still dominate the state economy.

Dianne Dredge shifts the policy gears with a review of tourism in Queensland that stretches back to the Bjelke-Petersen era. Dredge argues that tourism remains a key plank in Queensland’s economic development strategy, and that Labor in

1989 ‘inherited a tightly controlled tourism policy space characterised by preferential treatment and cronyism’. Labor’s mission, then, was to ‘clean up’ tourism decision-making. Dredge concludes that, despite the past two decades of Labor administration making ‘significant contributions in terms of clarifying roles and responsibilities’, there remain major future challenges, based in part on Labor’s separation of the policy development function of government, and the marketing and industry capacity-building functions of Tourism Queensland as a statutory corporation.

Stuart Glover then turns to cultural policy-making. He revisits the ‘cultural policy movement’ in the years after the early 1990s, during which cultural policy — assisted by political and academic influences — assumed a specific ‘civic and symbolic utility’. Glover argues that this movement had a special role in Queensland, where cultural policy before 1989 was often relegated to ‘quaint’ elements such as ballroom dancing. And while Glover argues that the movement was something of a failure — because the ‘rhetoric and ambitions of cultural policy exceeded the policy tools that cultural studies scholars and cultural bureaucrats could put in play’ — he nonetheless concludes that much has changed in two decades. Indeed, Glover insists that ‘while Queensland may not lead the nation in terms of arts output or impact, it can argue for a continuing contribution to cultural policy making’.

Shirleene Robinson extends discussion of the cultural sphere with a look back at the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer policy in Queensland. Robinson traces its history from before 1990 when male homosexuality remained criminalised, through to same-sex property rights and altruistic surrogacy laws. While Robinson notes that LGBTIQ laws have changed significantly since 1989 — with politicians today ‘more likely to want to connect with members of the LGBTIQ community and attract their votes’ — she also concludes that, despite a perception of bipartisanship, these reforms were Labor initiatives that faced significant Liberal and National Party opposition.

Veena Herron and Denis Cryle complete the edition with a specific account of how the development of a key pillar of Queensland’s economic infrastructure — the Gold Coast desalination plant at Tugun — was reported in two Queensland newspapers at a time of heated public debate. Herron and Cryle conclude, among other points, that two newspapers from within the same publishing stable could, and do, adopt contrary positions regarding public policy.

We might live in an era of leader-centric politics where generalised impressions dominate voters’ political judgements, but a final conclusion to draw from this special edition might be that policy — in its development, announcement and execution — remains a critical criterion on which all governments are ultimately judged. Put simply, it seems that policy can heal or harm governments as much as machine politics themselves. Inevitably, however, whether voters and history deem governments to have been ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is an exercise in subjectivity. Queensland governments since 1859, of course, have always boasted both deferential supporters and vitriolic detractors. It would be naïve to suggest that the Goss, Beattie and Bligh years would be any different.