CHANGES TO QUEENSLAND PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYMENT
1980-95: A UNION’S PORTRAYAL OF ITS RESPONSE

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There was turbulent change in the Queensland public service from 1980-1995. The traditional career service model of employment decayed in the 1980s, under a Conservative Government that attacked unions and faced increasing revelations of politicisation and corruption. The new Labor Government of 1989 promised to restore the career service under a Westminster system, but simultaneously implemented rapid public sector reforms, which had both positive and negative effects on the career service model. The major public service union struggled to defend the career service throughout most of this period. As its traditional strategies became less effective, it responded with new strategies. It strengthened relationships with other unions, and urged membership involvement. It discarded its traditional non-partisan stance, to take an active role in the 1989 state election, and continued this partisan stance at subsequent elections, in support of Labor in 1992 and in support of the Conservative Government in 1995. However, by 1995, the union’s persistence in defending the career service conventions appeared to fade.

Introduction

Australian public services faced problems of inefficiency, corruption and fragmentation in the 19th century. Public service employment was in disarray. Appointments were not advertised and openly available, but rather were given to the friends or supporters of politicians, regardless of efficiency. Remuneration and conditions were inequitable, and depended on the whims of each department. Positions were insecure, and officers were liable to dismissal without notice if they displeased their political masters. Britain had designed a career service model of employment in the 1850s to overcome similar problems, and Australia adopted a similar model. The key conventions of the career service included:

- An independent central agency, which removed personnel decisions from political interference and considerations;
- A unified service with standardised conditions;
- Merit as the basis for recruitment, rather than political or family connections, and appeal processes to challenge whether decisions were based on merit; and
- Tenure, which removed fear of dismissal upon a change of government, and provided an environment that encouraged provision of frank and fearless advice.
This model supported Westminster conventions, as politically neutral public servants could serve any government (Caiden, 1965; Curnow, 1989; Gardner, 1993; McCallum, 1984:23).

All of these conventions have been affected since the 1980s, as economic and ideological pressures for public sector reform led to a transition from public administration to new public management. In some cases, these reforms reinforced the career service, but in other cases did not (Gardner 1993:ix). Queensland had a mixed experience. The Conservative Government of the 1980s had little regard for the conventions and institutions that should ensure accountable government in the public interest. Parliament had failed to bring Government to account, electoral boundaries were manipulated, ministers had dubious business dealings, the public service had been politicised, and the police force was used as an active arm of Government (Coaldrake, 1989; Hughes, 1980). Premier Bjelke-Petersen also had little respect for the industrial relations system, repressing industrial action, and eroding the power of unions and tribunals (Goodwin, 1989). The public service conventions decayed in the early 1980s through neglect rather than reform, as the central personnel agency could not withstand political interference. When Queensland ‘reformed’ its public sector in 1988, it abandoned most of the career service conventions. The independent central personnel agency was abolished; personnel decisions were placed back into the hands of politicians; merit and tenure could potentially be removed for all public servants; and the benefits of a unified service were lost.

In 1989, a Labor Government was elected with a mandate to restore the public service and accountable government under Westminster conventions (Goss, 1989). It enhanced some of the career service conventions, through the introduction of merit selection and protection processes, and unification of the service. However, as will be demonstrated, there were negative effects from simultaneous public sector reforms and industrial relations reforms that decentralised bargaining to enterprise level (Gardner, 1993).

The career service conventions were of significant interest to public sector unions, which protected not only the financial interests of their members, but also their professional interests through preservation of these conventions. There had been relatively little change to the conventions throughout most of the 20th century, and the dramatic changes since the 1980s presented many challenges for unions. This paper considers how the major public sector union portrayed its responses to the changes occurring in the Queensland public sector, in the light of some theoretical concepts of trade union strategy. The paper does not attempt to describe or evaluate the specific public sector reforms, which have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Colley, 2001; Davis and Weller, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Stevens and Wanna, 1993), nor does it seek to evaluate or comment on the wisdom of the union’s strategies.

**Trade Union Strategy**

The strategic management literature identifies a variety of perspectives on the strategy formulation process. At one extreme are those who discuss intended strategy, where
strategy is proactively formulated as part of a deliberate and rational planning process. At the other extreme are those (such as Mintzberg) who perceive strategy as a more fluid process of learning. In an environment where goals may be unclear or competing, strategy may be a response to problems as they arise. Strategy may be about explaining past actions, as successive decisions evolve into a consistent approach. It is likely that strategy can be intended, emergent, or a combination of both (Gardner, 1989; Lundy and Cowling, 1996:23; Mintzberg, 1987; Price, 1999; Pullin and Haidar, 2003). Price (1999) identified that, while much less has been written on trade union strategy, there are the same opposing points of view in that literature.

Gardner (1989) and Gardner and Palmer (1997) suggest that trade union strategy is best described by Mintzberg’s emergent strategy concept. They contend that rational, consciously planned and articulated strategies are not common, particularly in industrial relations. Union activity tends to be more defensive and reactive, with only a minority of unions undertaking systematic or long-term planning. It is difficult to separate the means and ends, and therefore to separate formulation from the implementation of strategy. As a result, trade union strategy tends to be an accumulation of decisions that consolidate into a strategy. It may also be a combination of decisions that are carefully considered and selected for one situation, and unconsciously replicated in another. Gardner suggests that replication is more common than forethought, although such decisions still require consideration of opportunities and recognition of an ‘opponents’ resources. This approach to strategy may be determined by the democratic nature of union organisations: rather than rational and conscious actors making rational and conscious decisions, union decisions are more often collective and made by different groups at different times. This approach may also result from the need for unions to respond to both internal and external circumstances, such as government policy or management strategy (Gardner, 1989; Gardner and Palmer, 1997).

Further, Gardner (1989) contends that unions have a preferred strategy that is evident in most campaigns. Union behaviour is characterised by a:

strategic inertia … so in the absence of dramatic change in the environment or leadership, union strategy will develop slowly and undergo only minor modification over long periods.

Union strategy becomes the ‘characteristic means by which a union attempts to implement policy and achieve its goals’. Bramble (2001) agrees that there is a coherence and stability to union strategy, but found that changes in strategy were often conscious and explicit. The conclusions of Gardner and Bramble seem compatible, as the conscious changes in strategy identified in Bramble’s case studies were arguably in response to environmental changes (for example, new government, recession). This paper does not draw on Gardner’s or Bramble’s models of union strategic choice, which do not adequately separate the industrial and political strategies of public sector unions.

Simms (1987) specifically considers changes in public sector union strategy. Public sector unions traditionally eschewed industrial action, in favour of negotiation with the central
personnel agency or lobbying of the government. Governments tended to seek consensus due to the political and electoral risks of industrial action. However, public sector unions became increasingly militant in the 1980s, with explanations including; the declining distinction between white- and blue-collar workers; integration of public sector unions into the broader labour movement; or simply as a response to changing government policies.

Based on this literature, several propositions may be deduced regarding union strategy. First, a public sector union protects not only the financial interests of members, but also their professional interests through preservation of the career service conventions. Second, a union will have preferred strategies, and in the public sector these are likely to be traditional strategies of lobbying and negotiation. Third, a union will demonstrate a certain strategic inertia by continuing to use those preferred strategies, except in the face of significant changes in the environment or leadership. Fourth, an emergent strategy (in response to government policy) is more likely than a planned, intended strategy. Fifth, public sector unions will exhibit increasingly militant tactics, for reasons including response to changing government policy or integration into the broader labour movement.

These propositions will be considered in a case study of the Queensland public service, focusing on core administration (i.e. including professional and administrative functions, but excluding nurses and teachers). The major union representing these public servants was the Queensland State Service Union (QSSU), with approximately 20,000 members. The smaller Professional Officers Association (POA) represented certain professional groups. These two unions amalgamated in 1992 into the State Public Services Federation Queensland (SPSFQ), with combined membership varying between 25,000 and 30,000.

This paper reviews how the QSSU/SPSFQ portrayed its defence of the career service conventions. It is structured around the three-yearly election cycles of the period. Information is drawn solely from the union’s journal, ‘The State Service’ and subsequently the ‘Public Sector Voice’, which was published monthly until 1994, and quarterly thereafter. This will identify the espoused strategies of the union, as portrayed to members. Naturally, this is a partial source of information, and future research will utilise additional sources to verify these espoused strategies. Notwithstanding this partiality, the journal was an important and relatively reliable source of information for the purpose of identifying the union’s perspective and strategies. For most of the period, it provided detailed accounts of union council meetings and resolutions (i.e. policies and strategies). The journal was an important source of information for members, as the primary and possibly sole mode of communication in an era before electronic mail and web sites. The journals also attracted the attention of, and responses from, senior public servants, politicians, and local newspapers. From 1994, the journal became a less reliable source of information, as it focused less on the outcomes of meetings and more on newsworthy activities and stories.

1980-1983 Traditional Methods Falter

The QSSU utilised traditional strategies of negotiation with the Public Service Board (Board), and lobbying of government, but these traditional strategies began to falter. The
Board had traditionally managed all union claims and negotiations, but during this period was prevented from making decisions. The long-standing Premier came to view negotiation as a concession, and all union claims were referred to the Queensland Industrial Commission (QIC). The QSSU noted the waning of the Board’s independence, and that the Queensland Cabinet ‘seems to exert an obvious influence over many of the Board’s functions, which is not apparent in other Public Services’. This was contrary to the convention of an independent personnel agency. The Board’s independence was further threatened when the Government refused to maintain a union representative on the Board in 1982, but the QSSU’s lobbying succeeded in reversing this decision in 1983 (QSSU, Feb 1980:7-8, 20, 28; Aug 1981:10; Sep 1981:3; Feb 1982:13; Apr 1982:20; Oct 1982:9; Feb 1983:8, 14-15).

The Government introduced statutory authorities, such as the Queensland Tourism and Travel Corporation (QTTC). The QSSU opposed this action, which it perceived as breaking down the convention of a unified service, and removing employees from the merit and tenure protections of the Public Service Act. It launched a major campaign against the QTTC, and when that failed it continued to lobby for the QTTC’s return to the public service. However, it pragmatically sought an industrial award from the QIC to stem the erosion of conditions. Lobbying achieved a right for retrenched employees from the QTTC to return to the mainstream public service (QSSU, Jul 1980:3, 7, 9; Nov 1980; Dec 1980:24; Apr 1981:11; Oct 1981:1).

The Government’s non-observance of the Public Service Act placed traditional merit selection processes under threat. The Act provided that external candidates could only be appointed to a vacancy upon Board certification that there were no suitable internal candidates. This was intended to prevent patronage or partisan appointments and, as a result, the majority of promotions were made from within the existing workforce. Similar provisions existed in most Australian public services. From 1980-83, increasing numbers of external appointments were made without observance of the Act requirements, and such appointments were not subject to scrutiny or challenge through appeal. While union lobbying did not gain a commitment to cease external appointments, it did gain a right of objection before an external appointment was finalised, which was unique in Australia. The union journal reminded members of their legislated rights, and encouraged them to highlight any appointments that did not comply. The union then pursued certain of these appointments where it perceived patronage. One appointment was pursued in the Supreme Court, on the basis that the Board had overlooked many well-qualified public servants and did not issue the required certificate. Another appointment was pursued in the Queensland Industrial Commission due to the dubious nature of the Board certificate, but the union was stonewalled when the Board would not provide details, and the Minister avoided questions in Parliament. The union did not win these cases, but demonstrated its commitment to protecting the career service conventions (QSSU, Feb 1980:21; Mar 1980:10, 22; Feb 1981, 16, 23; Mar 1981:25; Dec 1981:30; Oct 1982:15; Nov 1982:21; May 1983:2).

Merit protection processes were also under threat during this period. Appeal processes were a means of scrutinising appointments to ensure that the merit principle was applied,
but the Board began to exclude certain appointments from appeal and therefore scrutiny. When lobbying failed to prevent this action, the union challenged certain appointments in external forums. It approached the QIC regarding Ministerial Liaison Officer positions, rejecting the claim that Ministers were entitled to choose appointees that they were sure they could work with. The QIC did not have jurisdiction to determine the matter but noted that the Board could review its decision, although the union was unsuccessful in gaining this review (QSSU Feb 1980:21; Jul 1981:13; Aug 1981:10; Dec 1981:16-17). Tenure remained relatively unchallenged during this period. The union prevented Government attempts to introduce casual employment in schools, but was unable to prevent the introduction of new labour-saving technology (QSSU, July 1980:17; Aug 1980:3; Jun 1981:8; May 1982:8).

In the 1983 state election, the QSSU canvassed each political party regarding the union’s policies. The conservative parties rejected most issues, while Labor offered to consider most issues and introduce broader reforms (QSSU, Jun 1983:4; Aug 1983:12; Oct 1983:2-4,8). The union journal was non-partisan, and published each party’s response without comment or recommendation.

The union’s activities in this period are consistent with the first three propositions. The QSSU sought to protect members’ professional interests, and largely relied on its traditional preferred strategies of negotiation and lobbying, together with publicity in its journal, and some recourse to tribunals and courts. However, it exhibited relative inertia in the face of mild threats to the career service conventions, and maintained a non-partisan stance.

1983 - 1986 The Need for Solidarity

The National Party Government was returned in its own right in 1983, and immediately directed that union membership was no longer required for public service employment. The union gained a favourable QIC decision granting preference clauses in public sector awards, but the Government frustrated this decision by refusing to implement it other than through verbal undertakings, and refusing payroll deductions for union fees (QSSU, Dec 1983:2; Apr 1984:27; Jun 1984:1; Jul 1984:11, Aug 1984:1-2; Nov 1984:24). The QSSU responded by strengthening relationships with other unions, including joint proceedings in the QIC, affiliation with peak union bodies, and participation in Labour Day marches. The union promoted the benefits of unionism in its journal, and claimed to have taken a responsible approach to the Government’s hostility (QSSU, Sept 1984:3; Feb 1986:10; May 1986:1; Jun 1986:6). However, the journal remained non-partisan by not making any general comment about the highly political electricity strike in 1985, and restricting its criticism to the anti-strike laws introduced during the dispute (QSSU, Mar 1985, Apr 1985, May 1985).

Merit issues received little attention in the journal in this period, probably due to the union’s battle for survival rather than improved practices. The union lobbied the Government repeatedly but unsuccessfully about patronage and the lack of transparency when two former Parliamentarians were employed in public service positions (QSSU May 1984:1; Jun 1984:3; Aug 1984:8-9).
The traditional strategies of negotiation and lobbying did not prevent the weakening of tenure during this period. The Government found a loophole in the normally stringent dismissal process, which allowed dismissal for incompetence without recourse to industrial or public service tribunals. Union lobbying and negotiation could not prevent this (QSSU, Dec 1983:6; 5Apr 1984:26; Jul 1985:9). The Government introduced new technology, which resulted in surplus staff, but the union was unable to negotiate formation of a committee to review or manage job security issues (QSSU, May 1984:9; Apr 1986:7; Sep 1986:4). The Government increased its use of non-tenured forms of employment. Short-term employment was being used to carry out long-term work, and contract employment was being introduced for certain groups (press and private secretaries in 1984 and crown prosecutors in 1985). The union lobbied against the potential politicisation and weakening of tenure, without success (QSSU, Jun 1984:11; Jul 1984:25; Aug 1985:12; Oct 1985:12; Mar 1986:4). The union continued to lobby the Government about staff ceilings, and joined a national protest against public sector staff cuts, without success (QSSU, Aug 1985:1; Aug 1986:1; Oct 1986:7).

The convention of a unified service and standardised conditions was weakened during this period. The Board was under continued political direction not to negotiate, and it rejected 99% of the union’s major claims in 1984. At the same time, salary increases were approved for senior staff, leading to disparate outcomes (QSSU, Jan 1984:12; Dec 1984:19-20). Government actions continued to fragment the service, through the use of consultants to undertake public service functions, contracting out, privatisation, and through the creation of statutory authorities that operated with a commercial focus and were outside the core public service (such as the State Government Insurance Office and the Queensland Industry Development Corporation). While the QSSU continued to oppose these forms of service delivery, its approach softened, from the outright opposition to the QTTC in the previous period toward a protective strategy of negotiating awards for the new organisations. The journal also carried an information campaign against the worldwide trend toward privatisation (QSSU, Sep 1985:6; Oct 1985:9; Feb 1986:10).

In the 1986 state election, the QSSU canvassed each political party regarding the union’s policies, with similar results to 1983: the conservative parties had little interest, while Labor supported most issues (QSSU, Oct 1986:1-3). Despite the increasing threats to the career service conventions and to the union’s existence, the union maintained its traditional non-partisan approach, and the journal published each political party’s response without recommendation.

The union’s activities in the period 1983-1986 are consistent with the first four propositions. The QSSU sought to protect the members’ professional interests, and largely persisted with its preferred strategies and its non-partisan stance, even when these had little success. An emergent strategy became evident as the union began stronger information campaigns through the journal, and formed stronger relationships with other unions.

1986–1989 A dramatic change of strategy
Attacks on the career service in 1987

The National Party won the November 1986 state election, and 1987 was a turbulent year. Merit and tenure were under threat within weeks, as the Government offered five-year employment contracts to senior officers, with increased salary packages and compensation in return for relinquishing tenure. The union had few avenues to protest other than lobbying against the potential for appointments based on political connections rather than skills (QSSU, Dec 1986:1, Jan 1987:1-2).

Tenure was threatened by the Government’s proposal for industrial relations reform, through the introduction of non-union Voluntary Employment Agreements (VEAs). The QSSU responded as part of a multi-union campaign. The journal raised awareness of the disadvantages of VEAs. The union encouraged membership involvement in the protest, supplying Parliamentarian’s contact details, and printing Parliamentarian’s responses in the journal (QSSU, Mar 1987:1; Apr 1987:1; May 1987:4; Jun 1987:5-7; Jul 1987:1-2; Aug 1987:12-13). In response to this campaign, the Government responded with a softer reform proposal that removed some of the most contentious issues (such as cashing in of sick leave and long service leave, and restricted right of entry for unions). This new proposal precluded the application of VEAs to public sector employees, but remained unacceptable to unions for reasons including a perceived attack on award on award conditions, and the circumventing of the Industrial Commission (QSSU, Oct 1987:5). The QSSU retained its non-partisan stance, and the journal did not comment on other industrial legislation changes that did not affect public servants. This suggests that the union’s engagement in the political arena by lobbying parliamentarians was a defence of member’s interests and not partisan activity.

Tenure was further threatened when the Government tabled a proposed retrenchment scheme, with which it planned to reduce the size of the public service. The union journal explained to disgruntled members that Queensland was the last Australian public service to introduce such provisions - Queensland unions were unable to prevent the scheme, and had little option but to negotiate a good package. As a result of union lobbying, the Government policy stated that redundancy should be the last resort rather than an inevitable consequence of restructuring, and used when retraining and redeployment were not possible. The union also succeeded in having the package extended beyond public service officers to include 20 000 crown employees (QSSU, Sept 1987:10; Oct 1987:2; Nov 1987:3; Feb 1988:4; Mar 1988:1-2, 4; Apr 1988:4; Jul 1988:5, 7-10; Dec 1988:1).

Political interference in appointments and working conditions continued. The Premier appointed a press secretary before the closing date for applications, and the union was unable to have this decision reviewed. The Premier gave large pay increases to his pilot and press secretary, but refused to allow the Board to negotiate wage increases for other public servants, forcing the QSSU to seek wage increases through the Industrial Commission (QSSU, Mar 1987:10; Jun 1987:3, 30; Jul 1987:8, 13; Aug 1987:9, 10; Sep 1987:6, 11). The Government planned to remove leave loading and flexible working hours for
public servants under the 1987 budget. The union conducted a strong campaign, producing journal articles and encouraging members to lobby Parliamentarians. This resolved one matter, through joint review of flexible hours and negotiation of a new agreement. The leave loading matter remained unresolved, and the union campaign escalated, with stop work meetings and rallies, a ‘waste-line’ telephone hotline to expose government waste and mismanagement, and involvement of the Industrial Commission. This campaign succeeded, as the Government abandoned the plan to remove leave loading. The union believed that its restraint in not taking strike action gained employee and community support, and disappointed the Government (QSSU, Sep 1987:1-2; Oct 1987:1; Nov 1987:1; Dec 1987:1; May 1988:4,6).

The Government continued to pursue plans to privatise public service functions, and the QSSU continued to oppose these plans. The union actively lobbied for the deployment of staff displaced by the privatisation of Suncorp and QIDC. It lobbied against plans to privatise prisons, noting an independent review’s concerns about the appropriateness of the state relinquishing supervision of sentenced offenders. The QSSU participated in joint reviews of privatisation proposals by Government, unions and accounting firm representatives. Some of these proposals (such as the privatisation of the government garage, and selling of information technology services to a US company) were found to be impractical, inappropriate or less efficient: possibly driven by ideology rather than efficiency. Journal articles highlighted the failure of privatisation in other countries, and the ‘myth’ that the private sector was inevitably more efficient than the public sector. A protest rally called on the Government to stop selling the state’s assets. The union also supported research on how an expanded public sector can help an economy (QSSU, Mar 1987:2; Apr 1987:9; May 1987:1,2; Oct 1987:2; May 1988:1; Jun 1988:2, 5, 6; Aug 1988:5; Oct 1988:1-5, Dec 1988:4).


Soon after the 1986 election, the Government established the Savage Review of the Public Service. The QSSU provided submissions recommending the protection of career service conventions. When the Review recommended removal of any controls on the autonomy of ministers and permanent heads, the union lobbied against this approach. However, the Government accepted most of the Review Report, and began formulating new legislation (QSSU Dec 1986:7,9; Jan 1988:7:1; Mar 1987:3; May 1987:5; Sep 1987:7; Oct 1987:4; Savage 1987:ii, 21-22). The QSSU campaigned heavily against the proposed new legislation, which it considered ‘attacked’ all of the career service conventions. Weakened appeal tribunals and the potentially unlimited application of contracts would result in reduced tenure, bypassing of merit processes, politicisation, and the removal of independent policy advice. The union used similar strategies to those used in 1987 to protect threats to working conditions, including an information campaign, a picket outside Parliament House, a protest rally, and lobbying of Parliamentarians. When the Act was passed with little change, the QSSU continued the campaign, particularly journal articles, to no avail (QSSU, Apr 1988:1-3,6; Jun 1988:9; Jul 1988:1; Oct 1988:1-2,6; Nov 1988:2; Dec 1988:6; Jan 1989:1,4-5).
In the election year of 1989, the QSSU announced ‘no more Mr Nice Guy’. It strengthened its relationship with the POA, by discussing amalgamation, and planning a joint state election campaign. The Government responded with provocative activities, abolishing preference for unions, establishing a union corruption inquiry, and initiating the privatisation and closure of certain prisons. The QSSU decided not to be ‘lured’ into industrial action that might divert attention away from the election issues, and used more subtle strategies to convey its message. It highlighted that a major corruption Inquiry recommended a reduction of political interference in public service careers, to prevent rewards for political loyalty rather than merit (QSSU, Jan-May 1989). In June 1989, the QSSU entered the election campaign, with posters, newspapers, and a survey of candidates in a Brisbane by-election. Public sector unions jointly urged their 60,000 members to use their combined voice to protest against the weakening of the career service. While the QSSU claimed that this was not a political campaign, it ran articles discrediting Government programs, and highlighting the Government’s plans to privatise public utilities. Conversely, it drew attention to the Labor blueprint for reform, which promised to restore the career service conventions under an independent personnel agency. The journal articles and full-page advertisements were unashamedly biased, comparing each party’s position, and imploring public servants to express their distaste for the Government’s actions (QSSU, Jan–Dec 1989). There was no doubt that the union supported the Labor Party platform. Labor won the election.

The union’s activities from 1986-1989 are consistent with all of the propositions. The union recognised that its preferred strategies had failed to prevent drastic changes to the professional interests of a career public service. An emergent strategy became evident as the union responded with new, often more militant tactics, including more collaboration with other unions, and mobilisation of members in both protest rallies and lobbying of parliamentarians. Additionally, the union abandoned its traditionally non-partisan stance, and actively encouraged members to support a particular party at a state election.


The Goss Labor Government established the Public Sector Management Commission (PSMC) as the central personnel agency, to ‘achieve efficiency, effectiveness, economy and impartiality in the management of the public sector’ (PSMC Act, 1990). The PSMC was intended to provide direction to public service employment under Westminster principles, to keep the recruitment and promotion of public servants out of direct political control (Goss, 1989), and to replace the devolution that had ‘threatened to become incoherence’ (Davis, 1995:104-106). The QSSU reminded public servants that the convention of political neutrality required them to serve the new government without harbouring any political alignments. The union initially noted its full support for the PSMC’s goals, and enjoyed being involved in discussions and the advisory board. However, as the reforms began to ‘bite’, this support was sorely tested and soon faltered (QSSU, Dec 1989:3; Jan 1990:1; Feb 1990:3; Apr 1990:1,4; May 1990:1,6).
The Goss Government proposed to corporatise Government Owned Entities (GOEs), to enshrine a commercial focus. The QSSU considered that this would potentially affect all of the conventions, by fragmenting the unified service and weakening merit and tenure, and so it continued its previous information campaign against privatisation. It eventually accepted Government assurances that corporatisation was an alternative to privatisation rather than a prelude to it. Nevertheless, the Government privatised prisons when it considered that they had failed to meet the challenge of being a GOE (through resistance of reforms, and alleged political games and sabotage by allowing prisoners to escape). The union responded with a variety of strategies. It continually lobbied the Government to uphold its election promises, terminate the privatisation experiments, and re-integrate prisons into the public service. The journal ran an information campaign against the private company running the prison, for its ‘creative accounting’ and short cuts on staffing, medical costs and rehabilitation. The union also used some more militant tactics. Members participated in a political campaign, including a protest march and rally, and vigorous contact with Labor Parliamentarians. Residents near prisons were ‘letter-boxed’ about the security risks under privatisation, and encouraged to lobby their Parliamentarians (QSSU, Dec 1989:6; May 1990:3; Jul 1990:1,3; Aug 1990:1; Sep 1990:1; Oct 1990:3; Nov 1990:1; Dec 1990:3; Jan 1991:4; May 1991:1; Jun 1991:4; Aug 1991:1; Sep 1991:5; Oct 1991:5; Jan 1992:4; Mar 1992:3,5; Apr 1992:5,7; Jun 1992:7).

The Government sought to introduce a new Classification and Remuneration System (CRS). The union supported the CRS in regard to the standardisation of wages across broader groups of public servants. However, negotiations faltered over philosophical differences regarding other aspects, such as the extent of the streamlining of classifications, and the link between performance reviews and salary increases. The union’s primary strategy of persistent negotiation achieved some minor gains. However, the Government considered that the union was stifling reform, and issued two Employment Standards that made the PSMC the sole umpire over issues of ‘managerial prerogative’. The QIRC was called upon for assistance, but confirmed that the Government could issue Standards without union approval. The union used more militant tactics, and mass meetings of QSSU and POA members endorsed a political and industrial campaign. Union members were again encouraged to lobby their state Labor Parliamentarians (QSSU, Mar 1990:3; Oct 1990:1; Nov 1990:3; Feb 1991:1,3,5,8; Mar 1991:1; Apr 1991:1).

The Goss Government reforms strengthened the merit principle. First, it introduced a more open recruitment and selection process that matched ability to job requirements, and opened recruitment to non-public servants. However, this was unpopular with those employees who preferred the previous internal promotion system. The union journal criticised the perceived influx of ‘Mexicans’ and academics as being cronism and ‘jobs for the boys’. It lobbied the PSMC about possible discrimination against existing public servants, but was assured that their experience was considered in selection processes (QSSU, Mar 1991:4; Apr 1991:3; Jul 1991:9; Aug 1991:9; Nov 1991:6; Dec 1991:3). Second, the Government strengthened merit protection through a broader and more transparent appeals process. The union supported the broader appeals process, but remained unable

While the Government restored tenure to many senior public servants who had previously been on contract, some other initiatives reduced tenure in this period. Departmental restructuring led to a spate of redundancies. Union lobbying against these redundancies was ignored, as the Premier considered that they were not inconsistent with the reforms outlined before the election (QSSU, Nov 1990:8; Mar 1991:1; Sept 1991:5; Nov 1991:7). The Government introduced a new Ministerial power to ‘spill’ any modified position and require the employee to re-apply for their job. The union perceived this as an underhand method of getting rid of people, and lobbied unsuccessfully against it (QSSU, Apr 1991:3). When maintenance work at one school was contracted out, the union lobbied with letters to Ministers and employee petitions, to no avail. The union agreed to be involved in the development of guidelines for a 12-month trial of contracting-out, just to remain involved, and felt vindicated when the trial was evaluated as deficient, and discontinued (QSSU, Jan 1991:7; Apr 1991:4; Sept 1991:4; Apr 1993:3).

Public sector unions banded together in protest against the broad range of reforms that affected the size and function of the public service. While this was a coordinated union response, it remained reactive and an emergent strategy. The QSSU accelerated amalgamation plans with the POA, and affiliated with the Trades and Labour Council (TLC). As militant industrial action was limited by public responsibilities, the QSSU President suggested political affiliation as a means to increase union influence (QSSU, Apr 1990:3,9; May 1990:1; Aug 1990:1; May 1991:3). Journal articles and an ongoing national campaign were designed to shame Labor Governments for cutting public sector jobs during high unemployment, and budget processes were targeted for assurances of no job cuts (QSSU, Jun 1990:1; Aug 1990:3; Jun 1991:4,7; Sep 1991:3; Jun 1992:1; Aug 1992:5; Sep 1992:1).

Notwithstanding its disillusionment, the union remained partisan in support of Labor. Union journal articles noted that the Queensland reforms were not unique, and condemned the industrial relations policies of conservative parties. The union warned Labor about the groundswell against its policies and actions. It got the Chair of the PSMC to concede some failure to communicate and commit to more constructive relationships in the future (QSSU, Jan 1990:4; Mar 1990:1,3; Dec 1990:3; Jan 1991:3; Jun 1991:3; Sep 1991:5-6; Nov 1991:6; Jan 1992:3,5; May 1992:3; Jun 1992:3,5; Jul 1992:3; Aug 1992:4). In the 1992 state election, the union outlined each political party’s platform, which revealed a softer approach from conservative parties. The union implored public servants not to make a hasty decision based on recent events. Labor won the election (SPSFQ, Sep 1992:3-8; Oct 1992:3).

The union’s activities from 1989-92 are consistent with all of the propositions. It attempted to revert to its preferred strategies to protect members' professional interests, and demonstrated inertia during the initial reforms. When these preferred strategies failed, an emergent strategy becomes evident as the union continued to strengthen relationships with
other groups, and adopted more militant tactics such as mobilisation of members in public rallies and political and industrial action.

1992-1995 The Disillusionment with Labor Grows

The union became increasingly frustrated with the PSMC. First, it considered that the PSMC focused more on its efficiency agenda than its fairness and equity agenda. Second, negotiations with the industrial relations department tended to be over-turned by the stronger central agencies (i.e. PSMC, Treasury and Office of Cabinet). The union hoped for improvements under a new PSMC Chair appointed in mid-1994 (SPSFQ, Jan 1993:8; Mar 1994:20; Jul 1994:7).

As a result of comments made by the Premier in an interstate forum, the QSSU suspected a plan to privatise the Government’s banking and insurance functions. A vigorous union campaign included journal articles about broken promises, lobbying the Treasurer, writing to Parliamentarians, and distributing brochures at the Labour Day March. This campaign succeeded in gaining assurances on all of the union’s concerns about privatisation and corporatisation (SPSFQ, May 1993:1; Jun 1993:12; Jan 1994:1; Feb 1994:1,3; Jun 1994:1,3). Prisons continued to be a ‘hotspot’, with strikes each year. The union sought QIRC assistance after one strike, and managed to draw management into negotiations on prison staffing levels (SPSFQ, Oct 1993:3; Nov 1993:9; May 1994:13).

The union considered that the unified service was under threat from other Government initiatives. The PSMC sought to avoid consultation on a new job evaluation process that the union considered introduced service-wide inequities. It also avoided establishment of a Classification Review Tribunal that the Government had promised as a means to address service-wide equity. The union’s tactics were relatively moderate, including approaching the QIRC and encouraging members to write to their Minister and local members, and had little success (SPSFQ, Dec 1992:5; Apr 1993:1; Jun 1993:3; Jul 1993:18; May 1995:7). The journal criticised the revised Performance Review Standard, which prompted a letter from the PSMC complaining about the ‘false portrayal’ of the Standards in the journal. This reaction from the Government demonstrated the effectiveness of the journal’s information campaigns (SPSFQ, Jul 1993:5; Sep 1993:12).

In accordance with new state Wage Fixation Principles, the Government pursued productivity-based enterprise bargaining (EB), which presented a significant threat to the convention of a unified service and standardised conditions. The union conducted an extensive political and industrial campaign on Government proposals. After considerable negotiation and stalemate, the Government tabled a proposal that would fragment the public service into several bargaining units, with potentially different wage outcomes. The union claimed to oppose this fragmentation, but after two years without a pay increase it wanted to expedite the process. The first draft EB agreement was rejected by the union council and led to the resignation of certain senior union officials, although journal contributors suggested they were forced out due to union factionalism. The final
agreement retained the fragmentation of the service and potentially disparate outcomes (SPSFQ, 1993-1994).

Merit was seldom discussed in this period, possibly because it was not under threat, or was of lesser interest to the new union leaders. The union did not agree to a revised Recruitment and Selection Standard, but was unsuccessful in having it amended (SPSFQ, Jul 1993:9). It was also unsuccessful in gaining a review of the appeals system, which was perceived as having a poor success rate (SPSFQ, Jan 1993:8, Oct 1993). While the union had defended merit under the longstanding view that merit was synonymous with seniority, it was less enthusiastic about the new open competitive merit arrangements. It agreed to the dilution of the merit principle, allowing exemption from appeals when merit was protected by other means such as the involvement of union representative in the selection panel. This would prevent the displacement of staff during multiple selection processes such as organisational restructuring, favouring tenure over merit (SPSFQ, Oct 1993:4).

The union actually played a role in weakening tenure, when it lobbied for relaxation of the redundancy policy. The existing policy provided only for the retrenchment in the case of surplus positions (for example, when a position was abolished) and not surplus people (for example, people who do not have a job as a result of re-classification or re-location of positions). However, employees sought greater opportunities to access redundancy packages. The new Standard allowed redundancies for surplus people, and relaxed merit requirements to allow redeployed employees to transfer at level without having to compete for positions (SPSFQ, Oct 1993:12; Jan 1994:4). While the union supported a policy for easier redundancies, its journal also criticised the Government regarding the increase in redundancies, and the ‘backdoor privatisation’ when redundant positions were replaced with contractors (SPSFQ, June 1993:2; Aug 1995:6). The union ran a lobbying campaign to ‘Save the Department of Primary Industries’ when funding cuts led to ongoing redundancies (SPSFQ, Mar 1993:3; Jun 1993:1; Aug 1993:5).

Public sector reforms continued to affect the size and function of the public service. As in the previous period, the QSSU joined with other unions in a coordinated, but nonetheless reactive, strategy. It amalgamated with the POA in late 1992, and with federal unions in 1994 (SPSFQ, Oct 1992, Nov 1992; Apr 1993:9; Dec 1993:12; Apr 1994:1). It joined a national campaign of industrial and political action, seeking new taxes to support service delivery and job expansion to counter unemployment, without success. It took the Treasury Department before the QIRC, and gained agreement to review rather than remove conditions under the 1993 budget (SPSFQ, Jun 1993; Aug 1993; Sep 1993, Jun 1994:3). In 1993, the union continued its information campaign against conservative policies, through a public rally against the Victorian Government’s reduction of the public service and working conditions, and criticism of the federal Opposition’s policies and the impact on Queensland public sector jobs. The union was criticised by some members for the journal’s apparent editorial bias, but it claimed to be protecting the public sector rather than attacking conservative parties (SPSFQ, Nov 1992:3-5; Dec 1992.5, 10-11; Jan 1993:7,14,15; Feb 1993:3-5,8-9; 10; Mar 1993:12).
The journal took a significantly different approach to the 1995 election. It did not provide the usual opportunity for all parties to state their position on the public service, but did run an article about its meeting with the conservative parties and a list of their promises (May 1995:13). Labor scraped back into power, and the union hoped that it had learned a lesson about privatisation, redundancies, and excessive restructuring (Aug 1995:2,4,36). When a change of government looked possible at a 1996 by-election, the journal again favoured the conservative parties. It questioned Labor’s commitment to maintaining a viable public service, but in contrast congratulated the conservative parties for their appreciation of the legitimacy of trade unions (Nov 1995:2,39). The by-election led to the conservative parties forming Government with the aid of an independent member.

During this period, a significantly different strategy was evident from the discourse in the journal. The first proposition was disproved or at least challenged, as the professional interests of members and the career service conventions seemed to become secondary to financial interests. It played a role in weakening the conventions of merit and tenure in some respects, and accepted the fragmentation of the service through enterprise bargaining proposals. There are several possible explanations, including the extensive resources required by the EB process, the agency rather than service-wide focus encouraged by EB and managerial reforms, or the different interests of union leaders who were not career public servants. A certain resignation was evident when the SPSFQ Secretary noted that the union chose to ‘organise rather than agonise’ in response to the reforms. By 1995, the journal had also become a less reliable source of information on overall union strategy: it was printed quarterly rather than monthly and so was less able to provide timely news or influence election outcomes; it refocused from reporting on the status of matters and outcomes of meetings, toward a more news worthy approach; and the professional and industrial benefits of union membership seemed to become secondary to other services such as Union Shopper cards (SPSFQ, Feb 1996:2; Mar 1997:3). This change in focus meant little evidence of strategy in relation to protection of the career service conventions, as put forward in the other propositions. There is some evidence of emergent strategy and militant tactics in campaigns regarding other matters.

Conclusion

The propositions drawn from the literature are supported throughout most of the case study. The period from 1980-86 confirmed that the union focused on the professional interests of members, and that this was achieved through a relatively stable preferred strategy of lobbying and negotiation. Initially, there was a certain inertia, and the career service conventions decayed, as the union continued to rely on these preferred strategies, despite their diminishing success. Emergent strategies became evident in response to threats to the career service conventions, and led to more militant strategies. These included stronger information campaigns, and increasing recourse to industrial tribunals and courts. There were also alliances and campaigns with peak union bodies and other public sector unions (although this seemed to be for collaboration and strength against Government policies, rather than integration into the broader labour movement). While the QSSU frequently engaged in the political arena, its activities seemed non-partisan, publishing each political
party’s platform in the 1980, 1983 and 1986 elections without recommendation, lobbying in every marginal seat regardless of the political party, and not mentioning newsworthy political issues that did not specifically affect QSSU members.

The period from 1986-89 also confirmed the propositions. The QSSU initially tried to continue to protect members’ professional interests through its traditional preferred strategies. The union abandoned its inertia and consciously changed strategy in response to dramatic changes in the environment. An emergent strategy became evident, as it responded to the removal of the conventions under the 1988 legislation. The new responses included stronger alliances with other unions, and more militant tactics, such as increased membership involvement in rallies and lobbying Parliamentarians. Most significantly, the QSSU departed from its non-partisan approach. The conservative parties did not intend to change their approach, while Labor promised far-reaching reform and restoration of the career service. The union took a side, and contributed to a change of government in 1989.

The period from 1989-92 reveals some attempt to revert to the traditional preferred strategies of lobbying and negotiation, which were expected to be effective under the Labor Government. However when these preferred strategies failed, an emergent strategy was again evident as the union utilised additional and sometimes more militant tactics including membership rallies and protests, lobbying of Parliamentarians, and recourse to tribunals. These militant tactics were regularly used, and it could be said that they had been added to the union’s repertoire of preferred strategies. The union retained its partisan approach in the 1992 election, quelling the groundswell against Labor, and demonstrating clear support for it as the lesser of two evils.

The period from 1992-95 disproves, or at least does not confirm, the first proposition that a public sector union is focused on members’ professional interests rather than financial interests, and demonstrates some lessening of the union’s interest in the career service conventions. Emergent strategies and militant tactics were evident in other campaigns. The union retained its partisan approach at the 1995 and 1996 state elections, but this time in support of the conservative parties. This may be explained by Gardner’s conclusion that a change of strategy may be attributed to dramatic changes in the environment (for example, reforms) and union leadership.

The propositions drawn from the literature were confirmed in most instances in this case study. The literature did not predict that the union would lessen its focus on the career service conventions. The literature also did not predict that, as the public service became increasingly politicised, the major union would also take a more partisan stance at elections.

References

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