

Queensland State Archives

Department of Public Works

Queensland 1979 – Background Document

Background to the release of the 1979 Queensland Cabinet Minutes

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For much of 1979, public attention was fixed on a succession of controversial decisions and actions taken by the State Government. Arguably, the most contentious and publicly emotive issue was the demolition of the Bellevue Hotel in Brisbane. The National Trust had argued for the hotel's preservation, and the 'Save the Bellevue' campaign became something of a cause célèbre. This public fervour did little to sway the mind of the Premier, who, going on a structural report commissioned by the Department of Works, described the hotel as being "in a bit of a state". ["Bellevue – just a heap of rubbish, Joh", *Courier-Mail*, 28 Mar., p. 3] While reports surfaced late that Cabinet was still considering its options – either restoration, retention of the hotel's façade or demolition – it appears that the Bellevue's fate was already sealed by virtue of the Department of Works' earlier report. ["Three options on Bellevue", *Courier-Mail*, 18 Apr., p. 1; "Down it comes – a sunken garden in its place", 19 Apr., p. 1] After 17 April, the Cabinet Minutes make no further reference to the Bellevue Hotel before its demolition. It is still unclear who made the final decision to have the hotel knocked down late on Friday evening of 20 April, or whether a Joint Government Parties meeting decided that matter as proposed.

Fallout from the Bellevue Hotel demolition was not contained to public protest. Terry Gygar, Liberal Member for Stafford, embarrassed the Government when he tabled a censure motion in Parliament criticising the summary handling of the demolition.

The motion attracted the support of thirteen Liberal backbenchers in addition to the votes of the Opposition; the motion was still defeated 41-30, with several Liberals admitting they had voted in favour of the hotel's destruction at the Joint Government Parties meeting. ["Toe the line or else, Joh tells Liberals", *Courier-Mail*, 27 Apr., p. 3]

Attention was again focused on the manner of Government conduct when, during the second half of the year, Cabinet discussed proposed legislation to equip authorities with strike breaking and Union deregistration powers. The Essential Services Bill was several times redrafted and revisited when Liberal Members repeatedly rejected its 'draconian' and 'crude' provisions. ["New strike law too tough, says Cabinet", *Courier-Mail*, 21 Jul., p. 3] In addition to these setbacks in Cabinet, the Premier faced public criticism over questionable funding practices to the self-styled 'Joh Bjelke-Petersen Foundation', while Russ Hinze, the Minister for Local Government and Main Roads, cut short an overseas trip to face questions in Parliament over a Gold Coast land rezoning scandal and conflicts of interest with his family businesses. [*Courier-Mail*, 24 Sep., p. 3; 5 Oct., p. 3]

Tension between the Coalition partners simmered throughout the year, with a variety of issues (and Liberal aspirations to Coalition seniority) clouding relations. In January, the Premier and Deputy Premier publicly aired their differences over a proposal to take a major share stake in the Bank of Queensland. Debate between the two party leaders was widely reported, despite the matter being the subject of a 'Secret' Cabinet decision. [Dec. 29798, 11 Jan.; "Joh backs bank deal", *Courier-Mail*, 13 Jan., p. 1; "Edwards in tilt at Joh over bank", *Sunday Mail*, 14 Jan., p. 1] Leaders and members of both parties also clashed over Coalition policy on 'three-cornered elections' (where Liberal candidates would contest National-held seats at upcoming State by-elections) and the 'separate Senate ticket' issue (where the State Liberal Party Executive proposed to run a team separate to the Nationals on the Senate ballot at the next Federal election. [*Courier-Mail*, 19 Jul., p. 2; "Joh hints at break with Lib. partners", 21 Sep., p. 1; 24 Sep., p. 1]

As in preceding years, the Government's continuing ban on street marches proved a sticking point in relations between the Coalition partners. Senior Liberal Party figures frequently waded into the debate, criticising the National Party's style of 'government by the executive' as "a blot on the State's administration". ["March change is Libs' price", *Sunday Mail*, 29 Apr., pp. 1, 3] Like the previous year, though, there was no decision recorded in the Cabinet Minutes relating to this policy.

In August, however, there appeared to be a sudden policy reversal. Anti-nuclear power demonstrators were 'free' to return to the streets of Brisbane when an application for a permit to march on Nagasaki Day protesting French nuclear tests in the Pacific was approved unexpectedly. [*Courier-Mail*, 9 Aug., p. 9; 10 Aug., p. 3] Among those to join in the 'legal' protest were State Labor MPs Bob Gibbs, Kev Hooper and Terry Mackenroth, as well as 'serial' marcher and watch-house 'guest', Labor Senator George Georges.

Divisions within the ALP continued to dog the Opposition, with Ed Casey's 'moderating' leadership seeming to do little to allay the in-fighting. At the party's State Conference in Rockhampton, disunity over the pace of reforms ordered by the Federal Executive the previous year was heavily reported in the press. [*Sunday Mail*, 18 Feb., p. 1; *Courier-Mail*, 19 Feb., p. 3; 20 Feb., p. 3; 22 Feb., p. 1] Disciplinary hearings were conducted on separate occasions during the year against ALP members who publicly criticised the party leadership. Among those charged (and more than once) were Senator George Georges and Railway Station Officers' Union Secretary, Peter Beattie; both were suspended from the party amid factional protests but later had the decisions overturned by appeal to the ALP Federal Executive. [*Courier-Mail*, 22 Oct., p. 1; 1 Dec., p. 3]

On the day after his 68th birthday, Joh Bjelke-Petersen became the State's longest-serving Premier, surpassing the previous record of ten years, five months and five days held by Country Party Premier, the late Sir Francis Nicklin. [*Courier-Mail*, 13 Jan., p. 1]

The new Parliamentary Annexe building (dubbed the 'Taj Mahal') in Brisbane's CBD, which cost over \$20 million to construct, was officially opened on 12 March by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester in front of a crowd of 1,400. [*Courier-Mail*, 13 Mar., p. 3] On 20 June, several Cabinet members attended the official project opening of the highly controversial Iwasaki Resort development near Yeppoon. In an opportune decision, Cabinet had scheduled a meeting at Yeppoon on the day before the ceremonial ground-breaking. [Dec. 30389, 9 Apr.; *Courier-Mail*, 19 Jun., p. 3; 20 Jun., p. 1; 21 Jun., p. 1]

As the year commenced, Tropical Cyclone 'Peter' brought record rainfall across far north Queensland, followed quickly by Cyclones 'Gordon' and 'Greta' in the first fortnight of January alone. Otherwise, the year began with extremely hot and dry weather over most of eastern Australia, with Brisbane and other sub-tropic centres receiving only meagre summer rainfall. [*Courier-Mail*, 9 Jan., p. 3] This pattern persisted for the remainder of the year, Brisbane receiving only 748mm of rain in total – over 400mm below the city's average. By the year's end, 16 shires and parts of three others across the length and breadth of inland Queensland – totalling a quarter of the State's land – were declared drought-stricken. Some graziers reported a 50% fall in calving after the cattle breeding season, while wheat growers expected a harvest only one-third the size of the previous year's record crop. [*Courier-Mail*, 16 Oct., p. 12; 28 Dec., p. 3; 31 Dec., p. 2]

In 1979, Australia's population stood at 14,602,481. Of this figure, Queensland boasted 2,239,669 residents; 1,046,400 of them (or roughly 47%) lived in Brisbane.

Industrial disputes remained a major concern for the State and Federal Governments throughout the year, prompting the Queensland Cabinet to draft retributive legislation in response to strike action in certain 'essential' industries. Nationwide, there were 2042 strikes across all industries involving nearly 1.9 million workers. In Queensland, 467,900 working days were lost to industrial action, equating to roughly \$12 million in lost wages.

As in previous years, the Queensland economy felt the pressure of downward financial trends globally and nationally. Yet despite the 1978/79 budget forecasting a deficit of almost \$390,000, in July the Treasurer, Dr Edwards, announced an unexpected surplus in the State's coffers of \$571,000. [*Courier-Mail*, 13 Jul., p. 2]

The national unemployment rate fairly improved, decreasing from 6.8% in November 1978 to 5.5% in November 1979 (averaging 6.2% over the year). In Queensland, the rate slid from 6.9% to 5.5% – or 27,000 jobless (averaging 6.6% over the year). Over the same period, standard variable mortgage rates remained steady at 9.13%, down from the 9.38% for much of the previous year.

The State average male weekly earnings was \$233.50 (compared to \$243.50 nationally), a rise of 9.7% over the previous twelve months. The State weekly basic wage was \$83.10 for men (a rise of \$2.60 from the year before) and \$66.90 for women (a rise of \$2.10); the wage attracted an additional remote area allowance of up to \$3.25. The guaranteed minimum award wage was \$124.40 per week. Public sector wages included \$198.60 per week for first-year police officers, \$163.55 per week for first-year, two-year trained teachers, and \$125.00 per week for first-year registered nurses. The State Service Union lodged a claim late in the year for a 12% pay rise for Queensland's Public Service staff, based on a work value and relativity case. [*Courier-Mail*, 10 Nov., p. 7]

At the start of the year, the inflationary rise in living costs was higher in Brisbane than in any other State capital. [*Courier-Mail*, 31 Jan., p. 1] The Consumer Price Index rose in Queensland by 0.7% in the March quarter and by 2.3% in the June quarter, making an 8.3% rise in inflation for the 1978/79 year (slightly above the national average of 8.1%).

Prices for some staple items remained relatively low – bread, for instance, was subject to unregulated price discounting by city manufacturers. In contrast, meat costs fluctuated during the year, with cattle yard prices falling by as much as 30 cents per kilogram before rising again sharply; rump steak sold in city butcher shops for \$5/kg. [*Courier-*

Mail, 28 Jul., p. 12; 21 Nov., p. 8] Other items predictably rose in price, milk increasing by almost two cents per litre for the second time in the year to 51c for a litre carton. [*Courier-Mail*, 30 Oct., p. 1] Petrol prices rose repeatedly, being subject to greater global demand as a result of oil supply shortages; motorists saw bowser prices jump almost 10 cents in the first half of the year to at least 30c/litre. [*Courier-Mail*, 16 Jan., p. 8; 28 Apr., p. 3; 30 Jun., p. 1] Mid-year, the Minister for Main Roads, Russ Hinze, warned that fuel rationing across the State was “imminent”. [*Courier-Mail*, 27 Jun., p. 1]