

How Joh inspired a generation

by Liz Willis

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The Bjelke-Petersen regime left Queenslanders with an unintended legacy, writes Liz Willis.

When I was in year 3, one of my classmates informed us we had a new premier, Mr Johannes Bjelke-Petersen. And we all laughed - mainly at her pronunciation of his unfamiliar long name. We didn't know or care that the name would still be stamped on Queensland almost 20 years later, and continue to bother us for 28 years after that.

I do not have to go into detail about Joh Bjelke-Petersen's government. He led a corrupt, violent and unprincipled regime, as the Fitzgerald inquiry showed. Yet his almost 20-year reign also produced a magnificent byproduct: a remarkable oppositional culture manifested in music, theatre and art; media, comedy and satire. Bjelke-Petersen unwittingly trained an army of politicised Queenslanders who, in any other time, may have lived the relatively uncomplicated lives of their forebears.

Joh Bjelke-Petersen united people in Brisbane in ways he could never have imagined - in fact in ways he may have deemed immoral and illegal. His approach to law and government threw together an unlikely alliance of people who otherwise may never have had the chance to meet, work and play together.

Media such as the community radio station 4ZZZ FM flourished as an unintended and unstoppable consequence. Under Joh's reign we also learned practical social justice. We did not have to go to university or read newspapers to know the desperate circumstances of Queensland Aborigines; of the reality of police violence and corruption; of the consequences of the blurring of the separation of powers: it was the stuff of our daily lives.

Through Bjelke-Petersen we grew to understand the importance of Aboriginal land and the special value that it could hold to all - especially mining companies and property developers. His government pushed through the substandard "deed of grant in trust" leases and laid the basis for the grog-based economies of Cape York communities.

The Rock against Racism concert held in Brisbane during the 1982 Commonwealth Games signalled the popularising of the national fight for indigenous rights. It would never have happened without Joh. The marches were deemed illegal and people were arrested daily.

Joh Bjelke-Petersen was a hardworking and driven man and he made those of us who were on the other side of his political fence work even harder unwittingly steeling and skilling up his political opponents.

The Queensland political scene is now populated by many who may have never been driven to politics had they not encountered the effects of the strongarm politics of his government in their jobs in law, community services, media and education or in their daily grind as foot soldiers in the army of the unemployed.

I am not angry we were denied the rich, varied and comparatively relaxed life that young Queenslanders now enjoy. I am proud to have lived through that time and also proud that Brisbane and Queensland emerged from being national jokes to be the desirable locations they are today.

Goodbye, Joh. You ruthlessly moulded Queensland in your image and marked all of our lives forever. I offer my sympathies to your family in their loss of a beloved father and grandfather. I also pay tribute to those who survived your regime and remember those who didn't.

Liz Willis, an adviser to Senator Aden Ridgeway, worked at 4ZZZ from 1980 to 1986.