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## QUEENSLAND

On his ascension to the premiership in December 1987, Mike Ahern signalled a fresh start for Queensland — a vision of excellence, with a promise of quality in public administration and public life. By the beginning of 1989, however, little of that vision had been realised. Indeed Premier Ahern appeared beleaguered. His National Party colleagues were fighting in public, opinion polls put Labor in a position to win at the election due before the end of the year and Queenslanders waited, with considerable anticipation, for Mr Tony Fitzgerald to deliver his official report on corruption, due on 4 July.

From his first day in office Ahern had been attacked by his predecessor. Sir Joh Bjelke-Peterson never forgave Ahern for his role in removing Queensland's longest serving premier. Sir Joh amused himself during 1988 by predicting doom for the Ahern-led Nationals. By January 1989 those prophecies appeared ever more plausible. Sir Joh turned 78 on Friday, 13 January, and in a series of staged events during the coming month sought to undermine his successor. The Bjelke-Peterson family helped in the venture, son John describing the National Party without his father as "a sinking ship without any direction".

Deposed leaders tend to bitterness, but Sir Joh's interventions remained important because his criticism of Ahern's leadership accurately captured much concern within the National Party. Opinion poll data showed the State ALP, led by Wayne Goss, posing a real threat to

National Party dominance. The Liberal Party too, under new leader Angus Innes, claimed a revival in its support. By February some National MPs were hinting at a challenge to Ahern's leadership, probably from high-profile Police Minister Russell Cooper. Though Cooper dutifully scoffed at media reports, the theme of government disunity remained dominant for much of 1989.

Ahern worked hard to overcome his government's problems. The Premier appeared almost incessantly on radio and television to defend his policies and his ministers. He flew to London to promote Queensland, and returned talking of new contacts for local companies. Following time-honoured Queensland political tradition, Ahern then attacked the federal government — over housing policy and interest rates, over child poverty, and over intervention in local environmental decisions. An expensive advertising campaign, paid for by taxpayers, reinforced the government's message. "Queensland leads the Way" announced full page newspaper advertisements, as a smiling Mike Ahern pointed to charts proclaiming Australia's fastest growing economy, lowest taxes, record growth and best future.

Yet despite his considerable efforts, Ahern failed to persuade. Two factors combined to frustrate this familiar parochial appeal to Queensland sensibilities — the damage done by the Fitzgerald Inquiry, and continuing disunity within the National Party.

### Fitzgerald Inquiry

Most public hearings for the Fitzgerald Inquiry were completed in 1988; from February 1989 Commissioner Fitzgerald withdrew to contemplate his report. After a year of revelations, however, corruption had been established as the only real issue in Queensland politics, crowding out older economic and State rights concerns. Ahern proved unable to reshape the agenda. For despite Fitzgerald's absence, events conspired to keep the police, the judiciary and dishonest politicians in the news.

The Queensland police force had not enjoyed 1988. Its most senior officer, Commissioner Terry Lewis, had been stood down and now awaited legislation to remove him from office. A large number of police had admitted corruption in the witness stand, and many more were under internal investigation for misconduct (some 200 officers, said Justice Minister Paul Clauson in June). Several further incidents, therefore, did little for morale. On 19 March Queenslanders learned that police in

Toowoomba for a football competition had rampaged through a local hotel, abusing customers, wrecking fittings and refusing to pay for drinks. A subsequent investigation made little headway, provoking accusations that police had again closed ranks to protect their own. It seemed, despite Fitzgerald, little had changed in the force — an impression reinforced a month later with allegations that officers were operating a sly grog shop and disco from their police station on Thursday Island.

Meanwhile, the saga of former Transport minister Don Lane kept corruption in the public eye. In late 1988 Lane admitted misappropriating ministerial expenses — and implicated fourteen other former and serving ministers in the practice. Lane did not resign immediately from Parliament, provoking a concerted media campaign about the morality of a confessed dishonest politician continuing to draw on the public payroll. Finally Lane bowed out at the end of January, collecting a superannuation payout of around \$535,000. Opposition leader Goss refused to sign the authorisation until Lane returned misused public money, but the Premier and Speaker combined to provide the necessary two signatures. Lane withdrew, his superannuation intact, to await charges from Fitzgerald Special Prosecutor Doug Drummond QC.

The resignation left Premier Ahern with an unwanted by-election in a Brisbane seat held only narrowly by the Nationals in the 1986 general election. A strange cast of candidates soon appeared, many reinforcing the message that corruption was the only real issue — a former policeman turned whistleblower, a one-time nightclub owner named in the terms of reference for the Fitzgerald Inquiry and of course Liberal and Labor candidates both talking of little but scandal. Though National Party candidate, car salesperson Betty Byrne-Henderson, bravely campaigned on the slogan "Send a Message to Canberra", the voters of Merthyr proved more concerned about Queensland issues. At the 13 May by-election the National Party vote collapsed to just fifteen per cent, leaving the Liberals to win the seat from Labor in a close contest. Merthyr, muttered some National Party figures, was a foretaste of the defeat to come if Ahern remained leader.

Thus corruption, and the impending Fitzgerald findings, hung over the government all through the opening months of 1989. Accusations of misconduct continued to surface — against Primary Industries Minister Neville Harper over administration of a drought-relief scheme, and against two senior judicial figures, Justices Vasta and Pratt. Vasta was eventually

dismissed from office by a special parliamentary sitting on 7 June. Former Premier Bjelke-Peterson told the Parliamentary Judges Commission of Inquiry that he had appointed Pratt to the bench believing him to be, "like all sensible people", "a National Party supporter". The Commission, however, found no evidence of wrong doing against Justice Pratt. While the judge was acquitted, many waited nervously to see who would be implicated when Fitzgerald delivered the report which Premier Ahern had promised to implement "lock, stock and barrel".

### National Party Disunity

Disunity had stalked the National Party since Bjelke-Peterson was pushed from office. Ahern talked of reconciliation, but tension remained between his supporters and those of the former premier. A reshuffle in January created more problems than it solved when Ahern chose to swap several portfolios rather than dismiss some lesser performing ministers. The move won little support within the party or the press. One backbencher was widely quoted as saying that if Ahern "thinks this is the right team to lead us into the next election then maybe we should be thinking about another leader".

The subsequent dismissal of Health Minister Leisha Harvey only exacerbated the problem. Ahern appeared to procrastinate before sacking the much criticised Harvey, who immediately threatened to resign and precipitate a by-election in her marginal Brisbane seat of Greenslopes. Harvey eventually withdrew to the backbench, another potential supporter for any move against the Premier.

In part continuing disunity reflected an internal argument about the direction of the National Party. Sir Joh had exemplified a rural party and philosophy while the younger, tertiary educated Ahern sought a more progressive image. Persuading the party room to follow his lead sometimes proved difficult. In February, for example, Ahern backed down from a recently announced policy that ministers could not accept gifts — a trivial incident, but characteristic of both Cabinet's unwillingness to accept change to established practice, and of Ahern's apparent indecisiveness when faced with opposition. A more serious challenge emerged in June when Speaker Lin Powell, an unreconstructed Bjelke-Peterson supporter, announced he could no longer remain in a party with Ahern as leader. Powell chose as his issue a recent decision allowing the re-employment of teachers with minor drug convictions, but the resignation reflected longer-term disagreements

between Ahern and more conservative elements of the National Party. Powell's resignation renewed speculation about a leadership challenge. Ahern survived into the parliamentary winter recess, but his hold on the top office appeared uncertain.

### The Labor Opposition

Oppositions do not win elections, says a truism of politics, governments lose them. Throughout the first months of 1989 political debate centred almost exclusively on the troubled Nationals. Yet given Queensland's zonal electoral system, and three-way electoral contests, Labor had few guarantees that government losses would be Opposition gains.

To ensure his party remained in the public eye, Labor leader Wayne Goss appeared to follow a two-part strategy. On the one hand, Labor sought to reinforce the image of a corrupt National Party administration. MPs attacked government advertising campaigns (costing \$9.5 million in the previous financial year), and criticised the government over controversial issues such as the Wolffdene dam, coastal development and foreign investment.

In one heated exchange Goss and deputy leader Tom Burns were ejected from Parliament in March for interjecting during question time. Yet the Opposition did not wish just to oppose. The second part of Labor strategy emphasised the party as a viable alternative government. Election advertisements, which began back in late 1988, talked of Wayne Goss and Labor as "The Only Change for the Better". A string of detailed policy papers — on regional development, housing, coastal development and tourism among others — all stressed responsible economic management and efficient, honest administration. Despite opinion polls running in Labor's favour, however, few believed in inevitable ALP victory at the forthcoming election, generally expected in December. Throughout 1989 the Goss team presented a disciplined and professional message, but one discounted by a media and electorate unable or unwilling to believe that Labor could finally, after thirty-two years, overcome the electoral system and win office.

### The Liberal Party

Both Labor and Liberal tacticians hoped their party would be the prime beneficiary of a National collapse. The Liberals had some cause for optimism — strong support at the 1988 Brisbane City Council elections, good polling at

the federal level, a reasonably high profile for Angus Innes and an experienced new State Director of the Queensland Liberal Party, David Fraser, a former adviser to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. Liberal election campaigning started early and followed a consistent theme: "Let's Put It Right" said the first newspaper advertisements in March. Innes talked of a Liberal resurgence, though Premier Ahern declared on several occasions that the Nationals would never return to coalition.

Yet two factors cast shadows over Liberal hopes. One was guilt by association — the Liberals were part of the government for much of the period investigated by Fitzgerald, though Innes had not been a minister during the coalition years. More important, however, was the political difficulty of establishing a viable middle position. Sitting on the cross-benches, the Liberals had to attack an unpopular government without encouraging the electorate to vote for the Opposition. In many seats, Liberal success would rely on the preferences of National Party voters. Should government support collapse completely, particularly in the crucial south-east zone, then Labor may win seats which should otherwise be comfortable Liberal gains. The Merthyr by-election, though a Liberal win, epitomised the problem. In what had long been a reasonably secure conservative electorate, the poor showing for the Nationals nearly delivered Merthyr to Labor candidate Barbara Dawson. Nineteen eighty-nine, then, promised both historic prospects and considerable risks for the Liberal Party in Queensland.

### A Fortieth Birthday

While political parties manoeuvred for position, an important player in Queensland politics celebrated a fortieth birthday. The zonal electoral system had been introduced by the Hanlon Labor government on 1 April 1949, and modified by successive National/Liberal and National Party governments. Opponents labelled the system a "gerrymander" (or, at least, a malapportionment) while defenders talked of "balanced regional political representation". There was little argument, however, about the effect of the system. Weighting country votes, and cordoning-off provincial city areas from their hinterlands, reduced the electoral impact of urban votes and so maximised National Party representation. A redistribution in 1985, which retained four separate weightings for electorates, enabled Bjelke-Peterson to retain power with just 36.9 per cent of the primary vote. Now

parties pondered how the electoral system might influence the 1989 result.

The zonal system has not been a topic of lasting controversy in Queensland, despite its obvious disadvantage for the Labor and Liberal parties. During 1989, however, the 'Citizens for Democracy' pressure group promoted successfully the issue of electoral fairness. CND had campaigned, somewhat sporadically, for a number of years with little noticeable effect. The Fitzgerald Inquiry provided an unexpected opportunity for more lasting impact. In its submission to Fitzgerald, CND asserted a direct link between electoral and political corruption; a government protected from full accountability, it argued, has little incentive to remain honest. Similar positions were expressed in a number of submissions, including that of the Labor Party. Now, in the weeks before the Fitzgerald Report was presented to the government, rumours spread that the Commission was taking the electoral argument seriously, and would make recommendations on the issue. As CND organisers cut the cake at a party called to mark the zonal system's fortieth birthday, they must have wondered whether their point of view was about to prevail.

#### **The Politicians We Deserve**

By July 1989, Queensland politics was a drama awaiting resolution. The Fitzgerald Report was about to arrive. An election was looming. The National Party appeared divided, speculation continued about the future of the Premier, and Labor and Liberal election campaigns were already underway. Yet how much these theatricals touched on the lives of ordinary Queenslanders remains a mystery. A federal parliamentary report, released in March, found "remarkable" ignorance and apathy about Australian politics. When a reporter from Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* (10 March 1989) interviewed students at the University of Queensland about state politics, a similarly disturbing pattern emerged. Though the sample was small, and the method doubtful, the poll found that those who see themselves as tomorrow's leaders "don't know much about today's". Clearly neither a vision of excellence, nor the promise of responsible alternative policies, had made much impact with at least some of the electorate.

P.C. & G.D.