

ACCOUNTABILITY -- FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE JOH ERA

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It is correct, Mr Chairman, that a discussion of accountability in the Bjelke-Petersen years might, of necessity, be brief. But this may depend on an answer to the question: *To whom was Johannes Bjelke-Petersen accountable?*

His administration of 19 years, in my view, became corrupt; he was accountable to his friends and cronies and potential benefactors. He was authoritarian. His view was that those who were not for him were against him.

Let's look not just at my assessment but the assessment of someone who was part of his government, a member of Cabinet, and a man who believed in accountability, Michael Ahern.¹ In fact, as Premier subsequently himself, Ahern moved quickly to introduce reforms including a Public Accounts Committee and a Register of Interests of Parliamentarians.

Three years ago he donated a copy of his unauthorised biography by Paul Reynolds, *Lock, Stock & Barrel*, to a charity book auction. This is what he inscribed inside the front cover:

With the benefit of hindsight, my two years in the Premier's office started a 'generation change' in the Government of Queensland. The process was made to change from secrecy (don't you worry about that) to openness; from corruption to transparency; from anti-intellectualism to a research-based community etc etc. It is still a work in progress but it is a lot better now and we made a good start.

I will tell you a story from the Joh era. Sadly, it is true.

At the beginning of May 1979, a leading businessman whose portfolio included major government contracts phoned a journalist and asked to visit him at home, or somewhere away from the public eye. The journalist's wife was a witness to what followed. In their lounge room, the businessman produced a letter on behalf of a political party, and supporting documents, and told of a private luncheon at which he had been the only guest.

Before the soup was finished, he said, his hosts had put the weights on him for a political donation. "Of course, he said, "I always kick in \$1000 or so to the government's campaign."

He was told, "We were thinking of rather more." Before he had regained his composure after being asked for a six-figure sum, he was asked about his current project. Would he finish on time?

"Yes," he said. He expected to.

Well, said his hosts, Minister X, here, will ensure Cabinet backdates the finishing time. That would entitle the company to a significant early-finishing bonus. And that would be his down payment.

The businessman offered the reporter a copy of this letter only if he could independently obtain another, because copies were individually typed and might not be exactly alike. It was six weeks before the journalist got another letter – and while it looked the same I can tell

¹ Michael Ahern was a Country/National party member of the Queensland Parliament from 1968-89, and Premier from 1987-9.

you it was not identical. These letters described this fundraising effort as 'investments in commercial protection'. Or they could be requests for bribes, depending on the way you look at it; donations ranging from \$25,000 to \$250,000 paid over three years.

This example is regarded as the first “brown paper bag” report, the system which gained notoriety from evidence before the Fitzgerald Inquiry which heard how these fundraising efforts had developed.

Apart from the donations, businessmen also left brown paper bags of cash on Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s desk.

In 1979, the National Party launched a \$2.5 million Bjelke-Petersen Foundation which was described as “a permanent tribute to Joh”. A \$10,000 donation would secure a private dinner with the Premier plus a scroll, personally signed and presented by him. If you allow for inflation you will see this was in no way a modest amount.

A \$50,000 donation to the Foundation would add an oil portrait of the donor to hang in the foyer of a selected building, a brass plaque commemorating the gift, and life membership of the National Party. And \$100,000 would gain naming rights to the building. The plan was to buy income-earning properties throughout the State.

By July 1979, when the foundation had raised \$800,000, concern was being raised about the tactics of some National Party fundraisers to solicit donations. Letters to businessmen signed by National Party president Sir Robert Sparkes said, in part:

Your contribution clearly should be viewed not as an act of altruistic generosity but as a sound and very essential investment in your commercial future, as well as our basic democratic lifestyle.

Think about it. A small government contractor at Gympie contacted the then State Liberal Party executive director Stephen Litchfield about a follow-up call for a big donation. He felt his relationship with the government might be threatened if he refused. Examples like this were passed to a federal MP on the Gold Coast, Eric Robinson, who referred them to the government of then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser.

One of the avenues to soften the blow of a donation was the National Party’s newspapers, where advertisements were also a tax deduction.

Sparkes denied allegations of improper pressure or favours in return for donations but allegations continued until fundraising efforts were wound down in 1984. The Fitzgerald Inquiry, which examined political donations in the broader context, reported:

Practices which were adopted with respect to donations included a propensity to accept large sums in cash, not infrequently from those who had benefited, or hoped to benefit, from dealings with the government ... While no finding of misconduct is made, there were occasions when persons or organisations engaged in business with the government or seeking business from it, made substantial donations to its political party.

I would like to give you another small insight into life in Queensland at the time. Under police rules of the day, a police officer apprehended for theft, assault, resisting arrest and even assaulting a fellow police officer could, with the express authorisation of the Police Commissioner, resign on the spot and claim long service pay on a pro-rata basis. When he

or she appeared in court, hours later, it was on summons as an unemployed labourer who had not been brought to attention previously, and could usually count on an unchallenged application for probation.

As for Freedom of Information: in those days we would say it amounted to the telephone number of the Premier's press secretary.

This was an era of publicly funded defamation actions to deter criticism of members of the government. It was a time when government practised commercial retaliation if media organisations were judged to have stepped out of line. *The Courier-Mail*, for instance, had its government advertising withdrawn when Cabinet objected to the way the paper chronicled its world. And Queensland had an electoral gerrymander based on a zonal system invented by Labor but perfected by the Nationals.

Queensland was in freefall towards the endemic corruption exposed by Fitzgerald.