

RESEARCH REPORT NO 18

The 1989 Queensland election remembered¹

Dr Chris Salisbury, Research Associate

With Premier Campbell Newman claiming during the lead-up that the 2015 Queensland election would be ‘historic’, it’s worth remembering the significant issues at play when the state’s voters went to the polls twenty-five years ago. TJ Ryan Foundation Research Associate Dr Chris Salisbury looks back at a modern benchmark for ‘historic’ state elections in Queensland.

The sad and untimely passing of former Queensland Premier, Wayne Goss, on 10 November 2014, prompted many to reflect on the years when Goss held centre stage in this state’s political spotlight. Following painfully closely from the death in October of former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, Goss became only the fifth former Queensland Premier to die after leaving office in the last fifty years. More significant was Goss’ death only a few weeks short of the 25th anniversary of the December 1989 state election, at which he led the Labor Party back into government, banishing the National Party after its 32-year grip on political supremacy in Queensland. The 1989 state election result, and the public exhilaration that greeted Goss’ victory, was Queensland’s own ‘It’s Time’ moment, an impression repeated at Goss’ recent memorial service by long-time friend and Labor colleague, Wayne Swan. The coincidence that the date of Goss’ win in 1989 – December 2nd – was the same as Whitlam’s historic 1972 federal election victory wasn’t lost on the politically attuned. At the same time, it reminded some that change can seem slower to arrive in Queensland than elsewhere.

Wayne Goss helped usher in a period of government in Queensland that was modernising, reformist and politically ‘clean’. After an unbroken 32 years of National Party-dominated governments in this state, famously including the 19-year premiership of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, when administrative malpractice and police corruption were allowed to take root, Goss’ time in office proved rehabilitative. His government’s early initiatives and landmark implementation of Fitzgerald Inquiry recommendations rode a wave of popular support, and advances made in governance and public administration were at times staggering in scope and reach, and seemingly introduced at breakneck speed. Perhaps inevitably, Goss’ reform program eventually slowed but it still prompted wariness and a growing pushback from an electorate unused to that scale of near-constant renewal. Yet Goss’ personal popularity with the voting public hardly dipped: playing on his personal approval ratings, the media dubbed him ‘Mr Seventy Percent’ nearly until the end of his premiership in 1996.

It’s a matter of some curiosity that Goss remained such a popular political figure, even when his government by the end of its second term was ‘on the nose’ across a good deal of the Queensland electorate, including among many of the state’s public sector workers. Another interesting observation is that, despite Goss’ popularity and holding such high public office, he remained a somewhat private figure, described by some at the time as ‘aloof’. So what did his parliamentary peers, and also members of the state’s bureaucracy, make of him and his political agenda as Premier? Since Wayne Goss’ death several leading identities with near experience of the transformative events of that period, such as Wayne Swan, Kevin Rudd, Peter Beattie and Peter Coaldrake, have offered personal and moving tributes remembering Goss’ determined leadership

¹ This article was written shortly before the 2015 Queensland state election.

and his landmark election as Premier in 1989. Significantly, Goss has also been remembered in respectful terms by those on the other side of politics, such as Rob Borbidge and Lawrence Springborg, both of whom recalled a powerful and persuasive performer in state parliament and a leader of undisputed integrity.

Adding to these public declarations are numerous interviews recorded with key figures from this period for the University of Queensland's oral history project, *Queensland Speaks* (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au>). Many of these interviews highlight what Goss' contemporaries recalled of him and of that time in government, casting a fresh and 'personal' light on the man and the reformist government he led. The collection of interviews on the Queensland Speaks website is also enriched by the presence of Wayne Goss himself, recorded in 2011 speaking frankly about his time as ALP leader, including that memorable 1989 election victory. Goss and his Labor government still hold a certain fascination for many interested in this state's politics; unsurprisingly, there was a huge spike in views of Wayne Goss' interview (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/wayne-goss>) on the Queensland Speaks site on 10 November and afterwards, with traffic across the site increasing almost ten-fold on that day.

In many respects, 1989 was a momentous year. Events on the national and international stage, such as the fallout from the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing and the startling dismantling of the Berlin Wall, brought home the power and urgency of popular movements for democratic reform. But at the time, Queenslanders could be forgiven for thinking that such movements were passing them by somewhat, while keeping their gaze focused largely on local events and conditions. The 'crony capitalism' that had become emblematic of the Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland, and which ultimately was responsible for that Premier's messy downfall, had been laid bare for all to see throughout the proceedings of the judicial inquiry into official misconduct and police corruption in Queensland, held between 1987 and 1989 and headed by barrister and former Federal Court judge Tony Fitzgerald, QC. When Premier Mike Ahern was handed the 'Fitzgerald Inquiry' report in mid-1989 and famously vowed to implement its findings 'lock, stock and barrel', the National Party's sole grasp on political power in Queensland was more or less lost. Ahern (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mike-ahern>) still holds, though, that voter polling at the time gave his government reasonable hope for re-election later that year, a position strengthened no doubt by the continued existence of favourable (the notoriously 'gerrymandered') electoral boundaries and vote weightage. Regardless, the Inquiry and its immediate aftermath sent shockwaves reverberating through the state's political and civic spheres, some of which are still being felt and revisited in this state today. According to Fitzgerald himself, some of the lessons of that time have recently been wilfully disregarded (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-28/tony-fitzgerald-sounds-alarm-on-government-standards/6052764>).

In December 1989, after two fitful years of the Ahern and then Cooper governments vainly wrestling with the fallout from the Fitzgerald Inquiry, the Labor opposition seemed poised finally to win office after 32 years of conservative rule in Queensland. The ALP ran a slick and focused election campaign under the banner, 'The only change for the better', with Goss very much leading from the front as the determined face of the campaign. In interview Goss recalled the sometime discomfort he felt at being so obviously the stand-alone figure of his party's push for power, but claimed that the critical issues at stake helped drive him to overcome any aversion to placing himself in the spotlight; if the 'cause was just', Goss felt compelled to stand tall and bring his party charges along with him. One of those charges, David Hamill (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/david-hamill>), first elected to parliament along with Goss in 1983, recalled Goss as the 'competent and respected spokesman' of the 'modern face' of a Labor Party pitching for a breakthrough change of government. By late 1989, this was an image and a message that resonated with many Queensland voters. Having replaced Ahern as Premier several weeks prior to the December election date, Russell Cooper (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/russell-cooper>) soon witnessed first-hand his party's fall from grace for the first time in many voters' living memory. This was a spectacular fall, not least because of its seemingly self-inflicted nature, and one that ushered in a revitalised ALP government with a young Premier barely two years into the job as Labor leader.

Wayne Goss went to the 1989 state election vowing to ‘sweep away the cobwebs’, not only of the recent years of corruption-tainted National Party rule, but also of a state economy that had become wedded to the conservative government’s attachment (and that of earlier Labor governments before it) to agricultural production and mining as the principal drivers of Queensland’s economic growth. With Goss’ election, the state government’s economic imperative shifted from a heavy reliance on these entrenched ‘pillars’ of primary industry and redoubled earlier tentative efforts to develop a more diverse and modern-oriented economy resilient to external shocks. This was a path that Ahern had tried to initiate during his premiership, only to meet with stonewalling resistance from within his own party and the National-voting heartland. After the watershed election win that saw Goss form the first Labor government since 1957 – albeit with a modest majority, holding 54 of the parliament’s 89 seats – the new Premier set about reforming the state’s administrative and legislative machinery. Anne Warner (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/anne-warner>), who became Labor’s first female Minister in 1989, recalled the challenges posed by Goss’ move to bundle several key policy areas into multi-portfolio departments. But in the same breath, she spoke of how Goss’ initiative provided a ‘real sense of purpose’ for new Ministers and a ‘huge sense of achievement’ in managing their portfolio responsibilities. Goss in fact spent much of his first term in office reconfiguring the state’s electoral and public administration structures, but also taking care to display to the electorate his government’s credentials for responsible economic management; in his own words, Labor ‘didn’t want to frighten the horses’.

One of the more interesting and significant aspects of the 1989 election outcome was the largely welcoming response by the public service to the change of government. When the election brought Goss and Labor into office after an entrenched period of conservative rule, many senior bureaucrats proclaimed (at least in private) their excitement at the prospect of broad administrative changes and renewed – or first-time – policy focus. Peter Henneken (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/peter-henneken>), later a Director-General for the Beattie government, felt strongly that by 1989 the public service was ‘ready and looking forward to change’. Even Peter Ellis (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/peter-ellis>), who later headed the Premier’s Department for the Nationals’ Rob Borbidge, enthused about the anticipation with which he and his public service colleagues awaited the promised reform agenda of Goss’ new government. For some, however, the changes (especially to policy development) seemed like ‘too much, too soon’, with Erik Finger (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/erik-finger>), retained by Goss as a respected head of the Premier’s Department, remembering the ‘angst’ and ‘tension’ felt by some bureaucrats unused to the ‘centralised command’ of Goss’ system of policy coordination. Relations with certain sections of the public service took on a decidedly ‘chilly’ feel when several heads of departments found themselves unceremoniously relegated to ‘the gulag’, an isolated place of restricted duties for bureaucrats seen by the incoming government as being ‘too close’ to National Party figures. Other accounts claim that many of Goss’ reforms were superficial and had too little of an impact upon government administration; nevertheless, these reforms marked the start of a professionalising agenda that built momentum – and indeed ruffled more bureaucratic feathers – as it progressed.

Immediately following its election in 1989, Goss’ government focused on implementing far-reaching administrative reforms, many in line with Fitzgerald Inquiry recommendations, but also mirroring similar restructuring in other jurisdictions, such as under Nick Greiner’s Liberal government in New South Wales. These changes sought to impose a structured order on the workings of the public service and brought some valuable refinements, including introducing the ‘merit principle’ for senior appointments, itself something of a revolution in the state’s public sector practice. Terry Hogan (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/terry-hogan>), also later a Director-General for Beattie’s government, fondly recalled the early period of the Goss government as ‘like starting everything over; it was ‘Year One’. ‘ One of the innovations copied from Greiner’s administration was the Office of the Cabinet, an offshoot of the Premier’s Department responsible for vetting and to some extent ‘streamlining’ the process of policy development and Cabinet submissions. Goss’ one-time chief of staff, Kevin Rudd, headed the Cabinet Office and quickly gained a reputation for demanding high standards and tightly controlling this policy process. Rudd’s approach didn’t sit well with several ‘established’ bureaucrats, some of whom saw his intrusion as damaging to the standing of the Goss government in the eyes of the public service. Long-time public servant Mal

Grierson (<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mal-grierson>) considered later that Rudd's nickname among government workers – 'Dr Death' – 'didn't come out of nowhere.' When interviewed separately, however, Glyn Davis, former Public Sector Management Commissioner and Rudd's successor as head of the Cabinet Office, held that many of the improvements to Queensland's public administration and governance in the past quarter of a century can be attributed to the early public sector reforms in the Goss era.

To win office and enact his reform agenda, and deliver on the aspirations of an invigorated electorate, including a cohort of enthusiastic public servants, Goss had to overcome not only the despised electoral gerrymander but also Labor's perceived lethargy and 'policy inertia' after so long in the political wilderness. That he did so in reasonably convincing fashion, and after only a relatively short time in the parliament and as party leader, speaks volumes about his tenacity, integrity and commitment to making his Labor team electable. It also reflects Goss' ability to lead decisively and with discipline, especially through periods of rapid and perhaps uncomfortable or unfamiliar reform. As Matt Foley, close friend and Minister in the Goss government, told mourners at Goss' memorial service: '[Goss] realised that the task of seizing government for Labor could be achieved only through hard work and application – he dedicated himself to that end.' Goss' victory at the 1989 state election and his time as Premier still resonate with many Queenslanders, and that period offers valuable lessons in political stewardship and responsible governance. By way of comparison with Queensland's current political landscape, there are clear differences today and signs that past experiences need reminding and revisiting. After an often turbulent first term in office marked by severe public sector cuts, administrative missteps and a questionable style of 'humble' leadership, it is probably doubtful whether Campbell Newman and his LNP government can expect similar bureaucratic enthusiasm or levels of voter support for their return to office come the 2015 state election. How clear a message this proves for Newman and his 'strong' government team, and how readily the next Queensland government takes on board the electorate's sentiments regarding trust, honesty and integrity, remain to be seen.

Interviews with most of the figures mentioned above, and others involved in the period under discussion, can be found at www.QueenslandSpeaks.com.au.