

## Transition to Government : Lessons from Queensland?

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The conference theme of the 2014 Public Policy Network focusses on the 2013 transition to power at the federal level from the Gillard-Rudd era to an Abbott government. This paper discusses an earlier transition which took place in Queensland in May 2012, from an ALP government led by Anna Bligh to an LNP government led by Campbell Newman. This transition pre-figured the national process in important ways. There were some elements which resembled activities in other states and nationally; there were also some startling departures from the norm.

The Newman victory and subsequent transition to government were abnormal in several dimensions. The ALP sought to exploit some of this abnormality in the campaign against Abbott in ways which may have dampened the anticipated conservative swing in Queensland in 2013. Coalition electoral strategists at the national level wanted to prevail upon Newman to behave more “normally”, at least for the period of the national election campaign. Nevertheless the echoes of Newman’s first hundred days, and the state campaign which preceded them, may have contributed to the unexpectedly strong showing by the ALP in Queensland in the national poll. (Rudd resuming the leadership may also have helped). The paper identifies seven lessons which might be drawn from the generally positive experience of Queensland’s transition from the perspective of the conservative coalition.

### ***1. How to change a leader***

The first abnormality of the 2012 transition in Queensland was the unorthodox change in party leadership - a response to polling which mirrored the later change inside the national ALP. Indeed, the success of the Newman gamble may have encouraged the plotting against Gillard, using the same sort of poll “evidence” to justify an attempt to improve the party’s chances of winning, or at least not losing too heavily.

In contrast to the ALP on the national scene, the change in leadership within the Queensland LNP was relatively peaceful, and this in turn created the

basis for the LNP's electoral victory.<sup>1</sup> The abnormalities of this change were, first, that it was a follow-up to an earlier merging of Liberal and National parties into a single Liberal-dominated party (from a coalition in which the Nationals had once held sway); second, that the change occurred without public rancour from disappointed contenders; and third, that the leader who enjoyed the support of the MP's was not himself an MP and did not become one until the general election itself.<sup>2</sup>

This remarkable chain of events was set in train when poll evidence suggested that the incumbent ALP Premier, Anna Bligh, might prevail over an LNP leader with a more conventional background. Bligh had survived in 2009 in what many on both sides anticipated was an unwinnable election. She then alienated large sections of her heartland union support by responding to the Global Financial Crisis by privatizing some public assets, an option which she had explicitly ruled out during the 2009 election campaign.<sup>3</sup> Bligh's strong performance as a community leader during the series of natural disasters which dogged Queensland during the later period of her term in office caused those controlling the destiny of the LNP to take desperate measures. They looked to the only non-Labor figure who enjoyed encouraging polling results as a potential opponent. The motive for the change of leadership thus resembled that of the ALP reverting to Rudd during the national campaign; the consequences were more satisfactory for the LNP to an almost unbelievable extent..

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Costar and others have written about the internal discipline of the National Party over several decades; they contrasted this with the Liberal Party which had been riven by disputes arising from its subordinate status over several generations and in particular over its willingness to trade-off individualistic and libertarian principles for access to ministerial power in coalition. When the parties merged, it was the Nationals' tradition of public solidarity which prevailed.

<sup>2</sup> There is a back story still to be told about attempts to persuade one of the sitting Liberal MP's to resign by offering him blandishments of an overseas posting. This alleged offer in turn became the subject of an enquiry by the anti-corruption body, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC). The enquiry was originally unproductive and then revitalized when it transpired that the MP concerned had taken a phone recording of a crucial conversation with a party official. The recording turned up inadvertently during a police investigation of the MP's phone records in a wholly unrelated murder investigation. The CMC in the end repeated its earlier decision, an outcome which made sense to impartial observers since such offers were commonplace among all parties at all levels of government.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the 2009 election and the changes in opinion polling afterwards, see Paul Williams, "Time of transition: the Queensland parliament and electoral volatility, 2008-2009", *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 25: 1, Autumn 2012.

## **2. How to win a campaign**

The second abnormality was the nature of the election campaign which led to this result.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the subsequent national campaign, the state ALP failed totally in a campaign of personal vilification of the Leader of the Opposition, raising questions about Newman's family and business associates, using the devices of parliamentary privilege and referral to the Crime and Misconduct Commission (the body created a generation earlier to fight corruption in public officials under the label of the Criminal Justice Commission)<sup>5</sup>.

At both state and then national levels, the ALP had to fight against the perception that it had recanted on major policy commitments, and against a hostile media refusing to facilitate discussion of substantive policy issues. So this feature of the transition was not abnormal in Queensland – it paralleled the Abbott transition nationally and the situation in most Australian states.

The difference in Queensland was that no difficult policy issues surfaced in the debate at state level like the national issues that had to be dealt with immediately by the incoming government. There was no extended discussion of records of achievement in relation to economic management, employment, education, disability, or environmental initiatives compared to the debates at the national level. The LNP provided a valuable lesson to its national campaign planners in offering a very small target in terms of policy alternatives and offering platitudes and reassurances it felt able to abandon with equanimity once in office.

The one very big exception which disturbed this equanimity was public sector employment. During the campaign, Newman sought to exploit Bligh's discomfort at her broken promise regarding privatisation of public assets by reassuring the relevant union leaders, some of whom had abandoned the ALP over the issue, that "no public servant had anything to fear from a Newman government". Abbott's promise of "no surprises" may have proved

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<sup>4</sup> For more discussion of the election and subsequent events, see Roger Scott, "Political Tsunami – the 2012 Queensland election and its aftermath", *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2012, Vol 27, no 2.

<sup>5</sup> Not unexpectedly, the incoming government took exception to what they perceived as misuse of CMC powers and set up an enquiry to prevent similar conduct in the future. The LNP had long-standing grievances with the CMC and these were compounded by the CMC's own behavior and incompetence which justified a second simultaneous enquiry by the parliamentary committee charged with overseeing the CMC. See Roger Scott, "Queensland transparency - watchdogs or lapdogs?" *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2013, Volume 28, no 2.

utterly false in many policy areas but here, at least, he was distinctly different from Newman – federal public servants knew in advance that they had plenty to fear from an Abbott government.

### ***3. How to win an unrestricted working majority***

The third abnormality in Queensland was, of course, the result: in an 89-member Parliament, the ALP held only seven seats, the Katter Party two, and two long-serving independents were returned.<sup>6</sup> The nature of electoral geography helps explain how “merely” double any “normal” swing could lead to such a massive change of party control. On earlier occasions, the ALP had been as low as 11 members and the Liberals at their lowest ebb of alienation from the Nationals had been reduced to a rump of three members. There were also relatively short periods when one or other governing party relied on the swinging votes of independents to be able to hold power. But it was unprecedented for a governing party to be able to rely on the votes of up to 90% of members of parliament – the Katter Party and several of the independents drawn from rural constituencies were likely to vote for many LNP initiatives in tune with their conservative preferences. In addition, unlike Abbott, Newman could ignore party waverers and had no upper house to stand in his way (just the judiciary, as discussed below). The “normal” constraints of a Westminster system could be ignored by a government that felt empowered to impose its will on a community which had conferred the authority of a massive majority. This allowed the Premier and the Attorney-General to claim a mandate of overwhelming public support for whatever course of action they chose to implement.

### ***4. How to abandon promises without media censure.***

The fourth abnormality compared to past post-electoral policy performance may now be the new “normal” to which conservative regimes aspire. This was the lightning speed with which the winning party could abandon a vast array of electoral promises central to its campaign. Further, in Queensland, they were able to do this without raising a bleat from the conventional media which had hounded the previous incumbents with accusations of lying and broken promises – in the case of Queensland, the Bligh promise not to adopt a privatization policy.

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<sup>6</sup> Over time, a further three MPs switched their allegiance away from the LNP, two later identifying with the Palmer United Party which did not exist at the time of the state election. At the end of 2013, after a disappointing performance nationally, the Katter Party indicated that it would work in close association with the rampant Palmer Party to avoid splitting the vote between them).

During the ALP's disastrous Queensland campaign, the local press had only to record events with minimal value-added coverage to advance its stated preference for a change of government. Immediately post-election, the Murdoch-owned *Courier Mail* seemed to embrace tentatively its previous position going back to Bjelke-Petersen times that "the fourth estate" needed to step up its criticism of government activity when the opposition parties were so palpably weak and in disarray.

This stance may have increased the readability of the paper but its editor did not survive a Murdoch visit in the run-up to the Abbott elevation. This brought in new leadership as a preliminary for an uncompromising effort to secure Murdoch's preferred outcome in the national election. The new editor of the *Courier Mail* had qualifications for the job which included a record of unqualified support for the Liberal government in Western Australia and pre-existing personal affinity with Newman. In these favourable circumstances, Newman realised he could dictate the terms of how frequently he need face the press and what coverage he could be certain of receiving.

By contrast, Abbott's pursuit of a similar minimalizing strategy is proving fraught with problems, given the depth and seniority of journalists who constitute the national press gallery, the wide range of critical website and social media, and the greater level of engagement by the ABC in its role as the national broadcaster. Abbott's Ministers in high-profile areas were subjected to much greater scrutiny as they sought to avoid comment on the range of policy embarrassments compared to those in the Newman government.

### ***5. How to implement public service cuts.***

The fifth abnormality flowed from the fourth - rapid implementation of stringent cuts to the public sector, initially by wholesale slaughter of public service staff numbers (14,000 being a proclaimed target of the initial onslaught, identified almost as soon as the election result was known). This was followed by systematic reduction in a range of services identified as unnecessary mollycoddling or undesirable impediments to entrepreneurialism. These second round of service cuts across a wide range of departments carried with them the redundancy of those charged with providing them. In some cases – such as health services – the "blame" for these cuts was transferred through decentralization, creating regional or local entities which were required to operate within severely restricted budgets which could only be met by staff reductions.

If the surprise, speed, and media management of these cuts was abnormal, the device chosen was utterly normal for incoming conservative regimes – the appointment of a Commission of Audit. This is now a time-honoured strategy in several jurisdictions as a basis for disowning pre-election promises and inventing new ones.<sup>7</sup> In Newman’s case, the political character of the device was underlined by using former federal Liberal Treasurer, Peter Costello, as chairman, in addition to the normal cast of experienced public sector administrators and sympathetic senior academics. Abbott, by contrast, looked to directly reassure the business community through his choice of chairman.

At this point, the transition processes intersected. Coalition strategists feared that the “Newman factor” might have an impact on attitudes towards Abbott. The response to this perceived fear of delayed retribution was a careful campaign of obfuscation and delay as Newman Ministers avoided making further commitments to cutting public service costs during the national election campaign. Newman suggested that the urgent and immediate program of sackings was complete and no more were envisaged; Abbott promised there would be no more surprises, by inference unlike the Newman process. Newman suddenly became invisible or at least a very small target in relation to the wider campaign.

It is unclear how far this strategy worked. The Queensland labour movement which had participated actively in past election campaigns (but not that of Bligh), reminded people of the threat of Howard’s “Work Choices” and openly doubted Abbott’s assurance that this was “dead, buried and cremated”. The unions reminded voters that Newman had a long-term connection with the national Liberal Party, where both of his parents had served as coalition ministers in Canberra: Queensland was just serving as a test-bed for the policies which would be adopted by Abbott. It is possible that this variety of a scare campaign had some impact in minimising the ALP losses in Queensland; the last-minute substitution of Rudd as leader may also have been relevant to improving Queensland performance despite the impact of his erratic policy pronouncements towards the end of the national campaign. Whatever the explanation, the ALP vote was much stronger than at the state election - it could hardly have been worse, but that was its nightmare.

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<sup>7</sup> Kate Jones provides a useful overview in her article in *The Conversation*, 16 December 2013, “Beware the veil of independence in government reviews”. She suggests that these devices are useful to government because the members can be represented as disinterested experts even though they are broadly sympathetic to the ideological stance of their appointing party, they can appear to offer transparency in their processes and their findings may offer useful but potentially unpopular advice which can be embraced or abandoned according to the pragmatics of political debate.

## ***6. How to legislate without concern for judicial restraint.***

The final abnormality is the unprecedented and on-going rejection by Newman of the conventions and democratic principles which were thought to protect Queenslanders, alongside other Australians, from arbitrary executive action without recourse to an independent court system. With the constraints occasioned by a national election out of the way, not only could the Newman government resume its policy of reducing government expenditure and public interference with the business community, it could set the tone for its re-election as a staunch and uncompromising defender of law and order.

Two unrelated events provided the catalyst for confronting the frustration associated with the separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary. The first related to the granting by a judge of the release from prison into supervised custody of a long-serving sex offender. Newman and his Attorney-General, Jared Bleijie, took legislative action under emergency provisions to attempt to overturn this decision and empower Bleijie to determine that the sex offender should be subject to indefinite detention. Newman claimed that his massive parliamentary majority allowed him to claim a mandate for such action and opinion poll evidence was produced to suggest that a majority of Queenslanders supported him.

The second event related to a lover's tiff stimulating a brawl between two members of what were rapidly identified as Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs (OMCG). The brawl escalated as gang members arrived outside a restaurant and, after police arrested some of the alleged participants after a protracted confrontation, members of one of the gangs then congregated in a show of force outside the police station where those arrested were being held. The presence of the Minister for Education at the restaurant provided first-hand evidence of the challenge to public order by groups which until then had largely conducted their criminal activities and vicious in-fighting in relative privacy. Suddenly OMCGs were identified by politicians and senior police as a major threat to the integrity of the State, requiring emergency and specially-targeted legislation rather than providing resources for more rigorous enforcement of the existing legal framework.

Conventional legal principles such as equality before the law, freedom of association, and presumptions of innocence went out the window. The Premier again claimed to have a mandate for whatever action he chose to take. He knew what Queenslanders wanted and so Parliament gave him the required legislative basis in the form of an ominously named piece of legislation called the "Vicious Lawless Association Disestablishment Bill"

(VLAD). The OMCGs were identified only in a schedule of associations and prohibited occupations, and locations which could be varied by regulation, so any new association, employment category or location of any kind could be added.<sup>8</sup>

The introductory of mandatory sentences, the denial of bail options and the particularisation of conditions of detention added up to a long list of denials of what lawyers called natural justice. But apparently lawyers had not been consulted. A series of confrontations with the judiciary then took place as magistrates declined to be instructed on refusing bail to all members of OMCGs solely on the basis of their presumed gang membership, irrespective of the actual crime. Ultimately, Newman's chosen candidate as Chief Magistrate was required to remove the discretion of individual magistrates and deal personally with all bail applications, inevitably slowing the process.

Other draconian aspects were also criticised by representatives of the legal profession, all the way up to Tony Fitzgerald QC, such as mandatory additional penalties to be applied to gang members and even higher penalties to office-holders in gangs irrespective of the seriousness of the original offence; the proscription of more than two gang members riding together (or even appearing in a public place like a hotel together) and the creation of specialised high security goals where there would be solitary confinement for 23 hours, no visits and the presumed ignominy of wearing special pink prison clothing.

Newman made it clear that he expected challenges to his legal strategies without repenting about his assertion of parliamentary supremacy. As the *Courier Mail* headline read, "Premier to try, try again in push to get laws right". The article reported that the specification of tattoo parlours as areas effectively banned from OMCG members would be extended to the fitness, security, and used car industries. He indicated that if the laws were overturned in any High Court challenge, "there is a breadth and depth to this, which means if something is overturned over here, there are a number of things in the other pieces of legislation which will allow us again to reach the objective, which is to protect Queenslanders." (*Courier Mail*, October 17, 2013, p 11.)

Throughout all this, the Premier and the Attorney General continued to enjoy uncompromising editorial support and an assertion that the wider public were also lined up behind the criticism that elements in the judiciary were out of

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<sup>8</sup> Or embarrassing deletions made when the list was shown to contain glaring errors in naming of people and of the proscribed workplaces.



touch with reality, either too elitist or their attitudes reflected the effect of partisanship in appointments during the ALP regime. (Appendix A provides an extended example, drawn at random from the Courier Mail.) One can only assume that Abbott will be watching this unfolding drama with interest, as the populist appeal of heavy sentences and demonisation gains political traction in other states.

## **7. *How to pervert liberal democracy***

There is a hint in Abbott's policies before and after the election that religious fundamentalism can be mobilized as a moral bulwark supporting the need for law and order. Within the Liberal Party and inside the ALP, there is a core of moral conservatives opposed to the granting of civil rights or equal access to public resources to those pursuing un-Christian aspirations. Abbott and his Education spokesman toyed with this during the election campaign when reflecting on what was wrong with school history curricula and the non-vocational direction of humanities and social science university research grants. Since coming to power, Abbott has identified himself with the virtues of punishment as a means to childhood discipline and the Education Minister, Christopher Pine, has returned to old battles against student union radicalism and indicated a willingness to micro-manage the allocation of research grants and purge the history syllabus<sup>9</sup>.

This lurch to the educational right has not gone as far as the Bjelke Petersen years when the Premier and some of his Ministers seemed beholden to extremist interest groups seeking to rule out the teaching of evolution in the science curriculum. But several of the dominant decision-makers in the Newman government embrace a similar brand of religious fundamentalism which dovetails neatly with a "law-and-order" agenda and limitations on expression of dissent. Pointing to the decision of the voters to confer on them 90% support in Parliament, both Premier Newman and Attorney-General Bleijie repeatedly assert that they alone know what is right for the whole community.

This raises the wider question of the extent to which the attitudes of Newman and Bleijie are part of a national conservative groundswell of opinion supporting authoritarian policy preferences. Do they represent straws in the winds blowing across the nation? Are Queenslanders and their political leaders different from everyone else rather than "earlier adopters"?

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<sup>9</sup> Dainel Hurst, "Say after the Minister – old is new again", *Brisbane Times*, 28 September 2013

The linking thread of “abnormality” in this discussion carries powerful echoes of a debate generated by the Bjelke-Petersen regime which lasted a very long time until discredited by the Fitzgerald Report. The palpably different values and conduct in government during that period was sometimes explained, particularly by Marxists, as a problem of delayed modernization. Queensland would catch up with the rest of Australia as the forces of urbanization and inward-migration lessened the impact of a rural and regional isolationist culture. The arrival of the Goss ALP government and two decades of ALP dominance suggested this process was already underway in the 1990’s, stimulated in particular by the impact of Expo in 1988 and the change of leadership to a “conservative reformer”, Michael Ahern

Others, this author included, suggested back around 1980 that the key to understanding Queensland might lie in focusing upon more entrenched characteristics related to its cultural heritage. Writing about education in particular, my wife and I gave titles to our publications such as “Reform and Reaction in the Deep North” and “Fundamentals and Fundamentalists.”<sup>10</sup> We alluded to parallels with the southern USA and specific linkages with the sort of religious conservatism which characterized state-level political processes at that time. The continuing saga of the “Tea Party” within the US Republican Party suggests that these forces remain undiminished or at least resilient despite demographic changes reducing their impact at the national level.

Thirty years later, the same proposition about the distinctiveness of Queensland needs to be examined – is Queensland different? Do the forces unleashed in the transition from Bligh to Newman originate in the particular circumstances of this state so there are few lessons to be drawn for studying the Abbott transition? Or is Newman a harbinger of things to come as the ideas of authoritarian conservatism take hold across the nation? In posing these questions rather than supplying answers, I need to record the very widespread anxiety among many older friends who are not at all sympathetic to the ALP that Queenslanders may be experiencing a second coming.

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<sup>10</sup> Ann and Roger Scott, *Reform and Reaction in the Deep North: Education and Policymaking in Queensland*, Melbourne University Press, 1980, (a monograph in a series on policymaking in the Australian states edited by Grant Harman and Fred Wurt). Ann and Roger Scott *Fundamentals and Fundamentalists : A Case Study of Education and Policymaking in Queensland*, Australasian Political Studies Association Monograph 22, Adelaide 1979.

In an earlier part of my career, I was absorbed in the literature now called “development studies” and its relevance to the analysis of modern states.<sup>11</sup> Dipping into it again, I found one recent discussion of the notion of authoritarian democracy which might bear upon the Queensland story:

*Thanks to research conducted in the past few years, our understanding has been significantly expanded concerning democracy and authoritarian regimes, as well as the means of both destroying and rebuilding democratic institutions.*

*The majority of autocratic leaders use the concept of democracy as a screen for building a political regime antithetical to the spirit and practice of a real democracy. Autocrats adopt a number of democratic institutions only to subvert their original purposes. While they pose as democrats, instead of a liberal democracy they initially organize a majoritarian democracy, followed by an illiberal democracy that ignores human rights.*

*In many cases, well-established democratic institutions do not offer a guarantee against the rise of strongmen when such leaders use the system's weaknesses in bad faith.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, “Ulster in perspective – the relevance of non-European experience”, *Australian Outlook*, 23, 3, 1969.

<sup>12</sup> Andras Bozoki, “Dictators and rebellious civilians – a review essay” *Perspectives on Politics*, American Political Science Association, Issue 3, 2013.

## APPENDIX A

### NEWMAN TRANSITION AND THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER

*“A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prelude to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both.”*  
*(James Madison, 1822)*

The authors had not purchased hard copies of the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* for some time before Newman came to power, but the headlines are occasionally so startling as to require closer study.

For example, on October 17, the Page 1 headline proved irresistible:

#### **JARROD WILL JUDGE**

*“State Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie will be given powers to overrule Supreme Court judges to keep ‘the worst of the worst’ criminals locked up for life. The laws being rushed through Parliament will give Mr Bleijie the power to keep rapists, pedophiles and other dangerous sex offenders behind bars indefinitely. The new laws, which lawyer groups say are unconstitutional, will also sweep up any already released offenders, who can be put back under lock and key if Mr Bleijie fears they are a danger to the public. Mr Bleijie yesterday insisted that the new powers would only be used when all other legal avenues have been exhausted.”*

(The other half of the front page was a picture of a tiger bearing its teeth and claws directly at the reader).

Page 2 included a four-paragraph apology from News Corp for breaches to the security of its email newsletter data-base.

Page 11 was a half-page spread headlined “Judge Jarrod” (with photo) which provides the interesting verbatim comment from Premier Newman that he was ‘not enthusiastic’ about the law change but it was a situation that had been forced on the government, as a result of the courts releasing potentially dangerous offenders.

The second half of page 11 was headlined “Premier to try, try again in push to get laws right”, in this case laws against Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs. This

noted that Blejje had widened the law's focus on occupations from which Gang Members were proscribed, expanding from tattoo parlours to include "fitness, security and used car industries".

*Newman said his government would 'try and try again' if the laws were overturned in any High Court challenge. We believe they've got a very good chance of holding together. There is a breadth and depth to this, which means if something is overturned over here, there are a number of things in the other piece of legislation which will allow us again to reach the objective, which is to protect Queenslanders.*

The rest of the article briefly reports on the various groups of lawyers lining up to protest about the unlimited scope of the legislation "raising fears it could be used to break up organisations from trade unions to sporting clubs".

On Page 16, the lead story was headed "Lawyers in payback threats over compo", about other lawyers who were "furious about proposed work changes to the State's workers compensation scheme had vowed the cruel the re-election chances if Government MP's". These changes, like the gang laws, had been rushed through Parliament in the middle of the night without any prior consultation or analysis by the relevant parliamentary committee.

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By Monday December 9, promoting the "law and order" agenda for the next election was in full spate.

The Page 1 photo image of brawling revellers "had disgusted Police Minister Jack Dempsey, who has vowed officers will crack down on escalating weekend violence". The main headline beneath the photo was "G20 CALL TO ARMS", a Murdoch exclusive sub-titled "Anarchist mob's plan for violent summit mayhem."

Page 2 was a story on the expansion of mandatory GPS electronic monitoring to perpetrators of small-scale sexual offences "to stop them graduating to major crimes". A Queensland Bar Association report offered ways of closing loopholes so that the Attorney-General could include as "dangerous sexual offenders" those who had not yet committed those "significant violent offences", which was the threshold for the application of the Act.

This act was part of the Attorney-General's response to a local court's decision to release a serial rapist despite the Government's legislated

intention to implement indefinite prison terms. The Attorney General repeated the refrain concerning the possibility of the laws being struck down on appeal : “We are not going to give up as a Government; we owe it to our kids to do whatever we can.”

After a digression on page 3 about the love life of a rugby league footballer and photographs of the two females in the triangle, Page 4 provided the details of the Sydney anarchist group’s plan for disrupting the Brisbane G20 forum; page 5 gave similar depth of coverage to the local weekend brawling.

Page 9 reported how a clothing shop launch at a former OMCG Rebels clubhouse backfired after police arrested a man they alleged to be a “bikie associate” under their power to arrest any associate who stepped inside premises the Government has listed as “a proscribed place”. The police had set up a site nearby for testing anyone visiting that street for alcohol and drug offences – the former clubhouse was being used a shop selling clothes as a fund-raiser for the Kidney Foundation.

Page 20 contained one editorial supporting the Attorney-General’s initiative on sex offenders and his argument that current laws do not meet public expectations. The second editorial argued for the strongest possible powers to be given to police during G20, as demanded by the silent majority: “maintaining order during the summit is critical to ensuring the event sees Brisbane present its best face to the world.”

Beside the editorials, the Attorney-General himself was the author of an article, spreading across two pages, under the headline “Family Safety at the Heart of the Tough Sex Offenders Legislation”, giving further detail of the laws “put in place to provide an extra layer of protection to the community” – “to find ways to make the laws tougher.” Somewhat incongruously Bleijie stated that “I have never criticised and never will criticise, a judge or a magistrate’s decision” and his concern arose because “the scales of justice have weighed too heavily in favour of the offender and not the victim”. He sought support for this activism by quoting Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

This two page spread was shared with an even longer article by Andrew Bolt, mainly directed at a criticism of the ABC for its misjudgment in posting television images of the house of the newly appointed “Queensland Bikie-buster Brigadier Bill Mellor”. Inter alia, Mellor was vigorously defended against accusations that his appointment was because he was a military friend of Newman or that there was a problem in militarising the control of the

police, dismissed as “all piffle” by Bolt. (Newman had defended his choice by suggesting that the military and the police were much the same).

Back on Page 9, as if to demonstrate that there were public policies beyond fighting crime, there was a human interest story about autism which managed to ignore any mention of Newman government cuts to children’s services. A story on the same page was headlined “Sea Levels No Longer in Planning”. Deputy Premier Seeney said the government had removed mention of sea level rises from planning policy regulations “so as not to inhibit development and to allow councils greater independence in deciding development issues”. (This was consistent with the Newman Government stance of treating any forecasts based on climate change assumptions to be suppressed as unjustifiably alarmist.)

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Finally, as our coffee shop was about to close for the year on December 19, mentions of battler millionaire lottery winners and idyllic weather forecasts took minor billing to the exclusive banner headline : FULL METAL JACKET. The subtitle was “Walls of Steel to Make Bikies Face Hard Jail Time.”

Here are all of the Page One paragraphs:

*Metal walls up to five metres high have been built outside the prison cells of Queensland bikies, blocking out the sky and any signs of life. The tight wire walls have been erected at Arthur Gorrie Correction Centre and will soon be built at Woodford Correctional Centre, leaving bikies to stare at them for at least 22 hours a day. The State Government said the ‘sight screening barriers’ had been erected to protect staff and other prisoners, however lawyers claimed the wall were a ‘Guantanamo Bay-like tactic’ designed to ‘torture’ and break the bikies’ spirit.*

*Attorney-General Jarrod Bleijie said bikies would be doing hard time in prison and the government made no apologies for it.*

(This editorial choice presumably was meant to set the tone for voters in the new year. The Midyear Fiscal and Economic Review released the day before was relegated to Page 2, even though its primary purpose was to lay the groundwork for asset sales. Page 3 girl was Cate Blanchett dressed in gold, distracting from the story above it which was a damning report by the State Ombudsman about Brisbane City Hall ripping off 50,000 citizens by overcharging them on property fees.)