

WORLD SCIENCE FESTIVAL BRISBANE – WHERE ELSE BUT QUEENSLAND?

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Brisbane has just hosted the 2016 World Science Festival, the first time the annual event has been held outside of New York City, where it was established in 2008 to celebrate scientific and artistic pursuits.¹ In a coup for Queensland, the event was secured by officials from the Queensland Museum in a six-year deal, ahead of efforts by leading institutions in Sydney and Melbourne. In 2015 the Palaszczuk Government contributed \$650,000 to help land the hosting rights for the signature event, after gestures of support were lent initially by the Newman Government's then Science Minister, Ian Walker, one year earlier.² But why would the current government make this a priority?

In a State with a penchant for staging grandiose drawcard events, this was billed as a tourism windfall as much as a coup for the local science community.³ The State government still celebrated the agreement as proof of its commitment to science, innovation and knowledge-based industries. Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk described the event as

A great opportunity to showcase our science endeavours here in Queensland, but also to make sure that we encourage young students to get involved in science ... to actually make Queensland once again, as we have been in the past, a science capital in the field of biotechnology.⁴

Those who witnessed the last two decades in Queensland will recognise the reference to science's recent 'glory days' in this State.

THE INNOVATION OBSESSION

Queensland's Labor government talks a lot about innovation, and harnessing it to help diversify the State's economy and provide more of the 'jobs of the future'. The government has also added to the national discussion about the importance of STEM subjects and learning coding skills at school.⁵ In its first year in office it's even committed some money and impressive legwork into supporting research, innovation and entrepreneurship via its Advance Queensland initiative.⁶ Furthermore, only a few months ago the Premier announced a new stand-alone Innovation Minister in an expected end-of-year Cabinet reshuffle.⁷ The World Science Festival has given the government another platform from which to spruik this agenda.

The event fits nicely into Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's current 'innovation agenda' – but, again, why Queensland? Arguably, Queensland would not have been a reasonable choice to host the festival without the State's recent record of investment in science and innovation. The reputation for outstanding research that Queensland developed during the Smart State period under former Premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh is integral to the State landing this hosting agreement. This built on a long history of excellence in scientific research and discovery, supported by government leaders on both sides of politics. Former Premier Mike Ahern, for

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instance, greatly expanded the capacity of the Queensland Institute of Medical Research (now QIMR Berghofer) in the late 1980s;⁸ and the Institute for Molecular Bioscience, the first of the 'Smart State' institutes at the University of Queensland, received its initial funding in the mid-1990s from former Premier Rob Borbidge.⁹ Both of these institutions are now centrepieces of Brisbane's world-class research base.

It was this reputation that saw Queensland's in 2000 become the first government outside the United States to form a research exchange partnership with the prestigious Smithsonian Institute. This partnership was only achieved after some impressive legwork and convincing representations by senior Queensland bureaucrats, including former Premier's Department head, Professor Glyn Davis, to Smithsonian Institute leaders. Premier Palaszczuk renewed this agreement during a trade mission to the US in 2015.¹⁰ It took similar concerted efforts from Queensland Museum executives to convince the World Science Festival owners of the merits of moving the event to Brisbane.

There are other interesting precedents that predate the accomplishments of the Smart State era, highlighting how both sides of politics here have supported science and innovation in recent times, and underlining the importance of the current bipartisan interest in an 'innovation agenda'. The Australian Government's recent *Innovation Statement* reinforces the notion that government at different levels has a meaningful role to play in supporting and fostering innovation, entrepreneurial enterprise and a 'connected' research culture and network.¹¹ Granted, the message is dressed in Prime Minister Turnbull's slightly cringe-worthy rhetoric – should we expect an 'ideas bust' after the 'ideas boom'? But Turnbull's obvious enthusiasm for promoting his government's interest in supporting innovators, entrepreneurs and, to a lesser extent, researchers, is important in terms of policy leadership, and (not coincidentally) marks a clear departure from his predecessor.¹² In fact, it's been refreshing to see that both the federal government and opposition have focused energies of late on contesting the field of 'innovation', insofar as it relates to economic growth and industry development, and what measures government can and should take to support it.¹³

It's now clearer than ever to political leaders on all sides that government investment into, and support for private uptake of, innovation initiatives provides tangible and substantial results for both the Australian economy and society more broadly.¹⁴ Also important is the recognition that innovation and collaborative research happen just as much at the sub-national or regional as at the federal level,¹⁵ meaning that state governments and local enterprises have an important role to play in this policy (and, increasingly, political) space as Canberra.¹⁶

A focused, bipartisan approach to science and innovation policy is needed, indeed it is critical, but over the past couple of decades this has been sadly lacking in Australia, a point noted ruefully by departing Chief Scientist, Professor Ian Chubb,¹⁷ and repeated by his successor, Professor Alan Finkel.¹⁸ It was partly this lack of coordination (particularly from the federal level)¹⁹ or a shared agenda that prompted states like Queensland, and to a similar extent Victoria, to 'blaze their own trails' in the promotion of innovation and the attraction of researchers and research investment. This included former Premier Beattie, and former Victorian Premiers, Steve Bracks and John Brumby, attending the annual international Bio conference in the United States to promote Australian biotech expertise, in an exercise that began as fierce competition between the states for increased profiles in fields of scientific research.²⁰ As a result, Queensland and, perhaps even more so, Victoria are now frequently hosts to significant gatherings of leading international science researchers and industry advocates, at forums such as this year's mammoth BioFest event in Melbourne.²¹

Similar to the Palaszczuk Government's 'coup', Beattie also helped secure his State's hosting rights for major international medical science and biotech conferences, held in locations such as Brisbane, Cairns and the Gold Coast,²² solidifying Queensland's reputation both as a hotbed for science research and a welcoming tourism destination. Beattie and his contemporaries, and his successor Premier Bligh, realised the value gained from drawing high-profile industry figures, as well as deep-pocketed investors, to see firsthand the inspiring research and innovation taking

place in this part of the world. Palaszczuk took a leaf out of this book, when on a trade mission to the United States in 2015 she invited Tesla CEO, Elon Musk, to speak at this year's World Science Festival.²³ It's a bit like the television networks' perpetual reliance on Hollywood 'talent' to highlight the glamour of the Logies, minus the awkward on-stage moments broadcast live into the nation's living rooms.

A RECORD OF INNOVATION

This interest in science promotion didn't come out of the blue, and Palaszczuk's government is not the first to do this. Queensland has long promoted itself as an 'innovation destination' – an abundant, diverse environment and an assumed 'entrepreneurial spirit' supposedly lend the State a natural advantage in creating an innovation 'ecosystem'.²⁴ The State has a long history of innovation and scientific discovery, often with government support. The State's leading universities have also been important partners in furthering the recent research and innovation agendas, and unsurprisingly all of Brisbane's tertiary institutions have played key supporting roles in hosting the festival.²⁵ Under the famous catch-cry of the 'Smart State', Beattie's government made many of the same claims as Palaszczuk's and launched many initiatives to those same ends.²⁶ Testament to his long-standing commitment to promoting research and innovation, Beattie's even released a book urging Australia to make the most of its innovation opportunities.²⁷ But even his government took cues from its predecessors. Surprisingly, for some, this record of innovation stretches back even beyond the Smart State era, showing Queensland as a natural home for an 'ideas boom'.

Notably, the release on 1 January 2016 of the Queensland Government's cabinet minutes from 30 years ago revealed that Mike Ahern, then the Minister for Industry, Small Business and Technology in the Bjelke-Petersen Government, secured Cabinet support for proposals that would support the development of "21st Century industries" and help to grow "a culture of innovation" in Queensland – in 1985.²⁸ He repeated those messages in parliamentary debates throughout his tenure as the State's first Technology Minister.

A key measure Ahern introduced in 1985 was the establishment of the Queensland Innovation Centre, a government-owned entity whose objective was to help encourage "innovation development and successful business growth" in the State. And this from a 'free enterprise' National Party government whose rhetoric was framed around minimal state intervention, as witnessed in its 'Enterprise Queensland' economic slogan of the time.²⁹ Interestingly, this initiative was achieved with financial assistance from the federal government. Barry Jones, Science Minister in the Hawke Government at the time, endorsed Ahern's moves to foster innovation and industry development in Queensland.³⁰ Even more interestingly, the original proposal for the Centre had been put to Ahern by the Queensland Science and Technology Council (or QUESTEC), a government-formed advisory body of leading scientific and entrepreneurial minds. This was the forerunner of Peter Beattie's later Smart State Council and today's Advance Queensland Expert Panel, providing advice – along with that from the State's Chief Scientist, another of Beattie's initiatives – to help government formulate effective science and innovation policy.³¹

Ahern was Technology Minister when Queensland won the hosting rights – when neither New South Wales nor Victoria would stump up the cash required – for another landmark event, the 1988 World Exposition (known colloquially as 'Expo '88'). Coincidentally, the event was devised around the theme of 'leisure in the age of technology', in another mix of science and tourism.³² By the time Expo '88 arrived on Brisbane's doorstep, Bjelke-Petersen had been removed as Nationals leader and it was new Premier Mike Ahern who had the privilege of opening proceedings alongside Queen Elizabeth II.

STATES COMPETING FOR THE EDGE?

On one level this is another case of a state government trying to 'steal a march' on its rival states – and willing to pay for the privilege – to be seen as a welcoming place to do science but also an attractive investment location for scientific and innovative enterprise. On another level, securing a high-profile event such as this sends a clear signal: that this government presents itself as serious about investing in research and fostering a 'culture of innovation', much as governments in Queensland have done before. It plays into the government's own STEM promotion and 'jobs of the future' rhetoric, and while the State's agreement to host the festival actually predated Turnbull's ascent, it makes Queensland appear a leading player in the context of the PM's innovation push (while little more than words at present).

It's interesting to consider how much attention this event will have garnered outside of Queensland. As an indication, one of the festival's chief visiting figures was actor and science advocate Alan Alda, but his recent appearance talking about the 'meeting of science and art' on the ABC's 7.30 – at least as reported on its website – barely mentioned either the festival or Brisbane.³³ This despite the festival taking place largely around Brisbane's cultural and arts precinct at Southbank, the site of the nation's most visited art gallery.³⁴

Reports afterwards claimed that most visitors (almost three-quarters) to the 1988 World Expo in Brisbane were in fact from Queensland, if not from Brisbane itself.³⁵ Presumably, most of the rest of Australia thought their own local events marking the bicentennial year were 'amusement' enough. Perhaps this will be repeated when the World Science Festival bases itself in Brisbane, and other states might divert attention to their own efforts to support and promote science and innovation. Not that the festival's organisers will be overly concerned, with the event attracting sell-out crowds over its five days.³⁶ Just don't tell those states that Queensland has again stolen a march on them.

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