

**Kathryn Talbot, ““A fun time for everyone”?: The Shifting Intergovernmental Relations of Expo ‘88’  
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In 1991, Brian Littleproud, Member for Condamine (1983-92), stated that ‘Expo was a fun time for everyone’.<sup>1</sup> For the thousands who enjoyed the treats that South Bank’s biggest celebration had to offer, this could definitely be the case. Not for one James (Jim) Soorley, however. This former Lord Mayor of Brisbane (1991-2003) has a rather different memory of Expo 88, one fraught with intergovernmental tension and private frustrations. He calls it a ‘traumatic relationship’ whereby ‘[the State government] would dominate and tell us what to do’<sup>2</sup>. Soorley describes a traditional teacher-student relationship as occurring between the state and local governments, but closer examination of the era produces more complicated results. The following seeks to discuss this shifting relationship between the state and local governments in the lead-up to and execution of Expo 88, with specific reference to the redevelopment of the South Bank site.

This paper will be structured in two chronological parts, the first detailing the years 1982-86, when a cursory glance would show the state and local governments occupying a master-servant relationship built on private and secretive political bargaining. However, a closer perusal highlights how the state relied heavily on its local counterpart, showing how the latter (in Brisbane’s case) held more power than first assumed. The second section will detail the years 1986-89, where the local government acquired a type of ascendancy through public outcry, coinciding with Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s deposing and resignation amid the fallout from the Fitzgerald Inquiry. This work seeks to discuss the juxtaposition between the comparatively private period of political bargaining that occurred 1982-86 and the public and media fuelled events of 1986-89.

#### Section One - Private Struggles

The years 1982 through 1986 in relation to Expo were characterised by private frustrations on the part of the Brisbane City Council (BCC). Throughout this era, it was clear that the State government exerted its dominant place in the political hierarchy through consistent political bargaining and exploiting the precarious political position of the Labor local government. According to Chapman and Wood, Australian local government is a ‘creature of the state, its existence and authority to act is

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<sup>1</sup> B Littleproud, 9 October 1991 in *Queensland Parliamentary Debates (QPD)*, vol. 319: p. 1527.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland (2011) *Queensland Speaks*,  
<http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/jim-soorley>: 00:14:09- :00:16:15.

state dependent'.<sup>3</sup> Carroll further notes that in the case regarding Expo, 'the state government attempted to structure its relationships with local government in an attempt to ensure that local government has even less authority and power' than traditionally given.<sup>4</sup>

From the early days of Expo planning, it is evident that decision-making power in regards to post-Expo development lay primarily with the State government. The key players in the development scheme were the Brisbane Exposition and South Bank Redevelopment Authority (BESBRA), whose members predominantly consisted of State government appointees. Then Labor MLA for South Brisbane, Jim Fouras (1977-86), deplored the 'speculative nature of the project...the displacement of the role of elected aldermen with an unrepresentative state agency'<sup>5</sup>. Subsequent member for South Brisbane, Anne Warner (1986-95), noted how, at that time, little attention was being paid to 'the plight of the local people', and that her constituents were filled with 'horror and foreboding' about the proposed development plans.<sup>6</sup>

The sole member of the BCC appointed to BESBRA was Town Clerk Tony Philbrick in 1984, ensuring that there was a majority of control favouring State appointees.<sup>7</sup> This is expanded upon by Soorley in *Queensland Speaks*, an online oral history project dedicated to providing the public with interviews with key Queensland politicians, public servants and others.<sup>8</sup> He states that there was a definite 60-40 distribution of power in favour of the State government at any given time.<sup>9</sup> Highlighting the traditional state-local hierarchy is the State government's use of its constitutional and legislative authority to 'legislate to override any authority that the BCC might have with regard to the exposition site'.<sup>10</sup> Key in allowing BESBRA to assume control was the Expo 88 Act (1984) which exempted it from the City of Brisbane Town Planning Act (1964-82) and the Local Government Act (1936-82).<sup>11</sup> These were the major Acts that determined the planning and development authority of

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<sup>3</sup> R.Chapman & M. Wood, *Australian Local Government: The Federal Dimension*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin: (1984). p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> P.Carroll, *The Intergovernmental Relations of Expo '88*, PhD thesis, The University of Queensland (1994): 12. It is worth noting how important Carroll's work was to the research and writing of this article. State-local government relations is a remarkably under-resourced subject, which made difficult the research for this piece. While the author has relied on Carroll's thesis (especially in regards to River City), it was predominantly for primary evidence quoted directly rather than opinion or personal attitudes.

<sup>5</sup> J Fouras, (30 November 1983) *QPD*, vol. 292: p. 341.

<sup>6</sup> A Warner, (19 April 1988) *QPD*, vol. 192: p. 6094

<sup>7</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: p.14

<sup>8</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland *Queensland Speaks*, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au>

<sup>9</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland *Queensland Speaks*, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/jim-soorley>: 00:14:09- :00:16:15.

<sup>10</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: p. 16

<sup>11</sup> Queensland Government (1984) *The Expo 88 Act 1984*, No. 9 of 1984.

the BCC for both small events and larger ones such as Expo.<sup>12</sup> Through this exemption, Carroll notes that in effect, 'a large inner city site had been removed from the control of the BCC, and the citizens which it represented'.<sup>13</sup> This lack of representation was exacerbated by Philbrick's 1986 departure from his position in BESBRA.<sup>14</sup>

There were two key factors that ensured that the BCC occupied the less dominant role; the precarious political position of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) administration led by Lord Mayor (William Charles) Roy Harvey (1982-85), and its desire for the 1992 Olympic Games for Brisbane. The 1983 Council elections saw the Liberal Party fail to gain control of City Hall by the smallest of margins – only one seat.<sup>15</sup> With only this small buffer between the party and an Opposition role, the ALP became deeply sensitive to any policies and action which might have a damaging effect on electoral popularity. The proposed Expo site, South Bank, was a Labor stronghold that the ALP could not therefore afford to alienate. The area had been part of a Labor-held electorate since 1977 when Fouras won the seat from a Liberal incumbent. Harvey's (and his successor Sallyanne Atkinson's) desire for the 1992 Olympics came close on the tail of the 'euphoric' and successful Commonwealth Games, held in Brisbane in 1982.<sup>16</sup> Fiscally and politically speaking, it was highly unlikely that Brisbane would be able to host both Expo and an Olympic Games, leading to a period of intense bargaining and negotiation between the competing governments. Thus, City Council's room to manoeuvre was severely limited by its Olympic ambitions. Put simply, by cultivating a hostile atmosphere, the BCC may have risked losing State support (both financial and political/public) for the Olympics bid.

However, the local government at this point still held a moderate amount of power over its State counterpart due to the latter's financial woes. This was exacerbated by lack of fiscal and political support from the ALP federal government. The State government's authority was tempered greatly by its need for assistance from the BCC to persuade the federal government under Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-91) to provide increasing levels of financial assistance. Sir Llew Edwards notes that his involvement in the Expo proceedings occurred due to Hawke insisting on his presence, as there

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, parts III and IV.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: p. 388

<sup>14</sup> T Philbrick, *Letter*, 8 May 1986, to BESBRA, QSA BESBRA file box 415, first noted in BESBRA *Minutes* 26 June. Cited in Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*, 1994

<sup>15</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: p. 391

<sup>16</sup> I. Jobling, *Olympic Proposals and Bids by Australian Cities*, (1994) Retrieved 18 January 2012 from <http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/SportingTraditions/1994/st1101/st1101h.pdf>

was 'nobody in Queensland [he] could trust with Joh as Premier'.<sup>17</sup> In the report of Dr Damaso de Lario, Chairman of the Committee of Commissioners General at the 1988 Exposition, he mentions that the federal ALP government initially aimed to distance itself from Expo, naming it a 'Queensland affair with some external ramifications'<sup>18</sup>. He states that it was only after the exposition appeared to be on its way to becoming a success that they changed their approach and 'decided to fully support the event'.<sup>19</sup> While somewhat Machiavellian, should Expo have proved disastrous this tactic would have ensured that there would be no great strain on the Australian economy.<sup>20</sup> The actions taken by the federal government highlight the interdependence of the levels of Australian government, which in turn shows how the relationship between any two sections may have a substantial and lasting impact on the third.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Expo, the deteriorating relationship between the federal and state levels led to the latter placing pressure on the local level to provide substantial financial assistance and to mediate between the two upper sections.<sup>22</sup>

Put simply, the outward appearance of the years 1982-86 showed the State government exerting the maximum amount of control over post-exposition development through private dealings and political bargaining. The local government did still hold a moderate amount of power, primarily through acting as a mediator between its upper level counterparts and through exploiting the deteriorating financial position of Expo. However, through its desire to make a bid for the 1992 Olympics, the BCC lost a significant amount of negotiating power.

## Section 2- Public Outcry

The years 1986-89 saw a marked change occur in BCC leadership, when Sallyanne Atkinson (1985-91) and her Liberal-led Council came to power. This period saw the rise of the City Council to a higher level of influence over post-exposition development, primarily through the very public decline in popularity and electoral trust of the State government. Key factors in the breakdown of confidence were the 'Joh for PM' campaign and the Fitzgerald Inquiry, the River City controversy, and the public outcry – led by the media – against the secretive nature of the Expo development project.

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<sup>17</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland (2011) *Queensland Speaks*, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/llew-edwards>: 01:12:19- 01:13:00

<sup>18</sup> D De Lario, *Report of Dr Damaso de Lario Chairman of the Committee of Commissioners-General at the 1988 World Exposition* (1988). Retrieved 16 January 2011 from <http://www.foundationexpo88.org/delario.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: p. 391

<sup>21</sup> De Lario, *Report of Dr Damaso de Lario*

<sup>22</sup> Carroll *Intergovernmental Relations*: 418

These were turbulent years for the Bjelke-Petersen National Party Government. While they were re-elected with an increased majority in November 1986, the unmitigated failure of Bjelke-Petersen's federal ambitions irrevocably damaged his political reputation. The 'Joh for PM' campaign was disastrous, as while at one point he attracted 20 per cent support in local opinion polls, Bjelke-Petersen's populist appeal never reached great heights in Sydney or Melbourne.<sup>23</sup> His very public failure led to Bjelke-Petersen not standing in the subsequent federal election; this and other concerns over the Premier's standing encouraged Cabinet opposition and resulted in a vote of no confidence.<sup>24</sup>

On 1 December 1987, Bjelke-Petersen was deposed as National Party leader by Mike Ahern (1987-89), ending his more than 19 years as Premier of Queensland. Ahern was prominent during the two years of what later became known as the Fitzgerald Inquiry, an investigation into the allegations of police corruption in Queensland, with talk of 'illegal gambling and prostitution, of kickbacks and brown bags, of vice at the highest levels'.<sup>25</sup> This was sparked by claims made by investigative journalists such as *Courier-Mail* reporter Phil Dickie and *Four Corners* reporter Chris Masters' renowned piece 'Moonlight State'.<sup>26</sup> In 1988, Bjelke-Petersen – still Premier – was away on business in Los Angeles, and acting Premier Bill Gunn appointed Tony Fitzgerald, QC to chair an inquiry into alleged police misdeeds.<sup>27</sup> Those implicated by the Inquiry would include former Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Four prominent National Party ministers were jailed, and thus the Fitzgerald Inquiry is touted by academics Prasser, Wear and Nethercote as a key factor in the National's defeat in 1989.<sup>28</sup> These changing political fortunes were publicly damaging, reducing voter confidence and later allowing the BCC to assume a larger amount of control during the River City controversy.

The River City controversy revolved around the eponymous company's controversial naming as preferred developer for the post-exposition South Bank site. To begin, eight proposals were perused

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<sup>23</sup> T. Stephens, (25 April 2005) "Farewell, Sir Joh, the great divider". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved 16 January 2012 from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Farewell-Sir-Joh-the-great-divider/2005/04/24/1114281454295.html>. Retrieved 2010-09-25.).

<sup>24</sup> P Coaldrake, *Working the System*, University of Queensland Press: St Lucia (1990)

<sup>25</sup> Crime and Misconduct Commission (17 December 2011). *The Fitzgerald Inquiry*. Retrieved 17 January 2011, from Crime and Misconduct Commission Queensland: <http://www.cmc.qld.gov.au/about-us/our-organisation/our-background/fitzgerald-inquiry/the-fitzgerald-inquiry>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> S. Prasser, R. Wear & J. Nethercote (eds), *Corruption and Reform*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press (1990)

in detail by what was termed the Working Group, a committee consisting of various appointees from BESBRA, the Premier's and Treasury departments, as well as one representative of the BCC, all of whom reported to the Post-Expo Evaluation Committee.<sup>29</sup> These proposals were then whittled down to four – World City 2000, CM Group, Kern Corporation and River City. In January 1988, the Evaluation Committee came to recommend River City Consortium for preferred development status. Liberal member for Toowong Denver Beanland (1986-92), preferring an alternate development choice, labelled the development a 'sketchy concept plan' that lacked detailed planning and forethought.<sup>30</sup> Suspicions were aroused when it was noted that the proposal, with its world trade centre and casino, was comparable to an offer put forward in 1982 by Frank Moore, now chair of the River City Consortium, and former member of BESBRA.<sup>31</sup> His close former ties with the National Party Government coupled with his BESBRA associations raised concerns about the propriety of the developer selection choice.<sup>32</sup> Furthering this, it became known that each of the other developer groups was informed that proposals that included a casino were not to be considered due to unpopularity with the general public.<sup>33</sup> Premier Ahern agreed to recommence the tendering process without River City being considered, and noted that any new redevelopment concept must be approved by the City Council 'under normal town planning arrangements' meeting the requirements of the BCC.<sup>34</sup>

According to Carroll, as the River City controversy grew, the media, 'newly sensitised to ... political corruption thanks to the Fitzgerald Inquiry', fastened quickly to the notion of foul play.<sup>35</sup> The media-fuelled public outcry took a kinder view of the City Council for its comparably 'open' strategies rather than the State government's closed door proceedings. The 1988 local elections were over swiftly, with the comparatively scandal-free Atkinson being re-elected with a 2:1 majority. Much of the media criticism was founded on the secretive nature of the redevelopment project, along with the lack of public consultancy. An article from the *Courier-Mail* stated that the proceedings were 'marked by secrecy, political conflict and government contempt', as well as noting how the City Council was being excluded from dealings.<sup>36</sup> Further to this last point, Queensland University of

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<sup>29</sup> Carroll, *Intergovernmental Relations*: 438

<sup>30</sup> Beanland, D (19 April 1988) *QPD*, vol. 196: p. 6078

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.436

<sup>33</sup> Premier's Department (15 May 1987) Minutes of the first meeting of the Post-Expo evaluation committee, QSA BESBRA file F3.8.1 pt 10 Post Expo Development; cited in Carroll

<sup>34</sup> M. Ahern, (23 May 1988) *Letter*. To Sir Llewellyn. QSA BESBRA file F3.8.1 pt 11 Post Expo Development. Cited In Carroll

<sup>35</sup> Carroll, *Intergovernmental Relations*: 439

<sup>36</sup> D. Peterson, (23 February 1998) *People Kept in Dark*, *Courier-Mail*, p. 9

Technology planning and landscape architecture head Phil Heywood criticised the power of the State government, noting that ‘a quango which is not responsible to the public will not pay any attention to the human problems caused by the sweeping changes’.<sup>37</sup> Atkinson supported the idea of creating an international design competition for the site, which contrasted heavily with the closed process that had previously taken place.<sup>38</sup> The BCC’s wish for a development focus on parkland resonated with the public, as several surveys including one constructed by AGB-McNair showed that respondents favoured the family-centred approach.<sup>39</sup> There was not, however, a sense of outward hostility between the two levels of government until the full extent of BESBRA’s financial difficulties became apparent.

The City Council’s position on minimising commercial space within the South Bank site did not sit well with BESBRA, which was bound by the Expo 88 Act (1984) to attempt to cover all costs.<sup>40</sup> In their joint report to Premier Ahern on 30 May 1988, Sir Llew Edwards and Sir Sydney Schubert, head of the Premier’s Department, recommended a compromise whereby the State government and the BCC share the financial loss garnered by accumulating less commercial space.<sup>41</sup> After several months of committee evaluation, the government discussions on draft legislation resulted in the Act establishing a South Bank Corporation that would manage the Expo site.<sup>42</sup> The South Bank Corporation Act gave much more power to the City Council, providing for two of the five Corporation board members to be nominated by the BCC.<sup>43</sup> The period 1986-89 therefore saw the State government publicly embarrassed by political upheaval and financial woes. The BCC took full advantage of this factor, using public opinion to add to their bargaining power and gain leverage – a far cry from their earlier position in 1982-86.

Sir Llewellyn Edwards identifies Expo 88 as ‘the best and hardest part of my life’, and that ‘I could not have asked for more cooperation’.<sup>44</sup> Looking back on Expo, Edwards represents the public face,

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<sup>37</sup> Anon (4 March 1988,) Site Planning “Better Off” with Council, *Courier-Mail*, p.2

<sup>38</sup> M. Kingston, (19 July 1987,) Llew’s Expo Auction: eight bid for Brisbane’s heart. *Times on Sunday*, p.10

<sup>39</sup> T. Livingston, (26 June 1988) Sallyanne to Buy Expo Site, *Sunday Mail*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Queensland Government, *The Expo 88 Act 1984*

<sup>41</sup> L. Edwards, Schubert, S (30 May 1988) *Letter and Report* (to Premier Ahern, recommending the River City Consortium be withdrawn). QSA BESBRA file F3.8.1 pt 11 Post Expo Development. Cited in Carroll.

<sup>42</sup> Government of Queensland (1989) *South Bank Corporation Act*, Retrieved 17 January 2011 from <http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/CURRENT/S/SouthBnkCorA89.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*: Part2, Section 10, p. 25

<sup>44</sup> Centre for the Government of Queensland , *Queensland Speaks*, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/llew-edwards>: 01:06:19- 01:08:00

brimming with pride and optimism. Soorley, though, represents the private struggles of this period, showing internal conflict to a moderate degree. Ultimately, the lead-up to Expo represented an era of shifting power in regards to intergovernmental cooperation, whereby those who initially seemed powerless due to private political bargaining eventually gained higher status on account of the power of changing public opinion.

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### Further Reading

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