

Micheline Astley-Boden, 'From Bjelke-Petersen to Beattie: the Evolution of Queensland's Indigenous Policy'

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Indigenous policy has been a divisive, yet important topic to contemporary Australians. The issues of land-rights, self-determination, and reconciliation are met with varying levels of support, through to scepticism. These positive and negative views, affected by political and personal motivations of governments and ministers, have been reflected in the various governments of Queensland's recent political history. Why is there such division? And, what difference is there between federal, state, and ministerial applications of Indigenous policy?

Queensland's Indigenous policy was particularly paternalistic and conservative during the Bjelke-Petersen era (1968-89). It was increasingly 'out of step with other parts of Australia'.¹ The government's actions in the 1960s and 1970s caused severe Indigenous disadvantage. Premier Bjelke-Petersen encouraged foreign investment in Queensland's bauxite and coal, to the detriment of local Indigenous peoples.² Coincidentally, my mother, working for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), remembers contact with leading ministers; she believes they were cavalier with respect to where these mines would be situated, and their effect on local populations. At this time, the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA) was under the directorship of Pat Killoran. Federal funding was siphoned away from Indigenous communities, toward other State government ventures. Thus, the Indigenous population received substandard social services and infrastructure. Killoran also personally attended the removal of the Indigenous community from the Marpoon reserve; a removal conducted at gunpoint, amidst the burning of homes.³ These actions were out of step with the federal government which, after the 1967 referendum, encouraged citizenship and civil rights.

The Labor and Liberal federal governments of the 1970s promoted land rights and granted Indigenous communities the right to manage their own affairs. Bjelke-Petersen called this 'an apartheid act' and he ensured that land rights were limited so that Indigenous communities could still be 'controlled'.⁴ Queensland asserted the Local Government Community policy which was first granted to the Aurukun and Mornington Island reserves in 1978. These reserves came under State control because they were akin to local councils.⁵ In 1984, Bob Katter, the new Minister for Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, gave all Indigenous communities Deeds of Grant in Trust (DOGIT). Rather than giving freedoms to communities, they were another veiled attempt to keep land rights from affecting Queensland – this meant that the way in which land was used, such as bauxite mining, could continue to benefit the government. Despite this, Katter supported Indigenous self-management and open consultation, but he was at loggerheads with the Director, Killoran. Once

¹ Rosalind Kidd, *The Way we Civilise: Aboriginal Affairs – the Untold Story*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1997, 254

² Wear 2007: 487

³ Tony Koch, 'Notorious Bureaucrat who Oppressed Aborigines Dies Unlamented', *The Australian*, 2 November 2010, p. 7

⁴ Kidd 1997: 325

⁵ Kidd 1997: 295, 298

Killoran had left the DAIA, Katter happily described his time as 'an evil regime'.⁶ Although Katter had an inclusive and supportive view of Indigenous communities, he was restricted by the overall aims of his government; this government also failed to keep in step with federal policy.

Paternalistic policy came to an abrupt end with the new Goss Labor Government (1989-96). Anne Warner – a progressive advocate of minority rights – became Minister of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs. In her role, Warner pushed for Indigenous self-determination. Warner introduced the *Community Services (Aborigines) Act, Amendment Act 1990*, to promote the capacity for Indigenous councils to manage their local affairs.⁷ The Labor Government also used a whole-of-government approach (eg Queensland Heath provided health services to Indigenous populations) and each department was informed with an Indigenous policy unit. One of Warner's proudest moments was when she gave the ownership of Cook Town reserve back to the Indigenous population. More generally, Warner implemented women's refuges, child care centres, and infrastructure developments in remote communities.⁸ Surprisingly, Warner received limited funding from her government. Warner had to contend with Kevin Rudd – known as Dr Death at this time – who 'would kill off submissions before they got to cabinet'.⁹ Land rights were shunted to the Office of Cabinet so that Rudd, the pragmatist, could maintain the interests of the mining industry and pastoralists. Warner was 'incredibly frustrated by that process' and she believes that 'the Westminster system itself was bring undermined [by the Office of Cabinet which was] able to overturn recommendations of the department'.¹⁰ If Warner's progressive stance was left unchecked by the Goss Government restrictions, Indigenous policy might have seen a greater shift toward self-determination, and more social services. Nonetheless, the Goss Government lost popularity – because of its failure to reform – and Labor was replaced by the National/Liberal Borbidge Government (1996-98).

After the short interlude of the Borbidge Government – which dealt with Indigenous affairs in even less detail – the Labor Beattie Government came to power in 1998. For most of the Beattie Government (1998-2007), Judy Spence was the Minister for Aboriginal and Islander Policy. The Beattie Government made well-intentioned attempts to remedy social injustices in Indigenous communities. However, its policies can be viewed as interventionist and paternalistic. The Aboriginal and Islander Women's Task Force on Violence reported on violence in Indigenous communities. In response, Spence launched alcohol restrictions, but without consultation – even though Indigenous communities expressed concern regarding infringements on civil rights.¹¹ Admittedly, this paternalism was not akin to the Bjelke-Petersen era, but by refusing to consult Indigenous communities they restricted self-determination. Warner astutely reflects that, even though the Goss

⁶ Koch 2010

⁷ John McCulloch, *The Legislators: Women in State and Federal Parliaments*, Rockhampton, Central Queensland University Press, 2005, 34

⁸ Centre for the Government of Queensland, Queensland Speaks, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/anne-warner>, 6 September 2010

⁹ Mann 2007

¹⁰ Centre for the Government of Queensland, Queensland Speaks, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/anne-warner>, 6 September 2010

¹¹ Parliamentary Library 1999; 2002

Government did not appear to reform quickly enough, compared to the Beattie Government, it was more still more progressive.¹²

Across several Queensland State governments, Indigenous policy has followed certain ebbs and flows. Admittedly, some ministers more than others, have advanced Indigenous self-determination and social services. Interestingly, these come from both the Liberal/National and Labor sides – Bob Katter and Anne Warner. It would be expected that Labor Governments would be more progressive and implement more social reforms. Yet, ministers have been restricted by their parties, and governments. Moreover, policy is greatly affected by State governments and individual ministers, irrespective of the wider federal government policy aims. Sadly, these issues between the personal and political, the minister and government, and the wider societal aims (as reflected, generally, by federal governmental policy) have not facilitated the true support of Indigenous communities.

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Further Reading

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¹² Centre for the Government of Queensland, Queensland Speaks,
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