

# **‘Queensland Speaks’: A progress report**

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## ***Introduction: Feast After Famine?***

There has been a growing complaint over the past twenty years from politicians, parliamentary officials and academics that, despite its centrality in the institutions of responsible government, nobody is interested in studying Parliament. This is usually associated with an observation which partly explains this dearth of studies — that Parliament has declined in power and influence over this time compared to the executive branch, the media, parties and interest groups.

One of the problems with this observation is that it presumes a ‘Golden Age’ when things were very different, when Parliament ‘really counted for something’. If such a ‘Golden Age’ ever existed in any society with a Parliamentary tradition, the Age was very short-lived and hardly lasted long enough to be called an ‘Age’. Usually the focus on behaviour inside Parliament was the product of either systemic shifts (such as the emergence of disciplined parties in late nineteenth century Britain) or temporary narrow balances of power between competing alliances which empowered individuals or small uncommitted factions (such as occurred in the early years of the Australian national government.)

But recently there has been a surge of interest from scholars interested in one of three aspects : first, the uncertain relationship between upper and lower houses in bicameral systems, making the Australian Senate the focus of contemporary political speculation; second, the relatively high level of adoption of parliamentary models in the resurgence of democratic regimes in post-colonial states in Africa and Asia; and third, more parochially, the unicameral experience in Queensland and in particular the strong focus on workable majorities during the transition from Premiers Goss to Beattie when non-Labor members were in a majority.

Intriguingly there is now a raft of interview projects based on the creation of oral histories of parliamentarians in Queensland. One is a comparative study by Suman Ojha described by her in another paper at this conference. The second is the initiative from the new Speaker of the Queensland Parliament, John Mickel, (being

implemented under the supervision of Dr Paul Reynolds,) which is aimed at a wide coverage of retired members. The third is the Queensland component of the Dunstan Institute's project relating to ALP parliamentarians. The fourth is the small complement of Queensland politicians interviewed to date by the National Library in their long-running oral history project, including the only major interview ever recorded with Vince Gair. The fifth is the focus of this paper.

### ***'Queensland Speaks'***

The Centre for the Government of Queensland, recently established at the University of Queensland, is undertaking four major projects with the support of grants from the Australian Research Council and the Department of Premier and Cabinet in Queensland. While the projects will bear some fruit in Queensland's sesquicentennial year, they are designed as lasting resources that can be built on by subsequent generations.

The projects include the Queensland Historical Atlas (in conjunction with the Queensland Museum), Queensland Places (the 950 settlements which once had or now have populations of 500 or more), and Queensland's Past Online (new digital resources, including *The Queenslander* (1867-1938), out-of-print books, theses and archival records).

The fourth project is *Queensland Speaks*, which is an extensive oral history project relating to ministers and public servants. In this project we wish to create an historical record of perceptions and reflections on the governance of Queensland between about 1965 and 1999. In the first instance we have identified 60 politicians and senior public servants who were actively engaged in policy-making during this period.

The overall projects are directed by Professor Peter Spearritt, Centre Director and second author of this paper; the committee overseeing 'Queensland Speaks' is chaired by the main author. As a long-time university teacher based in Brisbane and a former Director-General of Education in Queensland, I have been well placed to construct a network of both interviewers and respondents. The interview team has been chosen on the basis of their knowledge of Queensland politics acquired through research and/or participation in the senior levels of the public service: these include Brian Head, Ann Scott, Robin Sullivan and Rae Wear. We hope also to add a 'balanced ticket' of former politicians who have undertaken postgraduate tertiary education and have an active interest in political history.

Our intention is to interview people either at the University or a location of their choosing for 1-2 hours. The interview will be digitally recorded for archival purposes and a copy of the interview will be provided on disk. We are seeking copyright clearance so the interview can be available on the Centre's public website. The interview will focus on the respondent's time in political or public

service life in Queensland, with some contextual questions directed to the political climate and policy issues of the time.

This is the first time that an oral history project has been undertaken in Australia interviewing both senior politicians and senior bureaucrats who worked in the same era. While scholars will use the interviews to help analyse decision-making in this period, the interviews will also be available to the general public to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the Queensland Government in the last third of the twentieth century.

We will coordinate with a more focussed project mentioned earlier being developed by the Speaker of the Queensland Parliament, responding to the fact that the most recent election resulted in the biggest turnover in parliamentary history which did not simultaneously cause a change of government. Taken together, these two projects will provide a contribution to the conference theme of Opposition by identifying politicians who served both in government and opposition and the public servants who served ministers in Coalition, National Party and ALP governments.

### ***Implementation Issues***

Selecting interviewees is something of a moveable feast, likely to be subject to amendment on an iterative basis. The politicians we've selected have generally held senior ministries, although for varying lengths of time — the ALP members on the list have tended to have longer sequential histories; the Country-National have almost equal numbers on the list, most serving in the period before 1989 and some returning under Rob Borbidge; there are fewer Liberals, reflecting their longer time in the wilderness and occasional strategic defections. The public servants have varying lengths of service and more mobility, in some cases generated by three changes of party regime in the period.

The number of interviewees will be relatively flexible as the main costs relate to capital equipment and the labour needed for processing and indexing the audio recording. The interviewers themselves are working in a voluntary capacity, while obviously advancing their own sphere of knowledge. So it is a relatively low-cost exercise to expand the numbers interviewed to follow up on particular themes.

The main constraint is matching the backgrounds of interviewers and interviewees, so that past history does not interfere with free flow of information and objectivity. Some obvious candidates for interview, like the former Director-General of the Cabinet Office or the Chairman of the Public Service Management Commission, have had previous dealings with some members of the interviewer panel. There may be a preference on both sides for an interviewer with less 'baggage' to carry. In other cases, shared experience and common understanding may generate a more fruitful exchange without undermining the need for objectivity.

The key criteria for selecting the two groups of politicians and public servants are complementary. For politicians, level of seniority and influence in the party hierarchy and the length of experience as a Minister are relevant. For public servants, length and breadth of service are relevant and also the significance of their ministers' responsibilities — such as control of central agencies and departments with high levels of financial responsibility for capital or recurrent expenditure.

Another criterion was chronological. In seeking to create a sound archive, printed and archival material tends to get lost as time passes and respondents die. Modern technology may ensure that details of more recent events and attitudes will be available to scholars (although that is by no means certain; how many politicians and senior public servants properly archive their email correspondence, for instance?). What is certain are poor and declining memories to supplement hard-copy records for earlier periods. So voices that can still be heard from the era before the ALP hegemony after 1989 need to be recorded and listened to first.

A second chronological and occupational issue is that those involved in the recent past may be reluctant to express their views with the same frankness when earlier periods are under discussion. Serving politicians are already excluded from our sample (but recent retirements have added to the pool); public servants tend traditionally to be more reticent, even when they have left government employment. As one serving Director-General pointed out, some time before the current media frenzy over lobbyists and their links with the ALP erupted, the private sector in Brisbane is populated at senior levels with former public servants as well as ex-politicians. He offered us the advice that a sensible notional cut-off might be the accession to office of the first Beattie government and the following few months when processes of transition were completed.

The members of the interview panel participated in a full-day training exercise convened by the National Library's Oral History program. We chose to adopt their protocols, including the same high-quality recording equipment as used by the Library, not least because of being able to listen to the language used by our interviewees. While following, to a limited extent, the Library's 'whole-of-life' approach, our primary focus will be on the interface between politicians and public servants in the policy-making process. We are particularly interested to gain insights into where Ministers get their key briefings — their own staff, their senior public servants, the Premier's office — and what alternatives were considered for major legislative and/or expenditure decisions. What happened when Ministerial decisions were at odds with the path recommended by departmental heads? Are errors of judgement ever admitted and if so, how are they dealt with?

Our informal discussions and a pilot interview pointed to a need for flexibility in the choice of questions, beyond the predictable ones, as well as the identification of key actors outside the narrowly-constrained framework of Ministers and Directors-General. Comprehensive explanations of policy outcomes may involve contributions from key Ministerial advisers and party officials, especially in periods

when one regime was being replaced by another. And you may get unexpected responses to questions about interviewees identifying their most significant achievements, individually and collectively, and adding the other side of the coin by asking about failures and frustrations. ▲

### ***References***

The single best reference source on Queensland politics for this period is the chronicle published by the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, founded in 1955, and now available online.

Queensland is fortunate to have two recently published histories, Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2007, and R.Fitzgerald, L.Megarrity and D.Dymons, *Made in Queensland: a new history*, University of Queensland Press, 2009.

There is also a forthcoming book by Paul Reynolds on politics in Queensland since 1985, to be published by the University of Central Queensland Press. This includes a chapter on the public service written by Roger Scott.

The Oral History Association of Australia, founded in 1978, has a regular journal and a useful website, [www.ohaa.net.au](http://www.ohaa.net.au). The National Library oral history section has a list of all the major oral history holdings in public hands in Australia. Many of their own interviews can now be listened to on line.