What’s So Special?

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The Federation Mirror
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Johannes Bjelke-Peterson: The Lord’s Premier
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Queensland is different', overseas commentators would mutter sagely when the media ran yet another story on Joh Bjelke-Peterson, premier of that state from 1968 to 1987. Authoritarian without generosity, self-servingly ignorant of the decent checks and balances usual in the Westminster style of government, prejudiced and inarticulate, Joh was impossible. Town­send, Hugh Lunn and Alan Metcalfe. Joh’s own subject of three biographical studies, written by Derek Townsend, Hugh Lunn and Alan Metcalfe. Joh’s own account, but Wear also has the advantage of drawing on his premiership; Metcalfe was obsequiously partisan; Lunn Townsend published his book little more than halfway through Joh Bjelke-Peterson’s régime in terms of cronyism towards favoured entre­preneurs and disregard of public service ethics. Peter Reith and others — including Ned Hanlon, Bjelke-Peterson’s Labor predecessor in Queensland — have cracked down hard on the trade unions. If the Nationals held power in Queensland for thirty-two years, they were only making up for a Labor hegemony (with one short break) of forty-two years. Other states, such as Tasmania and South Australia, have also known long periods of one-party rule. What was so special about Queensland?

Yet was Joh so exceptional? Henry Bolte, in Victoria, was equally contemptuous of protest movements. Brian Burke’s Labor government in Western Australia matched the Bjelke-Peterson régime in terms of chronyism towards favoured entre­preneurs and disregard of public service ethics. Peter Reith and others — including Ned Hanlon, Bjelke-Peterson’s Labor predecessor in Queensland — have cracked down hard on the trade unions. If the Nationals held power in Queensland for thirty-two years, they were only making up for a Labor hegemony (with one short break) of forty-two years. Other states, such as Tasmania and South Australia, have also known long periods of one-party rule. What was so special about Queensland?

Ross Fitzgerald, an academic who was one of Bjelke-Peterson’s more outspoken critics, may come some way towards providing an answer in The Federation Mirror. Having presided over Queensland’s Centenary of Federation commit­tee, Fitzgerald undertook the task of summarising the year’s activities. Such chronicles are often predictable and boring.
Fitzgerald had the bright idea of looking at the public activities of eight representative Queensland communities in the Federation year of 1901 and comparing them with the celebrations of 2001. His findings offer some interesting insights into Queensland’s political culture.

Not surprisingly, Queenslanders in 1901 displayed only moderate rapture in greeting their new Commonwealth. Brisbane and Toowoomba had been opposed to Federation, fearing commercial competition from New South Wales and Victoria. North Queensland centres such as Mackay, Townsville and Cairns had voted strongly in favour of Federation, but their enthusiasm was tempered by uncertainty about the impact of the White Australia policy on the sugar industry. Consequently, most centres were slow to organise their celebrations on 1 January 1901, and many of the speeches made on that day placed more stress on Queensland’s membership of the British Empire than on the new nation. The death of Queen Victoria, three weeks later, seems to have generated considerably more emotion.

Despite the patriotic rhetoric, the celebrations usually turned out to be a pretext for a day’s holiday. In several centres, the Japanese and Chinese communities staged picturesque tableaux, and white Australians were not so hard-hearted as to stint on their applause. Some of the entertainments suggested nostalgia for the Old Country; there were Highland flings and maypole dances, and long-bearded characters masquerading as ancient Druids. In one or two places, the hilarity was planned to culminate in a chase after a greased pig, but at Irvinebank the sagacious animal escaped from its sty before the event could take place.

The celebrations of 2001 were at least as much fun. Queensland was divided into twelve zones, each taking turns to stage a month of events. Fireworks and merry-go-rounds were still much in evidence. Instead of Highland flings, several places now offered multicultural belly dancing. One of the finest celebratory displays anywhere in Australia took place in Townsville in August. The most impressive item in their street parade was the Carpet Snake Dreaming, evidence that Aboriginal Australians were no longer quite so marginalised as they had been during the 1901 celebrations.

Perhaps more should have been done during the centenary to promote an understanding of the constitutions of Queensland and the Australian Commonwealth. Although Premier Peter Beattie was more generous in sharing the limelight with politicians from rival parties than Bjelke-Peterson might have been, there was little emphasis on improving public awareness of the checks and balances desirable in a healthy political system. Other demagogues could arise in future to debase the political currency as Joh did. But like other Australians, Queenslanders possibly had their priorities right. As the visiting English historian James Froude observed more than a century ago: ‘It is hard to quarrel with men [and women] who only wish to be innocently happy.’