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Paris of the north

Robert Whyte

In an attempt to tie together the last of the Joh years, the years of effervescent and celebrated satire, poking fun at a police state, Robert Whyte here looks at the change from conservative to Labor rule. It is a wistful recollection as Queensland left behind the crazy days of Joh's corruption, repression and preposterous hubris. Joh was a bona fide nutjob who wouldn't have lasted a second in the real world and didn't, as it turned out, being shamed and ridiculed for his failed 'Joh for PM' campaign. Yet Joh was the flashpoint for the surge in interest from the southern states. Without him we wouldn't have had our fifteen minutes of fame. Maybe we would have, but we'll never know, will we? Does edgy satire require a reactionary, conservative regime to really flourish? It looks like it does.

IN THE NEW BRISBANE, there is no Sydney or Melbourne envy, no longing for London or pining for New York. We spit on your steinking badges of class and taste. We make our own rules because, deep down, everyone who lives here knows Brisbane is the centre of the universe, the creative hub, the Paris of the north.

Growing up in those civilised places down south, there was a place for you, no matter how arty, weird, green or radioactive. You really *could* be a rebel. Or so you think. As Mexicans,¹ compared with us you are only Claytons² rebels, ersatz innovators, placebo protesters. You had it made. 'Slip into something more radical. I'll just fix us a pre-dinner bong.'

In Brisbane there was no pathway to success for bright young things in the farcical gerontocracy that was the Bjelke-Petersen government. Up here we were on the outside or, more accurately, underneath, under the white-shoe veneer. We were in the underground, labyrinthine sewers where, unlike the shiny beige cushioned world above, life was dirty, dangerous and real.

¹ Southerners.

² Claytons was a non-alcoholic beverage in Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s and '80s: 'the drink you have when you're not having a drink'. In Australian and New Zealand vernacular it stands for an ersatz or dummy thing, or something that is obviously ineffective. For example, a knowledgeable but unqualified handyman could be referred to as a 'Claytons carpenter'. The term can also be used as an insult.

Opposite:
Paisley Pirates of Penzance poster, illustration and design by Damien Ledwich, 1985.



Concertgoers were dismayed when Blondie cancelled a performance at Her Majesty's Theatre. Debbie Harry became ill after eating too many cherries.
TELEGRAPH
9 DECEMBER 1977

The parallels between occupied France in the Second World War and Brisbane under Bjelke-Petersen are inescapable. Goodness gracious me, we invited neo-Stalinist Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu to dinner! Ceausescu, who visited Brisbane

during World Expo in April 1988, had met Bjelke-Petersen in late 1987 when Joh, with mining magnate mate Lang Hancock, visited Bucharest to woo Ceausescu with Queensland coal (and Western Australia as a job lot). Ceausescu and his wife were machine-gunned to death by a firing squad on Christmas Day 1989. Ceausescu, a run-of-the-mill European dictator, had indulged in crimes against the people, including genocide. 'You'd never think he had blood on his hands,' Joh said to under-treasurer Leo Hielscher on the way back from the meeting. Don't you worry about that.

You think you Welshies and Vics had it tough when you had Gorton and McMahon making it hard on you to stage sit-ins, to 'occupy' Melbourne and Sydney. You poor things. In Brisbane we had the pleasure of taking down the whole Whitlam government, when good old Joh flouted the rules and appointed Albert Field to the Senate, which led to the Whitlam dismissal. We had a state of emergency declared in order to play rugby. Six hundred police were transported to Brisbane from elsewhere and a series of violent attacks by police on demonstrators occurred during the Springboks tour. Joh described the tour as 'great fun, a game of chess in the political arena', which 'put me on the map'.

You took to the streets to have a good old squawk about your pet problems, like war. Queensland banned street marches altogether in 1978. You supported Medicare. In Queensland the government opposed it because it was obviously out-and-out socialism. Not only did Queensland oppose any chance of land rights for Aboriginal people, Indigenous groups were banned from being able to own large tracts of land. Joh was rather happy with AIDS and HIV because it might wipe out Indigenous communities. No condom machines, public safe-sex campaigns and school sex-education programs up here, lads. Gay men (publicly denounced as deviants) were banned from entering pubs and clubs, men suspected of being gay were arrested and Queensland tried to make lesbianism illegal, a valiant attempt that failed because, like the Queen, most Queenslanders didn't know what lesbianism was or, if they did, weren't going to admit it.

We knocked down historic heritage buildings in the middle of the night because we needed to keep our days free for raids on suspected abortion clinics and stopping pregnant women getting on planes to have an abortion in Sydney. We had a whale of a time. In fact, Queensland was a proud whaling nation, or at least parts of it were.

The Bjelke-Petersen era was 1968 to 1987. First signs of a reactionary and authoritarian, rather than just conservative, regime came with him granting six-year leases to prospect for oil on the Great Barrier Reef to Exoil NL and Transoil NL. He was a major shareholder in both. This was followed by a windfall for several Queensland government ministers and senior public servants, as well as Florence Bjelke-Petersen, from the public float of Comalco, a mining company that had direct dealings with the government and senior ministers. The shares bought due to this insider trading doubled their price on their first day of trading. Bjelke-Petersen rejected claims of conflict of interest in all these dealings.

The 1971 redistribution resulted in Brisbane electorates averaging about 22,000 voters, some rural seats such as Gregory and Balonne had fewer than 7000. It was at this time that Joh found his 'style', that of authoritarian strong man, prepared to crush any left-wing, greenie, anti-uranium, trade union uprising in a police state, a strategy characteristic of despots.

In 1972 Whitlam and Labor came to power federally. In the parallel with Paris, this was rather like America's entry into the Second World War. Joh fought the 1974 state election on opposing 'the alien and stagnating, centralist, socialist, communist-inspired policies of the federal Labor government'. As Joh wielded the iron fist against students and unions, resulting TV coverage saw Rosemary Severin being bashed over the head with a police baton during a street march, and Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod announcing he would hold an inquiry. Bjelke-Petersen quashed it, saying he was tired of radical groups believing they could take over the streets.

Police officers passed a motion at a meeting commending the premier for his 'distinct stand against groups acting outside the law' and censured their own police commissioner. The police state was in full swing, with a military-style raid on a hippie commune at Cedar Bay in far north Queensland late the following month. The police, who had been looking for marijuana, set fire to the residents' houses and destroyed their property.

Bjelke-Petersen's increasingly hardline approach to civil liberties prompted Queensland National Party president Robert Sparkes to warn the party that it was developing a dangerous propaganda-created ultra-

conservative, almost fascist image. He told a party conference: 'We must studiously avoid any statements or actions which suggest an extreme right-wing posture.' Bjelke-Petersen ignored the advice. He went from strength to strength, from corrupt power to a ludicrous *Mein Kampf* style biography, *Jigsaw*, lauding him as a 'statesman extraordinaire' and 'protectorate of Queensland and her people'.

The parallels with an occupied France, with Brisbane occupied by National Party overlords, go deeper. We had an underground, of course, and it was a melting pot of artists, journalists, architects, writers, musicians and other creative radical types, making posters and sneaking around in the dark putting them up on the walls of Bjelke-Petersen House, but we were not without the encouragement and support from 'allies' first in the Whitlam government, then in the Hawke federal government. At the same time as street marches were banned, the Hawke government funded community arts and agit-prop theatre. It must have cheered off the Queensland premier no end.

On 20 April 1985 the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) opened with a production of *Pirates of Penzance*. The Brisbane cultural underground did not fail to notice the opening show was wholly imported from interstate. Hardly very Queensland, was it?

The counterculture responded with a show of its own, a two-night season of *The Paisley Pirates of Penzance*, directed by Sean Mee and David Pyle, with a cast and crew of forty-five. The home-grown show got the attention of the southern artists in the mainstream *Pirates of Penzance* at QPAC, who attended a by-popular-demand second performance at midnight. This seems a bit like the 'Marseillaise' scene in *Casablanca* in the presence of the Germans.

The satire of *Paisley Pirates of Penzance* had the major-general being played by comedian Gerry Connolly as Joh, the very model of a modern major-general, don't you worry about that! The on-stage constabulary satirised the Queensland police with plenty of time given over to Senior Constable Dave Moore, who was, with Agro the puppet, the TV face promoting the Queensland police. Dave Moore, meanwhile, was an enthusiastic paedophile who had been convicted for carnal knowledge of a sixteen-year-old boy in 1982 and later was convicted for masturbating in a public toilet in 1989. His behaviour around the known beats of lavatories in public parks and in gay pubs was a matter of public notoriety. Corrupt Police Commissioner Terry Lewis (later jailed as a result of the Fitzgerald Inquiry) protected Dave Moore, giving him a clean bill of health despite Moore's involvement in such non-trivial pursuits as child pornography rings.



The *Cane Toad Times* contributors in the Labour Day march in Brisbane wearing Tony Fitzgerald Fan Club T-shirts.

In the same year, 1985, *Paisley Pirates of Penzance* was followed by another successful underground satire, *Conway Christ, Redneck Superstar*, again directed by Sean Mee and David Pyle, with a cast and crew of over 120.

Meanwhile, Joh unveiled plans to create seven new electorates with boundaries to be drawn by electoral commissioners especially appointed by the government, one of them a fundraiser for the National Party. Never mind the corruption, feel the hubris. A 'Joh for PM' campaign was conceived in late 1985, driven largely by a group of Gold Coast property developers, and at the 1986 Queensland election Joh recorded his biggest electoral win ever. *Conway Christ* was more a youth culture values statement than an overt political satire, drawing positives from the underground drug culture, feminism, anti-Christian sentiment, oppression of the workers by the man and, of course, the perennial 'somewhere to get a drink after midnight on Sunday'.

By 1986 the underground was breaking into the mainstream. The 1986 *Hound of Music* mashed together the *Sound of Music* and *Frankenstein*. Premier Joh was given a Hitler moustache and the image was released as a popular resistance movement T-shirt with the slogan, 'Be afraid, be very afraid.' In retrospect, it would have been like cabarets in Berlin during the Third Reich depicting Hitler with horns and a forked tail. Perhaps they did.

But all was not rosy in the corridors of wealth and power. When right-wing governments are in control too long and their *laissez faire* becomes 'crooked millionaires' the red mist comes down and the greed knows no restraint. Things go weirdly distorted with business able to raise millions on a 'better mousetrap' or the slightest whiff of 'nickel futures'.

By the time of the October 1987 financial collapse, still the biggest one-day fall of the ASX, lots of Joh's closest pals were up to their elbows in the till and about to get their arms blown off.

Eventually, despite Joh's immense popularity among sheep (who vote in Queensland), it all came to an end.

Wayne Goss (Labor leader) and Wayne Swan (state secretary and campaign director of the Labor Party), with a little help from Kevin Rudd (a nobody from Nambour who handed out how-to-vote cards), stormed the citadel despite the Bjelke-mander. The truth was, the Nationals simply couldn't muster enough sheep. Get it?

Paris was overjoyed when they were liberated – they danced in the streets, came out of the sewers, wore berets and did all of those other crazy things French people do when they're happy. In Brisbane it was more subdued and dissidents had to fight tooth and claw against some entrenched cultural conservatism. After all, the only interesting story for southern journalists was 'What will Joh do next?' After the Lutheran nitwit was toppled, first by his own party, then ratified by the people in the 1989 election, the soufflé collapsed. Queensland was no fun anymore.

For Brisbane people, the building blocks of Brisbane's culture were already in place, and they were not 'radical friendly'. There was no storming of the Bastille and setting all the prisoners free. By that time either you had learned how to survive with Hawke government help, or you left. The stages of the theatres were not suddenly cleared for radical Queensland plays; the walls of galleries didn't suddenly get covered with radical, edgy art; 4ZZZ had already played its part in bringing new music, news and counterculture to the young. It was business as usual with cranes on the skyline and the 'Culture Bunker' QPAC precinct with the adjacent Queensland Museum and State Library already built by the white-shoe-brigade era's economic success. Despite it resembling a sterile, anti-art parody of architectural monuments (with no visible entrances) and a blond-stone homogenised exterior, the Culture Bunker wasn't going to be torn down and, in terms of mainstream art and culture, money ruled.

Radicals did not stream out of the lofts, garrets and sewers to take over the streets; in fact, nothing much visible happened at all.

In George Street the serious young lawyer, Wayne Goss, wasn't really in touch with the counterculture underground. He admired their stars, who had soldiered on, like Erroll O'Neill and *The Cane Toad Times*, but that's not what government was about. Government for Wayne Goss was about the need

for integrity. This required new anti-corruption institutions, an overhaul of electoral laws to entrench 'one vote, one value', freedom of information, administrative law reform and major structural changes to the public sector. The Goss government is said to have pursued an ambitious social agenda, but really it was just to bring Queensland up to speed with the 'real' Australia, outside Queensland, with a focus on investment in schools, hospitals, new infrastructure and new protections for the Great Barrier Reef and the northern rainforests.

In post-war Paris, swarming with black jazz musicians and raining crime novels 'translated from the American' there was a struggle, arguably an unsuccessful one, to find an authentic French culture while the Frenchifying of the American culture produced an Anglophone counterculture in itself, a strain of quirky, dark, violent stories more in love with Raymond Chandler than Richard Nixon. These got jumbled up with spaghetti westerns, absurdist comedy, self-mocking satire and a whole lot of other flames attracting the English-language literati like moths. Ultimately all this was burned by the searing misunderstanding of post-modern everything and an overarching but flaunted inability to read French philosophers in the original and the lack of even half an idea towards knowing what they were banging on about.

The Queensland counterculture, resistance and underground eventually manifested as mainstream success (in QPAC its very self, with the Mee-Pyle and ToadShow team staging the mainstream rock musical *Sherwoodstock* in January 1990 followed by *Phantoad of the Opera* as music score for the 1991 Gulf War in 1991. Both of these were funny but relatively bland celebrations, lacking stinging satire. The triumphant return of edgy comedy came with *Glamalot* satirising the Goss government, even as it was falling on its sword in 1995. Perhaps authentically edgy art needs the threat or, even more, the reality of conservative rule in Queensland as it did in the Borbidge-Sheldon Liberal National government in 1996 and then again in the catastrophic Newman LNP government in 2012.

Labor in Queensland, it must be said, like Queensland itself, is basically conservative. The misfits and dissidents never really outmuscled the white-shoe brigade, property developers and real estate tycoons for a lasting place in the sun. The rebels now lie dormant, waiting for the inevitable dark times in which to spark and grow.



Wayne Goss wins office, 2 December 1989.