

Emeritus Professor Roger Scott, Centre for the Government of Queensland,  
University of Queensland

*The Ayes Have It; The History of the Queensland Parliament 1957–1989*, John Wanna and Tracey Arklay, ANU Press, 2010. pp x + 744, paperback, \$39.95 print version

## **Roger Scott**

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I agreed to review this book out of a sense of professional duty as a Brisbane-based member of the editorial board of the journal. When the book arrived, it had lots of features which put me off — a mundane title and a cover which together promised an emphasis on arcane processes and architecture; it was well over 700 pages long, with only seven muddy photographs and no cartoons; it was based on a project dating back to 1995. What kept me interested was the reputation of the authors. Tracey Arklay's role as a long-term research assistant is described in the Acknowledgements, alongside her expanding expertise through higher degree study. She contributed to the finalisation of the project as well as organising appendices and wrote two unspecified chapters herself (probably those forming the book-ends of the manuscript). John Wanna has an enviable national reputation for writing with insight about a breadth of policy topics for national and international publications. In addition and of particular relevance to my own current work, he contributed for many years the regular Chronicle entry for Queensland in the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* as part of his wider role as a political commentator.

I was very glad I stayed interested despite my initial forebodings. The title gives no hint of the breadth of the discussion of Queensland politics which has been achieved by viewing events through the prism of parliamentary debates. The insights and analysis of these events is similar in kind to that provided in the Chronicle entries and, viewed at a distance in time, this aggregation here still knock the socks off the number of standard histories which claim a broader compass. Go to this book first, not afterwards, if you want to know anything about the politics of Queensland between the end of Gair via Bjelke-Peterson to the arrival of Goss.

My own arcane current interest is to fill the lacuna of historical sources dealing the contiguous later period, specifically the non-Labor parties out of office (and briefly in office) during the 1990s. I will be linking this to the oral history resources of 'Queensland Speaks' — a project described in the 2010 issue of this journal. And I found plenty of useful stuff in this book, often derived in an entertaining fashion from the Chronicles of the time, plus finding a reference to a related Griffith thesis by Arklay covering my own specific interest viewed across a longer historical period.

'Entertaining' is the operative word for this book. Despite its length and potentially dry content, the book is enormous fun, particularly for anyone who like Wanna (and me) came from outside but lived through some of the last forty years in Brisbane. Parliament was anything but dull when there were so many colourful characters engaged within it and Wanna's sardonic humour takes full advantage, so the narrative never flags. You start to chuckle even before you finish the Acknowledgements. Among the list of names of all those who helped in various ways, including the variety of parliamentary staff, there is testimony to the encouragement and support from previous Speakers. Neil Turner rates an extended mention:

A taciturn bloke. (he) had our manuscript vetted by his chauffeur Justin Choveaux (who had featured as the 'worst' witness in the Criminal Justice Commission's 'Joh Jury' investigations), but then jokingly showed us his unique skill with a stockwhip just in case we got out of line. (p. ix)

Five hundred pages later you are still ready to smile again at the exploits in 1981 of future Minister Vince Lester who established his reputation on the basis of instituting a parliamentary debate on the virtue of outward opening or revolving toilet doors. And laugh yet again a hundred pages later when Lester won further promotion as Minister for Police, Employment, Training and Industrial Affairs, serving alongside Bob Katter during the short-lived Premiership of Russell Cooper. Wanna records that: 'Lester's new responsibilities seem to go to his head straightaway as he thought the police were there as a personalised taxi service to take him on his errands.'

Wanna is exemplary in his even-handedness. Labor's colourful characters get equal billing for their ridiculous behaviour; it just seems that there were fewer of them during an era where they had little to smile about for most of the time under discussion. He also is willing to be even-handed in his harsh judgements of electoral and parliamentary misconduct and miscalculations. So he records forgotten ALP leader Percy Tucker's injunction just before the 1974 election, 'Go out on the hustings Joh and I'll slaughter you', and comments that 'Tucker's bravado has subsequently passed into political folklore as one of the most foolhardy statements in Australian politics'. Reporting on Liberal Ministers taking strong principled stands a decade later against the same Premier, Wanna comments that 'When they lost, they appeared to accept the outcome too meekly. In some ways, taking a stand and losing, then not doing anything about it, harmed the political standing of senior Liberals among their own colleagues'.

The pace of the commentary hardly slackens. Each chapter stands alone as an unfolding story of events based largely on parliamentary debates and contemporary press accounts. There is little in the way of reflection after the event or reference to secondary literature to get in the way of the narrative. After a brief overview 'Inside the Queensland Parliament', covering lucidly the history of the building and its operational procedures, the book follows a fairly rigid chronological structure. Part One deals with the Nicklin years in six chapters, with one chapter devoted to an

overview of oppositional parties 1957–1968 — i.e. Gair’s Queensland Labor Party versus Duggan’s ALP. The second and longer Part Two takes the story from the arrival of Bjelke-Petersen in 1968 to the end of the Nationals era in 1989. It starts with the early years under Bjelke-Petersen and the stages by which Parliament was progressively bent to his will. Chapters 11 and 12 describe the overall pattern of legislative output during the twenty-year doldrum into which the ALP had lapsed. Then the exciting events of the 1980s are recounted in more detail from the perspective of what was said and done in Parliament. Suddenly the legislative institution of the Westminster model came to mean something instead of being an irrelevance impotently trudging alongside a rampant executive. What was said in Parliament counted for something — both for coalition partners placed under stress by the ambition of the Nationals to govern alone and for the ALP seeking to portray itself as a credible alternative by demonstrating the lack of moral fitness of its opponents.

Each of the main chapters is between forty and fifty pages long and all are broken into bite-size chunks, with a bold sub-head which in places resemble newspaper headlines followed by a few pages of text, sometimes as few as two pages. In the nineteenth century, the subheads might have been collected at the start of each chapter but they are nowhere collected together in this book. There is a price to be paid in terms of a feeling of depth, so the reader might feel he or she is reading a piece of extended journalism. Against that, the headlines reminded me of events and people I had forgotten about up till then, just like the AJPH Chronicles viewed anew in my current research. To use an example closer in time than most, chapter 15 is headed ‘The Implosion of Joh Bjelke-Petersen 1983–1987’. Here are the subheads which follow: the eighth Bjelke-Petersen Ministry; surviving financially in ‘the show that goes on here’; the sudden death of two sitting Labor members; four by-elections in quick succession; the Parliament as the ‘laughing stock of Australia — or those in glass houses who always throw stones’; budgets and arguments over taxation; the vexatious SEQEB dispute — ‘do not test this government’s patience and resilience too far’; a litany of allegations; ensuring the next win — the Electoral Redistribution Bill 1985; new Governor and changes in the ministry — more than a tinker at the edges; Speaker Warner’s last stand; the 1986 election — Don’s Party or a chance to conquer Australia?; Bjelke-Petersen’s ninth and final ministry; the Bjelke-Petersen edifice begins to crumble — Joh for PM, friends fall out, mates in jail; the Fitzgerald Inquiry — a window of opportunity; ultimately deposed — the burlesque finale to Joh’s premiership.

The book is rounded off by with three appendices and a substantial bibliography and index. My only complaint about the bibliography and the discussion of parliamentary procedures in the book based on it is that this journal’s significant contributions have not been discovered. It also feels a bit dated by recent events, especially the substantial changes to the committee system and the unrelated dispute over the powers of the Speaker which was part of the same reform package.

Appendix One is a brief pen-picture of the occupants of the Speakership in the period covered by the book, liberally illustrated by references to Hansard, many of them uncomplimentary. An epithet given beside the name of each underlines the lack of gravitas associated with a role, seen as a patronage appointment rewarding loyalty — ‘Johnno’ Mann; ‘a true gentleman’ Fletcher; ‘the cannonball kid’ Nicholson; ‘bugger’em Bill’ Lonergan; ‘big Jim’ Houghton; ‘here to serve the government’ Muller; ‘a nice bloke’ Warner; ‘Joh’s little mate’ Lingard; ‘I didn’t come from a monkey’ Powell. (The last named was a prominent creationist supporting a religious interest group and Minister for Education under Bjelke-Petersen).

Appendix Two is a list of members during the period, covering 32 pages. Appendix Three is a much shorter list of those members who died in office and Appendix Four is a longer list of members suffering temporary expulsion from the chamber. One of the few criticisms I would voice of the whole book is that it feels old-fashioned, and here is one illustration — many trees would have been saved by making reference to a website to cover all this information.

Chapter 17 is entitled Conclusion and subtitled ‘Do the ‘ayes’ have it?’ After galloping through all the 641 pages that had gone before, I was genuinely disappointed when the music stopped after only ten pages. There was so much more to be said, to complement and systematise the analysis and data provided on the way past in the long saga.

Here is the final paragraph:

The title of this volume is ‘The Ayes Have It’ and there can be little dispute about the certainty of this outcome throughout the bygone era covered in this study. The history of the Queensland Parliament during these decades clearly showed that almost invariably the ‘ayes’ controlled the proceedings, decided things their way and determined what results they wanted (even election results). As Bjelke-Petersen once said, ‘the numbers are the only things that matter in politics’. There was little the opposition could do to prevent abuse, excess or unaccountable behaviour. The ‘ayes’ might have ruled the day, almost to the point of despotism, but over time they could not prevent the accumulation of demands for systemic reform. p 652.

What the authors have made less clear is the specific role of parliament as an institution in the accumulations of demand for systemic reforms. There is a case to be made that other factors and other institutions were at work in the demands for reform, especially the role of the mass media and the changing nature of Queensland society, including urbanisation and education. The authors end the paragraph quoted above on a highly optimistic note.

All parliamentary systems — even harsh ‘winner-takes-all’ systems — operate in a social political and legal context; a context that implies consent, which can resist if necessary and urge reform. In Queensland, that ‘context’ eventually did fight back, especially in the aftermath of the Fitzgerald Inquiry. A quiet social revolution imposed new reform agendas on Queensland’s system of parliamentary democracy,

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placed constraints on unbridled executive power and targeted misconduct and corruption that had been allowed to flourish. As a final reflection, the 'ayes' could make history most of the time, but not always under the conditions of their own choosing.

Some readers will be less confident about the universal proposition about *all* parliamentary systems or even about the unilinear nature of progress in Queensland away from executive dominance. But this is no reason not to examine the wealth of evidence presented here about 'a bygone era'. Even for bygoners like me, it seems fresh and a timely reminder. For everyone else, the book is a valuable and immensely readable narrative account of an exceptional period of history in an exceptional state. ▲