POWER AND PASSION
Fiery leaders and public fury
How different would Queensland have been if Jack Pizzey, who had a university degree and the experience of life gained by serving as a World War II artillery officer, had not died in August 1968? For with his death, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen became premier. Bjelke-Petersen seemed an unlikely choice. He was not a good public speaker and, even as a youngish backbencher, he was a problem for the party whips. His first cabinet portfolio was Works. It was ideal, because bridges, roads, schools, police stations—all the great items of state government spending—could be dispensed to electorates. And Bjelke-Petersen never forgot the backbenchers concerned owed him a favour. In 1968, those favours were called in. Bjelke-Petersen’s premiership was nearly very short. The coalition was re-elected in 1969 only because voters did not want a dull and limited Labor Party led by a dull and limited Jack Houston, about whom the most exciting thing to be said was that he judged dog shows. Queenslanders had not warmed, either, to Bjelke-Petersen, a curious man with a convoluted speaking style, a difficult name and the reputation of being—not to put too fine a point on it—a wowser and a Bible basher. Late in October 1970, Bjelke-Petersen was in
In 1969, Queenslanders had not warmed to Bjelke-Petersen, a curious man with a convoluted speaking style, a difficult name and the reputation of being a wowser.

Left: Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen holds court in his Parliament House bedroom for students from Kingaroy State High School, in the heart of his electorate, on a 1969 tour of the building.

Below left: The former premier in 1991 after a jury, led by a National Party member, failed to reach agreement on whether Sir Joh had perjured himself at the Fitzgerald Inquiry.

Hinze went to Bjelke-Petersen and told him they planned to move against him the next day. They thought they had the numbers: 16 to 10. They might have had — then. By the next morning, Bjelke-Petersen had narrowed the margin. When the vote was taken, he claimed he had the proxy vote of minister Neville Hewitt, who was overseas. That produced a tie: 13 votes apiece. Bjelke-Petersen then voted for himself. As it happened, he didn’t have Hewitt’s proxy. The wily premier had been unable to contact his minister and thought that, if he could not contact Hewitt, neither could his opponents.

No Queensland politician has aroused such passions as Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Even last year, when he celebrated his 90th birthday, he was praised and reviled. But from 1970, when he prevailed in the party room, until 1987, Bjelke-Petersen dominated Queensland politics and played no small part in the destruction of a federal Labor government.

The master of mangled syntax, Bjelke-Petersen actually endeared himself to taciturn Queenslanders with his verbal eccentricity. Sometimes, his statements verged on self-parody. For example, Bjelke-Petersen on finance: “Australia is bankrupt. It is even worse than that.” Or on the worker: “The 40-hour week has given the opportunity to many to while away their time in hotels.” Or, on fighting Labor: “My goodness, there’s a deep responsibility.”

His first great political success came less than a year after his party challenge. In the winter of 1971, Australia hosted a tour by the South African rugby team, the Springboks. The team, all white and overwhelmingly Afrikaner, was certain to attract protesters against apartheid. At the time, the rugby headquarters at Ballymore was largely insecure; police commissioner Ray Whitrod realised his men could not stop protesters getting into the ground and disrupting the two matches planned for Ballymore, against Queensland and Australia.

Bjelke-Petersen’s response was to invoke a state of emergency, just as Hanlon and Gair had done before him. This time, however, the object was not the unionists but “long-haired protesters”. Under the state of emergency, police powers were extended and the RNA Showground oval, with its better security, was acquired for the games. Bjelke-Petersen was opposed in cabinet, but his view prevailed. The state of emergency also provoked a 24-hour strike by unions and some ugly protest clashes involving an unruly and undisciplined police force. But the games went ahead. The government won two by-elections the next weekend, including a seat held by Labor for 36 years. Bjelke-Petersen had established himself successfully as a “law and order” politician. Recently, he acknowledged that his “political stocks soared” after the Springbok tour. He was commenting on the release of cabinet and other documents showing how his government had used the police special branch to spy on citizens at the time. A former Queensland Police Union
The day of the political street march is over,” premier Bjelke-Petersen proclaimed in September 1977. “Anybody who holds a street march, spontaneous or otherwise, will know they are acting illegally. Don’t bother to apply for a permit. You won’t get one. That’s government policy now.”

Sixteen months and nearly 2000 arrests later, in the wake of an electoral setback for the National Party in the Sherwood by-election, Bjelke-Petersen quietly reversed that policy. In the meantime, the premier and his police commissioner, the compliant and crooked Terrence Murray Lewis, combined to deny Queenslanders the right to protest in a peaceful assembly. These times were marked by street battles, by opposition from the churches and even from The Courier-Mail, rather more conservative then than now. The protesters included Peter Beattie who in 1971, as a young university student, had been whipped over the head by an over-zealous policeman during the Springbok tour. Another was a fiery young priest named James Soorley, later to swap clerical cloth for lord mayoral robes. Recently Premier Beattie recalled the times. “It was a dark time in Queensland history. As someone who was beaten up for his trouble, I am delighted that we now have a free and open position on peaceful protests.” He said he was proud to be involved in the demonstrations.

The subject of the protest didn’t matter then — uranium mining, apartheid, even the street march ban itself — all were banned. For Bjelke-Petersen, it was the perfect law-and-order issue. It was the perfect law-and-order issue. As someone who was beaten up for his trouble, I am delighted that we now have a free and open position on peaceful protests. He was, he said, “out to get the unions”. Finally the unions gave in, the state of emergency was lifted early in March and Bjelke-Petersen had won. But at enormous cost: one contemporary estimate suggested total losses had been over $100 million.

STREET MARCH PROTESTERS HAD THE LAST LAUGH (OR IN PETER BEATTIE’S CASE, THE LAST GRIN)
president, Ron Edington, said police regarded the special branch as a tool of the Bjelke-Petersen government. "Anybody that stood for the right to demonstrate or opposed the government went in the file," he said.

Three years after the Springbok tour, as Gough Whitlam’s federal Labor government was becoming increasingly unruly and unpopular, an election reduced Labor to 11 members in the Queensland parliament. Bjelke-Petersen’s power was unrivalled. That year, too, Bjelke-Petersen appointed political nonentity Albert Patrick Field to replace deceased Labor senator Bert Milliner. Field’s appointment enabled the Senate to block supply late in 1975, precipitating the dismissal of the Whitlam government by governor-general Sir John Kerr.

Toowoomba’s Nell Robinson, right, first woman mayor in Qld. 1968
1969 State of Emergency called in anticipation of protests against Springbok rugby union test match.
1970 Joh survives tied vote in leadership challenge by voting for himself and using dubious proxy vote.
1971 State of Emergency called in anticipation of protests against Springbok rugby union test match.
1973 Voting age cut to 18.
1974 Labor Party decimated in Qld election, winning only 11 seats; Country Party becomes National Party of Australia.
1975 Bjelke-Petersen rejects ALP’s Senate replacement nominee, Mal Colston, and appoints disenchanted, anti-Whitlam ALP member Albert Field, left, opening way for constitutional crisis.
1976 Over 700 right-to-march demonstrators arrested in Brisbane in two months after Joh bans street protests.
1978 Christians arrested for disobeying police order to cease singing hymns in Queens Park.
1984 Bulletin report says backbenchers of all parties support the premier.
1987 Four Corners program The Moonlight State was aired. Following on from reports in the Courier-Mail, the program alleged corruption in the Queensland police force, involving payments from brothel owners to crooked cops. The allegations were not new; they had surfaced from time to time and some news organisations had been forced to pay damages to aggrieved wallopers who alleged their reputations had been damaged. This time it was different. William Gunn, an honest and thoroughly decent politician, was premier in all but name as Bjelke-Petersen stumped the country on his PM campaign. Gunn had had enough. He wanted the allegations investigated and quickly. He decided it would be better to seek the premier’s forgiveness than his permission. Ignoring a suggestion that District Court Judge Eric Pratt handle the inquiry, Gunn opted for G.E. "Tony" Fitzgerald, QC, on the advice of Ian Callinan, QC, now a High Court judge. Fitzgerald began his hearings on July 27, 1987. The Joh for PM campaign was all over — a risible result for all concerned. John Howard had lost his first election as opposition leader and Bob Hawke was back in The Lodge. Lewis was the first witness.

Not one to cop the blame, Lewis said five successive police ministers had told him to tolerate brothels in Queensland. It was a neat variation of the Nuremberg defence: Lewis was just doing his job.

Above: Courier-Mail cartoonist Alan Moir pulled no punches as he chronicled the Joh era. The Joh scowl, the hick corked hat and the straw in the mouth were his standard symbols as he mercilessly lampooned the premier.
Every time Hanson was interviewed by some smart-alec, slick southern journalist, her approval rating would rise in Queensland, where paranoia and suspicion grow like mould in summer.

following orders. It was, however, a Lewis verbal; the orders came not from his political masters, but from Lewis himself. A month later, Fitzgerald heard evidence from Sgt Harry Burgess, known as "Dirty Harry". In the parlance, he had rolled over. Later, Burgess was to incriminate Jack Herbert, formerly of the licensing branch, branch inspectors Noel Dwyer and Graeme Parker (who had collected money for being "defamed") and, by hearsay, Lewis himself. The genie was out of the bottle.

By the time the inquiry was finished and the report in, Bjelke-Petersen was gone. He was forced out of office in December 1987 after increasingly erratic behaviour during which he tried to sack members of his cabinet. The then governor, former chief justice Sir Walter Campbell, neatly avoided a political crisis by telling Joh to reconsider.

Joh went to jail, as did some other crooked cops. He lost his knighthood and his house, he was bankrupted by the tax office and disgraced. But there are still people who believe he didn't get a fair trial because of the publicity. The Fitzgerald inquiry claimed other political scalps. Ministers went inside themselves. The genie was out of the bottle.

The 1996 federal election brought to the political stage a flame-haired former fish and chip shop owner from Ipswich, Pauline Hanson. Disenrolled by the Liberal Party before the election, she won the seat of Oxley – safe Labor and the only Queensland seat to withstand the anti-Whitlam tide in 1975 – as an Independent. Her maiden speech six months later, in which she railed against Aborigines, immigrants, Asians, economists and various other targets, was seized on by the shock-jocks like Alan Jones and John Laws. Suddenly she was leading a political party – well, actually more of a small company – stumping the country. In the next state election, thanks to preference deals with the Liberals and the Nationals, One Nation candidates won 12 seats but promptly disintegrated into a rabble. Hanson's appeal was simple: she wasn't a politician and didn't pretend to be one. She was good at homing in on the problems caused by globalisation and technological advance but woefully short of solutions. Every time she was interviewed by some smart-alec, slick southern journalist, her approval rating would rise in Queensland, where paranoia and suspicion grow like mould in summer.

By 2001, Prime Minister John Howard had brought disaffected, former One Nation voters back to the traditional conservative fold, thanks to his stance on boat people. Hanson, perhaps distracted by criminal charges against her, failed to win a Senate seat. She might have gone, but the problems she barely articulated remain.