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Separation of powers: Why respect for this doctrine matters a lot more in Queensland than other places

OPINION

A classy photo shoot of the state's leaders together to celebrate gender equality is an alluring idea. But those involved should be careful of what else it suggests, writes Madonna King.



The cover of The Courier-Mail's Weekend magazine last Saturday

If Tony Fitzgerald, the man who created a new democratic Queensland after a savage investigation into corruption more than 30 years ago, saw the photographs doing the rounds on the weekend, he must have almost choked on his cornflakes.

There, widely-published on and offline, were photo shoots of Queensland's top four women. Adopting various poses, they supposedly showcased the power of gender equality in a state many elsewhere greet with a smirk.

And good on them. Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, Governor Jeannette Young, chief justice Helen Bowskill and police commissioner Katarina Carroll have worked long and hard to reach the offices they now call their own.

Whether a team of four females counters the hundreds of men who still run companies and public service departments and even governments is an argument for another day.

But what is discombobulating is that this clever senior foursome actually

thought this was a good idea.

Separation of powers.

It's a doctrine made famous, at least in Queensland, by a previous premier who didn't have a clue what it meant.

When asked, Joh Bjelke-Petersen rabbited on about this and that, highlighting that someone could hold the most senior post in government, and not know its role.

In short, for those under 35, have not been at school, and not taken by Queensland's corrupt history, the separation of powers is a doctrine under which the three branches of government – the executive, legislative and judicial – are kept separate.

Its reason is clear. It provides a means by which each branch has specific powers to be able to provide a check and balance on the other branches.

But Tony Fitzgerald's far-reaching inquiry found that a couple of these branches were more intertwined than a teen girl's hair plait. And that was behind some of the frightful corruption, that led to charges being laid against half a dozen ministers, a police commissioner and a host of others.

In leadership, it's not just about doing the right thing. It's about modelling the right thing; being seen to practice what you preach. Blurred boundaries lead to valid questions.

On that measure, this little gathering just doesn't pass the high tea test.

Nobody would suggest that a premier can't highly respect the governor she appointed. She should. Or the police commissioner she appointed. She should. Nobody would begrudge the police commissioner and chief justice enjoying each other's company, in passing.

But imagine, for a minute, if a similar 'event' occurred involving men. Imagine if Campbell Newman, as premier, invited then governor Paul de Jersey, then chief justice Tim Carmody and former police commissioner Ian Stewart for a weekend chat.

The outrage would break the sound barrier. Or imagine former chief justice Catherine Holmes dressing up in power red or dark blue, for a photo shoot with the premier, police commissioner and governor. It just would not happen.

And the passage of time doesn't make this any better. Let's just pick a year. 1985. What would we now make of a planned and friendly photo shoot of Bjelke-Petersen, alongside former governor Sir Walter Campbell, disgraced police commissioner Terry Lewis and then chief justice Dormer Andrews?

I can't imagine Sir Wally Campbell and Dormer Andrews – or others in their position – ever agreeing.

And neither can many, many others who saw those photographs plastered on news sites last weekend.

This isn't the media's fault. This is a serious misjudgement by a group of fabulous women, who have worked harder than most to earn the respect they have.

So what would prompt them to risk that? Or Tony Fitzgerald choking on his morning breakfast?