



The Premier of Queensland

Includes information and commentary by Honorary Research Fellow Dr Paul Reynolds.

The Role of the Premier

Following a general election, the Premier, who is the elected leader of the party or coalition of parties holding a majority in the Legislative Assembly, is commissioned by the Governor to form a Government.

The office of the Premier is specifically mentioned in s.42 of the *Constitution of Queensland Act 2001*. The Premier's power and authority largely depend on his/her relationship with parliamentary colleagues; with his/her political party; and the electorate in general.

The role of the Premier includes:

- leading the Government and being the most dominant political figure in the State;
- being the main channel of communication between:
 - the Governor and Cabinet;
 - the Queensland Government and other Australian State and Territory Governments; and
 - the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government and overseas Governments.
- providing advice to Her Majesty the Queen on the exercise of Her Majesty's powers and functions in respect of the State of Queensland eg. the appointment and termination of appointment of the Governor;
- choosing Ministers and allocating portfolios as occurs in a National Party or Liberal Party government; or allocating portfolios to Ministers who are chosen by Caucus, as usually occurs under a Labor Government;
- determining the Administrative Arrangements setting out the principal Ministerial responsibilities of Ministers and the Acts which they administer;
- being the Chief Minister, Chair of Cabinet and having the authority to form Cabinet Committees;
- authorising the absences of Ministers from the State for up to 14 days;
- authorising a Minister to perform the duties and functions of another Minister;

- having the authority to determine when an election is to be called;
- ensuring that there is adherence to the caretaker conventions and practices after a general election has been announced; and
- representing his/her electorate.

The Office of the Premier

After Federation it became the custom for the States' Chief Minister to be called the **Premier** while the title **Prime Minister** was reserved for his/her Commonwealth equivalent. Following self government in the ACT and NT the office was known as Chief Minister. The position itself evolved in 18th century Britain and has become an indispensable part of Westminster government ever since.

Premiers and their equivalents have often been described as "the first among equals" but, in reality, this is not the case. In addition to the roles of the Premier described above, his/her power derives from at least six sources:

- The Premier chairs Cabinet, sets its agenda and strongly influences its decision-making outcomes;
- The Premier commands Parliament, dominating its business and generally determining its activity;
- The Premier is spokesperson for the Government, announces its initiatives, defends its record, explains its processes and, by virtue of the office itself and his/her personality, is instant and constant news;
- The Premier is supported by the Department of Premier and Cabinet which exercises a supervisory and co-ordinating role and presence across the whole range of Government activity;
- Premiers have media units which cultivate relations with the media in an attempt to regulate and 'spin' news stories about themselves and their Governments. The frequency of news conferences, photo opportunities and press releases ensure that Premier/media relations are constantly interactional; and
- The Premier's chief-of-staff exercises a supervisory role over both policy and media advisers in all other Ministerial offices.

The Road to the Premiership

Modern Governments are very complex and multi-faceted in their operations and structure. None is a 'one man band' but equally all will stand or fall in large measure by the standing and reputation of the leader. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that the road to the Premier's Office is



rather haphazard if recent Queensland history is anything to judge by.

Sir Francis (Frank) Nicklin (1957-1968) gave up the Premiership to retire and was the last Premier before Peter Beattie (1998-2007) to leave office in his own time and of his own choosing. Both chose and groomed their successors, respectively Jack Pizzey (1968) and Anna Bligh (2007-2012).

Pizzy died unexpectedly of a heart attack after seven months, and after hectic lobbying within the National Party a relatively unknown Minister, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1968-1987) emerged and went on to become Queensland's longest-serving Premier. He was deposed in a party room coup by Mike Ahern (1987-1989) who, in turn, suffered the same fate

to Russell Cooper (1989). Cooper went on to lose the 1989 election to Wayne Goss, who served as Premier of Queensland from 1989-1996. Meanwhile, Cooper had been replaced in Opposition by Rob Borbidge, who became Premier after the 1996 Mundingburra by-election. Borbidge then lost office in 1998 at the next general election which brought in the nine-year Beattie premiership.

Finally, while Queensland's political history is characterised by long periods of one-party rule, Premiers rotate within this structure more rapidly. Over the past 50 years there have been 10 Premiers—the average length of time in office being five years.