

a million people staying low

The fist made a sound like two footy boots smacking together and the blood spurted and the student went down, and the line of police blue seemed to smile benignly.

— Pat Burgess'

When the charge came, it was as unexpected as it was brutal. As the police stormed over Wickham Terrace with batons raised, protesters paused in shock, frozen for an agonised second, caught as their minds instructed their bodies to fight or flee. Many were inexperienced campaigners at their first demonstration.

Steve Gray was not one of them, though. He'd been here before, been at this very spot the previous evening, when nothing untoward had happened. Restless, he'd been cruising around the scene, cheekily pointing out the undercover officers mingling among the crowd. But now things were serious. With the screaming crowd breaking up all around him, he fled down the hill into the darkness.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, Gray paused over the steep drop as two friends rushed to join him. Some jumped heedlessly; others turned towards the rocky face and clambered down. Most just slid on their backsides. Small and agile, Gray negotiated the small cliff-face with ease, but one of his friends

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fell, twisting an ankle. Moving more slowly, they soldiered on towards the brightly lit Roma Street markets.

Once safely inside the maze of alleyways, the trio relaxed, and began making their way back to the safety of Toowong. Rounding a corner, they almost collided with three heavy, brown-shirted police officers. Quick as a snake, one of them grabbed Gray by the hair. Twisting its length around his wrist, he hoisted his slightly built opponent to eye level.

'Bang. Bang. Bang,' said the sergeant. 'If I ever see you at a demonstration again, I'm going to kill you.'

It's both an understatement and a cliché to say that Queensland is different. Peter Charlton wrote a book trying to explain why in 1983. He came up with two words: 'Distance. Climate.'² It is indeed an enormous state: from the capital, it is nearly a 24-hour drive north to Cairns, even further west to Birdsville. It's also hot: even Brisbane, in the south-east corner of the state, endures a prolonged summer in which the mercury hovers around 30°C for five months or more. Winter days, if they can be labelled as such, average around 20°C.

More to the point, as any southern visitor will moan, it's bloody humid. From September onwards, thick black thunderheads form over the MacPherson and Main Ranges to the south-west before dumping huge amounts of rainfall over the city. With the humidity comes a certain sluggishness, and it's equally a cliché to observe that isolated cities in warm climates move at a slower pace than elsewhere. While fostering a more casual attitude to clothing and a laid-back demeanour, such places also tend to be conservative, slower to warm to new ideas.

But Brisbane made an early exception for rock & roll. In February 1958 Buddy Holly played three of his six Australian shows at the Cloudland Ballroom. The same year the Bee Gees arrived in Australia from the Isle of Man and began performing anywhere they were allowed, including the

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that confronted my parents and I was encouraged by my mother who worked long hours . . . We had extreme poverty but I was rich in that my parents gave me a deep understanding of spiritual things by their lives and their influence.⁸

This Calvinist outlook of 'hard work = money = success = salvation' accounts for Bjelke-Petersen's fanatical pursuit of state development while premier.⁹ Whether it was the drilling of oil on the Great Barrier Reef or the tearing down of historic buildings, Bjelke-Petersen was not about to let arcane concerns about conservation and heritage get in the way of the more important business of wealth creation.

It also explains his passionate pursuit of unfettered free enterprise and his hatred of anything that smacked of socialism. After entering parliament in 1947 as the member for Nanango, Bjelke-Petersen's maiden speech – indeed, almost all his speeches – stressed the freedom to develop without any kind of regulation in the future. Instead he attacked the evils of drinking, gambling (including the broadcasting of horse-racing), imported films and working on the Sabbath.

After becoming premier, Bjelke-Petersen retained the police portfolio, vowing to make law and order his own personal crusade. He was less concerned about the allegations of official corruption swirling around the force. A tightly controlled Royal Commission held over the summer of 1963–64 had turned up nothing, but then, the government was in the force's pocket. Journalist Evan Whitton characterises the relationship in these terms: 'you stand for law and order; we are your loyal spear-carriers in this unending battle; an attack on the force, or individuals therein, is an attack on you and your policies'.¹⁰ This mutual agreement would ultimately benefit both parties.

Bjelke-Petersen had been a vocal critic of the gerrymander during his time on the opposition benches. Once in power, he became its staunchest defender, further manipulating the system to his advantage. 'We believe,' he said in a statement

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thick with unintended irony, 'in the rights of the minority as well as the rights of the majority'.¹¹

A more humorous but revealing comment on Bjelke-Petersen's attitude to democracy came from a National Party conference in July 1977. Rebuking the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, for criticising the South African apartheid regime, Bjelke-Petersen offered the following: 'We have got to get away from talking about majority rule – it just doesn't add up.'¹²

The real genesis of this story lies not in the foundations set down by any band, but in the unlikely shape of a sporting tour by the South African rugby union team in the winter of 1971.

The Springbok tour came amid a rising tide of condemnation of South Africa's apartheid laws, and their arrival in Australia was met with fierce demonstrations, which rolled continuously as the team and their entourage were hounded from state to state. Matches in Melbourne and Sydney were interrupted as protesters invaded the pitch. Hundreds more in the stands blew whistles similar to those used by the referees, turning the games into high farce.

Bjelke-Petersen was at the low ebb of his early premiership. The previous October, he had survived a challenge from within his own ranks by a solitary vote, his own. He was perceived, even within his own party, as a wowsler and a country bumpkin. Further, both he and his ministers were under pressure over conflict of interest allegations in relation to their numerous share portfolios, in particular with mining giant Comalco, and Bjelke-Petersen's defensive media handling of the issue saw him branded a weak and ineffective leader.

The Springbok tour gave the premier the law-and-order ticket he needed to banish that perception for good. His proclamation of a month-long state of emergency caused immediate uproar: the suspension of civil liberties and the

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granting of extraordinary (and unspecified) police powers on the pretext of protecting a visiting football team from political dissenters was unprecedented. It earned the premier the nickname Jack Boots Bjelke.

The result was predictable. Protests against the tour were further inflamed, and the government itself became the target, with 40 unions declaring an immediate 24-hour strike. With the government preparing to go to two by-elections, Bjelke-Petersen wasted no time in linking the unions (and by extension the ALP) to anarchy in the streets. No one, however, foresaw the level of force with which the protests would be crushed.

The Springboks finally arrived in Brisbane on 22 July. They were greeted outside their lodgings, the Tower Mill Motel, by about 300 demonstrators and an equivalent number of police. The standoff did not prevail long: after just 15 minutes, police charged the crowd, scattering them into Wickham Park below. Many were assaulted. But they were not easily dissuaded.

Alan Knight: What you've got to understand with these demos, they didn't last for an hour or so. They went for days, in the face of this police violence. People just kept coming back. They'd get biffed or roughed up and then they'd come back later on.

Demonstrations began again the following morning, and ended in a stalemate when staff from the Holy Spirit Hospital, next door to the motel, explained to police that noise levels were disturbing patients. A silent vigil ensued and eventually the crowd dispersed peacefully, although some remained through the night. It was the next day – Saturday 24 July, the day of the Springboks' first match – that was to bring matters to a head.

The premier issued a warning. 'I would not be surprised if the demonstrators open a new line of attack. I have heard that it could be rough in the streets today.'¹³

The proclamation of the state of emergency had enabled the

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government to move the match from the scheduled venue of Ballymore Oval in Herston to the Royal National Association showgrounds in Bowen Hills. Surrounded by high walls and topped with barbed wire, the fortress-like showgrounds were considered the better venue to deter protesters. Thus, instead of targeting the game, between 1500 and 2000 demonstrators assembled in Victoria Park opposite the grounds before marching slowly up to Wickham Terrace, eventually camping themselves once again at the foot of the Tower Mill in the gathering darkness of the late afternoon.

Commensurate with the Saturday crowd, the police ranks had swelled to an intimidating 500, not just uniformed and plain-clothes ranks from the city, but country 'brownshirts', bussed in as reinforcements by the police commissioner, Ray Whitrod. Among the crowd were two young law students, future Queensland premier Peter Beattie and barrister and civil libertarian Terry O'Gorman. For both, what transpired that evening proved to be a pivotal event in their lives.

Terry O'Gorman: It was my involvement as a legal observer [of the demonstration] that was my introduction to the whole scene. I remember after the police charge a particular law student who was organising the legal observers came back, thoroughly traumatised by it. Right to that I'd come from a very Catholic, Christian Brother, right-wing education and family background. So, from that point of view, it was fairly formative.

Wickham Terrace winds along the northern ridge overlooking Brisbane's central business district, lined by upmarket hotels and medical clinics. Opposite the Tower Mill lies Wickham Park. Fringed by gigantic Moreton Bay fig trees, it slopes steeply down towards Albert Street, which runs directly through the city heart, and the Roma Street markets. At the lower end of the park was a small cliff-face, now a stone wall up to four metres in height. The terrain would put the protesters at an unusual disadvantage.

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At five o'clock, Whitrod gave a statement to the crowd: 'There will be no action from police as a group if you move back to the white line, except that there can be individual police action if necessary and in the event of large police action reasonable notice will be given.'¹⁴ This pronouncement did nothing to quell the thickening knot of fear rising in the stomachs of the protesters.

Steve Gray (4ZZZ): Moving through the crowd, you could spot the plain-clothes police. The demonstrators were chanting 'Paint them black and send them back,' and this busload of coppers pulls up. And they get off the bus and start chanting back, 'Paint them red and shoot them dead.' So, not surprisingly, the tension started to rise on both sides of the street.

At 6.54pm, minutes before footage of the protest would go live around Australia courtesy of ABC news, Whitrod told his men to 'move to the other side of the road'.¹⁵

As commissioner, Whitrod did not enjoy the support of his rank and file. Police Minister Max Hodges had brought in the well-educated South Australian a year earlier after convincing Bjelke-Petersen that he risked being dragged under by the still-circulating rumours of official corruption. Whitrod thus had a brief to reform the force, but his prosecution of some police for malpractice earned him the enduring enmity of not only the powerful police union, but the premier as well.

Whitrod was also regarded as a soft touch on students, preferring conciliation and dialogue to force. Only the previous day the country police he had brought in for the occasion had passed a motion of no confidence in him. Thus the proposed orderly move forward – intended by Whitrod simply to move the demonstrators off the road to the opposite footpath – did not eventuate. The violence of the subsequent charge caught even seasoned protesters by surprise.

John Stanwell: These were the country cops who were

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brought in, with the old [khaki] uniform. They'd been brought in especially for the football game by this new commissioner who was regarded as a pinko liberal bed-wetter, and basically they broke ranks and went berserk. We were cannon fodder.

The protesters immediately found themselves being forced down the hill into Wickham Park as baton-wielding police wrought their vengeance. More police were waiting in the park. As the panicked mob fled towards them, they sprung from the shadows of the trees, tackling and clobbering anyone within reach. Those that evaded the ambush were forced to scramble or jump down the cliff-face as the police gave chase.

Lindy Morrison (The Go-Betweens): It radicalised everybody . . . What I remember most vividly is the actual fear, of running away from police with batons, and seeing them bashing friends. Whoever stumbled and fell got heavily beaten, and all of us were too scared to stop and help.

Peter Beattie: It's one of those indelible things imprinted in my mind about oppression, about violence, about excessive power. I ran down to Trades Hall and I remember trying to do the gentlemanly thing by letting some of the women in first, and I got beaten up for my trouble.

That same day, the two by-elections were held. The government won both. One seat, Maryborough, had been a Labor stronghold for 56 years; the other, Merthyr, was situated only a few kilometres away from the violence at Tower Mill.

Bjelke-Petersen's leadership would not be challenged again for another 16 years.

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