

Springbok Demonstrations / State of Emergency 1971

Joh Bjelke-Petersen's hard-line conservatism attracted national attention in July 1971 when he declared a "state of emergency" in Queensland to control demonstrations against a South African Springbok rugby union tour.

The Springboks tour resulted in widespread condemnation of South Africa's racial policies around Australia. In every State, the Springbok team was faced with demonstrations in condemnation of South Africa's apartheid laws. The Springbok rugby matches had caused riots in some of the southern Australian cities. The last leg of the Springbok rugby tour was to take place in Brisbane in July, 1971.

At the time, Bjelke-Petersen's leadership as Premier of the State of Queensland was not yet well established. His portrayal in the media was often that of a simple peanut farmer and an inept country bumpkin. Joh had survived a leadership challenge just the year before in 1970 by a single vote after producing a proxy vote of an MP who was overseas and uncontactable. His political career was anything but on a sound footing at the time.

Things began to turn around after Bjelke-Petersen appointed Allen Callaghan as his press secretary. Callaghan's immediate task was to improve Joh's image in the media, especially on television. Callaghan taught his boss the basics of effective television appearances. Together they set about the task of revamping Joh's public image.

With the immanent arrival of the Springboks in Brisbane, they were quick to recognise the political gains that could be made at a time when Joh's premiership was still untested. Callaghan saw an opportunity to establish Bjelke-Petersen as a strong and clearly-focused leader by successfully framing the debate as a law and order issue. Bjelke-Petersen was to become the tough man in charge, and the Queensland police force his "army". Law and order became a key issue for the remainder of the decade and beyond, with Bjelke-Petersen clearly in command of his troops. Once asked about human rights, Joh replied: *"What's the ordinary man in the street got to do with it?"*

Underlying the success of the Queensland State Government's campaign in 1971 was a simple catch phrase, *"Don't mix politics with sport"*. This clever deception was extremely successful in a nation full of sports lovers. Behind this smoke screen, Joh was busy milking the situation for all it was worth in order to bolster his faltering credentials. Hypocritically, he was able to generate substantial political capital from this sporting event. Still untested as Premier, Joh used the tour to try out anti-democratic practices that his premiership would become associated with over the next 16 years.

Unions made life awkward for the State Government in the lead-up to the rugby match in Brisbane. The game was played at the Exhibition Grounds because BWIU unionists black banned essential plumbing works at the better equipped and more desirable Ballymore rugby ground. The BWIU also halted the production of police batons and the AMIEU stopped the transport of police horses to the demonstration.

Under advice from Callaghan, Joh declared a month-long state of emergency starting on 14th July, 1971. This was issued on the pretext of protecting a visiting football team from political dissenters. The legislation gave police carte blanche for the operation that followed to counter the action of the protesters. It also allowed his Government to commandeer the RNA venue (Exhibition Grounds), outlaw labour strikes, and gave the police unlimited powers of arrest without warrant.

In response to the state of emergency, several hundred students marched from the university campus to Parliament House on Wednesday, 21st July. There were clashes with police who used "excessive force". TV cameramen and press photographers were also hassled by police and had their film confiscated. Thirty-six were arrested that day.

The Springbok rugby team arrived in Brisbane the next day on Thursday, 22nd July, 1971. That evening, approximately 300 demonstrators assembled outside the Tower Mill motel on Wickham Terrace where the Springbok's were being accommodated. The protest was relatively small in size as most sports-lovers stayed away from the Tower Mill demonstrations believing the convenient lie about mixing politics and sport. The demonstrators faced about the same number of police lined up in front of the Tower Mill motel. Police in plain clothes mingled with the demonstrators and acted as agents provocateurs.

Without warning, the line of uniformed police marched forward. The demonstrators were forced down the steep, poorly-lit hill in Wickham Park behind them. The police followed attacking with fists, batons and boots under the cloak of darkness. Some protesters escaped by jumping down an eight metre high embankment into the busy traffic of Albert Street below. Others were simply thrown over this cliff.

One demonstrator (Sue Russell) was clubbed over the head while she was being interviewed by ABC Radio. The shocked interviewer shouted out, *"She's been hit, she's been hit,"* an exclamation which went out over the airwaves.

A member of street theatre group "Hegel's Angels" Steven Gray recalls how, after fleeing the protest area he and a few friends went down into the old Roma Street market area...*"and we got cornered down there by four or five cops...I got literally picked up by the hair...and I can very distinctly remember a country police sergeant, brown uniform, saying to us all 'boom, boom, boom....if I ever see you at a demonstration again, I am going to kill you'. Just as simple as that. We then went back to a friend's place, and turned on Channel 7 news to hear that everything at the Tower Mill was nice and peaceful and nothing had happened!"*

Some demonstrators sought sanctuary in the nearby Trades Hall building (now demolished) including the student, Peter Douglas Beattie. One unionist recalled seeing a girl held and punched by police while a youth (Beattie) was also jumped on and held to the floor. Two of the three police attacking him were forcibly ejected from the building and the third became frightened when he realized he was now alone. The policeman, Lindsay Daniels, left the injured Beattie lying on the floor. Daniels was wearing two different police numbers both of which were wrenched off by students who now outnumbered him.

Outside, 50 police attempted to gain entry to the building. When ambulance men gained admission, they were followed by police who were restrained only because they were accompanied by an inspector. Beattie was taken under armed guard to the orthopaedic ward of the Royal Brisbane Hospital for observation of suspected spinal injuries. Beattie was charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, although he was the one assaulted. Beattie was later released on bail and the police never pressed charges.

The same Peter Beattie later became the 36th Premier of Queensland for nine years between June 1998 and September 2007 when he retired electorally undefeated. His sweeping victories in the 2001, 2004 and 2006 state elections confirmed him as one of the most electorally successful politicians in Australia.

The next day, Friday July 23rd, 3,000 students at the University of Queensland voted to go on strike as a political protest against the shocking events during the state of emergency. There was general condemnation of the police tactics used the night before.

That night, there was another demonstration at the Tower Mill. This time protesters significantly outnumbered the police and the protest was peaceful. The police refrained from repeating their unruly tactics from the night before.

The next day, Saturday was the day of the Springbok game. The drama surrounding the lead up to the game kept the crowds away in droves. Only about 6,000 attended instead of the anticipated 30,000 full house.

With the oval at the Exhibition Grounds ringed by barbed wire, protesters decided instead to launch a demonstration in nearby Victoria Park. About 2,000 people turned up faced by 900 police. Led by Labor Senator George Georges, the marchers then went down Fortitude Valley and staged a rare sit-down in Queen Street. Violence was minimal during the day as marcher leaders, including Labor MP Bill Hayden urged caution. But the peace did not last.

That Saturday evening, a thousand gathered once more at the Tower Mill. Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod was there personally to command his men. Commissioner Whitrod ordered that the roadway be kept clear, but when the lines of police moved forward, they charged the demonstrators once again.

Whitrod tried to order the men back but was ignored. Whitrod was already being criticized from within his own ranks. Many, including the imported country police, were threatening a no confidence motion in Whitrod's "soft" handling of demonstrators.

The police later claimed the charged started when a rock was thrown that broke a plate-glass window in the Tower Mill motel. The offending missile was never produced and glaziers called to fix the window insisted the fall of the glass suggested it was broken from inside the building.