

BRIEFINGS

Après Joh, Le Deluge

It all had a touch of high tragic drama about it. Storms swept Brisbane; Macbeth and King Lear were invoked; and there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth as the tribune of the Moral Right, Rona Joyner, warned of an imminent "wave of immorality" in the wake of the demise of Joh Bjelke-Petersen after 19 years as Premier.

It also had more than a touch of farce as Queensland moved into its interregnum with a premier who was no longer leader and a leader who was not yet premier. The reporters at the press conference held by Mike Ahern and Bill Gunn after the former had been elected leader of the Queensland National Party and the latter his deputy, still seemed to be acting like Joh's proverbial "chooks": they were a little hysterical, giggling and shuffling around not knowing quite what to ask and, in the end, resorting to questions to Mrs Ahern about whether she had any ambitions for the Senate and if she could cook pumpkin scones.

The next days had everyone wondering. Had Joh really made such a fundamental error of judgment? Was this really going to be the end or did he have something else up his sleeve? This, we should

remember after the state elections last year, would not have been inconceivable and very few political commentators here were prepared to confidently predict that this was definitely the end for Joh. There were rumours, for example, that Joh had been talking to the ALP state secretary Peter Beattie with a view to gaining ALP support on the floor of parliament and thereby forcing an election. That there were some negotiations has since been substantiated although the ALP is wisely — and rather shamefacedly — keeping quiet about their precise content. There were rumours also that Joh would speak to the Queen, and that he would sack the Governor, Sir Walter Campbell, before the Governor sacked him.

When, in the end, Joh did pack his bags and leave the Executive Building for his home at Kingaroy, nicely timed for peak hour national news in those states without daylight saving, it was not without a few barbs being flung here and there — at Mike Ahern, at state president Sir Robert Sparkes, at the disloyal members of the Cabinet and, finally, at the whole organisation and leadership of the National Party — Joh claiming that this last was a party he no longer wanted to lead.

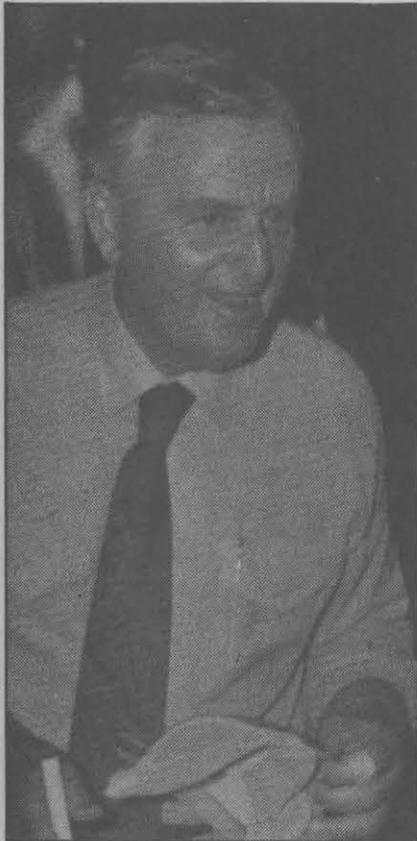
It was not a good year for Joh.

Ever since the push on Canberra and its attendant humiliation both for him and for the federal National MPs who lost their seats, Joh seems to have stumbled from one error and backdown to another. The proposed ICI chlorine plant at the Brisbane bayside suburb of Lytton, which had the former premier's full support, was the subject of a highly successful community campaign which persuaded ICI to scrap their plans in order to save face for Joh. Then there was his support for a private hospital at Southport on the Gold Coast, to be built by his old mate Sir Edward Lyons. He was forced, by moves in Cabinet initiated by Mike Ahern, to back down on this one too. To cap it all, Joh lost his voice during the state conference of the Nationals at Townsville and, from his home, had to watch as his party voted in significant policy changes — on condom vending machines, for example — in his absence and against his wishes. But possibly the most decisive act in Joh's fall was the setting up, by deputy premier Bill Gunn, of the Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry into police corruption.

And now that he has gone these policy changes are accelerating. Mike Ahern has announced the probability of a Public Accounts Committee, the very issue on which Joh withdrew his Nationals from coalition with the Liberals and brought his party to power in its own right in 1983. Another pet project of the former premier — the world's tallest building — will not now go ahead. Changes to the structure of the education system initiated by Lin Powell, one of Joh's strongest supporters in the former Cabinet, have now been shelved (along with their initiator) and are unlikely to be implemented. Sex education will now go ahead in Queensland schools; condom vending machines will be replaced in those university toilet blocks from which they were wrenched early one morning by the state police; and the "Black Hole" detention cells at Brisbane's Boggo Road Jail are now likely to be closed following a visit by Justice Marcus Einfeld and Brian Burdekin, respectively President and

Commissioner of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission — both of whom were previously refused access by Sir Joh.

The new Premier, Mike Ahern, has announced new portfolios in



Finance and in Communications and Technology. Brian Austin, former Liberal and 1983 "defector" will take the finance portfolio and will also be charged with the development of a new economic strategy for a state which, by all the pertinent financial indicators, is way behind the rest of Australia other than in the fields of property development and tourism. Ahern has also promised more open government with stricter observance of due parliamentary procedure. Not on the cards, however, is any change to the electoral malapportionment — the famous "Bjelke-lander" — which gives some rural voters up to two and a half times the electoral clout of urban voters. The Nationals' position may, however, be weakened if Ahern and the "new image" which he is projecting for the National Party are unable to retain the loyalty of the rural vote in the way that Joh

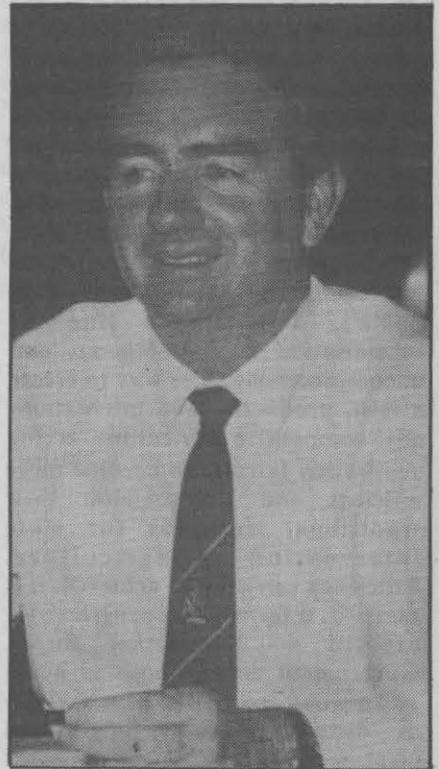
was able to do so effectively. On this we will have to wait and see.

The Left and progressive movements up here might be forgiven for thinking that they are entering an era of new possibilities: our own little transition from feudalism to capitalism, from Absolutism to Enlightenment. The problem is, however, that this transition is taking place independently of any *strategic* input from the ALP, itself riven by factional disputes and characterised by opportunist alliances trying to convince everyone that the problem is one of leadership! Responses to the Joh crisis and to the Ahern government have been singularly inept to date.

It is fair to say, though, that the Left is faced with a bit of a problem. If Ahern does fulfil his promises for a revitalised economic strategy, more open government and more equitable social and welfare policies, then it is possible that the Nationals will find a new lease of life and, failing any modifications to the zonal voting system, the ALP is not likely — on current form and even with a new leader (probably Wayne Goss) — to be any better placed at the next state election than it was at the last. On the other hand, however, it is possible that Ahern's proposals for public accountability will open up so many cracks in the power base of the National Party and its system of cronyism that it will enter a severe crisis and be unable to govern effectively on its own.

This is, no doubt, part of the reason for the new premier keeping one eye very firmly on the proceedings of the Fitzgerald Inquiry. Two long-serving ministers, Russ Hinze and Don Lane, have been excluded from the present Cabinet because they have been named in hearsay evidence to the inquiry. Ahern's immediate response to his sacking by Sir Joh was to drop a very large and public hint that he had material relevant to the inquiry which he could not specify because of the laws of defamation. The new Premier is clearly moving quickly to distance himself and his Cabinet from whatever the inquiry might turn up.

Rumours at the time Ahern was sacked were that Jack "The Bagman" Herbert, a key figure in high level corruption, was talking his head off to Inquiry officers somewhere in northern NSW, and that Sir Edward Lyons was likely to be subpoenaed to appear before Commissioner Fitzgerald. Nothing further has happened on this front but the big question is whether or not Ahern and his new Cabinet will be able either to get far enough away from the fall-out if anything big does blow up at the inquiry, or to give the new administration sufficient substance to withstand the effects.



In any event, it is clear that the Fitzgerald Inquiry remains the one big shadow over Ahern's and the National Party's bright new future. In this context, too, it is imperative for the ALP and the left in general, at the very least, to keep the new Premier on his toes and to his word, to recognise that cracks and contradictions in the Queensland National monolith are opening up (especially with its law and order ethos in a shambles), and that a strategic response is called for.

Colin Mercer