

John Mickel, Bjelke-Petersen - Nutter or Strategist

My PhD research of the 2008 merger of the Queensland Liberals and Nationals, comprises many Elite Oral History interviews covering a forty-year period including the Coalition split of 1983 which left a bitter taste in the mouths of State and Federal Liberal parliamentarians. Bjelke Petersen's 1987 quixotic Joh for PM campaign alienated Federal MPs who vetoed merger attempts up until 2008. Public oral histories gave insights in the relationships Bjelke Petersen had with fellow politicians. Material from my interviews provided insights into how interviewees felt about specific personalities and events. A public interview with National MP David Cory outlined the different attitudes to Coalition relationship building from Premiers Nicklin, Pizzey and Bjelke-Petersen. He spoke about how Bjelke-Petersen slowly eroded previously cordial relationships between Coalition parties. This insight was not taken in isolation but was checked against other oral histories and books from that period. For instance, the oral history was backed an author's opinion who said of "Bjelke - Petersen He was never a 'hail fellow, well met' politician. Nor did he have the quiet dignity of Frank Nicklin." This paper argues that Bjelke-Petersen's personal style broke political relationships thereby delaying the 2008 Queensland merger for decades.

Mary-Ellen Ryan, Elite Oral Histories cast new light on Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's 'strong man' leadership

Abstract: Queensland's Bjelke-Petersen Government carved a unique path in response to the emerging AIDS public health crisis in early 1980s Australia. Refusing to join the Commonwealth's co-operative model, to which all other mainland jurisdictions signed, the Bjelke-Petersen Government instead opted for a legalistic and punitive model which aggressively targeted both individuals and marginalised groups. The approach was without regard to potentially deadly health outcomes. The Queensland response was not based on a policy approach formally adopted by Executive Government, but on an *Idee Fixe* held by the Premier. His compounding mismanagement of the politics of AIDS resulted in crucial National Party support swinging away from Bjelke-Petersen, most notably, Queensland National Party President Robert Sparkes, as the Premier proved incapable of grasping the *Weltanschauung* of the Queensland people. This is the first time this history has been recorded. Unique to Queensland, AIDS was a public health crisis taking place within a series of political crises, with the beginning of the AIDS crisis coinciding with the final tumultuous years of the Bjelke-Petersen premiership. To capture a more comprehensive account of the impact of the AIDS crisis on Queensland's political leadership, I conducted oral history interviews with five key public figures (elites) who had direct involvement in, and background knowledge of, Queensland's unique experience of, Queensland's unique response to AIDS from 1983 to 1987. Participants included two Cabinet Ministers in the Bjelke-Petersen Government; Queensland Health's then Deputy Director-General tasked with the Department's response to AIDS; then head of Brisbane's Mater Hospitals; and the Commonwealth Health Minister Dr Neal Blewett's Principal Secretary. I asked all participants what they remembered of the early years of the AIDS crisis, and to describe their own role in the response. I also asked them to reflect on what the State's initial response

revealed about the functioning of the Bjelke-Petersen Government. Their responses, both individually and in combination, revealed new information about a co-ordinated guerilla campaign to combat AIDS, without Bjelke-Petersen's knowledge. Crucially, they also revealed particularities of Queensland's AIDS crisis response which exposed profound vulnerabilities in the Premier's in the Premier's leadership style, which contributed directly to his catastrophic downfall.