

Letter From Queensland

by R.J. Stove

Bland Rube Triumphant

Let us now praise famous Queenslanders, in particular the most famous Queenslander of the lot: Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, who died, aged 94, on April 26. One of Australia's most sure-footed and most intuitively brilliant political leaders, Sir Joh, as everyone called him (though he received his knighthood only in 1983, it is now impossible to imagine him as plain Mr. Bjelke-Petersen), ruled his home state as premier from 1968 to 1987. By his tenure's length and ethos, he appalled the liberal commentariat, while being regarded by most of his subjects—"subjects" is *le mot juste*—with amused tolerance that often enough, when fueled by non-Queenslanders' snickering, flared into passionate approval. Queensland, in his time (and long before), had a seemingly ineradicable reputation as "the Deep North," awash with Faulknerian craziness. In more genteel Australian regions, it inspired an endless catalogue of jokes—mostly witless—about bananas, pineapples, and incestuous cross-burning rednecks. Not that its sovereign cared. The more vociferously *Ausländer* elements demonized him, the happier Sir Joh grew, the bigger the majorities he piled up in the state's unicameral legislature, and the more attractive Queensland's low-tax economy became to business investors of sometimes dubious morals but always impressive wealth creation. (Uniquely among state leaders of his time, Sir Joh achieved budget surpluses year after year.)

Readers nostalgic about America's gubernatorial populists of old—the Huey and Earl Longs, the George C. Wallaces, the Eugene and Herman Talmadges—can surely consider shedding a manly tear for Sir Joh, who exercised a similar electoral appeal. Yet, to the pantheon of such bosses, Sir Joh, head of Queensland's Country (renamed, in 1982, National Party, contributed a distinctive new type:

the *drab* populist. He could not match Wallace's outbursts of fighting-cock temper, or Huey's impish taunts, or brother Earl's more languid rebukes ("Guv'nor, Ah'm with yo' when yo' right, not when yo' wrong." "Yo' stoopid S.O.B., Ah don't need yo' when Ah'm right!"). The elder Talmadge, displaying truly Whitmanesque egalitarianism, once interrupted an interview with Alistair Cooke so as to visit the lavatory. Sir Joh—a Lutheran pastor's son who boasted that he owed his political success to his daily Bible readings—would not have permitted himself such coarseness for all the mining profits in the Southern Hemisphere.

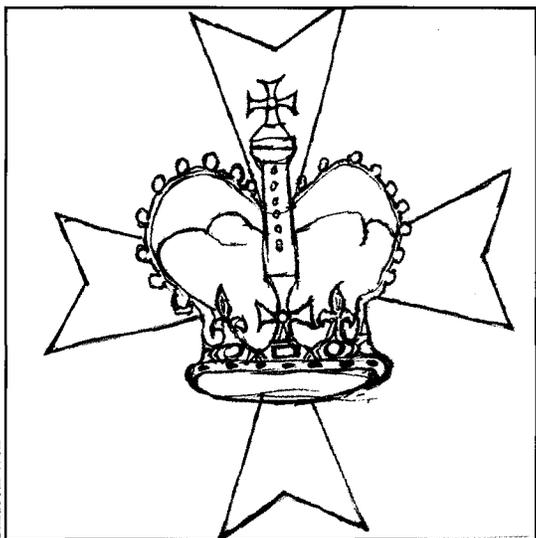
If he ever uttered a swearword, or even touched alcohol, friend and foe alike remained ignorant of the occasion. His visage, somewhat psittacine, revealed nothing; Providence had inscrutably lavished the ideal poker face upon one who abhorred card games. When you saw him on television (he had the mysterious gift of making even a color TV set look black-and-white), he gave no clue by his comportment as to whether he had won an election or lost it. Except that, until just before the very end, he always won. Like Eisenhower, he assumed with genius the role of bland rube, tangled in his own labyrinthine syntax. His reelections became as ceremonial as the changing of Buckingham Palace's guard, and much less dynamic. In 1969, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1980, 1983, and 1986, voters put him back in office. None save the most besotted psephologists remembers most of the luckless Labor Party candidates whom his electoral juggernaut turned, one after another, into roadkill. The only such candidate to achieve wider notice, 1983's Keith Wright, did so not on political grounds but because his taste for schoolgirls later sent him to a less-than-idyllic penitentiary.

New Class spokespersons railed against Sir Joh's electoral methods, notably the gerrymander by which the inhabitants of ghost towns possessed thrice or four times as much voting power as the citizens of Queensland's state capital, Brisbane. (With some accuracy, Sir Joh regarded Brisbane as part of the Soviet Empire and avoided the city whenever possible.) This gerrymander had antedated his rule by decades. He did not invent it; he merely perfected it. But though a

master of electoral malapportionment, he shunned electoral corruption. Apparently, he never wanted—certainly he never attempted—to imitate, let alone emulate, LBJ and Richard Daley, Sr., by granting suffrage to entire graveyards. He would have considered this not merely immoral but a waste of effort.

To his administrative endurance, he matched formidable psychic discipline. For 15 years, as even Britain's *Daily Telegraph* admitted in an otherwise petulant obituary, Sir Joh lived in a cowshed. Possessing the farmer's capacity for months of solitude (he grew peanuts near Kingaroy, in the state's rural southeast), he felt more grief about needing to shoot clapped-out horses than about finishing off parliamentary rivals. A bachelor until his early 40's, he attained unclouded happiness through his marriage to a civil servant, Florence Gilmour, who, as Lady Flo Bjelke-Petersen, represented Queensland during the 1980's in the Senate. As premier, Sir Joh prohibited street protests, forbade sex-education programs in schools, enforced every last statute against sodomites, and ensured that girlie magazines, if sold at all, had their more explicit portraiture removed (thus making them worthless to the black market). Upon the development of Queensland's nude theater, Sir Joh exercised a wholly obstructive influence. Playgoers longing for *Hair* and *Oh! Calcutta!* had to flee to Sydney's fleshpots. "Banned in Queensland!" became as proverbial an artistic boast as "Banned in Boston!" had been in Mencken's day.

By these acts, Sir Joh earned permanent leftist and neocon execration, outside as well as within Australia. The death notice in London's *Independent* condemned his rule as "despotic." Yet those of us who are neither leftists nor neocons managed to survive in one piece his putative tyranny (while noting that even his biggest infrastructure projects never included a reeducation camp). By so strong an instinct did he embody social conservatism that he never even viewed himself as a social conservative. He thought that sort of talk was just a needlessly pretentious synonym for "common decency." It is difficult, in 2005, to say that he erred. Besides, his supposed despotism stopped well short of real elective dictatorships: He scrupulously avoided persecuting gun owners, massacring Branch



Davidians, outlawing “hate speech,” or bombing Belgrade.

Until his 76th year, no enemy could vanquish him. Many tried, including Gough Whitlam, who, when prime minister, dismissed Sir Joh as a “Bible-bashing bastard.” Bland rube to the hilt, Sir Joh let his adversaries curse and shriek. Then, with imperturbable politeness, he would clean up their corpses. His entourage, known as the “White Shoe Brigade”—it included Rabelaisian property developers such as Michael Gore, once credited by an admirer (himself) with being “as slick as snot on a door handle”—lacked his own fortitude and personal austerity. Yet the White Shoe Brigade’s crimes, examined and recounted in prurient detail by a governmental commission after Sir Joh left office, should hardly in themselves have scandalized even Jane Austen’s maiden aunts. They were all pretty Runyonesque: a banknote-filled brown paper bag here; a rigged tender there. Sir Joh’s gamier underlings observed, without knowing it, Gladstone’s distinction between an aristocratic and a democratic leadership: The former bribes individuals, whereas the latter bribes whole classes. The White Shoe Brigade operated strictly at the individual level. To this extent, and this alone, it can be called aristocratic.

Sir Joh’s reign ended dramatically in 1987, when his disgust at the ineptitude of federal right wingers—led (if “led” is not too violent a word) by the young John Howard—goaded him into running a third-party campaign for the prime ministry during that year’s national election. Already Howard had perfected the talent which has served him so well ever since: being too weak and cynical to advocate

genuine conservatism, but eminently strong enough to make sure that no rival can get away with advocating it either. The “Joh for P.M.” drive failed, launching an entire literature of neocon mythology—which flourishes still—about how Sir Joh selfishly “split the conservatives” (*what conservatives?*). For the first time, he had overreached himself, and his own *quondam* party loyalists toppled him from the premiership before the year finished. Thereafter, except when he occasionally emerged to praise Pauline Hanson’s movement before and during its late-1990’s apex, he retired from public life as completely as any latter-day Emperor Charles V. No more did the airwaves resound to his much-mocked all-purpose slogan: “Don’t you worry about that.” No more did the airwaves resound to him at all. His innate dignity prevented him from whining. To the therapeutic state, he scorned to pay danegeld. (A less than appropriate metaphor, on reflection, since his father had come from Denmark.)

Canberra Times journalist Ian Warden (in a 1980 book of columns which boasts the title *Do Polar Bears Experience Religious Ecstasy?*) furnished as moderate a portrayal of Sir Joh as we may reasonably expect the Fourth Estate to give us. Shortly before the 1977 Queensland election, Warden met Sir Joh, the latter being on the campaign trail to aid a charming 82-year-old millionaire named Sir Bruce Small. (“Think big, vote Small,” screamed Sir Bruce’s fluorescent red-and-orange posters.) Expecting a flamboyant ogre, Warden found himself unexpectedly impressed by Sir Joh’s plainness:

I was struck [Warden wrote], not for the first time that day, by how dull, forgettable, and unobtrusive he becomes in a room full of others. Laurie [Sir Joh’s police escort] had twice the presence and charisma of his charge. We are, I think, missing the point that he is a very, very ordinary man, albeit a man with extraordinary energies which enable him to express his ordinariness in political ways. . . . The more arts degrees you have and the longer you remain a perplexed agnostic, the harder it becomes to plumb the shallow depths of the man.

But “shallow depths” is unfair, a mere repetition of the same patronizing mis-

take that doomed so many of Sir Joh’s antagonists. Rather, when we contemplate Sir Joh’s long heyday and abrupt decline, let us recall Churchill’s assessment of Lord Curzon’s career: “The morning had been golden, the noontide was bronze, and the evening lead. But all were solid, and each was polished till it shone after its fashion.”

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Letter From Alabama

by J. Michael Hill

Whose Security?

Several years ago, when the summer blockbuster *Independence Day* came out, I was told that audiences cheered the part where alien spacecraft destroyed such Washington, D.C., landmarks as the U.S. Capitol and the White House. At least some Americans know who the real enemy is and are willing to cheer publicly at cinematic depictions of their demise (at least in the dark of a theater), despite the threat of being labeled a “domestic terrorist.”

The recent circus caused by the innocent mistake of a Cessna pilot violating the airspace of official Washington, along with one of Jorge Bush’s many hypocritical utterances, made me realize just how wide the gulf is between the Official Ruling Class and the rest of us and why a healthy suspicion of the current regime and its motives is a good thing.

El Presidenté Bush, who never met a Mexican immigrant he didn’t like, told the paranoid xenophobes in Red State Land who oppose his post-September 11, wide-open-borders policy that confident nations do not build fences to keep others out: Only fearful nations do that. Been near the White House lately? Talk about fences! But again, Jorge and his entourage are important people, and the normal rules do not apply to them. We don’t need no stinking fences from Brownsville to San Diego to keep out Al Qaeda, as long as official Washington is bomb proofed. To hell with the yokels! Let them fend for themselves—just as long