



Court Politics in a Federal Polity

Journal:	<i>Australian Journal of Political Science</i>
Manuscript ID:	CAJP-2014-0109.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	court politics, core executive, Queensland, Bligh government

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COURT POLITICS IN A FEDERAL POLITY

Introduction

Australian political scientists have explored the core executive only episodically. XXXX and Wanna’s (2009) review of the literature including textbooks, journalism, biographies and memoirs led them to conclude there was little research on Australian executive politics; it was ‘almost devoid of theory, even controversies’. Other characteristics include: the predominance of *realpolitik* in accounts of executive power and a tendency to emphasise ‘practice over theory, commentary over fieldwork, and teaching over research’ (XXXX and Wanna 2009, 129-30). Weller (2005, 37) concurs. He notes the academic literature provides ‘slim pickings for a reader who wants to know how the executive system of government works in Australia’. The challenge for Australian political scientists, therefore, is to provide theoretically informed studies of the political executive based on original fieldwork.¹ Strangio, ‘tHart and Walter (2013) also call for a greater focus on the political executive. They exhort the next generation of scholars to pursue an ‘integrated approach to the study of prime ministerial leadership, focusing on the *interplay* between political circumstances, institutional possibilities, individual characteristics and social relations at the apex of executive government’ (Strangio et al. 2013, 6, emphasis in original).

This article offers theory *and* fieldwork. We argue for a focus on court politics and we illustrate our argument with a case study of the court politics of Queensland under Labor premier Anna Bligh. We pose three key questions. First, why is court politics a useful approach in the study of the core executive in Australian governments? Second, what is the nature and extent of court politics in State politics? Finally, recognising that local traditions shape and inform the beliefs and practices of political elites, how does the court politics approach need to be modified for

¹ In the 2000s, there is evidence of a reinvigorated field in Australia. See: Bennister 2012; Strangio et al. 2013; and XXXX and YYYY 2014a.

application in Australia?² We highlight four dilemmas that characterised the court politics of Queensland's central networks. These are:

- Contingency, which continuously frustrates agenda-setting and other efforts to plan for the medium-term.
- The problem of fragmentation and coordination, which arguably is greater because of States' service delivery responsibilities.
- The primacy of coping and survival in the calculus of political-administrative elites, especially as electoral defeat looms; and
- The tendency of a besieged leader to rely on an ever decreasing circle of close advisers who, because of their close relationship with and loyalty to the leader, cannot or are unwilling to offer alternative advice.

We also identify those features of the court politics approach that work in Australia and highlight some differences arising from local traditions and practices. These key differences are: the physical location of network members; the greater number of partisan staff near to leaders; and the close and closed relationships among network members over the course of long-term governments.

The court politics of the core executive

Court politics have existed throughout the ages (see Campbell 2010), but in its current reincarnation the idea marries the core executive to the analysis of prime ministerial predominance and to the study of statecraft.² It focuses on the beliefs and practices of core executive actors. Practices are actions that display a stable pattern; they are what a group of people do. We interpret these actions by ascribing beliefs to them. Practices presuppose apt

² For a detailed account of the core executive debate, its criticisms and variants and its emergence as the 'new orthodoxy' in executive studies see Elgie (2011), Heffernan (2003 and 2005) and XXXX (2006 and 2014).

beliefs, and beliefs do not make sense without the practices to which they refer. So, a government department is a set of embedded practices; so too a Cabinet, a Premier's or Prime Minister's office.

Beliefs and practices are passed on through inherited traditions. Central to analysis of traditions is the notion of *situated agency*: of individuals using local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage. So, analysis shifts to people's beliefs and practices, the traditions in which they are located, and the games interdependent people play to resolve dilemmas. A dilemma arises when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices, forcing individuals or institutions to reconsider their existing beliefs and associated tradition. To accept a new belief is to pose a dilemma that asks questions of existing traditions (Bevir and XXXX 2003; 2006a). The court politics approach's emphasis on the beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas of courts provides the organising concepts to systematically explore how they work (see XXXX 2011, chapter 1; XXXX and YYYY 2014a, Chapter 2).

Court politics exists as journalists' reportage, in the autobiographies, biographies, diaries and memoirs of politicians.³ The nearest usage to that employed here is that of Savoie (2008, 16-7). He defines the court as 'the prime minister and a small group of carefully selected courtiers'. It also covers the 'shift from formal decision-making processes in cabinet ... to informal processes involving only a handful of actors'. In a similar vein, Dexter (1977, 268) refers to the collection of courtiers continuously related to one another and dependent on the top person. Such views of court politics are too narrow. We prefer Cowling's more expansive focus on the intentions and actions of a political leadership network which consisted of 'fifty or sixty politicians in conscious tension with one another whose accepted authority constituted political leadership'. Court politics was 'a matter of rhetoric and manoeuvre' by statesmen (Cowling 197, 3-4). Similarly Williamson (1999, 12-18)

³ On the reportage, auto/biographies, memoirs and diaries relevant to court politics, there are too many items for a complete listing here. Recent Australian examples include: Blewett (1999); Bligh (2015); Evans (2014); Fraser and Simons (2010); Howard (2010) and Watson (2011).

understands the study of court politics ‘in the interpretative, not simple descriptive, sense, where the narrative is not of one politician nor even of one party, but rather of the whole system of political leadership’. Even with these more expansive definitions, the number of participants is still limited. But, as well as the core network or inner circle, we can also talk of circles of influence (Bennister 2012; Hennessy 2000, 493-500). In the more formal language of political science, the court is a set of interlocking, interdependent networks. For example, Burch and Holliday (1996) suggest that the prime minister is at the core of the core networks supported by enhanced central capacity that increases his or her potential power. In other words, the inner court is personal but it is embedded in interlocking networks that encompass their support staff, whether public servants or political staffers.

When the idea of court politics is married to the analysis of beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas, it ceases to be mere metaphor. It focuses attention on the contingencies, personalities and the ebb and flow of conflicts and negotiations between interdependent actors in the overlapping networks that constitute the core executive. Court politics also offers useful insights into the problems of effective government. Courts perform essential coordination and management tasks that hold the centre together (XXXX and YYYY 2014a). The court sets priorities and coordinates the policy process by filtering proposals. In the quest for coherence, it contains and manages conflicts. It acts as the keeper of the government’s narrative, and is gatekeeper and broker for internal and external networks. Its power ebbs and flows with that of the prime minister.

For Walter (2010, 9-10), ‘court politics’ implies small, closed group decision-making. He is concerned about potential dysfunctions – poor decision-making, an inability and unwillingness to engage in ‘rigorous reality-testing’ and other pathologies, if this mode of decision-making should become routine. XXXX and YYYY (2014a, 196-204) report the siege

mentality that gripped Julia Gillard’s court as she faced the extreme contingency of a minority government, relentless destabilisation from her predecessor and the missteps of her own supporters as they became insular and defensive. For Savoie (2008, 230 and 339), the key adverse consequences are centralisation and the collapse of accountability; ‘the centre has slowly but surely been made deliberately stronger’; ... and ‘the chain of accountability ... has broken down at every level’.

There are also more prosaic but no less important consequences – the loss of institutional memory and the tendency to ‘organisational forgetting’ (Pollitt 2000, 2008). Savoie (2008, 25) agrees ‘senior civil servants no longer have the experience, the knowledge, or the institutional memory to speak truth to power’ (see also XXXX 2011, 293-5). However, it is a mistake to focus only on the pathologies of court politics. ‘tHart (2014, 76-81) distinguishes usefully between the court as think tank, as sanctuary, as arena, and as ritual. We need to tease out the patterns in court politics and the intended and unintended consequences of those patterns. ‘tHart’s suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities; for example, the court as ceremony and myth. As will become clear, our case highlights the court as siege but that should not obscure the fact that court politics come in many varieties.

Research methods

This article draws on a larger study that assesses the nature and extent of court politics in Australia. It examines the everyday working practices of ministerial ‘courts’: the individuals, offices and units that collectively comprise the system of support for ministers, with the aim of identifying their beliefs, practices, rituals and routines.

Observing the court politics of the core executive is challenging because of the secretive nature of government decision-making. However, there are now several ethnographic studies of

governing elites, so it can be done.⁴ We use a distinctive mix of methods, drawn from the toolkit of ethnography (XXXX 2015). Participant observation is a key tool of anthropology, but there are several ways of collecting the stories of elite respondents who have 'been there'. They include intensive repeat interviews, focus groups, informal conversation, and the analysis of official documents, biographies and memoirs, oral histories, interviews and speeches to recover beliefs and stories (and see XXXX et al. 2007: chapter 9 on the pros and cons of ethnographic methods). These stories are the institutional memory of government departments; a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today. The stories serve to socialise not only officials to 'how things work around here', they play a similar role with Ministers and their staff who also bring their own stories to the task of governing.

The defeat of the Bligh Labor government in March 2012 offered an opportunity to conduct interviews with members of its various central networks. We conducted 25 semi-structured interviews (ranging between ninety minutes and two hours in duration) with a sample equally divided between ministers, senior officials and political staffers. In several cases, we conducted repeat interviews with respondents. We draw also on data from media interviews with Anna Bligh and former members of her government. Finally, we had access to the review of the 2012 Queensland election campaign (Wright et al. 2012); to documents and testimony to the Commission of Inquiry into the Queensland Health payroll initiated by now former Liberal-National Party (LNP) Premier Campbell Newman; and to Bligh's recently published memoir (Bligh 2015).

⁴ On ethnography Geertz 1993 [1973]; and Hammersley and Atkinson 2007. On ethnography in political science see Aronoff, M. J. and Kubik, J. 2013; and XXXX 2015. For examples of ethnographic fieldwork in political science see Crewe 2005; Fenno 1978; and XXXX 2011.



Court politics

Court politics in Queensland

The inheritance

Queensland has an eccentric administrative history. Its unorthodox development is, in part attributable to its unicameral parliament. It provides few checks on the power of the executive and sustains a tradition of long-term majoritarian governments. This combination of executive dominance and personalised governance has fostered a political culture that seems to favour the ‘strong leader’ tradition of the Premier as ‘the boss’ (see Davis 1995).

Following the landmark Fitzgerald Inquiry into political corruption in the National Party government of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, there were significant reforms, including reforms to the Cabinet processes, which were codified in a *Cabinet Handbook*, formally adopted by Labor Premier Wayne Goss, elected in December 1989. The aim was to ensure Cabinet deliberations were well informed, that policies were coordinated and that there was a whole-of-government perspective (Scott et al. 2001, 249-52). Davis (1995) describes the Goss government’s (1989-96) approach to managing Cabinet and the business of government more broadly as ‘a government of routines’.

In February 1996, the Goss government lost office following a bi-election in the seat of Mundingburra. A Liberal-National Party coalition under the leadership of Rob Borbidge formed a minority government with support from conservative independents. The new government consciously and symbolically dismantled Labor’s central coordinating arrangements. It quickly encountered difficulties in maintaining discipline and coherence. A former Director-General (DG) noted that ‘as a government they quickly showed all the signs of what happens when you have lost a central policy function’. After just two years, the Coalition lost the 1998 state election to Labor, now led by Peter Beattie.

While aware of the benefits of centralised coordination for disciplined decision-making, Beattie eschewed the punitive style that had so alienated ministers under Goss (Wanna and

Williams 2005, 65-66). His was a more 'inclusive', collegial Cabinet, with transparent briefing processes from the public service through his Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) to ensure ministers would not be 'ambushed', nor would Cabinet's time be wasted in disputes about 'facts'. Relatively few ministers had served under Goss, nonetheless the emphasis on 'routines' permeates the stories of a subsequent generation of Queensland ministers and officials.

The core executive

Davis (1995) identifies three domains of coordination within Queensland government: the political, the policy and the administrative. Each comprises distinct groups of 'players' supported by routines, which Davis (1995, 28) describes as 'the standard repertoire of institutions, those rules and codes which guide action and give effect to values'. Within the central networks these domains overlap and cluster around the Premier. Supporting routines and regular meetings bring the players together so at the centre, Cabinet decision-making is coordinated and well-informed.

Queensland's strong leader tradition has ensured a prominent role for DPC since its establishment in 1859 (Scott et al. 2001). DPC and the Premier's private office comprise the centre of Queensland's core executive networks, but it is important to distinguish the administrative from the political domain – although they are in almost constant contact. Anna Bligh's Premier's office had 32 ministerial staff – a mix of personal appointees covering administrative, policy, political and media advising roles. It was led by a Chief of Staff, with a Deputy Chief of Staff, a separate head of the Government Media Unit and policy advisers mirroring DPC, providing the Premier with partisan support and briefing about issues across government. Bligh noted the inevitability of a leader relying on a small core group:

... if you really look at the people who have influence over a Premier, or a minister, it's really down to about five or six. The Chief of Staff, the Deputy Chief of Staff, the media

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staff – in my office, I had four. So, it’s a handful of people who have daily contact with you and who help you form your views and influence your thinking.

As Premier from 2007 to 2012, Bligh maintained a Cabinet of 18. The routine was a weekly Monday meeting in the Cabinet room in the Executive Building, which also houses DPC and the Premier’s office.

Within the administrative domain the DG of DPC is Queensland’s most senior public servant. Anna Bligh had two DG’s of DPC, Ken Smith (2007- mid-2011) and John Bradley (2011-12). His responsibilities - there has never been a female head - invariably come as a surprise to the new appointee, who perhaps envisaged the job as driving policy across government. Instead, he is the ultimate coordinator; the ‘fixer’ of a litany of problems and conflicts that cannot be resolved elsewhere. According to a senior official:

The reality is that [DGs of DPC] are often caught up in the minutia of small problems that if unsolved could become big problems. So, instead of their job being to sit back with a pipe and have big ideas and write big policy papers, their job is running from crisis to crisis and fixing things whether it be on behalf of the Premier, whether it be something that’s in *The Courier-Mail*, whether it be a problem in another Director-General’s office. It doesn’t matter what it is, often times their day is caught up with what seem to be small issues, but [which] if escalated, would be quite terrible issues and managing the personalities of all of that – and that’s not even bringing into account the private sector and other businesses and things like that who are looking to that person as their key interface with the Premier and the key influence.

As this comment suggests, the DG DPC plays a major coordinating role across the policy and administrative domains. He is supported in this task by senior departmental officers

and importantly, by his own private office.⁵ The incumbent DG chairs key coordinating forums. These include *inter alia*: the weekly CEO Leadership Team meeting of all DGs; the Performance Leadership Group (which dealt with and advised the Premier on CEO performance agreements) and the State Disaster Management Group (SDMG). A member of the DG's court described his job as follows:

So he has a job almost as a – in a funny way, as a call centre and as a central problem solver and the busyness of his job will often be a reflection of the relationship of the other directors-general and their ministers and the relationship of the other ministers with the Premier's office. So sometimes, depending on the dynamic, his job changes in relation to the dynamics that exist in those other systems.

A noticeable feature of Queensland's courts is that their members are always together because of co-location and government routines. The governing elite is relatively small. It became smaller when machinery-of-government changes reduced the number of DGs from 24 to 13. Labor held office in Queensland for almost 20 years from 1989-2012. Thus, court members had known each other a long time. In the political domain they were often contemporaries from university; grew up in the same towns; had children at the same schools; were part of the same professional networks; and had friends or associates in common. They had forged long professional relationships. As a university student, Bligh's Treasurer Andrew Fraser, completed an internship with Neil Roberts, later a Cabinet colleague. Fraser was a junior staffer to Peter Beattie in Opposition and in Beattie's Premier's office, where he met and dealt with public servants who would later advise him.

Under Labor, the political-administrative elite met regularly; they travelled together, usually on the government jet, to Community Cabinet meetings held across the state, Council of

⁵ In 2012, the DG's office comprised two executive assistants to manage his diary and meeting papers; a receptionist; and an Executive Officer.

Australian Governments (COAG) and other intergovernmental meetings. Bligh’s DG Ken Smith, explained that as head of DPC:

I met with the Premier twice a day, morning and afternoon and then basically often in between times with meetings with ministers, with a range of meetings around crisis situations. We were on the same floor in the Executive Building. The phone would ring – your time literally wasn’t your own. Whereas, if I was running a line department, I literally managed my own diary. I could travel within the state; I could go and visit schools; I could do a range of things. In the central agency, I had to always be there and in fact, even during times of disasters. It wasn’t my role to get up in a helicopter, or to go and visit a particular community... I had to be there to chair a process and then communicate with the Premier about what was happening.

Such frequent, often informal interaction contrasts sharply with experience in Canberra (XXXX and YYYY 2014a).

The DG of DPC sits at ‘the pointy end’ of the political-administrative interface. By proximity and routine there is frequent interaction with the Premier’s office. Bligh’s Chief of Staff Nicole Scurrah reported the she saw ‘a lot of the DG’. She explained the face-to-face interaction and on-going dialogue helped to clarify the Premier’s priorities; it facilitated coordination and enabled Bligh to be across the detail of her role. Because the task of supporting Queensland Premiers is shared between political staff and public servants, it is both essential and inevitable that the DG of DPC is a member of the central court – but the perspective he brings is administrative, distinct from but complementary to, that provided by senior ministerial colleagues and the Chief of Staff.

We found an inner and an outer court in Queensland’s core executive (see Figure 1). There was the inner court of the Premier comprising her Chief of Staff and private office, and

selected senior ministers (Andrew Fraser and Paul Lucas). All three had their offices in the Executive Building. Such co-location facilitated closeness. The outer court comprised members of Cabinet and its support staff. The Cabinet Secretary (an official, conventionally an SES officer of DPC, who reports to the DG) was also part of this network, along with Cabinet Liaison and Legislation Officers (in each of the departments, each trying to maintain the integrity of government routines). Other members of this outer court included the Assistant Director-General Policy, the Executive Directors of Policy Division and the Deputy Director-General Governance.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Finally, individual ministers had their departmental courts to support their links with the outer circle. These courts were clustered along and around George Street, mostly in walking distance of the Premier's office. The contrast with the Commonwealth is sharp where political staffers are in parliament house with their minister, but public servants are a taxi ride away in the suburbs of Canberra.

Political staffers were key members of each court. As noted, Bligh's inner court had 32 appointments. Andrew Fraser had 14. Paul Lucas had 12. In other ministers' offices the number of staffers varied from 9 to 16. There were 223 in total.⁶ Strikingly, Queensland government has many more advisers than British Ministers who, on average, appoint two Special Advisers (SpAds), although the prime minister has significantly more. In July 2012, there were 79 appointments in total with 19 in the Office of the Prime Minister.⁷

Not only were there multiple courts, but each court was subject to change, often at the Premier's behest. Anna Bligh succeeded Peter Beattie when he retired as Premier in

⁶ 2011-12 Queensland State Budget - Service Delivery Statements -Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 13.

⁷ On political staffers in Australia see YYYY 2007. On special advisers in the UK see Blick 2004. On the growth of such political appointments internationally see Eichbaum and Shaw 2010.

September 2007. She was elected unopposed (Bligh 2015, 149-54). Bligh only narrowly won the 2009 election. The small ‘Strategy Group’ that fought the 2009 campaign (Bligh, Fraser, Lucan and Scurrah) became the nucleus of Bligh’s government from then until 2012. Bligh (2015, 161-75) offers insights into the importance of the group, the relationships and dynamics among its members forged during the 2009 campaign. Her team had ‘defied political gravity’ to win the election ‘against the backdrop of a powerful electoral mood for change’. Bligh’s authority increased after her electoral victory, but she achieved neither Beattie’s political authority within the government, nor his electoral popularity outside it. Victory enabled her to reshape the Cabinet she had been forced to retain after her mid-term accession to the premiership – enemies and rivals were isolated. Bligh (201, 162-63) argued such personnel and other changes were necessary because:

As we headed into that election, Labor had been in power for almost seventeen of the previous twenty years, and the electorate’s hunger for change was palpable. It had dogged Peter Beattie in the lead up to the previous election in 2006... Having been denied change in 2006, the electorate was hungrier for it in 2009.

Inevitably, there were limits to Bligh’s authority. In-government transitions are fraught because those who have been close to power under the former leader will resent being sidelined. Beattie’s decision to ‘anoint’ Bligh his successor denied her and others who saw themselves as contenders the legitimacy of winning a leadership ballot. It mattered because it stoked discontent. Like most leaders, Bligh was constrained in selecting her ministerial ‘team’. She was forced to retain factional powerbroker Robert Swarten as Minister for Public Works and Housing and to appoint his close ally Judy Spence as Leader of Government in the House. One respondent described the personal relations between Bligh and these two colleagues as ‘very unpleasant’; both were constant irritants and persistent critics. Serious internal tensions were contained rather than resolved, only occasionally becoming public. For example, when

Bligh authorised controversial changes that removed the powers of the Speaker of the Parliament, John Mickel, a rival from the right faction, he became an outspoken critic of Bligh's leadership, both publicly and privately.

Bligh's memoir *Through the Wall: Reflections on Leadership, Love and Survival*, was published in March 2015. In the book, interviews and promotional appearances, the former Premier claimed 'I have no interest in writing a back-stabbing, tell-all critique of my colleagues in public life' (Bligh 2015, x). However, she concedes the process of remaking her Cabinet after the 2009 victory involved a series of 'difficult conversations':

With a couple of exceptions, those who were not returned to the Cabinet held their pain as a grudge, allowing it to fuel a growing distance between themselves and their loyalty to a party that had given them their every chance in public life. When things were at their toughest for us in the years to come, it would be some of those I disappointed on that first day who would let us all down as they took their revenge on me, leaking to the media and betraying the party' (Bligh 2015, 176-77).

To protect our several respondents, the following, brief 'composite' portrait of the Bligh court uses the unattributed words of three leading critics. We are not suggesting these views are accurate. However, we believe they show the climate in which the Bligh court worked and that, to some extent, it engendered. To a significant degree it does not matter if the allegations are true because they changed behaviour both inside and outside the court. The court became 'defensive', the critics went public, and Labor politics became tribal, even feral. So the consequences of criticism were real.

Our respondents characterised the Bligh court as 'highly centralised', and claimed it was the Premier's fault because in contrast to Peter Beattie, she was 'not a people person'. Bligh was 'awkward', 'transactional' and even 'cold' in her dealings with people. Members of

the court were ‘bullies’; prone to undermine, or to ‘give the pineapple’, to those who disagreed or questioned them. There was little or ‘no respect or deference for ministers’ who were ‘bypassed’, ‘micro-managed’ and sometimes abused by the Premier’s private office. The court was ‘tribal’ and ‘media driven’. Critics claimed that Bligh and Lucas were career politicians who trod the increasingly well-worn path to government from Young Labor. Hence, according to one ‘I always maintained we didn’t get a Premier. We got a student union leader’.

Of course, the various proponents had different accounts of why the court behaved as it did. For the court, it was ‘an opportunity for renewal’, a ‘lack of talent’, the need to rely on those who could be trusted, and to ‘never let one’s guard down’ given how bad the government’s electoral prospects were throughout the final term. To critics it was pathology of an insecure and increasingly insular leadership group. The court had to spend, some might say wasted, much time on managing tensions that, in part, it created through its very existence.⁸

Dilemmas

This section highlights four dilemmas that characterised the court politics of Queensland’s core executive from Beattie’s retirement in September 2007 to Labor’s defeat at the March 2012 election. We discuss the dilemmas under the headings of: contingency and agenda-setting; fragmentation and coordination; crises, coping and survival; and ever decreasing circles. These dilemmas demonstrate the utility of the court politics approach for analysing the dynamics of relationships in and between the core executive’s central networks.

⁸ Fitzgerald (2011) supports this composite, asserting the Bligh government’s defeat was caused by incompetence. He notes Bligh’s focus on image over performance and promotion of inexperienced speakers into Cabinet took its toll in poor administration. Fitzgerald says these appointments resulted in a failure to oversee projects, make tough decisions and the public service was process driven rather than outcome focused.

Contingency and agenda setting

The spectre of defeat loomed over Anna Bligh's government after she failed to secure the majority of votes at the 2009 election. She had gone to the polls early, cognisant the budget was deteriorating rapidly after the global financial crisis. Constrained by an earlier commitment to maintain capital spending to sustain employment, but under pressure from Ratings Agencies about the extent of the State's borrowings, Bligh, from the ALP's Left faction, was forced to privatise state assets. The option was canvassed by the Strategy group, initially without consultation with the Cabinet or the party room, although the final decision was taken by the full Cabinet. Bligh maintains that ministers understood the profundity of the decision for the Labor Party and particularly the unions, Labor's traditional base and a key funder, who were outraged. Bligh (2015, 183) describes a meeting with union officials in the Premier's office on the afternoon after the Cabinet meeting where initially everyone was 'grieving', 'sorrowful and ashen-faced'. She goes on to describe the estrangement between her government and the unions like a 'relationship breakup where 'the sadness soon turned to anger'.

The decision to privatise assets was similarly controversial with the media and the community. Bligh was alleged to have 'lied' to the people of Queensland by not revealing the budget position before the election and seeking a mandate to privatise assets (see, for example, Wright, Lee & Tebbutt 2012, 12-15). Bligh (2015, 178-86) rejects claims her government had a 'secret plan' to privatise state assets. She offers a passionate defence of her decision-making through the uncertainty of the global financial crisis, describing the rift with the 'entrenched industrialised male' union power base as 'an epic fight between the new and old guards of the Labor party' (Bligh 2015, 185).⁹

⁹ While acknowledging the decision cost her government, Bligh maintains the decision to float Queensland Rail's coal and freight divisions on the Australian Stock Exchange 'remains an important economic reform that will stand the Queensland economy in good stead for decades into the future' (Bligh 2015, 186).

Having alienated its support base and facing internal dissent, the government became defensive and reactive. Queensland’s media market is small and concentrated, but ‘feeding the media beast’ dominated key court members’ thinking. This constant preoccupation was reflected in the time Bligh’s office devoted to media monitoring and planning. A senior staffer told us work began at 3.30 am with a review of the national news, ahead of a 4.30 am phone hook-up with the head of the Government Media Unit. Ministers reported similarly that media management dominated. They were lined up for interviews on early morning radio from home or in the car, to an increasingly hostile reception.

Directors-General felt this pressure keenly because it escalated the demands from ministers’ offices:

My day was governed by what was in *The Courier Mail* in the morning or the 6 o’clock news at night. If they ran a story that was critical of the department, if I hadn’t already had a phone call from the Minister’s office or one of his staffers, I soon would and for the first few hours, that’s what I’d be concentrating on.

On reflection, Bligh’s staffers conceded the ineffectiveness of this approach to governing:

[By the end] we were jumping at shadows and that’s what long-term government is about.... It’s kind of like Stockholm Syndrome. We got to the point where we jumped at everything...

It is moot whether, in a different context and having secured re-election in her own right, Bligh might have asserted a more coherent policy direction. Almost immediately her government was confronted by one damn thing after another.

Between December 2010 and February 2011, a series of natural disasters devastated 80 per cent of Queensland’s landmass; each of the state’s 73 local government areas was declared a disaster area (Arklay 2012, 9). The government’s response was effective, but the demands of

dealing with a series of severe, unpredictable and geographically dispersed threats, understandably were enormous. It required twice-daily meetings of the SDMG and a huge response effort at the height of the crisis and its aftermath, and in recovery of affected communities. The beleaguered Premier's decisive and empathetic leadership drew national and international plaudits. Some interviewees suggested that in this case, the court politics of a familiar and cohesive small group spanning the three domains of policy, policy and administration, worked well. Others commented on the Premier's improved performance when on the road and away from her court.

Fragmentation and coordination

Sub-national governments are focused on delivering public services. They operate large and complex delivery systems – in cooperation and at times in conflict, with other tiers of government. The coordination challenges are immense; the potential for problems, failures and mistakes is omnipresent. This potential is especially acute in Queensland, which is large, diverse and decentralised, and experienced rapid economic and population growth over the past 20 years, creating pressures on infrastructure and service provision.

Queensland's 'strong leader' tradition, and deeply entrenched tradition of government intervention, creates strong expectations, which have implications for administration and political management. The tendency for every problem and issue to land on the Premier's desk is exacerbated by their predictable knee-jerk reaction. Members of Queensland's inner and outer courts insisted on the importance of routines while simultaneously reflecting on the gap between this normative value and the practices of the Bligh government, especially towards the end of its tenure. A DG described the clash between government routines and political-administrative reality:

More and more I found that you needed to push some of the routines and wish lists of agencies and ministers back as you dealt with really urgent and often complex issues,

which ironically, need more time to resolve. But governments are put into very pressured situations, I think by the media, but also by new media through tweets, through commentaries and blogs, through direct communication that ministers now have with the electorate and wanting to see particular solutions put in place.

A close observer explained that ‘... many [Cabinet] submissions were prepared outside of that normal routine... That meant there wasn’t necessarily the early circulation of submissions or of the advice that was provided’. Others acknowledged the pressures, but argued the erosion of Cabinet processes meant the agenda became overcrowded and the government was unable ‘at a decision-making level to really prioritise what we were doing’. It is an article of faith in Queensland that Cabinet should never debate ‘facts’ – such issues should be resolved between departments in the various coordination processes that prepare for Cabinet meetings. Yet submissions were coming forward before facts and value conflicts had been resolved.

Such difficulties are consistent with experience in other core executives. Despite strong pressures for more coordination, the practice is ‘modest’. It is ‘largely negative’, ‘anchored at the lower levels of the state machine’ ‘rarely strategic’, ‘intermittent’ and ‘selective’ ‘improvised late in the policy process’, ‘politicised’, ‘issue-oriented’ and ‘reactive’ (Wright and Hayward 2000, 33). A former senior official was critical of Bligh’s reactive ways, insisting that routines help to insulate leaders from relentless pressures:

Every government has so many bombs going off around them, which is why you have the rock solid processes underneath, because it enables you to deal with the bombs.

Thus, while both the academic literature and practitioner experience suggest coordination remains the ‘holy grail’ of modern government, Queensland officials still felt beholden to try to achieve it.

Crises, coping and survival

In the British context, XXXX (2011) found that politicians and civil servants find the distinction between policy and management meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive. Their priority and their skills are about surviving in a world of 'rude surprises'. They have to juggle the contradictory demands posed by recurring dilemmas. They must appear to be in control. Of course, they are not and cannot hope to be. Anna Bligh's experience in Queensland is a case in point.

Coping and survival are the twin imperatives that confront the political-administrative elite (XXXX 2011). The demands of political accountability and the media spotlight overwhelm their interest in and capacity for longer-term thinking and planning. This is perhaps especially so as they approach a much-anticipated defeat. Much government is about being here tomorrow.

This observation is as true of the states in Australia as in the departmental courts of Whitehall. But the risks of implementation deficits that threaten governments' survival, and the vulnerability of premiers who try to sustain the fiction that they are in control or can 'fix' things, may be more acute in sub-national government. The much-publicised Queensland Health payroll fiasco, an IT project failure that resulted in thousands of health and public hospital workers being either not paid, or incorrectly paid, was the final nail in the Bligh government's coffin (Bligh 2015, 281-2; Wright et al. 2012, 15). The government's incapacity to 'fix the problem was demonstrated every fortnight for more than two years, despite enormous effort and resources being devoted to solving it. A senior ministerial staffer described the Health payroll debacle as 'the thing I personally feel most ashamed of in my time [in government]'. Another described how it exposed ministers' dependence and utter powerlessness:

...there's a certain point where, as a minister, you are helpless in terms of technical stuff. You have to rely on the best advice from the Department. But I

think the Health payroll was a debacle in terms of public confidence in the government. You had to sit back and say, ‘how did you buy this product?’ How did this happen?

Bligh (2015, 281) conceded the political damage this implementation problem wrought on her government:

It became for many a powerful symbol of an old government. It was a technology failure that should not have happened, and while any government would have been marked down for it, there was no mercy left for a government that should have known better after almost twenty years in the job.

Ever decreasing circles

Controversy over asset sales led commentators to question Bligh’s honesty and integrity. The fact that she had campaigned on protecting jobs, but not explicitly on asset sales dogged her administration, sapping the energy and commitment of her Cabinet, which, as noted earlier, contained several rivals. The unions ran a spirited and sustained campaign against Bligh and her government. Wright et al. (2012, 14) report that:

A number of submissions [to their Review] contended that some unions spent more on this campaign against asset sales than they had spent on supporting Labor’s efforts to defeat the LNP at both the 2009 and 2012 elections combined. With the government already in a politically weak position, this campaign by some unions was effective and damaging. Having previously been seen as open and transparent, the Labor Government came to be perceived as inward looking, defensive and under siege.

Communications between the Government and many unions broke down and a gulf developed between the Government and large sections of the trade union movement. This robbed Labor of one of its key institutional and electoral bases of support.

One consequence of court in-fighting was an increasingly defensive leader and a siege mentality. The Premier began to rely on a steadily diminishing circle of close advisers – the Strategy Group. Under the pressures of crisis and longevity the government became highly centralised. Our research suggests this was attributable to a combination of personalities and circumstances; but there were concerns too about trust. Bligh's several enemies, some of whom had indicated their intention to retire at the 2012 poll, became openly critical as the end of the government approached and the pool of available talent diminished. We asked a senior staffer, who agreed the government became centralised, why this was so:

I think it's essential to get direction... Without naming names, the whole reason you become central is because you don't have the skill set around you to deliver...

The whole reason it was very centralised, particularly in our government around Anna [the Premier] and Andrew [Treasurer] for example, was because they were always the smartest people in the room.

Reliance on 'inner circles' is a consequence of the trends to centralisation and personalisation noted by scholars in Australia and internationally (Strangio et al. 2013, 11; Peters, XXXX and Wright 2000). The tendency to turn to a small group of trusted loyalists is characteristic of beleaguered leaders during crises (see, for example, XXXX and YYYY 2014a, 144-49) and where there is division and distrust between the courts and caucus. The distrust extended to officials. So, turning inward is understandable and may help leaders to cope, but it is pathological when it becomes the standard operating procedure of governing. Such was the case under Bligh as her government faced a defeat they knew was inevitable.

After Labor's historic loss, outgoing Cabinet ministers lambasted the Strategy Group. Energy Minister, Stephen Robertson argued the ALP had run 'a terrible campaign', for which he blamed the party's 'inner sanctum'. He indicted Anna Bligh, her Deputy Andrew Fraser, former Deputy Premier Paul Lucas and their advisers (ABC 2012). A former minister was

similarly scathing, arguing Bligh surrounded herself with ‘sycophants’, ‘chaotic people’ who ‘reinforced her prejudices’.

Bligh’s Chief of Staff conceded the leadership group became insular but offered a different explanation:

I think that working the hours that are required [of people in these jobs], that you become unable to – you stop speaking to people. So, you think of all the things that influence your thinking and influence your ability to make clear decisions... Once you are actually in that cocoon – this goes to the loneliness and isolation of these roles – you don’t talk to people because they always want to know what is going on. So you enclose even more, you stop being able to take on new ideas. You’re not out there, at home at five o’clock, being able to watch the news or television for enjoyment; you don’t talk to people at barbeques. So your ability to bring to the job all of those skills that actually you need to generate new ideas – dissipate. Just through the nature of the job.

Such inward looking is not peculiar to Bligh, nor to Queensland (XXXX 2011, 275-6). ‘tHart (2014, 76-81) distinguishes between courts as think tanks, sanctuaries, arenas and ritual. At different points over its life, the Bligh court played some of these roles. In its early days, it was a think tank over campaign strategy and budget repair. It was a negotiating arena over how to fix the IT system and hospital pay. But, above all else, it was a sanctuary. Such ‘group think’ is an oft-remarked feature of most Western governments (‘t Hart et al. 1997). Its core characteristics are that a group under stress becomes cohesive and insulated. It values unanimity over a realistic assessment of the available options; and makes decisions characterised by stereotyping others, rationalising past behaviour, and belief in one’s own correctness. Whether we call it siege mentality or group think, it came to characterise court politics around the Queensland Premier. It was caused by a combination of perceived fiscal

stress, political crises not necessarily of their own making, pressure from 24/7 media, and the personalities involved. It was an unholy brew; an omnishambles.

Conclusions

This paper has examined three questions. First, is court politics a useful idea? Second, what is the nature and extent of court politics? Finally, given that local traditions shape beliefs and practices, to what extent can we apply the court politics perspective to Australian government?

Our Queensland case demonstrates the utility of the court politics perspective in highlighting the fluidity of relationships in the core executive; and the contingency and shifting allegiances that characterise life at the centre of government. Premiers, ministers, their political staff and officials occupy positions that are assumed to be powerful. Yet each is keenly aware of their dependence: on one another and on so many things - events, political fortunes, public opinion - that they can neither influence nor control. Beyond the interdependence of the political-administrative elites are the vagaries that arise between the tiers of government.

While Walter (2010, 9-10) agrees that contingency and dependence characterise relations in the core executive, he argues that 'court politics' implies dysfunctional decision-making. Our use of 'court politics' is different. We have no normative agenda. Rather, we seek to map, to understand, and to characterise how executive politics works in Australia and to determine whether it travels well. Our work on court politics in Queensland suggests that as the Bligh government confronted defeat, decision-making was concentrated within a small, insular group. This group demonstrated many of the pathologies that Walter identifies, producing decisions and outcomes that indeed did undermine the quality of government. But we would argue this represented the prevailing pattern of executive politics in Queensland then. It was not only the variety of court politics; it was at least briefly a think tank and a negotiating arena.

Far from entrenching a dominant leader, the election result indicated that an administration perceived as being insular and out-of-touch would get its comeuppance at the ballot box. There was a democratic correction. Moreover, the story of those dysfunctions is likely to enter the institutional memory of the court. Just as Peter Beattie eschewed the pathologies of command and control that he experienced as a member of the Goss government (see Wanna and Williams 2005), lessons will be drawn from Anna Bligh’s leadership. Indeed, it had already begun in the narrative of the government’s failings published in the Review of the 2012 election campaign.

We have shown that the court politics framework ‘travels’ effectively to the Australian context. However, we have identified some key local differences that must be taken account of in seeking to apply the approach outside the United Kingdom. These differences are the colocation of network members; the greater numbers of partisan staff supporting ministers; and the close and closed relationships among network members developed over the course of long-term governments.

We started with Savoie’s (2008) definition of the court as ‘the prime minister and a small group of carefully selected courtiers’. We accept there is often such an inner sanctum but find Savoie’s conception too narrow; participants in core executive politics are rarely so few. We prefer a broader definition that distinguishes between an inner and an outer court; between circles of influence spanning the intersecting and overlapping domains of politics, policy and administration. Like Burch and Holliday (1996, 104-6), we see the prime minister (and premier) at the core of the core networks. However, their effectiveness depends on contingent factors, and on the personalities and preferences of key actors. Moreover, first ministers and their courts are subject to many constraints (and for a review see XXXX 2014). Some ministers resist, and yet leaders must depend on these senior colleagues. No prime minister or premier can intervene continuously in everything. They are defeated by the complexity of government

and the massive demands on their time. They confront the expected and the unexpected. They manage the intended and the unintended consequences of their actions. The national, and in the case of prime ministers, the international context vie for scarce attention and resources. He or she has to be selective. It is also important to distinguish between intentions and outcomes, intervention and effect. As Savoie concedes (personal interview 22 July 2014), there is much ebb and flow both within and between ministerial colleagues. The court politics approach seeks to map that ebb and flow.

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