

Queensland

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Queensland is Australia's second largest state by area and third largest by population. Among the states it stands out in constitutional terms in having only a single legislative chamber, and politically in having a sharp mismatch between balanced major party fortunes at state level but Liberal-National dominance at federal elections. The state includes significant mining and tourism industry interests and a relatively large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. From the late 1950s state politics was dominated by the Liberal-National Coalition party until electoral reforms in the late 1980s ushered in fairer election competition, contributing to Labor predominance in recent times.

What does democracy require of Queensland's political system?

- ◆ An effective state constitution that provides an anatomy of legitimate public power to: define the limits of state governmental powers; make government accountable to the people by providing for checks and balances; and promote long-term structures.
- ◆ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be afforded full individual civil and human rights. The histories, languages, cultures, rights and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peoples should be addressed.
- ◆ The electoral system for the Legislative Assembly (LA) should accurately translate parties' votes into seats in the state legislature, in a way that is recognised as legitimate by most citizens. Ideally the voting system should foster the overall social representativeness of the legislature. Elections and the regulation of political parties should be impartially conducted, with integrity.
- ◆ The political parties should sustain vigorous and effective electoral competition and citizen participation. They should enable the recruitment, selection and development of political leaders for state government; formulate viable policy agendas and frame political choices for state functions; and form governments or, when not in power, hold governments accountable. Political parties should uphold the highest standards of conduct in public life.

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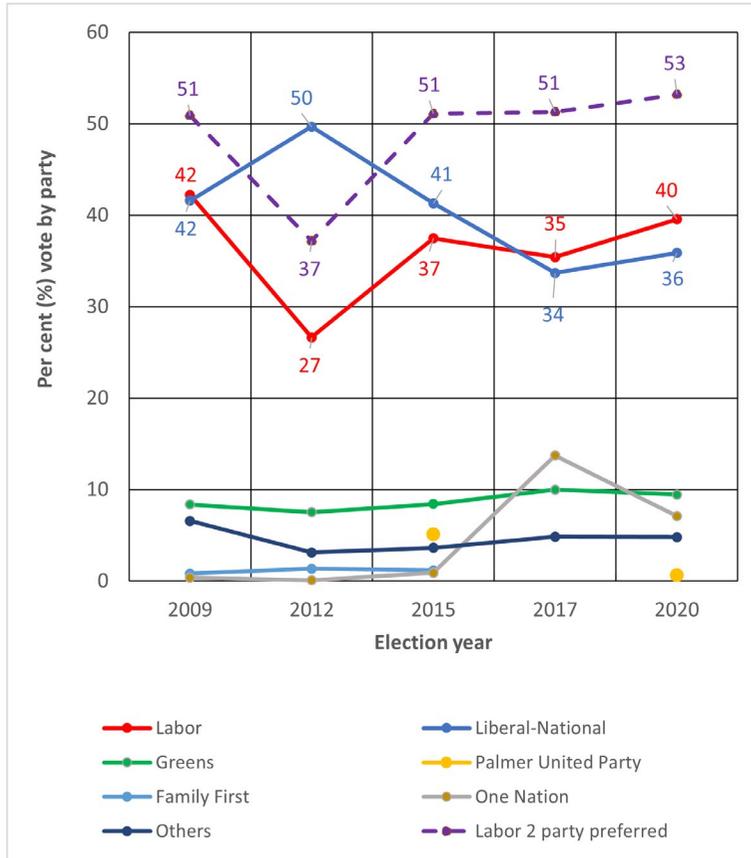
- ◆ The state legislature should normally maintain full public control of government services and state operations, ensuring public and parliamentary accountability through conditionally supporting the government, and articulating reasoned opposition, via its proceedings. It should be a critically important focus of Queensland's political debate. With no upper house, the legislature in a unicameral state must have processes that incorporate a plurality of viewpoints and subject a majority government to some effective checks on its power.
- ◆ The Queensland government should govern responsively, prioritising the public interest and reflecting state public opinion. Its core executive (premier, cabinet, ministers and key central departments) should provide clear unification of public policies across government, so that the state operates as an effective whole. Both strategic decision-making within the core executive, and more routine policy-making, should foster careful deliberation to establish an inclusive view of the 'public interest'.
- ◆ The core executive and government should operate fully within the law, and ministers should be effectively scrutinised by and politically accountable to Parliament. Ministers and departments/agencies must also be legally accountable to independent courts for their conduct and policy decisions.
- ◆ In the wider state, public service officials should act with integrity, in accordance with well-enforced codes of conduct, and within the rule of law. The administration of public services should be controlled by democratically elected officials so far as possible. The rights of all citizens should be carefully protected in policy-making, and 'due process' rules followed, with fair and equal public consultation on public service changes. Public services, contracting, regulation and planning/zoning decisions should be completely free from corruption.
- ◆ At the federal level, the Queensland government should effectively and transparently represent its citizens' interests to the Commonwealth government and Parliament.

Recent developments

The top two factors affecting the practice and quality of democracy in Queensland have been improvements in accountability and representation, and the government's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some long-running aspects of state policy-making are considered after the SWOT analysis below.

Elections, accountability and representation

Queensland returned to a 'normal' single party majority in 2017, after the 2009–2015 period of a dramatic landslide, seat swings and minority government. In 2020, the Labor government strengthened its primary vote a little and its two-party preferred support, making Anastacia Palaszczuk the first female premier to win three elections in a row, and the leader of the first state government in Australian history to increase its vote share across three elections (Figure 19.1). After the election, the leader of the state opposition resigned amid public infighting in the Liberal National Party of Queensland (LNP). The Greens picked up an important political scalp: the former Labor stronghold of South Brisbane, once held by Premier Anna Bligh and more recently by Deputy Premier and Treasurer Jackie Trad. In December 2023, after leading the state during the

Figure 19.1: Votes cast for parties in Queensland's state elections, 2009–2020

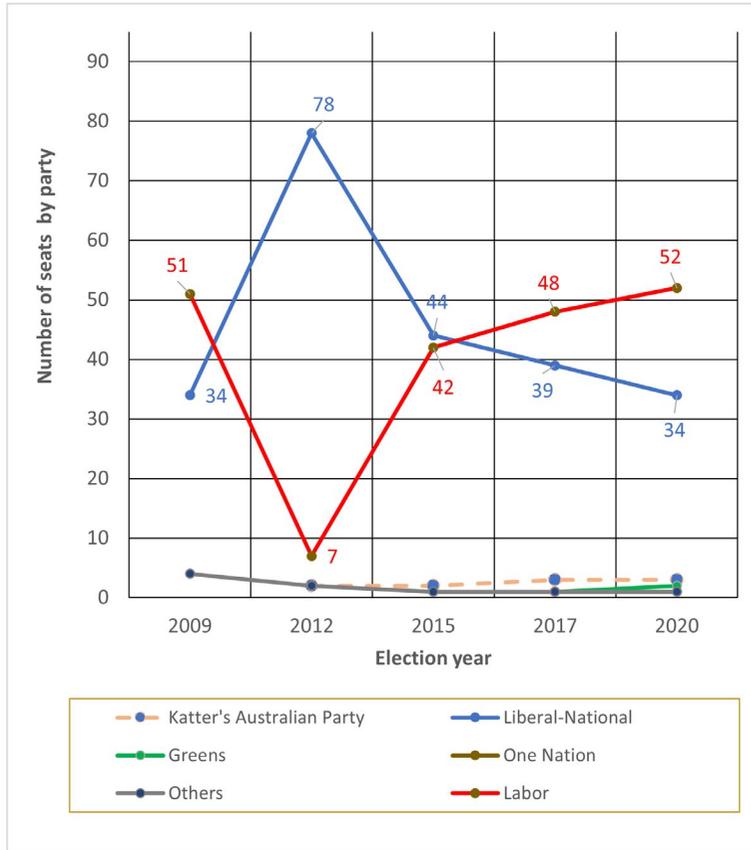
Source: Compiled from data in Queensland Electoral Commission (2023) 'Election results and statistics'.

Note: The Palmer United Party did not stand candidates in years not shown.

pandemic period, Anastacia Palaszczuk resigned as premier, with her former deputy Steven Miles taking over in the lead up to the 2024 election (Petter 2023).

In terms of seats the top two parties still dominated representation in the LA, maintaining a historically entrenched pattern (Figure 19.2). However, this apparent 'business as usual' picture coincided with some ongoing changes in the running of elections, as well as the composition of the Parliament. Along with a move to more stable fixed four-year terms from then on, the Parliament also included a diverse crossbench of minor party MPs: two Queensland Greens, three Katter's Australian Party (a socially conservative and economically protectionist party with support in North Queensland), a single One Nation member (representing Australia's main right-wing populist party) and one independent. Given the lack of an upper house with multiple-member constituencies in Queensland, this represented an unusual level of diversity of opinion in Parliament. The parliamentary crossbench was also granted extra resources for parliamentary staff by the Queensland Independent Remuneration Tribunal (2021) with the aim of improving their ability to scrutinise legislation and conduct research. Despite this, the government's majority and unicameralism have meant these voices have limited structural power to influence legislation and hold the government to account.

In the federal Parliament, Queensland accounts for 30 seats, with the vast majority (two-thirds) held by the Liberal-National Party in 2022 and 2019, and the Coalition gaining over half of the 'two party preferred vote'. Labor won only a handful of seats at federal level, a historical weakness considerably worsened in 2022 when the Greens won three of the Brisbane federal seats.

Figure 19.2: Seats won by political parties in the Legislative Assembly, 2009–2020

Source: Compiled from data in Queensland Electoral Commission (2023) 'Election results and statistics'.

Note: The number of LA seats was 89 up to 2015 (majority = 45), and 93 from 2017 on (majority = 47).

Concerns around integrity dogged the Parliament and political system in recent years. The state government faced an integrity scandal when Deputy Premier Jackie Trad stepped down from her cabinet positions over allegations of impropriety in property dealings and interference in the process to appoint a school principal in her electorate. Although cleared of wrongdoing, the controversy contributed to the loss of her seat in the 2020 election (Pollard, 2020). In response to a climate of perceived corruption, laws and regulations designed to cap political campaign spending, improve the accountability of ministers and ban donations from property developers were introduced in 2020 and took effect in 2022 (Palaszczuk, 2022). However, opposition members argued that these laws were skewed to benefit the Labor government, because they limited donations to candidates by individuals and organisations without preventing multiple unions making separate donations to the same campaign (McCutcheon and Hartley, 2020).

In terms of the political representation of historically excluded groups, recent parliaments have produced mixed results. The assembly still under-represented women (with the second lowest women members among the states), a deficit exacerbated by the lack of an upper house (Laing and Madde, 2024). The legislature included three Indigenous MPs at the election, second only to the Northern Territory's five (Richards, 2021). These included the first Aboriginal and first Torres Strait Islander women elected to the state's parliament. One of these, Leeanne Enoch, a Quandamooka woman, also became a cabinet minister. In substantive terms, legislation was introduced that sought to recognise traditional Torres Strait Islander cultural practices of customary adoption within family law (Palaszczuk, 2020a). The Palaszczuk government also

continued work on a formal treaty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of ongoing reconciliation reforms, where state-level progress may be impaired by the 2023 federal referendum results rejecting a First Nations Voice to Parliament (see later and [Chapter 4](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic

Queensland largely escaped significant direct health impacts from COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, yet the pandemic had a powerful effect on politics in the state. In the context of Australia's federally fragmented response to COVID-19 – where states and territories went their separate ways in handling the pandemic – Queensland's Labor government took a consistently hardline approach to suppressing the virus ([Salisbury, 2020a](#)). The state's border to Australia's other populous states remained closed for much of 2020, and border restrictions were imposed again in August 2021 due to the surge of cases in the 'Delta' variant, with police and military maintaining roadblocks along the border with New South Wales (NSW) and searching all vehicles attempting to enter the state.

Queensland's aggressive suppression policy generated some conflict along party lines. Both the federal conservative government, NSW and some state Liberal-National opposition politicians criticised the border closures during 2020, citing negative impacts on personal freedoms and economic activity, including Queensland's tourism industry ([Guardian, 2020](#)). However, the Queensland government effectively controlled the political debate within the state surrounding COVID-19, fending off criticism by comparing the state's experience to its southern neighbours, where COVID-19 outbreaks led to extended lockdowns. Meanwhile, political pressure from the economic stresses of the pandemic was blunted by state and federal pandemic payments. Increasing activity in the state's two largest employment sectors (healthcare and construction) also muted pressure for the reopening of borders. Finally, intra-state tourism partly offset the collapse that quarantines caused in international and interstate visitors. The government also enjoyed a prestige gain from the temporary relocation of clubs and the finals matches of the two major football codes from NSW and Victoria to Queensland ([ABC News, 2021](#)). The October 2020 state election was the first in Australian history to be contested by the top two major parties both led by women ([Salisbury, 2020b](#)). It also provided many insights into Queensland voters' reactions to COVID-19 decision-making, with results somewhat less clear cut than some observers expected (see below). There were swings to incumbents of both major parties in individual seats, along with some wins for minor parties (see [Figure 19.1](#)).

Despite dominating the politics of COVID-19, the Queensland government did not escape controversy over its handling of the pandemic. Its choice to defer to the advice of the Chief Health Officer (CHO) Dr Jeanette Young was partly credited with the state's successful suppression of the virus. Dr Young also became the public face of the government's media messaging surrounding the pandemic response. She was made the next Governor of Queensland in a further symbolic nod to the government's deference to expertise. At the same time, Dr Young's dramatic public condemnation of the AstraZeneca vaccine ([Zillman, 2021](#)) was criticised for stoking vaccine hesitancy and contributing to Queensland long having the second lowest vaccination rate of the Australian states ([McKenna, 2021](#)). The arrival of the Delta COVID-19 variant and the implementation of the vaccination program created new challenges for a government committed to virus suppression. However, the Palaszczuk government was able to navigate the challenges of engaging in a meaningful public conversation about opening borders, and balancing civil and economic freedoms with an inevitable rise in cases and deaths ([Wordsworth, 2021](#)).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>Queensland managed to avoid significant outbreaks of COVID-19 during 2020–2021, in part due to the government’s proactive use of short, sharp lockdowns. As a result, the state became for a time a magnet for individuals and families seeking new opportunities, as well as public events that could not run in southern states. This helped attract and retain human capital in the public and private sectors.</p>	<p>Having consistently ‘gone hard and early’ on COVID-19, and coming near last in the vaccination coverage, the state had to struggle to create a dialogue about opening up its borders later on. The dominance of the pandemic on the political and policy agenda also sidelined other urgent problems, such as environmental protection and socioeconomic inequality. This suited the government in the short term, but it may have created serious problems for long-term structural adaptation.</p>
<p>The Queensland government relied on clear communication, consistency and expert advice to build widespread support for its pandemic responses. Trust in the government and institutions has been high, and public cooperation generally forthcoming.</p>	<p>Democratic representation is skewed along several dimensions in Queensland. Labor dominates state politics while the Liberal-National Coalition hold more than two-thirds of the seats at federal level. Meanwhile, the urban-regional/rural divide has grown in recent elections. This makes compromise and structural reform on critical ‘wedge issues’ like climate and conservation difficult.</p>
<p>The opposition in the LA was unable to attain much traction during COVID-19. A larger number of crossbench MPs secured voice within Parliament on issues, such as human rights, renters’ rights and the environment.</p>	<p>Queensland’s unicameral Parliament continued to provide a weak forum for scrutiny and accountability of the government’s COVID-19 agenda and performance. The lack of an upper house means that committees are consistently controlled by the government.</p>
<p>On issues of ‘morality policy’, such as the decriminalisation of abortion and assisted dying, Queensland has largely managed to avoid fractious public debates and political polarisation found in other jurisdictions. At the same time, MPs had the opportunity to raise constituents’ views and representatives of religious groups have had their voices heard.</p>	<p>Public corruption remained a serious problem in Queensland. There was considerable debate about the appropriate roles of the various institutional actors involved in anti-corruption work. Both major parties stand accused of undermining the reforms implemented after the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1989) and a political consensus on corruption mitigation remains elusive.</p>
<p>Political support for and appreciation of the public service has rebounded since the turbulence of the Newman government (2012–2015). Greater attention has been paid to ensuring that state staff are supported through permanent employment and managed so that they succeed in their roles (Queensland Government, no date).</p>	<p>Local government democracy was to some extent marginalised in the COVID-19 period’s consolidation of the state government’s authority. This effect was compounded by corruption scandals in local governments. This produced worrying examples of non-consultation with local communities over developments that impacted them, such as the location of government-run quarantine facilities in the pandemic period.</p>

Future opportunities	Future threats
<p>The state's capacity to attract major national sporting and cultural fixtures, and international mega events such as the 2032 Olympics, suggest the potential for further diversification of the economy, opening up opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged groups to participate more fully in social and political life.</p>	<p>The survival of education and tourism industries at their current scale depended on the full return of interstate and international travel. The potential for conflict between the state and federal governments' other important intergovernmental issues, such as the protection of the Great Barrier Reef, lessened after Labor's 2022 return to power federally.</p>
<p>Population growth in Queensland, especially in the regions, provided a chance to reduce gaps between wealthy south-east Queensland and the rest of the state. This may potentially mitigate the urban–rural polarisation that has existed in Queensland and limited the state's capacity to address major policy challenges.</p> <p>Current expansion of infrastructure in south-east Queensland, including school expansion and new mass transit systems, could potentially foster inclusion and participation and reduce regional disconnection.</p>	<p>Economic development, interstate migration and mega events have rapidly changed the socioeconomic complexion of many areas of Queensland, including inner-city Brisbane and large regional centres. There is a danger that growing inequality will reduce relative opportunities for the least well off.</p>
<p>In 2020, there was an outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement, creating a window of opportunity to address the colonial legacy of First Nations peoples' ongoing disadvantage, over-policing and misalignment in bureaucratic relationships with communities.</p>	<p>Law and order has remained a hot button issue in Queensland politics. The Labor government has been determined not to be politically outgunned on the issue. The Liberal-National Coalition rhetoric often suggests they favour extending policies that are known to disproportionately affect First Nations peoples and their communities, including youth.</p>
<p>Current debates about the appropriate framework of corruption prevention in Queensland offer an opportunity to rethink the existing model, introduce greater parliamentary oversight and build community awareness and consensus.</p>	<p>Corruption prevention remains a polarised issue. While the political disagreement has faded somewhat from the Newman days, this has been achieved through a watering down of corruption provisions. There is a danger that the cultural and systemic problems identified by the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1989) could re-emerge.</p>
<p>After the Liberal-National 2020 election defeat, party polarisation on public services somewhat reduced. The new opposition leader called for a different approach to public services (Lynch, 2020).</p>	<p>Support for the public service became a sharply political issue from 2012–2015 and subsequently continued to be salient, with both the Labor government and the Liberal-National opposition keen to signal loyalty to public servants. Reforms to employment conditions and performance management processes have enhanced job security but may make it harder to address underperformance at individual and organisational levels.</p>

Queensland democracy faces some long-run tensions, and three of these are explored in more detail in the rest of this chapter. The state's strong government/unicameral legislature tradition has softened a little and some key legislative reforms have somewhat redressed the balance in favour of rights. Changes to public administration continue to create some issues. And finally, examples of increasing social disadvantage raise new issues for governance.

Reconciling strong government with democratic accountability

Although its popularity had begun to wane at the end of 2023, the state's strong government was widely perceived as 'getting the job done' and was credited by voters with keeping Queenslanders safe during the COVID-19 crisis. However, some of this came at the expense of holding government accountable, creating a vibrant representative political community and instituting necessary structural reforms to address problems like inequality and climate change. Queensland has tended to produce long periods of one-party dominance in government – Labor was in power 1932–1957, followed by the Liberal Nationals in 1957–1989. Labor has occupied the Treasury benches for all but six of the last 32 years. The electoral successes of the Queensland Australian Labor Party (ALP) under Premier Palaszczuk, and the popularity of her hardline response to COVID-19, seemed to signal a continuation of a tradition of executive-dominated majoritarian government, even after her resignation.

Queensland's history has shown that executive dominance carried a risk of reduced accountability (Coaldrake, 1989), which may adversely affect the quality of democratic deliberation and lead to poorer outcomes for citizens. The Palaszczuk government's approach to addressing these concerns showed that they were sensitive to political pressure, and keen to be seen as fighting corruption and improving the accountability of elected representatives. Despite legislative action designed to improve the standards of ministerial accountability, curb political donations by property developers at both state and local level, and enforce higher standards of conduct in local government, substantial concerns have remained. They centre on the proper use and operation of statutory oversight bodies and on the use of Parliament as an effective means of keeping the executive accountable. The Crime and Corruption Commission had some recent success in bringing cases of political and police misconduct to trial and proved instrumental in the investigation and dismissal of corrupt local governments. However, it has been criticised for focusing on these high-profile cases at the local level, while many other complaints are sent back to referring agencies to investigate in-house after routine assessments.

On the other hand, the Office of the Independent Assessor, which investigates routine misconduct by local councillors, was sometimes overwhelmed by the volume of often spurious complaints referred to it (State Development and Regional Industries Committee, 2022). Its officers also faced criticism for undermining the independence and democratic legitimacy of elected local government officials. Councillors faced complicated new codes of conduct and were intimidated by the broadly defined terms of reference and investigative powers of the body (Stone, 2021). It was also not matched by any equivalent body focusing purely on state government. So, while the Labor government made moves in the right direction on corruption and accountability, more resources were needed to tackle the problem, but ministers had little political incentive to do so.

Enhancing scrutiny and diversity

Some steps have enhanced the Queensland Parliament's suitability as a platform for meaningful legislative debate and the representation of historically excluded groups. Extra resources for crossbench MPs became independent of the premier's discretion and gave minor parties and independents greater adequacy and certainty of funding support. This has reduced the ability of the executive to bargain with or punish these representatives based on political or electoral calculations, a pattern that occurred a good deal in the past (Bavas, 2019). It also enhanced the capacity of non-traditional parliamentarians to produce independent research and use Parliament as a platform to give voice to their constituents or debate the government more effectively. However, ongoing concerns have remained about how much meaningful input the opposition and crossbench can contribute to legislative debates and consultation, not least since the actual number of sitting days in Parliament (36 in 2023) remains comparatively low. This amplified the COVID-19-period effect of regular manipulation of standing orders in Parliament to 'gag' or curtail debate on important legislation, or force votes when the opposition had not had a chance to read amendments (McCutcheon, 2020a).

The parliamentary committee system and yearly budget estimate sittings are intended to act as a means of scrutinising government, reviewing legislation and consulting with important stakeholders before it is drafted. Both aspects were reformed in 2011, yet since the operation and timeframes of these systems were often dominated by the governing party they have not always allowed proper scrutiny and opposition input (Pretty, 2020).

Turning to the diversity of representatives, the 2020 Parliament and executive (Cabinet) now included more women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander MPs than in the past (Harris Rimmer and Stephenson, 2020). However, like other Australian jurisdictions there are no reserved seats in Parliament or legislated quotas designed to improve the representation of women or ethnic minorities. The ALP has operated candidate selection policies that set aspirational targets, and has had some success in advancing female candidates, yet Labor has shown no inclination for legislated quotas. The Liberal-National Coalition at state level has also remained ideologically resistant to any such measures.

Structural reform to the constitutional and administrative relationship between the Queensland government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was another ongoing concern. Premier Palaszczuk publicly endorsed an Indigenous Voice to Parliament at the Commonwealth level without committing her government to a solid model of how to incorporate one at the state level (Queensland Government, 2020a and 2020b). The Queensland Labor government also initiated a process of consultation with the eventual aim of an official treaty supported by a commitment to truth-telling and education about the colonial past. A bill was introduced into Parliament to establish a First Nations Treaty Institute and a formal Truth Telling and Healing Inquiry, and amend existing legislation that reflects discriminatory policies of the past with bipartisan support. The Bill followed the signing of the Path to Treaty Commitment on 16 August 2022, which ministers saw as 'historic' (Palaszczuk and Crawford, 2023). However, many observers suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will not be granted meaningful political autonomy or influence in Parliament soon. Instead, developments will reflect a tendency toward incremental progressivism used by the government of Queensland to manage challenges across several policy areas.

After the defeat of the Labor government's Voice to Parliament national referendum in October 2023, fears were raised that social media disinformation and polarisation generated in parts of

the No campaign might set back the prospects for further progress in Queensland (see [Chapter 4](#)). Indeed, in response to the result the Liberal-National opposition abandoned their previous support for the process ([Gillespie and Smee, 2023](#)). Given the inequalities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the failure of successive governments to address these through meaningful, consultative action, the need for urgent reforms seems plain. However, in current conditions Queensland's present incremental approach looks unlikely to produce such a change soon.

Funding and legislative protections designed to reduce First Nation peoples' dependence on the continued political will of the sitting government have not yet fully materialised (see below). Although the government appointed an independent Treaty Advancement Committee to continue consultation and report next steps to Parliament ([Palaszczuk and Crawford, 2021](#)), the opposition's commitment to any process was far from guaranteed even before their change of heart in 2023 ([Hobbs, Whittaker and Coombes, 2019](#)). Therefore, as occurred in South Australia, when a treaty process was abandoned with a change of government, any tangible outcomes of recognition and self-determination might still be lost to the vicissitudes of politics ([Hobbs, 2019](#)). Further constitutional innovations of the kind seen elsewhere (like Victoria's elected First Peoples' Assembly ([2021](#)) or reserved seats in Parliament like those for the Māori in New Zealand ([Taonui, 2017](#))) are definitely not on the current political agenda.

In terms of other reconciliation policies, recent funding announcements and legislative activities (like the provision of grants to teach and preserve Indigenous languages ([Queensland Government, 2023a](#)) and acknowledgement of Torres Strait Islander practices in family law) have formed part of the current government's Path to Treaty policy ([Queensland Government, 2023b](#)). This initiative was designed to give due recognition to the peoples displaced by European colonisation, and to redress past wrongs committed against them. However, while the government set up a panel of eminent experts to conduct community consultation and produced a report about next steps in 2020, actions to give effect to their recommendations took time to materialise. Labor ministers' response to the Path to Treaty process indicated in principle agreement with many of the suggestions, but did not commit them to concrete timelines – and also included caveats regarding spending on items such as a Treaty development institute and future fund to ensure continuity of the process, justified in terms of the uncertainties of COVID-19 ([QDATSIP, 2020](#)).

In more substantive policy areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders have continued to face disproportionate challenges. For instance, in recent years they made up 20 per cent of the homeless population but were only 5 per cent of the total population. Indigenous incarceration has been 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous people in Queensland, and only grew further between 2020 and 2021 ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021](#)). Indigenous and youth crime featured heavily in political campaigning in recent years, particularly in relation to marginal electorates in the state's north. The issue came to political prominence during the 2020 election when the opposition proposed a controversial youth curfew, sparking civil liberties groups to characterise the election as a 'law and order auction' ([Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, 2020](#)). This campaign was politically unsuccessful, in part because the Labor government also promised tough law-and-order measures ([Sarre, 2020](#)) that have been criticised by community groups and youth advocates. State Labor also declined to support reforms to increase the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years, against the advice of experts on crime and human rights and in contrast to the position of the federal Labor party ([Hall, 2021](#)).

For some other minority groups, however, the Labor government tried to extend human rights. The state delivered several legislative and policy outputs in recent years that reflected majority public positions on controversial and historically vexed issues, while minimising partisan conflict over these matters. The government pursued a broadly consensual agenda of legal rights reforms, including the formal decriminalisation of abortion in 2019; the introduction of a human rights Act to expand the scope of the existing anti-discrimination framework; and legislation on Voluntary Assisted Dying in 2021.

Public services and policy challenges

Queensland's public services were a key source of political controversy in the recent past. Some of this residue reflects the legacy of the radical Newman years (2012–2015), when the Liberal-National government cut public service positions ([Hawthorne, 2012](#)), and appointed senior officials seen to be personally loyal to Newman and other Liberal-National figures. The then premier also used disparaging rhetoric to criticise the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the Queensland public service ([Australian Associated Press, 2012](#)). Newman's loss of a massive parliamentary majority within the space of a single term has been partly attributed to a backlash from public sector workers, who have long made up a significant proportion of the Queensland workforce ([QGSO, 2021](#)). Health and social service delivery has been the largest employer in the state, while core public administration and public safety sectors employ more Queenslanders than all the primary industries. The Labor government subsequently reinstated more than twice the number of public servants cut by Newman, and Labor ran a campaign during the 2020 election warning Queensland voters not to 'risk cuts' by returning to a Liberal-National government ([Palaszczuk, 2020b](#)). Following the 2020 election, the new Liberal-National opposition leader publicly pledged not to cut the public service and made such promises a core component of the 2024 campaign ([Riga and Pollard, 2023](#)).

Despite the expansion of public service positions under the Palaszczuk government, the sector also attracted continued critical attention in relation to integrity and corruption. Public agencies were implicated in the controversy surrounding Deputy Premier Jackie Trad's involvement with the selection of the principal for the new Brisbane South State Secondary College. It was determined that the public service had inappropriately involved her in the appointment process in order to anticipate the Deputy Premier's wishes ([McCutcheon, 2020b](#)). A Crime and Corruption Commission ([2020](#)) report found evidence that the Education Department falsified documents and misled the media and public about the process, and a senior official was stood down pending investigation. Earlier on in 2016, at the local government level, the Crime and Corruption Commission's ([2017](#)) Operation Belcarra found problems with corruption and political donations, which led to the mass sacking of the city councils in Ipswich and Logan ([ABC News, 2019](#)) – two major satellite cities of the state's capital – and a subsequent series of regulatory reforms ([QCC, 2018](#)). Concerns were also raised about policy shifts that have resulted in more matters of public service misconduct being handled in-house, with suggestions that the government bowed to pressure from the police union to weaken the system of independent scrutiny of police set up in the wake of the landmark 1989 Fitzgerald Inquiry ([Smeed, 2019](#)).

While Queensland retained a capable public service, it faced a series of structural challenges in adapting to the post-COVID-19 environment. Some of the underlying challenges were addressed in a series of earlier reviews by Peter Coaldrake ([Jenkins, 2019](#)) and Peter Bridgman ([2019](#)). These addressed the Labor Government's pledge to restore permanent employment as the default arrangement in the Queensland Public Service (QPS), which sought to make the QPS an 'employer of choice'. Reforms to the legislative framework for the QPS in 2020 created a stronger environment for worker rights, including new provisions for transforming casual roles into ongoing positions. In addition, there were new steps and principles to guide performance management in a more 'positive' direction, separating it from disciplinary procedures and placing a greater onus on organisations and managers to demonstrate they have worked to engage and support staff before initiating action for underperformance ([Queensland Government, no date](#)). These developments aimed to reduce job insecurity in the QPS, but the changes 'will also likely see an increase in the complexity of and challenges to performance management processes' ([Tobin, 2020](#)). If the state service's recurrent shortage of skilled labour continues, this could lead to a significant structural shift in the power relationship between agencies and their employees, with implications for the future capacity of the public service to implement change and manage performance.

From crisis management to structural adaptation

Queensland's response to COVID-19 reminded voters of the advantages of strong, stable executive government in tackling emergency management issues. Other responses to recent natural disasters (especially recurring severe flooding and coastal typhoons in the 2020s) also showed that the Queensland government has a well-developed capacity for crisis management, both at the political level and within the public service. Yet governments should not just respond to crises; they also need to consider how to adapt to them to reduce future costs, and they should explore how public policy settings might be changed to reduce the likelihood of future crises. Some of the biggest policy challenges in Queensland fall under this category – they can be made better or worse by government action and inaction. However, Queensland's democratic institutions and processes have not been optimised for the structural adaptation required to address these challenges.

Environmental protection and adaptation to the impacts of climate change have remained serious and highly contentious issues in Queensland (and see [Chapter 27](#)). The state spans subtropical, tropical and arid regions, making it prone to a wide range of severe weather events, which are predicted to worsen in frequency and severity with climate change, producing social, economic and environmental costs that are not evenly distributed across the state ([Queensland Department of Environment and Science, 2019](#)). With strong inter-regional differences in the state's economic and employment base, no easy compromise between economic development and environmental sustainability has been able to be reached, to date.

Primary industries are concentrated in central and western Queensland in the form of agriculture and mining, and they make up an important share of the state's GDP, revenue and total land use. While tourism experienced a downturn due to COVID-19, it has remained a key component of the economy in the north and south-east coasts of the state. Meanwhile, the majority of the populated areas in the south-east corner have formed a mainly service-based

economy built on retail, human/professional services and construction. Politically, state and federal Labor have struggled to manage tensions between the different industrial sectors and concerns about the changing face of employment and the need to transition to a greener economy. Controversy around the Adani Coal Mine was a totemic issue for pro-mining and pro-environmental movements, playing a key role in successful Green campaigns in inner-city Brisbane seats, and in Liberal-National campaigns in the central and northern districts. This was a wedge issue for Labor, as highlighted by the party's poor showing at federal elections in 2019 (when the Australian Greens' 'Adani caravan' drew the attention of both left-leaning and pro-coal communities to Labor's ambivalent stance on the issue) and again in 2022, when the party lost seats to the Greens in Brisbane (**Horn, 2019**).

The profile of social inequality has also changed rapidly in Queensland, with particularly dramatic effects in the area of housing affordability, requiring a rethink of Queensland's historically limited investment in social housing during an earlier era of cheap and plentiful private housing stock (**Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023**). While Queensland increased its investment in social housing in recent years, it also remained second to the bottom of Australian states for per capita net recurrent social housing expenditure – that would have to increase by 27 per cent to reach the national average (**AGPC, 2021**). Queensland has long prided itself as a region of opportunity, prosperity and equality. While there have always been groups that were left out of this 'fair go' ideal, critics argue that the state risks entrenching and expanding an underclass that has been economically excluded and politically marginalised, unless structural reforms to social services and housing are implemented. Dramatic increases in housing insecurity and shortages during the pandemic period meant that housing affordability for people on average incomes came to be among the worst in the country (**Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023**). The government responded with an allocation of A\$2 billion over four years for social housing (**Riga and Gramenz, 2021**), as well as large-scale land releases for suburban development of private housing in south-east Queensland. It also sought to reform rental laws to provide additional certainty of tenure to tenants. However, critics in the housing sector and parliamentary crossbench argued that these reforms did not go far enough to prevent social marginalisation (**Gramenz, 2021**).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced a long-standing Queensland political tendency for voters to reward strong and decisive executive government, further entrenching the dominance of the executive over political and policy processes in the state. Despite this, the Labor government sponsored initiatives that built the capacity of opposition voices to challenge government policy. It successfully managed controversial legislative processes in the area of morality policy, and at least made a start on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' issues. While voters rewarded the Labor government of Anastacia Palaszczuk with a third term and an increased parliamentary majority, critics have argued that all is not well for democracy in the 'Sunshine State'. Regional polarisation, a politically weak opposition for much of the pandemic period, and an institutional framework that has allowed the government to truncate debate in pandemic times have added to longer term difficulties in response to politically divisive structural problems, including climate change and worsening social inequalities. Queensland has also continued to struggle to undertake the structural reforms required for the expansion

of democratic representation, maintenance of economic prosperity and preservation of environmental values. Reforms to parliamentary procedures and greater resourcing for the crossbench cannot overcome the serious representative and deliberative deficiencies and risks produced by unicameralism, while the changes made to integrity institutions seem to be producing too much and too little accountability at the same time. Therefore, questions remain about whether Queensland can build on its success in short-term crisis management during 2020–2022 to confront the ‘slow crises’ of social inequality and climate change.

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