

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Flo Bjelke-Petersen

1920-

Former Senator

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 3 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Flo Bjelke-Petersen

Director/Producer Frank Heimans

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Duration 26 minutes **Year** 1993

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Also in Series 3: Veronica Brady, Smoky Dawson, Malcolm Fraser,
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SYNOPSIS

Florence Bjelke-Petersen was born in Brisbane in 1920. She has been a National Party Senator for Queensland and is also well known as the wife of former Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Flo has strong conservative values. Growing up during the Depression, she was sent to Brisbane Girls Grammar School. After school, she worked in the Queensland Main Roads Department, eventually becoming Private Secretary to the Commissioner, a position she held from 1949 to 1952.

At 32 she met and married 40-year-old Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, a peanut farmer and member of the Queensland Parliament. As Joh's career took off, she became first a minister's then a premier's wife. But far from living in Joh's shadow, she was herself a significant political presence. In 1981 she became a National Party Senator for Queensland.

Flo was Deputy Leader of the National Party in the Senate from 1985 to 1990, and retired from politics in 1993.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Studies in Society and Environment, Legal Studies, Religious Studies, Personal Development, Economics, Women's Studies, Civics and Citizenship, and English.

MORALITY

From the outset, Flo Bjelke-Petersen identifies herself as a believer in behaving according to a set of standards. As she explains, those standards are Christian. Some of these come across throughout the interview, either directly or indirectly.

Morality concerns systems of values or morals to which people conform their behaviour. One essential question morality asks is—what is the way to be? Our immediate response might be 'the right way' (or true, virtuous, fair, ethical, etc). So open the floodgates, for there are very different ideas about what is right. Moral values or standards are both personal and social—what we expect of ourselves, and what we expect of others.

Aside from setting out a standard of behaviour, morality also reflects a broader system of beliefs. This is why moral values differ across cultures, where differences in belief are most striking. Even where beliefs are the same or similar, the way the belief manifests itself in standards of behaviour may be sharply different.

Consider the issue of voluntary euthanasia. A question that arises here is how we should treat the terminally ill. Most people would agree that the terminally ill should be cared for. However, there are other questions involved such as: 'What is care?' and 'What value should be placed on a patient's wishes?'. Here is our system of beliefs.

Understanding how moral positions are formed is vital to appreciating the way people think and act. We better appreciate that no morality is right or wrong, just as no belief is right or wrong. Beliefs, like our physical environment, are subject to and able to change. Some people refer to this approach of understanding how moral values are formed as a critical approach. It helps discern whether a moral value is based on untested judgment or a weighing up.

The idea of a universal moral code is difficult to maintain with this understanding. Even in the case of law and religion, often held as the moral institutions of western society, we find disagreement and challenges. Throughout the 1990s, Christian churches faced division over important questions of their moralities and belief, such as the

ordination of women priests, same-sex relationships and in-vitro fertilisation. Disagreement on moral issues is, after all, a recurring feature of the history of Christianity.

Discussion questions

- Identify some standards or moral values held by Flo that come across in the interview. How are these moral values Christian? What are some other Christian values?
- How would you describe her idea of morality?
- Think of some current issues of morality. What beliefs do these issues involve?
- What is an important moral value for you? How did you form that standard? How else are moral values formed?
- Do you think it is possible or desirable to have a universal set of moral standards?

ISSUES IN DEMOCRACY

Elections

The core mechanism for ensuring representative government is the right to vote. It is one of the basic political rights in a democracy. However, this right in itself is not enough to ensure that a government is representative of the people. Even dictatorships have held elections. Voting relies on the protection of other rights, such as free speech and political communication. It also requires democratic election processes.

Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen attracted controversy when, in his election campaign for the Queensland government, he redistributed electoral boundaries. The redistribution had the effect of putting his government into office with only 28 per cent of the overall state vote, but with a majority number of seats.

The Australian electoral system provides for a system of representation where parliamentary seats represent electorates. This is opposed to a 'one vote, one value' system, where standard practice is to allocate seats according to the overall share of votes.

For example, in a hypothetical 'Middle Earth', there are 10 seats in the parliament, each representing an electorate or political division. A candidate can only be voted in by electors living in that area. The political party with the greatest number of successful candidates or 'seats' is granted office. This is the case even if when all votes for Middle Earth are counted together; the government is in minority. This reflects the Australian practice. The alternate system allocates seats according to what share of the overall vote they receive.

Of course, areas are not populated with exactly the same number of people and it would be difficult to draw such boundaries. Areas may have significant discrepancies in people per square kilometre, such as urban and rural regions. To accommodate this, an average number of electors in an electorate is set. Usually, the actual number of electors in electorates can only be less than or more than the average by 10 per cent. So, if the average is 1000, there can be no fewer than 900 and no more than 1100 electors in that area. Further concessions can be made to larger electorates.

One of the main advantages is that it ensures more densely populated areas do not dominate the vote. In states such as Queensland, where there is a far greater population in the coastal cities compared to inland cities, this has been a major issue of debate. On the other hand, a major concern is that it can give the vote of electors in particular areas more value than others. Votes of those in less-populated electorates will have greater voting value than votes of electors larger ones.

Electoral laws are not enshrined in the constitution but developed through the usual law-making powers of government. Since populations can change over time, governments have the power to alter electoral boundaries to keep electorates within the prescribed average. This gives rise to a second concern with this system, a practice popularly known as 'gerrymandering'. This is where a government alters electoral boundaries to increase their chances of re-election. Joh Bjelke-Petersen was criticised for redistributing boundaries to favour the Queensland National Party.

Discussion questions

- What do you understand by the term 'gerrymander'?
- How does Flo respond to claims that her husband's redistribution of electoral boundaries was a gerrymander? Do you agree?
- Discuss your understanding of the differences between the two electoral processes mentioned above.
- Using the hypothetical example of Middle Earth (or any other) and the information provided above, show how:
 - the Australian electoral divisions work;
 - it could give greater value to votes in some electorates over others; and
 - such a process could produce different results to a 'one-vote, one-value' system.
- What other rights are necessary to ensure representative government?

Accountability

Voting and voting rights are not enough to ensure that the political structure of Australian society is representative. An important consideration in democracies is how to keep government representative and accountable to the public between elections.

In 1987, two media outlets ran reports on alleged corruption in the Queensland Police Department, and in response a commission of inquiry was set up to investigate the allegations. It was coined the Fitzgerald Inquiry. The inquiry confirmed that sections of the police force were protecting criminal activities such as gambling and brothels, and receiving financial or other remuneration in return.

The inquiry is one of the most controversial issues in Queensland's political history, leading to several senior state bureaucrats and government ministers being convicted for corruption. It also led to a criminal prosecution of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Premier during the period of the corruption. The trial resulted in a hung jury.

The Fitzgerald Inquiry raised not only issues of corruption, but accountability and openness across all aspects of government.

After the inquiry, the Queensland government introduced reforms to monitor the activities of government, including those of its ministers right down to the departments and agencies. The laws enabled the public, monitoring agencies and community groups to access certain government information and report allegation of impropriety. Other states and territories, particularly where similar instances of corruption arose, followed suit.

Government agencies and officials possess a great deal of information about the process of government, policy formation, matters of public affairs and personal information. It is important that much of this information be made available to the public so that government actions and decisions can be scrutinised.

However, freedom of information laws do contain exemptions that limit their application and allows some information to remain confidential. This is especially the case where information is politically sensitive. Governments sometimes decline to disclose information on the basis that its release might harm the public interest. While this is a legitimate reason for non-disclosure, it does create a dilemma. The process of deciding whether something might harm the public interest rests with government, and so is a government process. Where is the room for accountability in this process? Does the public have a right to know information that might harm them? If so, would this require disclosure of that information?

Discussion questions

- What point does Flo make about practices in the private and public sectors? Do you agree with her comparison?
- Aside from the general desirability of open government, why else is accountability and transparency desirable?
- How are governments held accountable between elections?
- Give some examples of agencies that monitor government practices, ensuring transparency and accountability to the public.
- Do you think all matters of government should be transparent to the public? Can you think of any circumstances where this would not be desirable? What interests are involved in these situations?

Country and City

As a National Party Senator, Flo Bjelke-Petersen represented the interests of rural Queenslanders. She sought to bring issues faced by those living in the isolated and less densely populated west Queensland before parliament.

The perceived divide between urban and rural Australia has a strong influence on Australian political and cultural developments. City and country are quite distinct geographies, often seen as incompatible or opposite. The country is commonly identified as the 'natural way of life', where as the city is identified with 'civilisation' or technology. The country is associated with peace and tranquillity; the city with the 'rat-race'. These ideas are reflected in the media, literature, politics and travel brochures. Of course, these are just representations. We can find technology on farms, and tranquillity in city gardens.

The city and country have very strong connections, and one of these is economic. Rural Australia is the source of a wealth of raw materials for export from city ports or for manufacture in urban factories. Alternately, agrarian and mining industries rely on investment from big city financial institutions, such as banks.

There are also connections between the rural and global, not least in the area of trade. Events or government decisions overseas can have significant effects on primary producers in rural Australia.

The differences between city and country can, however, be very real. Both have developed dominant values, attitudes, cultures and personalities. And there are significant social and material differences. A major difference is proximity to essential services. The discrepancy between access to and cost of services in urban and rural areas has been a major social and political issue. This includes transport, telecommunications, education, health, welfare and employment.

In a 2003 survey by the National Farmers' Federation, people identified this as the second most important issue facing rural Australia. The most significant issue identified in the survey was climatic conditions, notably drought.

These differences continue to shape Australian society and politics.

Discussion questions

- What are some phrases, attitudes and values you associate with the city and the country? Do these hold true?
- How else are urban and rural areas connected in Australia? In what other ways is rural Australia globally significant?
- What trends or shifts in the past 30 years may have widened the social and cultural gap between city and country?
- Think of examples in the media, literature or legend where country and city are represented. How are they represented?

GENDER

‘I’ve always said that after I became a senator I hoped that they remembered me first for being a senator who just happened to make pumpkin scones.’

These opening lines of the interview start an important thread, one Flo refers back to. Clearly, she has struggled to maintain her political status over her domestic one. Her experience highlights some of the issues for women in perhaps the most public area of life—politics.

While the number of female parliamentarians remains disproportionately low, Australia does have a strong history of women involved in politics. Australia was the first country to grant women both the right to vote and the right to stand for election. This was a victory for the suffragettes, who had campaigned for over 20 years. Henrietta Dugdale established the first women’s suffrage movement in Australia in Melbourne in 1884. Once voting rights were extended, the suffragettes focused their attention on improving women’s participation in political decision-making.

Despite this, it took nearly 20 years for the first woman, Edith Cowan, to be elected into a state parliament (Western Australia). Australia would wait another 20 years before the first women were elected into federal parliament—Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney in 1943.

Towards the end of the 20th century, women figured in leadership positions. Janine Haines was elected leader of the Australian Democrats in 1986, becoming the first female party leader. Women have continued to feature in the Democrats leadership, with Cheryl Kernot, Meg Lees and Natasha Stott-Despoja.

Discussion questions

- What difficulties do you think Flo experienced in maintaining her status as a politician over her domestic image?
- Do you think there is political value in her domestic image? How do politicians (both male and female) use a domestic image as part of their political one?
- Aside from seats in parliament, how else have women been involved in political processes?
- Do you think big business reflects the trend of women in leadership positions within the public arena?
- What pressures or limitations might be placed on women in leadership in the past? Do you think challenges continue to exist? How have they been overcome?

ACTIVITIES

- Essay. Choose a moral issue of significant social debate. Investigate moral arguments around the issue, the beliefs that underpin those arguments, and whether you think those beliefs are satisfactory.

- Research. Select one of the women politicians below and write a brief record of her political career. Identify their achievements, how she represented herself and any challenges she encountered.

Bronwyn Bishop, Helen Clark, Edith Cowan, Indira Gandhi, Pauline Hanson, Joan Kirner, Carmen Lawrence, Clover Moore, Natasha Stott-Despoja, Margaret Thatcher.

- Mind mapping. Choose an expression used to represent an aspect of the city and the country. Using a mind-mapping technique, begin by creating branches for the main ideas contained within each phrase and continue to branch these ideas out. See: www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/mindmap

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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Wikipedia—Australian Electoral System http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Australian_electoral_system

Flo Bjelke-Petersen

Books by Flo Bjelke-Petersen:

Classic Country Wisdom. Mandarin, Melbourne, 1994

Classic Country Collection. New Holland, Sydney, 1999

“Lady Flo’s fury at ‘Joh only’ ruling”. **The Age**, 8 October 2003 www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/07/1065292591265.html?from-storyrhs

Speech by Flo Bjelke-Petersen for the Australian Monarchist League www.monarchist.org.au/bjelkeart1.htm

Her famous recipe for pumpkin scones www.southburnett.net/recipes1.htm

Morality

Religion vs Morality—philosopher Ayn Rand <http://religion.aynrand.org>

Issues in Democracy

The Fitzgerald Inquiry Report—www.cmc.qld.gov.au/library/CMCWEBSITE/FitzgeraldInquiryReport.pdf

Background Briefing on the Inquiry—ABC Radio National www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s26032.htm

Wikipedia—information on gerrymandering <http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerry-mandering>

Curriculum Corporation—Discovering Democracy www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy

Australian Electoral Commission www.aec.gov.au

Rural Australia

National Farmers’ Federation www.nff.org.au

ABC Rural Australia www.abc.net.au/rural

Gender

Women into Politics www.womenintopolitics.org.au

Women in Leadership—Office of the Status of Women www.osw.dpvc.gov.au/optimal4.cfm