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Is Queensland Australia's laziest parliament?

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The Australian Institute for Progress exists to advance the discussion, development and implementation of public policy for Australia's future, from its base in Brisbane. The future does not look after itself.

How does the sitting record of the Queensland parliament compare to the other states?

In the run-up to the 2020 election campaign there were accusations that the Queensland government was using COVID to avoid scrutiny. These are neatly summarised on August 1 by journalist Peter McCutcheon in "[Why the Palaszczuk Government is accused of exploiting coronavirus to avoid parliamentary scrutiny](#)", published on the ABC website.

While we can't be certain that COVID was used as an excuse to avoid scrutiny, now that the year is at an end, we can say that Queensland had a very short sitting year in 2020, and under Anastacia Palaszczuk has had consistently short sitting years.

In this brief paper we compare Queensland's legislative assembly to the other state legislative assemblies for the periods of the Palaszczuk governments, as well as the Newman government. We also compare it to the period when the Bjelke-Petersen government governed in its own right.

This reveals that the Queensland government has sat less frequently under Anastacia Palaszczuk than either the Newman or Bjelke-Petersen governments, and holds the record for the last 9 years for the shortest sitting schedule of all the states and administrations.


Palaszczuk governments against peers and Newman

The sitting days between 2012, the year Newman won, and December 2020 are laid out in the table below:

| Government | Year | Qld | NSW | Vic | SA | Tas | WA | Average |
|---------------------------|---------|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|---------|
| Palaszczuk | 2020 | 31 | 41 | 39 | 47 | 37 | 64 | 43 |
| Palaszczuk | 2019 | 37 | 39 | 44 | 52 | 45 | 70 | 48 |
| Palaszczuk | 2018 | 37 | 52 | 42 | 49 | 36 | 63 | 47 |
| Palaszczuk | 2017 | 34 | 54 | 51 | 47 | 45 | 50 | 47 |
| Palaszczuk | 2016 | 43 | 54 | 51 | 51 | 45 | 61 | 51 |
| Palaszczuk ¹ | 2015 | 33 | 45 | 51 | 48 | 45 | 66 | 48 |
| Newman | 2014 | 40 | 53 | 43 | 40 | 38 | 75 | 48 |
| Newman | 2013 | 40 | 60 | 51 | 50 | 43 | 61 | 51 |
| Bligh/Newman ² | 2012 | 37 | 63 | 52 | 52 | 43 | 58 | 51 |
| | Average | 37 | 51 | 47 | 48 | 42 | 63 | |

¹While Newman was Premier until January 31, 2015, he did not preside over parliament in that year.

²Bligh was premier until March 24, 2012, and presided over parliament for 3 sitting days in February 2012.

 Indicates this was an election year

From this table it can be seen that the Palaszczuk government holds the record for the least number of sitting days, which it set this year, by sitting only 31 days. This is 12 days, or 28% less than the average for this year, and only 48% of the number of sitting days as the most industrious state, Western Australia, sat this year.

It also holds the record for the second and third shortest sitting years with 33 in 2015 and 34 in 2017. Tasmania takes 4th place on this dubious honours list, having sat only 36 days in 2018.

The Palaszczuk government has also sat the least of all state governments in every year that it has been in office, apart from in 2018, when it was beaten by one sitting day by Tasmania.

The Newman governments also sat the least days amongst their peers, with the exception of 2014, when they sat the same number of days as South Australia, and 2 more days than Tasmania.

Compared to Newman the Palaszczuk government has sat less frequently in the last 3 years, than any year of the Newman government, and tied with the slowest year of the Newman government (2012) once. Newman achieved 40 sitting days in each of two years. The Palaszczuk government has only matched or exceeded that in one year, 2016, when it sat for 43 days.

It is claimed that election years make for shorter sitting schedules, yet the year it was elected the Newman government (combined with 3 days from the Bligh government period) sat 37 days. In 2015 when it was first elected the Palaszczuk government sat 33 days (2 more than this year), and in 2017 when it was re-elected the first time it sat 34 days (3 more than this year).

Palaszczuk government against Bjelke-Petersen

The Bjelke-Petersen government was often criticised for lacking accountability, so we examined the period when it was in majority government. The table below lays out the relevant data.

| Bjelke-Petersen majority government | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| 1987 | 49 |
| 1986 | 28 |
| 1985 | 51 |
| 1984 | 50 |
| 1983 | 29 |

There is greater variability in this set than the Palaszczuk set, with 1984 and 1985 being particularly industrious years of 50 and 51 sitting days respectively. But 1983 and 1986 at 29 and 28 are lower than any year during the Palaszczuk regime. The Bjelke-Petersen schedules do suggest an electoral effect with '83 and '86 both being election years.

Australian league table

Probably the best way to compare is via the average number of sitting days. The table below does this.

| Government | Average number of sitting days |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Bjelke-Petersen | 41 |
| Newman | 40 |
| Palaszczuk | 36 |
| Australia | 48 |

From this it is clear that the Palaszczuk government has the worst record of all Queensland governments, followed by Newman and then Bjelke-Petersen. They are all below the Australian average of 48.

Why do other states sit more frequently?

It may be that politicians in other states are more hard-working than Queensland politicians, or that governing other states is more time-consuming. Neither of these theses seems likely. Queensland politicians are unlikely to be more slothful than the average to that degree – 36 sitting days is 25% less industrious than the average and almost half the most industrious (WA in 2014 sat 75 days). And it should be noted that out of all the states Queensland and WA have the most in common, but in terms of population WA is half the size of Queensland, suggesting a lower level of complexity required from government.

It is probably the case that because all the other states have an upper house this extra scrutiny causes a higher workload with bills going to the upper house and then coming back at times to be amended.

Rather than giving the state government cover for the number of days they sit, this suggests that in the absence of an upper house they need much more stringent accountability measures, requiring more time on the job.

While upper houses do not guarantee perfect legislation, they do apply a stronger test to legislation than a unicameral parliament.

We are currently seeing the state government introducing retrospective legislation to change the Local Government Act because of the way that it was designed to replace a mayor who resigned within 12 months of an election.

The foolishness of designating the runner-up, normally called the losing candidate, as the replacement mayor, should have been obvious to anyone with any experience in democratic elections.

Would this kind of sloppiness have happened with an upper house? It's possible, but unlikely. Should this have happened in a properly regulated unicameral system? Not if the committee system is working and the opposition is given plenty of opportunity to scrutinise bills.

More scrutiny means more time on the job. The mere act of allocating more time should lead to more scrutiny. It's about time Queensland lifted its work rate.

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