



Power of One

The Power of One is not just a best-selling Bryce Courtney novel. The 'power of one' is actually a very real phenomenon where one person, and their vote, can make a real difference to society.

Often people believe that they are only one voice, so what power do they have among many voices? Well, one voice can often make a world of difference and sway important decisions. For instance, one vote¹:

- made English the official language in America instead of German in 1776;
- made Oliver Cromwell Lord Protector of England in 1653;
- made Adolf Hitler leader of the Socialist (Nazi) Party in 1923;
- in a party leadership contest in 1970, saved Sir Joh Bjelke-Peterson as Premier of Queensland;
- in a party leadership contest in 1971, Sir John Gorton lost the Prime Ministership of Australia on his own one vote; and
- in 1993, not one but two votes won Sydney the 2000 Olympic Games.

When the numbers voting are small, then one vote can often make a huge difference. But there are also many examples where one vote among many has also made a significant difference. On average, 32,000 people vote in each electorate at a state election. Even so, there have been several close elections.

The power of one politician...

In July 1995, a general state election was held in Queensland to elect the 89 members of the Legislative Assembly. This

election resulted in the closest election result ever in this state. The electorate of Mundingburra determined the fate of the then Goss Labor Government at this election. The result in this seat relied on postal votes. After ten days, the Electoral Commission of Queensland declared that the Labor Party had won the seat by 16 votes. As a result, the Goss Labor Government had a parliamentary majority of one to govern the state.

But the election result was challenged by the Liberal Party in the Court of Disputed Returns. After some deliberation, the court accepted that some votes were incorrectly disqualified. They declared the seat vacant which triggered a new election in this electorate.

This election was one of the most hotly-contested in recent years, largely because of the precarious hold Labor had on state government in Queensland. The February 1996 election was won by the Liberal Party's Frank Tanti with a 2.8% swing against Labor, resulting in a hung parliament. The Coalition had 44 seats, the Labor Party had 44 seats and there was one Independent holding the balance of power. With the support of Gladstone Independent Liz Cunningham, the Goss Government fell within a week of the by-election and the National Party's Rob Borbidge became Premier of a minority government. With this one vote, Premier Borbidge governed Queensland until the next state election held in 1998.

The power of one mother...

In 2006, the Labor state government was debating the introduction of the *Unlawful Drink Spiking: Criminal Code (Drink Spiking) and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2006*. This legislation amended the *Criminal Code 1899* to include a specific offence of drink spiking, carrying a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment.

Drink spiking occurs when alcohol or another drug is added to a person's drink without that person's knowledge or consent. As a result, a



person becomes incapacitated, most likely impairing their consciousness. It is a very dangerous practice and places the drugged person in a dangerous situation, possibly even leading to death. It has become a growing problem worldwide, and has come to be associated with sexual assault and theft.

Following media discussion about the legislation and drink spiking, a mother of five, Tammy Bretherton, a Bribie Island resident contacted her local Member of Parliament, Carryn Sullivan MP and Member for Pumicestone, to discuss taking positive steps to educate people on the dangers of drink spiking, along with the legislative steps proposed by the government. Tammy told her local Member of her anguish following one of her daughter's drinks being spiked. Tammy suggested that, since licensed venues did not have to carry warnings about drink spiking, maybe the government should encourage them to do so. This suggestion was welcomed by the government and along with the enacting of the legislation making drink spiking a criminal offence, a promotional campaign highlighting the dangers of drink spiking was launched. The campaign involved clubs and pubs placing warning signs in their facilities which contained instructions on how to protect yourself from becoming a victim of drink spiking. These signs read:

'Drink Spiking Happens'
Be aware that rapists are using this new strategy
Educate yourself about drink spiking safety
Stay together with trusted friends
Monitor drinks constantly
Avoid tasting or exchanging drinks with others
Refuse any drinks from open containers
Throw away drinks that taste funny or salty
For support call the 24 hour Sexual Assault Helpline on 1800 010 120

The information signs were produced with the sponsorship of the state government and reproduced with the permission of the Gold Coast Sexual Assault Support Service. Signs can now be found on walls and on coasters in licensed venues across the state.

Tammy identified a need to educate the community about the government's legislation. Through her actions, which included researching the issue, approaching her local Member of Parliament and highlighting the issue in the media, this one mother improved the outcome for the whole community on this important issue.

The power of your one vote...

As these examples clearly demonstrate, the power of one is real - your vote does matter!



Are you going to become an active Queensland citizen and participate in your democratic system to help shape your future?

¹ Electoral Commission of Queensland, *Elections Queensland*, Brisbane, 1996, p 8.