

QUILTGATE

By Russell Fairfax (botanist in residence at Bimblebox Nature Refuge)

This is a true story about a tremendous bunch of sheilas. The youngest is 68. After hundreds of hours of love and care a first-time quilter plied her new trade as a fund-raising prize. Her chosen cause was a non-profit organisation striving to help landowners protect our fauna and flora through Nature Refuges. Much like a prize cake or large pumpkin, the humble quilt was to be displayed and raffled at various Queensland agricultural shows with tickets selling for \$2 each.

The quilt's centrepiece is a photograph of a man making a cup of tea. Were it not for the subject's resemblance to a Sydney Nolan with Fred Williams painting the background to the overall effect of a Frederick McCubbin, the photograph is unremarkable. The man is surrounded by stitched panels depicting several plants and animals familiar to a child, such as an echidna, brolga, plumed whistling duck and so forth.

The quilt has had a rough journey over the last few months from the outback to the central coast. History now begs the question: did the stitchers realise just how instrumental the quilt would be at displaying the fabric of rural Queensland? How long will they think that one word, not even stitched, could be so 'political', its mere portrayal is unfit for public display?

The answers start at the Barcaldine Show. Barcaldine people are laid back as a rule, but glossing over the oopsie-daisy under that Tree, not afraid to whack a couple of rockets on a skateboard and fire up now and again. However, there's a sort of a drought on and not too much is happening. You made a quilt? Great. It was displayed without fuss and received comments such as how nice it was.

Next stop Alpha. Somewhat surprisingly, given its proximity to Bimblebox Nature Refuge, the Alpha Show committee didn't return correspondence requesting the quilt be displayed. At this point it might be useful to know that the same State Government that signed off on protecting the values of Bimblebox in perpetuity also granted several companies exploration permits for coal over Bimblebox and an adjacent area the size of Germany. Patrons of the 2015 Alpha Show noted that there were no mining company stalls, that many Alphanians were sad, and that some speculative jams turned out to be pickles.

Onward to Clermont where the quilt was hung, just. This town sits at the western nexus of prime cropping and Bowen Basin coal. One industry is finite. Graziers over the central portion of the Galilee Basin head east into Clermont for supplies so the town's glancing west. One can see historic flood-marks near the town, where A dunny'd be underwater.

Advance to Emerald, currently hosting the full gamut of cropping, grazing and mining. Fairbairn Dam with its omnipresent grey specks on the weather radar has enough water for next year's cotton. Memories of the Nogoia River flooding the town and nearby Ensham mine have not faded. While at this Show the quilt could not be hung and was unwelcome, but a fifth member of the sewing circle stood up to the injustices, keeping it alive until Rockhampton.

...obfuscation, denials, memory loss and dummy-spitting. Maybe it was the word 'brolga' that got their rancour up or even the 'spirit of the bush'. Kindness emerged from the local quilting group, allowing some space and the public showed their support. But no-one predicted what would happen in Mackay.

QUILTGATE!

Upon arrival at the Show, the lady in charge of the pavilion looked it up and down.

'It's a bit controversial.'

'It is just a quilt with wildlife from a Nature Refuge we want to raffle for.'

'You know the Mackay Show Society will charge twenty per cent of your ticket sales.'

'Yes', said lassie number six, standing her ground politely.

'OK', she said and a spot was found next to the entrance door.

Next morning the quilt was nowhere to be seen. The lady in charge said that the quilt was 'political' and could not be displayed or raffled.

'What on earth is political about this quilt?'

'It's got "biodiversity" on it.'

Forward fast to the main office and unfold the quilt...

'How is this political?'

'It is political and we do not allow anything political at this show.'

'Do you believe in free speech?'

'No.'

'Show us your constitution or vision statement or anything that clearly explains your position, Incorporated organisation'.

'Request a copy in writing.'

'Where shall I send the request?'

'To me.'

'Well, I realise shows along the coast have been under some pressure from the mining industry...' she said, only trying to understand where he was coming from. With that his face went purple, denied industry involvement with the situation and mentioned the word security, all with some volume. So she left, trying not to throw up.

Are we too ashamed to show off our biodiversity? Is there really no room for biodiversity in the pastoral, agricultural, horticultural, mining or education sectors? Brisbane's turn next. See the famous quilt at the Ekka.