

Hello

Please find attached my submission to the Ministerial Expert Committee on Electoral Reform

Julie Freeman

Mrs Julie Freeman

19th May 2021

Submission to the Ministerial Expert Committee on Electoral Reform

I am writing to you as someone who lives in one of the rural communities most likely to be impacted negatively by the pursuit of one-vote-one-value in the Legislative Council of the WA Parliament. I have lived in a variety of places over the last 50 years including 12 years in metropolitan Perth and 28 years in Mullewa, in the state's Midwest. During my time in the Midwest, I have been involved in local government, a wide variety of community organisations and several not-for-profit boards. My experiences have positioned me well to comment on the impact of Electoral Reform in Regional WA.

Ultimately, the best way to level the ratio of voters to elected members is to arrest and reverse regional population decline, especially in the Agricultural Region and the Mining and Pastoral Region and bring growth rates more in line with the South West Region. This requires a significant shift in policy and a commitment to investing in service provision, infrastructure, and economic development. Until that happens, I would like to submit the following comments for your consideration in relation to the Terms of Reference and in response to the Discussion Paper produced by the Committee.

In summary:

1. To achieve electoral equality for all citizens entitled to vote for the Legislative Council the current system of regions with equal representation *should be maintained*.
2. It is appropriate that changes are made to allow preferential voting above the line and disallow group voting tickets to ensure the voter is in control of where their vote is directed.

(a) Which model (whole-of-state electorate or region-based) is preferable to achieve electoral equality?

The region-based model must be retained to achieve electoral equality across the whole of parliament.

It is too simplistic to discuss electoral equality without also considering electoral equity or to look at the Legislative Council without also considering the Legislative Assembly. At a basic numerical level electoral equality implies one-vote-one-value. This has already been achieved in the Legislative Assembly and has resulted in 43 Members of Parliament from the metropolitan region (6,418km²) and 16 Members of Parliament to cover the remaining 2,520,595km². This is an equal distribution by measure of population but not by any other measure.

Australians accept that achieving equality in many areas of society means actively removing the barriers which create disadvantage and protecting the conditions which make access and participation fair. We do not apply equality in a numerical sense, that is, 'giving everyone the same',

when it comes to addressing disadvantage in disability inclusion, gender diversity, educational outcomes or cultural diversity because we know that applying a one-size-fits-all formula to disadvantaged groups will only create further disadvantage. In these circumstances we recognise that achieving equality means recognising the unique challenges of each group or individual and applying supports or removing barriers. In non-metropolitan Western Australia, the greatest barrier to participation in parliamentary process is low population, as evidenced in the Legislative Assembly. The current region-based model in the Legislative Council actively removes that barrier.

It is fair and just that the Legislative Council provides an alternative model to provide balance in representation. Three metropolitan regions and three non-metropolitan regions provides for equality between the city and the rest of the state. Each region having the same number of representatives (6) further enshrines equality between the regions ensuring no region has a louder voice than the others when it comes to reviewing legislation proposed by the Legislative Assembly.

(b) The strengths and drawbacks of each model.

The drawback of the whole-of-state model is the high likelihood that it will deepen the disadvantage already entrenched in regional, rural, and remote communities by reducing the regional voice in parliament and therefore consideration of our unique challenges and needs in policy, planning and legislation. A simple example of this is the development of road transportation routes for heavy haulage. Strong representation by regionally based members is needed to keep the spotlight on maintaining and improving heavy haulage routes for grain and ore, to ensure mining and agriculture thrive and local populations who share heavy haulage routes with triple and quad road trains are kept safe. Without region-based representation there is a danger that funding for roads would be monopolised by urban projects with higher visibility.

An additional drawback of the whole-of-state model is the challenge of serving a state the size of Western Australia. New South Wales and South Australia, the only states with a whole-of-state model, although still large, are significantly smaller geographic areas this makes it easier for members to deliver fair and effective representation without the burden of covering vast distances. If members in WA are elected to represent a particular region, their constituents know who to hold accountable for effective representation. The current region-based model also ensures a team of elected members, from a range of parties, can share the load of effective representation and hold each other accountable. The danger is that a whole-of-state electorate will result in an increased number of metropolitan based members with less interest or understanding of non-metropolitan issues.

Western Australians living in non-metropolitan areas consistently score the lowest in outcomes for health, prosperity, education, employment and access to services such as aged care, childcare, allied health, or child protection. The low population coupled with vast distances and a decades-long erosion of government services in rural communities has resulted in significant disadvantage under the existing electoral system. Any further reduction in a voice for the non-metropolitan regions, especially those to the north and east of Perth, will make it harder to bring attention to the challenges of living and working regionally and is likely to exacerbate the conditions which already exist.

The strength of the region-based model in the Legislative Council is that it provides a mechanism to redress the imbalance of metropolitan vs non-metropolitan seats in the Legislative Assembly. With an equality of representatives in the Legislative Council all legislation can be scrutinised to ensure that it will consider diversity and be for the benefit of the whole state.

The strength of the region-based model is also reflected in the electoral system for the Australian Senate where there is a recognition that less populated states of the Federation require equal representation in the Senate to achieve fair and just legislation for all Australians. Proponents of the whole-of-state model or one-vote-one-value should remember that translating this model to a Federal level would result in a reduced voice for Western Australia due to our relatively low population and further intrench the disadvantages of distance and isolation in a national context. An equal voice for Western Australia in the Federal Senate redresses the imbalance in the House of Representatives where the eastern seaboard with its much higher population holds the most seats.

(c) Whether any other electoral model, not covered in the Discussion Paper, is better suited to achieve electoral equality, with reasons; and

No response to this question.

(d) What changes (if any) should be made to the distribution of preferences in the Legislative Council's proportional representation system, including group voting tickets.

The current method of distributing preferences according to Group Voting Tickets is clearly having undesirable results with a Member being elected to represent the Mining and Pastoral Region, with only 98 primary votes, for the Daylight Savings Party, in a region which consistently votes against daylight saving in referendums. Group Voting undermines the intention of the individual voter by allowing parties to determine preferences in backroom deals with no regard for the values and aspirations of the people of that region.

I have always voted below the line in Legislative Council Elections because it is the only way to have full control over my vote and where preferences are directed, however voting below the line is difficult, confusing and requires careful preparation. I spend hours prior to Election Day researching the minor parties and independents, some of whom have absolutely no online presence, trying to determine where they sit in relation to my values and my aspirations for the Agricultural Region. I then create a draft ballot paper to practise numbering and double check to make sure there are no mistakes which will render my vote informal. On election day I transfer my carefully planned numbering onto the official ballot paper. There are very few people who are willing or able to invest the time and effort to vote below the line.

Abolishing Group Voting and providing the voter with the opportunity to nominate their own preferences above the line will have a better outcome, taking the ballot paper out of the hands of political parties and putting it back in the hands of individual electors.

I also recommend reducing the number of boxes which must be numbered below the line for a vote to be formal. This will not only allow the elector full control of their preferences but will also allow them to stop numbering boxes after a manageable number, reducing ballot paper errors and

releasing the elector from having to choose between parties and independents they know nothing about.

In closing, I would like to reiterate:

1. To achieve electoral equality for all citizens entitled to vote for the Legislative Council the current system of regions with equal representation *should be maintained*.
2. It is appropriate that changes are made to allow preferential voting above the line and disallow group voting tickets to ensure the voter is in control of where their vote is directed.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission,

Yours sincerely

Mrs Julie Freeman

21st May 2021