

Good morning,

Submission from the Shire of Wagin on Electoral Reform attaches.

Yours sincerely

**BILL ATKINSON**

Chief Executive Officer

Shire of Wagin



PJB:WTA GR.SL.22

26 May 2021

To the:

Ministerial Expert Committee on Electoral Reform

Dear Chair & Members,

## **SUBMISSION TO THE MINISTERIAL EXPERT COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

### **FORWARD**

The Shire of Wagin welcomes this opportunity to make a submission into electoral reform in Western Australia. The Wagin Shire Council (*The Council*) has not taken up any invitation to circulate and promote petitions on this matter as it believes that *Local Government* should remain apolitical and should not become involved in any actions that could be construed as being "party political".

### **OVERVIEW:**

There seems to be a high level of bipartisan support to review the proportional representation system which sees candidates elected to the Legislative Council on a handful of primary votes due to preference deals being entered into during the election process. Council abhors the practice of "preference harvesting" and believes that addressing this should be the principal focus of electoral reform in Western Australia. Council is very concerned however at the prospect of a reduction in the numbers of Legislative Council members representing the regional areas of the State.

Whilst Council concurs that the principle of *one vote – one value* is a noble one, it is of the view that due to the relative sparsity of population in regional Western Australia, the level of disadvantage experienced by those living in the regions and the significant contribution that the regions make to the Gross Domestic Product (particularly in mining and agriculture), there is a strong argument for resisting changes to the current level of Parliamentary representation in the Legislative Council.



## SUBMISSION ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE:

### ***1. Recommendations as to how electoral equality might be achieved for all citizens entitled to vote for the Legislative Council.***

Council promotes a viewpoint that the existing system provides a degree of electoral equality/fairness when factoring in the challenges and disadvantages faced by constituents living in the regional areas of Western Australia.

Western Australia is one of the most centralised States in Australia. Perth has the distinction of being the most isolated city in the world. Massive wealth for the nation is generated in the regions which have relatively small populations. Those living in the regions sustain significant gaps in health, education and emergency services and have the tyrannies of distance to contend with at great personal expense. They have to send their young people to the city for higher educational and career opportunities (again at great expense and family fragmentation) and often the aged have to relocate, late in life, to access high end medical services.

Regional employers are often required to meet heavy costs in attracting and accommodating staff due to non-existent or very small labour pools from which to recruit from at a local, or even at a regional level. The consequences of these challenges manifest in disproportionately high levels of mental health issues (sometimes resulting in suicides), relatively high levels road trauma incidences, poorer health and higher mortality rates. It is contended that reducing existing levels of Parliamentary representation, which is the principal safeguard towards ensuring a "fair go" prevails and which tries to address the inarguable disadvantages experienced by those living in the regions, will make it that much harder and less attractive for people to live outside of the greater Perth Metropolitan area.

In the last State election, the people of Western Australia rewarded the current State Government with unprecedented trust and custodianship by electing a majority of government members in both houses of Parliament. The increased majority achieved by the government at this election proved that overall, voters (including regionally based voters) in Western Australia do not have entrenched positions with respect to who they elect to government. They will vote for the party in which they have the most confidence in providing good government for the State as a whole.

After the election, reassurance was given by the Government that it would govern fairly and honestly for all people. Given its significant majority and control of both houses of Parliament, there is unprecedented opportunity for the Government, if it wished, to capitalise on its position and to reduce regional Parliamentary representation in the Legislative Council. If this opportunity was taken it would result in grave disappointment throughout regional areas that the Government was primarily focussed on power than on recognising the challenges and disadvantages that those living in *the bush* contend with on a continuing basis. The last election has proved that the Government need not be concerned with the current level of representation in the Legislative Council. If the Government governs well, the electorate will retain confidence in it and will re-elect it. This will be achieved without penalising regional constituents by reducing their Parliamentary representation in the Legislative Council.

The question needs to be asked whether political opportunism will take precedence over the trust and custodianship that was given in good faith by the people of Western Australia by convincingly electing the Government for a second term. It could be strongly argued that the premise for the Governments re-election was based on the confidence and assumption that the Government would continue its ethos of a "fair go" for all and particularly for those who experience disadvantage through living, working, raising families and contributing to the economy in the remote and rural areas of the State.

***2. Recommendations for the distribution of preferences in the Legislative Council's proportional representation system.***

The terms of reference imply that there should be some change to the distribution of preferences in the Legislative Council's proportional representation system – rather than that the proportional representation system being replaced. Council does not know about what options might exist here and this part of its submission may well be outside the terms of reference.

*It is believed that central issue here is the question of the Proportional Representation system of voting.*

Council believes that the proportionate representation system of voting should be replaced with a system which is attuned to ensuring that the intentions of voters are accurately reflected at the ballot box (such as preferential voting). It concurs that the current system is broken when candidates with very few first preference votes are elected because of preference harvesting. If it is within the terms of reference, Council would encourage the Ministerial Expert Committee to recommend a change in the voting system to the Minister with a view to establishing some credibility in the election of Legislative Council members. If this is outside of the terms of reference, and the proportional representation system is to be retained, then Council would encourage the Committee to ensure that there is a change to the method in distributing preferences within the system to more accurately reflect the intentions of voters.

In closing, Council takes pleasure in inviting the Committee to Wagin to discuss this submission and/or matters associated with the question of Electoral Reform, should it wish to obtain viewpoints firsthand.

*Appreciation is extended to the Ministerial Expert Committee in considering this submission.*

Yours faithfully,

**CR PHILLIP BLIGHT**  
PRESIDENT