

Of all the issues you are to consider in the review of the electoral system used to elect Members of the Legislative Council, the most important is that of weighted votes for those electors who live outside the Perth metropolitan area. It is the most influential in affecting the result of the election, and it will be the most hotly disputed by those who have benefited from it – unfairly – since self-government began in Western Australia.

The fight for equal value votes has been long and arduous, sporadic and frustrating. Those who hold undue and outdated privileges cling to them vigorously. In this case they claim they are protecting a productive minority whose voices are diminished by their distance from the seat of power. They play down the fact that rural people, the world over, are more conservative – socially and politically – than those who live in cities. Giving extra weight to their votes inevitably means more conservative politicians. more conservative governments, more conservative laws, imposed on everyone. The worst effects of damnable democracy are kept at bay.

However, democracy has evolved. With universal adult suffrage comes the strong belief that all votes must be equal, regardless of social standing; land holdings ; wealth ; sex ; education ; productivity ; intelligence ; character ; habitation ; or whether you are a member of one of a multitude of minorities, real or perceived (especially for political advantage). Your vote must count the same whether you live in Esperance or Success, in Hall's Creek or Margaret River. Whether you feature in the Rich List or on Centrelink records. Whether you are dynamic and innovative or phlegmatic and compliant. Whatever kind of person you are, and wherever you live, you are equally subject to the laws, and so should have an equal say in determining who makes those laws.

The old argument of remoteness and difficulty of communication between electors and their representatives has withered away with the ever-increasing ubiquity and speed of modern communications. And there is still extra support by way of extra offices and allowances.

It is always a hope, and aim, to have more people move out of Perth to live in the country, but it is both fanciful and improper to lure them out with the promise of extra political representation through weighted voting. And in a democracy, minorities must not be ignored, but must not be allowed to dominate, nor to hold greater sway than their numbers allow.

So I implore you to give this issue of equal value votes your primary consideration and bring this sort of malapportionment to an end, with no sops whatsoever to those who have enjoyed an unfair advantage for so long a time.

The question then is, should we take the whole state as a single electorate, or split it into a number of electorates, keeping foremost in mind equal value votes?

I favour the former, preferably having half the members elected at each election. This will raise the quota, still allowing minor parties and independents to be elected, but making it harder for single-issue and frivolous candidates, and simpler for electors. Eight years is a generous term, but many Councillors remain in the Council longer than that. Going a step

further – and perhaps one too far – you could even have a third of the members elected at each election, with the proviso that nobody could have two twelve year terms.

If the state is to be split into a number of electorates, any number of possibilities can be considered, with the over-riding principle of equal value votes prevailing. Some possibilities are:

1. 9 electorates with 9 members apiece.

Given Perth's population is around 75-80% of the state's total, the obvious division is Perth North, East and South, with the rest of the state the fourth. Even incorporating outer metropolitan

areas into the fourth electorate, this cements the city/country divide, not all that conciliatory, even if hard to avoid.

2. 6x6, but with current boundaries greatly changed. The Perth Metropolitan Area boundary would have to be abandoned.

3. 4x7 ; 1x5 ; 1x3.

Since the coastal strip between Rockingham and Busselton is now largely urbanised, it could make up the fourth electorate with 7 members. The rest of the south of the state could return 5

members, with the north of the state returning 3.

A second over-riding principle is that the numbers of members returned in each electorate should be uneven numbers, with 7 and 5 the best, 9 and 3 the outriders. This to promote a clearer result and to keep the quota within the goldilocks range.

Nomenclature is important. Best to avoid points of the compass ; emotionally loaded regional names ; names of past Worthies of ambivalent standing today ; dominant industries ; condescending, non-relative Aboriginal names.

What then? Possibly names of people who have advanced electoral fairness in the past, or apolitical people of general high standing in the area.

Two other issues to be considered are the "preference whispering" ticket system, and the extent and timing of public disclosure of political donations.

The first is so obvious an affront to basic democratic principles, bringing blatant gaming into the electoral process, and hugely diminishing it in the eyes of the public. Legislation in the Federal arena has done away with it, and Western Australia would do well simply to copy that.

Political donations should be kept small – no person nor organisation should be allowed to buy an election – and disclosure should be at the time of the donation, and certainly before the election. Declarations of donations of consequence months after the election hide the probability of intended influence. And the horse has bolted.

The Legislative Council should be a house of review only. What is the point of electing a government in the Assembly only to have it's program frustrated and denied by a contrarian Council?

The Council should not be allowed to block legislation. It should be restricted to proposing amendments, and to delaying for up to 6 months, not just to delay and frustrate, but to further their argument to effect a compromise.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my views on so vital a subject.

Gerald Hitchcock