

The Chair and Members,
Ministerial Expert Committee on Electoral Reform

Dear Committee,

Please accept my submission addressing the terms of reference for your consideration, below.

Electoral “Equality”, or Voting Equity for All?

What really is “electoral equality? Is it “one vote, one value”? Is it fairness to the WA voters as a whole, or “electoral equity”? The former is the simplistic notion of a particular political ideology; the latter can only be achieved by considering several facets of WA electorates, based on equity.

At the moment, electorates are unevenly distributed as population density is lower in country than in metropolitan areas – this has resulted in a superficially perceived “inequality”. One proposal is that the electorate boundaries are altered so that all electorates contain a relatively equal number of electors (equal population density). This would reduce the number of country electoral regions and thereby dilute the country representation in the Legislative Council, disenfranchising rural voters.

However, most of the people residing in the country areas carry more economic responsibility than city dwellers. Farmers, for example, must manage vast areas of land and produce vast wealth for the state, as well as being the source of much food, many being firefighters. Miners loosely fall into this category. Country people also tend to be far more mature and considered on important issues than city folk. Aboriginal people are additionally the custodians of vast tracts of outback land.

Additionally, those living in the rural regions suffer several disadvantages not besetting those in urban areas of Perth:

1. Isolation
2. Greater costs
3. Lack of equal resources
4. Lack of equal infrastructure
5. Extreme weather conditions
6. A required amount of self-sufficiency

The principles behind the electoral structure of the Federal Upper House, that being the Senate, are somewhat similar to those underpinning the State Legislative Council. The State of Tasmania, for example, has a much smaller population than the nearby States of Victoria and New South Wales, but enjoys equivalent representation in the Senate to their more populated neighbours.

Similarly, the WA non-Metropolitan Upper House electoral seats contain a less dense electoral population but should retain an equivalent representation as the Metropolitan seats.

Distribution of Preferences

The perceived inequity of the current Council voting system is primarily due to the requirement to complete either (a) a single vote above the line or (b) every box below the line, on the voting paper for the Legislative Council. This is, in itself, an inequitable set of options.

With option (a), a political party's preferences are used to direct the voting preferences according to the party's “How To Vote” card. With option (b) a voter is forced to number every box and, should a mistake be made, then this would invalidate their vote completely (and inequitably).

Both of these result in votes either being ultimately allocated in a manner that may not be preferred by an elector (but the elector has no real choice) or the elector casting an informal or invalid vote. This has the disadvantage of biasing voting to dominant political parties at the expense of minor parties and independent candidates, effectively disenfranchising voters that prefer independents (independent candidates being a more constitutionally sound proposition). It also probably requires an extra workload on electoral staff to translate the party's preferences on behalf of the voter.

The obvious answer to these problems is for a system of “optional preferential” voting. This would allow a voter to numerate as many or as few boxes as they choose, either above or below the line. Additionally, a voter should be allowed to strike out any remaining boxes with a horizontal line to prevent anyone adding to their vote at a later stage, once their completed ballot paper is lodged.

Conclusions

This proposed “reform” is simply a continuation of the Labor Party “One Vote One Value” agenda, to marginalise the regional areas and strengthen power for itself. It is only on the table as Labor has once again gained control of both the Houses of WA Parliament and seeks to strengthen that victory. This will not benefit the West Australian voter nor will it provide any benefit to the State, and certainly cause a deleterious impact on country regions in the mid to longer term.

In fact, the negative impacts – both to the regional areas of WA and to the economy (due to the cost of implementation) – far outweighs any perceived “benefit”. Aboriginal land custodians would also be adversely affected as they would lose more of their voice. The implied effect that minor parties are able to “play the system” to gain a seat in parliament is based on a “straw man” argument and is closely related to the “How to Vote Card” preferential system used to great effect by major parties.

Each member of parliament has a duty to represent their electorate regardless of their electoral pitch. Minor parties and independents are equally able to represent their electorates and allow for more choice in the WA Parliament. While the current system is not based on “equality” it produces a somewhat equitable result. A strictly “one vote, one value” system, with Upper House electorates of equal voter population, would be like running racehorses without weight handicaps – the horses with the most money behind them, and the best form and jockeys would win almost all of the time!

Recommendations

My suggestion is that the Committee recommend that the government's proposal to change the Legislative Council electorates has little, if any, merit and is simply a grab for political power by one party at the expense of every elector in WA, but especially those in rural regions.

The only alterations to voting in Legislative Council elections should be the following:

1. Elimination of “How to Vote” cards
2. Allocating minor parties and independents a position above the line on voting cards;
3. Introduction of “optional preferential” voting, whereby a voter:
 - 3.1. may vote above or below the line, numbering as many boxes as they choose;
 - 3.2. may strike out any boxes not so numbered using a horizontal line, to prevent fraud.

Thank you,

Tad Krysiak
Seniors ANd Disabled Basic Access Group
www.facebook.com/SANDBAG.WA

Reference:

- Kelly, Norm. "One Vote, One Value.", Chapter 8 In *Directions in Australian Electoral Reform: Professionalism and Partisanship in Electoral Management*, 109-30. ANU Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hbxv.11>