
From: Metcalfe, Jon
Sent: Friday, 30 July 2010 4:42 PM
To: Law, Justice and Safety Committee
Subject: Submission on electoral arrangements (from an Individual)
Attachments: Submission on electoral arrangements enquiry.doc

Dear Sir, I neglected to state in my previous correspondence that my submission is on behalf of myself as an individual.

Thank you,
JM Cairns

From: Metcalfe, Jon
Sent: Friday, 30 July 2010 4:36 PM
To: 'ljsc@parliament.qld.gov.au'
Subject: Submission on electoral arrangements

Submission to Review of Local Government electoral systems

From Jonathan Metcalfe

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!DEPTSTAMP!

Dear Sir,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to put forward my views on local government voting arrangements. My basic premise is that the present system, of First Past the Post in single division systems, and of Optional Preferential voting in multi member jurisdictions, is not serving citizens well. It allows for large parties or interests to dominate and it disenfranchises a large proportion of the population.

I advocate that all jurisdictions become one division and a system of Proportional Representation be introduced. This would be the “quota system” where a candidate has to gain a certain percentage of the vote in order to get elected. Those without full quotas would be “topped up” by the preferences of the eliminated candidates.

Single division jurisdictions:

In the present day single-division electorates each vote expressed for a candidate is worth the same (i.e. votes are put on a list, and not in preferential order). The candidates with the highest votes are elected to fill available vacancies. I saw this system operate in Cairns before amalgamation. Invariably the powerful political interests ran tickets, and so people tended to vote as they were encouraged to do by the How to Vote cards of these interests. The system gave magnified majorities to whichever block won the contest.

Smaller interests were frozen out. The votes of anyone voting against the winning camp were all, in effect, wasted. A wholly terrible system. These systems are undemocratic and should be replaced with a system where every vote can count for something.

Divisional systems :

After amalgamation in 1995 Cairns turned to a divisional system based on Optional Preferential voting in each division. OP is a more advanced system than First Past the Post because, as you say in your issues paper, it elects the “least disliked” candidate from the total of people’s preference allocations. In this system smaller interests and parties can have a voice, and even win sometimes if they can get around 30% of the primary vote and then get preferences from one of the larger interest blocks.

But with the advent of Optional Preferential voting we have seen a marked tendency for people to not be bothered allocating a preference. This started with the Queensland Labor Government’s “just vote one” campaigns of the late 90’s. This approach was designed to destroy the Coalition which relied on preference flows in order to elect either National or Liberal candidates. So successful was the campaign that now a merger has taken place between the conservative forces. Now the optional preferential voting system can no longer be used as a weapon against Coalition parties. But also what about the diversity a community should seek as an outcome from any system of voting mechanics?

What about community interests that are substantial but can't claim a majority in their own right? A voting system must take them into account.

One has to conclude that Optional Preferential voting has seen a decline in political diversity, as we now just have two big blocks of sectional interest parties.

Unfortunately the habit of not preferencing in state elections flowed on the local government elections. In Cairns in 2008 and in 2004 we saw a virtual a de-facto First Past the Post system operating. Only a handful of voters gave preferences and the opportunity of political candidates outside the major interest blocks was correspondingly reduced. In both elections there were 2 to 3 divisional results that could have been different if the habit of preferencing had been maintained. Candidates from outside the interest blocks would have been elected and this would have lead to different, and in my view better, power balances inside the local chambers.

One of the facts I hope your committee bases its deliberations upon is that divisional systems with Optional Preferential voting are in effect de-facto First Past the Post systems. They suffer from all the disadvantages of this most primitive form of voting. There is huge vote wastage, and candidates can get elected without a majority of the vote on first and subsequent preferences. It gives huge advantages to just two major power blocks. Smaller voices are excluded.

My answer to the present undemocratic voting system is to introduce a system similar to that existing in most parts of New South Wales local government areas. Here there are multi member single-divisions based on a quota to gain a winning place in office. Such systems allow for political diversity and allow a corresponding percentage inside the elected chamber as to that which exists outside. Votes are not wasted. Every person's vote counts for some elected candidate.

One criticism of PR at the national level is that the one division is too large – i.e. it is the size of each state. But this is not applicable in local areas where every candidate will be quite readily known to local electors.

In Cairns at present an argument is being put forward that under PR the northern parts of Douglas would not be especially represented. However what would happen under PR is that the interests in the far-flung sections of greater Cairns would form an alliance against the centre where the population is. So while Douglas would no longer have its own division, the rural and sectional interests it espouses would be picked up by an elected candidate expressing an alliance of those concerns (i.e. of the far-flung parts against the centre). This alliance might include Miriwinni and Babinda as well as Douglas. What is important is that this interest would then be given a weighting in the chamber equal to its electoral strength. So Douglas may be better represented in such an alliance than it is at

present. Local government PR is far better at representing community interests in this way than is single member electorate systems. PR is fundamentally democratic and allows and encourages political diversity.

For all these reasons I urge the committee to introduce PR (based on the NSW Local Government model) as the preferred voting system in Queensland local government areas.

Sincerely

Jonathan Metcalfe