

ljsc@parliament.qld.gov.au

30/7/10

To Whom It May Concern

I appreciate the opportunity to put forward my views on local government voting arrangements. First Past the Post in single division systems and Optional Preferential voting in multi member jurisdictions are not serving citizens well. It allows for large parties or interests to dominate and it disenfranchises a large proportion of the population. Nor do I advocate Compulsory Preferential voting as will be explained later.

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.

First Past the Post

This is widely accepted as the least democratic of voting system as individuals can get elected with very small percentages of the vote. It is estimated that roughly 25% of the voting electorate got the Labour party in Britain elected in 2005.

Single division jurisdictions

Here 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. This system operated in the Cairns region before amalgamation in 1995. Invariably 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. This was a poor system and very undemocratic.

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 but only if they can get a high enough primary vote and then get preferences from one of the larger interest blocks.

Optional Preferential Voting

However, with the advent of Optional Preferential voting, we have seen a marked tendency for people not to bother allocating a preference. This started with the Queensland Labor Government's "just vote one" campaign of 2000. 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.

Both major political forces have now adopted a Just Vote 1 strategy which makes a mockery of the intent of the preferential system and indeed has been challenged as illegitimate in some quarters as it is increasingly hard to get 50% + 1 of the vote if half the population don't preference.

Unfortunately the habit of not preferencing in state elections flowed on to the local government elections. In Cairns in 2008 and in 2004 we saw a de-facto First Past the Post system operating. A substantial reduced number of voters gave preferences and the opportunity for political candidates outside the major interest blocks was correspondingly reduced.

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 2 major power blocks. Smaller voices are excluded.

Compulsory Preferential Voting

I do not advocate CPV as the voter is obliged to give a preference to one of the two major political groupings or interests in nearly all electorates unless there is a rare well known independent or minor party candidate. Albert Langer tried to establish the right to put 1,2,3,4,5,5, for example, and failed. This system is fundamentally undemocratic and leads to all sorts of confusion in the electorate about what constitutes the 'giving' of preferences when they are only recommendations on an HTV.

Proportional Representation

My answer to the present undemocratic voting system is to introduce a system similar to that existing in most parts of New South Wales. 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 that which exists outside. Votes are not wasted. Every person's counts for some elected candidate.

One criticism of PR at the national level is that the one division is too large – i.e. the size of each state. But this is not applicable in local areas where every candidate will be 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 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 concerns for these special interests (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 when they coalesce into blocks, than are single member electorate systems. It 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.

Yours sincerely

Denis Walls (individual)