



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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COMMUNITY-BASED REFERENDUM BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (8.31 p.m.): I rise today to offer the people of Queensland the choice between taking their future into their own hands through direct democracy and remaining with the present system, whereby the Government of the day dictates every facet of their lives. I am happy to sponsor the concept of community-based referendum as I believe it will open a new door on democracy for Queenslanders.

Community-based referendum, or as it is more commonly known, citizen-initiated referendum, is a form of referendum which allows law-making to be, when the need arises, addressed by the people who are affected by and concerned about the laws they must live under. The current climate is right for promoting community-based referendum. Electors of all political persuasions are embracing it. The ethic of participation and openness in Government is growing.

The reputation and standing of democracy in Australia is an increasingly important political issue. The move towards centralised power has heightened the concerns of many voters that they are increasingly being distanced from the decision makers. We have a better educated population which is well equipped with the latest in high-tech information systems and more capable than ever before of participating in the decision-making process. The people no longer believe that members of Government know better than they do, and about this they could very well be right.

In recent years the idea of community-based referendum has enjoyed increasing support. This is in direct response to the lack of trust people have in Government to work in the people's best interests. The only sour note in the past has come from the entrenched forces of reaction within the Labor, Liberal and National Parties. I will share with the House some notable exceptions from all political persuasions. In 1917, the Popular Initiative and Referendum Bill was introduced by the ALP and supported by such notables as Ryan.

I mention an information paper from 1994 by Peter Reith, a parliamentary colleague in Canberra, entitled Direct Democracy. It states—

"The proposal allows the Australian people to propose legislation ...

Members of Parliament ... should welcome a proposal which enables the common sense of the electors to be heard.

It would provide a last resort measure to ensure that governments act in accordance with the popular will, and thus add a vital new element to our democracy."

Governments over the years have stripped the people of their right of say in many areas, have taken away people's input into how this State is run and have taken away their enthusiasm and responsibilities. The apathetic response from the people is due to no involvement in what happens in their lives. They have a sense of lack of control, that nothing they say will make a scrap of difference to politicians. Once again I have to wonder if they are not right.

Politicians continually use the argument that the people are ignorant, but a few words from former Senator Michael Macklin in his speech "The case for a Citizens' Initiative" states—

"This criticism comes down to the argument that people do not know enough to decide for themselves. This argument was used to oppose other reforms such as women's and universal suffrage.

...

The greater sense of responsibility and involvement this form of participatory democracy gives to the people also encourages them to be more far-sighted."

It is interesting to note that no city, State or country I am aware of has ever reversed its support for community-based referendum once it has the right to have a real say in what happens to it.

One of the major arguments for not supporting the introduction of community-based referendum is cost. Once again, former Senator Macklin states—

"... if the people decide to spend their money on this advance in democracy then what is the objection? Elections are also expensive but are considered as essential to the health of our democracy."

What are some of the other arguments against community-based referendum? I have heard it said that community-based referendum undermines the Westminster system. The Westminster system ensures that there can be no return to tyranny under the divine right of kings—or in its mutated form today, the Government. Ultimately, the power is reserved for the people who under the Westminster system have the right to elect representatives to the Parliament who are to make laws for the common good and in representative character. Therefore, direct democracy is entirely compatible with our current system and this proposal would merely supplement the existing political system.

What are other arguments against this initiative? What about overuse? The noted authority on citizen-initiated referendum, Geoffrey de Q Walker, found that that proposition was not supported by experience in America. He states in his book—

"... they averaged two initiative measures every two years. Fears of a tidal wave of initiative legislation seem unwarranted."

Another argument often used is that people who endorse community-based referendum or citizen-initiated referendum are ignorant and ill informed. I have here speeches and quotes from people from all walks of life who have supported the idea of community involvement in citizen-initiated referendum. I think members will agree that these people are neither ignorant nor ill informed. I cite former Senator Macklin; Colleen McCullough; Bob King, a former MLA for Nicklin; the late honourable Andrew Mensaris; Bill Taylor, MP; Russell Cooper, MLA; Trevor Perrett, a former MLA—

A Government member: He was a good member.

Mrs PRATT: I said noted people. And there are many more.

Not long after I was elected to Parliament I heard a comment from the Honourable the Premier on ABC Radio. He stated that community-based referendum—I have to smile—gives power to the radical minority. Well, here we have a Government elected on just over 30% of the vote—surely a minority in any language. I could also suggest that the great majority of the people who did not vote for the Labor Party would say that it is radical. So here we have in Government what could quite conceivably be one of those radical minority groups that the Premier did not want having a say.

In conclusion, I would like to use the words of the honourable W. Stephens, the final speaker in the debate of 2 October 1917 on the Popular Initiative and Referendum Bill. He stated—

"I am prepared to trust the people ...

It is my business to go straight and trust the people in a democratic country. I intend to do that by giving my vote in favour of the third reading of this Bill."
