



Speech by

GARY FENLON

MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

Hansard 15 September 1999

COMMUNITY-BASED REFERENDUM BILL

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (8.40 p.m.): It is a great pleasure to rise in this debate because, once again, it affords the members of this House the opportunity to publicly debunk these sorts of ideas that emerge from time to time out in the community and need to be put on the record as useless ideas that are just not going to be good for the government of this State.

The first issue that I wish to address in relation to this proposed Bill is the fact that the people proposing it probably do not properly appreciate the fact that it means a real change to the form of government within which we currently operate. We currently work within the Westminster system of government, which has its own set of principles and precepts, and fundamental to that is the concept of representative democracy. This is a principle which would completely undermine that. It would change the onus and responsibility on both sides. The fundamentals of the social contract, which are also vital to this system of government, would entirely change.

At the moment, voters take that responsibility. They must know that, when they vote at the ballot box—and indeed, there is a greater need for them to be more conscious of this—they are electing a body of people who must be charged with the responsibility of making decisions on their behalf. They have to think about the people for whom they vote. More importantly—and this might be a revelation to some—they also have to, and should, think about the policies for which those people stand. That is the process of government that we have adopted in this country based upon the Westminster system of government.

More and more indeed, people should engage that democratic process and think about the policies that they want pursued. That is a very well-tried and tested method of executing and implementing policy, and it has been effective in this State for well over 100 years. As well, it is a well-tested process throughout the Westminster systems of the world. This principle—this concept—would simply undermine that. Beware that this means a very different system of government from the one under which we currently operate.

The other irony about this particular proposed legislation relates to the people who are proposing it, namely, One Nation. We have heard a lot of platitudes over the past couple of years since that particular party came into existence about how they are standing up for the country, standing up for the battler and standing up for the bush. I could almost write a script for them. I could help them out with a few press releases. I could do a few things to assist them. But while they are mouthing those platitudes, they should go out and tell the people who the losers would be through this particular legislation and who would be dominating it.

One of the obvious problems is that the members of One Nation are having a bit of trouble with their mathematics. It is no wonder that they are having all sorts of other troubles, because mathematics seems to be their least endearing virtue. In terms of electoral enrolments in this State, Brisbane, which is in the south-east corner of this State, would dominate. So if there was an issue such as a petrol tax which might have a particular agenda in the south-east corner—

Mr McGrady: Daylight saving.

Mr FENLON: And daylight saving. I am very pleased to accept that interjection from the honourable member for Mount Isa. That is something that would indeed be dominated.

Mr Reynolds: The people of Kingaroy would vote for daylight saving.

Mr FENLON: Yes, of course. But the members of One Nation do not seem to understand that that would be a tyranny over the bush—the people whom they profess to represent—because of the simple mathematics. The tendency in the future would be even more imbalance, because the demographic trends in Queensland show very readily that the progression of population movements in this State is favouring the south-east corner. So ad infinitum, we would have the south-east corner dominating the agenda if we could organise a referendum on whatever issue suited the south-east corner of the State.

The system of government that we have in Queensland, a system of government that is based upon electorates spread throughout this State, is one that promulgates, promotes and accommodates a greater sense of consensus. That has been the case historically. Over the history of this Parliament, whatever party has been in Government has comprised people from the bush, from the regional cities and from the south-east corner. So in that sense, we do have a very great capacity to have a consensus—a Government that can be and is truly representative of the whole State, not a Government based on the prospect of the whim of one vote on one day when a particular geographical sector of the State can absolutely dominate.

The members of One Nation have sold out the bush. They have been out there pontificating about looking after people in the bush, but they have sold them out all the way. The real irony is that they do not seem to have the basic intelligence even to understand that that is what they have done. They have left the bush behind. They have sold them out. They have moved down to the Parliament, they have had a taste of the Parliament, and now they want to be city slickers. They have left the bush behind, they have left the regions behind, and they have left everyone else behind because they are following some weird agenda out of the One Nation think tank.

Mr Robertson: That is an oxymoron.

Mr FENLON: Exactly. We need to give more attention to the concept of this think tank upon which One Nation seems to rely.

Again, this particular proposed legislation should be looked at in the context of where it is coming from: from One Nation. One Nation's tendency with everything that it does is to move towards an extreme oversimplification of the issues—basic, one-liner, tabloid press oversimplification of the issues. If they can simplify everything—whether it be crime, weapons or whatever—down to a one-liner that they can get across in the public bar of a hotel over a packet of peanuts in 30 seconds, that is the extent of their policy. There is no thought in that level of policy. Again, this is what this particular proposed legislation is about. It is about being able to oversimplify the issues and to grab the simplest solution—not a solution that comes from the process of government.

The process of government is about the most thorough deliberation of issues, executing decisions through this place based upon the best advice from the advisers within the bureaucracy. But One Nation's proposed legislation is not about that. It is about getting that simple little solution that does not rely upon advice, does not rely upon debate in this place and does not rely upon the testing of ideas. This Parliament is about the testing of ideas. That is what the democratic process of representative government is about in this place: debate and advice. But a direct referendum is absolutely contrary to that process. It is about finding the simplest way and going with it.

The other matter to which I wish to allude relates to a fundamental One Nation trait, and I refer to the tendency towards populism. If we look at the history of Right Wing movements, populism is one of the fundamental elements. One could refer to the South American dictatorships or even the history of the rise of Right Wing movements before the Second World War. Populism is a political phenomenon whereby a simple solution is picked up as a mass movement. It is a temporary solution which is pushed by an extreme movement.

This is exactly what One Nation is trying to effect through this process. Popular solutions would ultimately have the effect of impeding good government because popular solutions are not always the best solutions. We could have a referendum about abolishing taxes. Let us do that tomorrow. Who is going to vote for it? We all will, of course! However, if we had half a brain, we would not vote in favour of such a proposal. We would not vote in favour of it in this place because, ultimately, we know that we have to deliver services such as schools and police. We have to keep the economy going to look after the welfare of the people. The fundamental dictates of our Constitution are peace, welfare and good government. We are not concerned with a narrow, populist item that might come up on one day of the week.

The other issue which smacks against the democratic processes that we enjoy in this State is that these processes could be funded or backed by well-heeled or financially well-off lobby groups. These groups could have their way. History has shown us plenty of examples of a deluge of propaganda being well-funded and swaying public opinion. This can occur just for the 24 hours that

might be needed to achieve a particular result. This type of legislation would pander directly to those sorts of forces. That is not democratic. Democracy consists of people being elected by voters who think about who or what they are going to vote for. Ideas are tested and debated in this Chamber.

The next matter involves the question of expense. Waiting around for three years for a referendum which is tied to a State election is not an example of contemporaneous government. If we are going to have serious decisions made by this process we have to have regular referendums. This would be an unwarranted expense.

I believe I have come to the heart of the issue. I mentioned the oxymoron of the One Nation think-tank. I ask why One Nation is introducing such legislation at this time. The only similar example I can think of is a citizens' referendum in California which was responsible for the liberalisation of the cannabis laws. Given the past performance of the One Nation think-tank, one can only think that those opposite are doing this so that they can have greater access to cannabis. That would enable them to put forward more of the same in the future.
