



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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COMMUNITY-BASED REFERENDUM BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (8.54 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Community-Based Referendum Bill. It was an absolute pleasure to hear the contribution of the member for Greenslopes. Unfortunately, I find myself agreeing with a lot of what he says. He is right when he says that the primacy of Parliament must be maintained. That is something in which I personally believe. The Parliament consists of a representative body of people drawn from all over the State under our electoral system. It is a good system. However, I have seen examples of political systems which do not work very well. The Indonesian system would be an example of a system that does not work very well at all.

We have a representative democracy in this State, but a lot of the issues that are important to the community might not be important to the party. People are turning away from the mainstream political parties because they have become frustrated. For example, in one electorate we might have only 60 or 70 members of a political party but a huge number of voters. I am sure all honourable members would agree with me that we have more and more swinging voters who are not aligned with political parties. All parties are feeling this move away from them.

I believe people are frustrated because they are unable to go to a party meeting, go through the branch process, bring their issue to the fore, have the issue stated, and, as a result, affect party policy. As a result, parties are bringing policies to Parliament which are representative of the constituent members of the party but are not representative of the community.

A Government member interjected.

Mr NELSON: I am slowly coming to the point. I believe that the member for Greenslopes and the member for Warwick made many good points. However, I was more enlightened by a point which was brought to my attention a couple of weeks ago. I refer to the firearms laws—something about which I, together with other members of the House, feel very strongly. If the firearms issue was ever put to a referendum it would be overwhelmingly defeated and we would probably end up with even harsher laws.

The member for Greenslopes made the very good point about the city being able to control country and rural areas in their voting patterns through community-based referendums. I concede that. This matter would have to be addressed in Parliament. The majority of the population in such States as Victoria and New South Wales is urban. One could argue that we have a very decentralised population in Queensland, but one of the interesting points about decentralisation, as the Deputy Speaker, the member for Barron River, would know, is that our population, whilst not necessarily being in Brisbane, is still in urban centres. While Cairns may not compare with Melbourne or Sydney, it is still very much a city to me.

Ms Boyle interjected.

Mr NELSON: The member for Cairns is a very lucky person to be living in such a magnificent city in the far north. I would choose to live in Cairns before I would ever choose to live in Sydney.

Even though we have urban clusters which are well beyond the city limits, they still contain city oriented people with city lifestyles. Such people would maintain city ideas in their voting patterns. We certainly see that occurring in Queensland where we have regional capitals such as Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton and Mackay strongly represented by Labor Party people.

I come back to the original point. Even though we have party politics in Queensland and we have members from all over Queensland, the representation levels have to be considered. For example, my electorate of Tablelands is very large. We could probably fit six or seven Labor electorates into my electorate.

Mr Lucas interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Clark): Order! I remind the member for Lytton that if he wishes to interject—and I am sure the House is interested in hearing his interjections—he must do so from his own seat.

Mr NELSON: Madam Deputy Speaker, the member is ever recalcitrant and you treat him very leniently.

The point I make is that even though our electoral system is based on population and not size, under our current system in Queensland the constituents in some electorates can remain relatively unrepresented simply because the people who represent those electorates are not members of the Government. It does not take too keen an eye to be able to cast a view over a few. I know that this is not supposed to happen, but it does. It is simply a fact that, when a Government is in power, it will concentrate mainly on the areas that are necessary for it to maintain its vote so that it can stay in power. I have raised in this Parliament many issues which, party politics and political alignment aside, are very important and deserve a very good hearing. However, they sometimes do not receive that hearing because it is I who have raised them and not a member of the Government.

Mr Robertson: It is about the quality of the argument.

Mr NELSON: Exactly. The member makes a very good point. The politics has to be taken out of politics. I believe that this drive towards citizens having more participation in Parliament is to try to bring the political animal that we have in Australia back to heel. Personally, I have a very strong belief—and I have always held a very strong belief—that political parties are on the way out. Throughout the world, political parties are falling slowly by the wayside. Just recently in Australia the National Party copped a very large smack for its—

Mr McGrady: And you ain't seen nothing yet!

Mr NELSON: No. As I was saying, members of the National Party copped a very large smack for their utter recalcitrance in relation to issues in rural areas. I believe—and many people in my electorate believe—that the National Party stepped away from their traditional voter base in a very big way.

Mr Springborg: If you can't say something nice, don't say anything.

Mr NELSON: It is true. The trade union movement is also slowly but surely fighting a bitter battle with its political wing, the ALP. We again see those bitter differences that kept the ALP out of power in Queensland for 32 years. At the moment, the ALP in Queensland is surviving so well only because of the ineffective Opposition. The trade union movement will exact its revenge. However, in the current climate of casual labour and unemployment, how long will the trade union movement last? I am no expert on these matters, but I can say that we are certainly seeing a move away from the trade union movement.

A Government member interjected.

Mr NELSON: How interesting it is that the Government members agreed with me when I was talking about the National Party, but when I try to bring some balance into the argument, all of a sudden they are not so much in agreement with me. That is a perfect illustration of how party politics takes representation away from the people. It prevents people from making their politicians aware of issues that are above and beyond party politics. Most people used to be members of a political party. If people were not members of a party and they wanted to raise issues, they could go to friends who were members and ask, "What about this issue?" In those times, most communities had party branches. My electorate is a perfect example of the trend away from parties. In my electorate, there used to be a hell of a lot of National Party branches in towns such Malanda, Atherton, Mareeba and Ravenshoe. However, there are no longer any National Party branches in those towns. The National Party branch in Mareeba has a lot of trouble just getting people to attend meetings.

Mr Springborg: To be totally fair, how is One Nation going?

Mr NELSON: In answer to the member for Warwick—and I am getting to the point—to be totally fair and apolitical in this debate, it is unfortunate that the party—

An Opposition member interjected.

Mr NELSON: How unfair of me: I forgot completely the Country Party. Of course, I was a member of One Nation. I am no longer a member of One Nation because the very party that has suggested a Bill such as this cannot find it in its heart to allow its own constituency to bring up policy or ideas. As a matter of fact, as the member for Greenslopes states quite rightly, in One Nation to talk

between branches is banned. That is a fact. I know it, because I used to be in the party, and nothing has changed. The unfortunate problem with One Nation—

Mr Gibbs: There is one thing that never changes: once you rat on your own, you are still a rat, rat, rat. You are a great example of that.

Mr NELSON: There is an old saying about sticks and stones. I am above that. As I have said many times in this Parliament, the fact that the Honourable Minister does not agree with me makes me right. If it ever came to the fact that one day I came into this Parliament and people such as Mr Gibbs thought I was wonderful, then I would be taking a long hard look at myself. I dare say that I would not be allowed back in my own house. I think that I can be guaranteed of that. I do not mean to offend the Minister. I am sure that he does not take offence at that. I am sure that the Minister would be horrified if I ever agreed with him.

The fact remains that I have some beliefs. Of course, I joined the One Nation Party believing in the whole idealism of populism—believing that there could be some sort of change. Unfortunately, that did not happen; unfortunately, it is still not happening. I do not think that is ratting; I think that is doing what I was elected to do. The people of Tablelands asked for a change. Their previous member did not listen to their concerns. The people of Tablelands had a member who was not interested in the day-to-day issues of his electorate. They had a member who let them down very badly. They now have a member who is not interested in his own personal political life. If I do not get re-elected, then that is the will of the people. The simple fact remains that I will come into this Parliament and I will say the things that are being said to me in my electorate. One of those things is that the people of my electorate do not believe that party politics is working for them. My only hope is—

Mr Feldman interjected.

Mr NELSON: That is very much the opinion of the member for Caboolture. I believe that One Nation's greatest misconception is that it firmly believes that that 25% of the people who voted for One Nation voted for Pauline Hanson. I voted for One Nation in the State election. I voted for myself.

A Government member interjected.

Mr NELSON: I recall saying that. Has the member ever heard of somebody being able to say every once in a while that he was wrong? I certainly was. I did not vote for One Nation in the Federal election. Do members know why? Because I did not like the person who was standing for election. I did not think that he was capable of doing the job. One Nation has forgotten the fundamental belief that very clever people can come off the party political platform and look at the people who are standing as candidates. Those people will not vote for a party. They often change their vote. Generally, they vote for the person before they vote for the party. It was my decision to step away. Of course, that decision was made in light of these very issues—the fact that the local branch in my electorate could not raise these issues through the party organisation, could not work onwards and upwards, and could not get their ideas heard at a higher level. They could not bring those ideas into Parliament.

Mr Fenlon: Is that why Mr Feldman's branch has resigned?

Mr NELSON: That is for the member to pursue later on. The simple fact remains that this Bill will not be passed because it does not have the support of the House. However, as the member for Barambah quite—

Mr Springborg: Have you forgotten Mr Knuth's Country Party?

Mr NELSON: I will leave the Country Party out of it. The member for Burdekin is not here to defend himself.

The fact remains—and this is a very interesting point—that on 28 July 1994 at the Direct Democracy seminar in Canberra, Russell Cooper, MLA, the member for Crows Nest, who was then the Queensland Opposition spokesman for Police and Corrective Services, stated—

"In 1992, when we were in Opposition, the concept"—

and that is community-based referendums or direct democracy, as it is known—

"was again considered by our State council and was again narrowly rejected for what I believe were the worst possible reasons. Yet, at virtually the same time, when the matter was put to the entire 26-member Parliamentary National Party, the vote was unanimously in favour."

That puzzles me greatly.

Mr Robertson: It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Mr NELSON: It seemed like a good idea at the time. However, I suppose a lot can change between 1994 and 1999.

I support the Bill because, although we live in a democratic society with a representative Government, I believe that a lot of people are not being heard. I believe that the main reason that they are not being heard is because party politics is hindering them from being heard. The political system

that we have may be what we call a fair and democratic system, but party politics interferes with it. For example, although some members of the ALP might disagree or have problems with different issues here and there, they must vote as a bloc to maintain endorsement in their seats. The same goes for the other major parties in this House, the National and Liberal Parties. Therefore, for whatever reason it may be, certain issues might not get up in members' electorates because they are not kosher or they are not associated with the Labor Party platform. A majority of the community or even a minority of the community might feel an issue is important, but it will not get up.

Although we have a representative democracy, we have a preference system in this State. I personally believe in the philosophy of one person, one vote. It is said that we need the preference system to stop a person from getting into Parliament with 28% of the vote. I do not have the exact figures in my head, but I was roughly 2,300 votes clear of Tom Gilmore but, because of Labor Party preferences, ended up being only 94 votes clear. The same thing happened to the former member for Oxley in the Federal Parliament. Preference deals were done whereby the National Party ensured that a smaller party or an Independent could not get up, thus blocking the fair voice of the people.

Mrs Lavarch: What about the Senate?

Mr NELSON: I believe that Queensland made a very good move in 1922 by getting rid of its Upper House. It is a shame that other States in this country cannot get rid of that drain on the taxpayer. We are a low tax State only because we do not have another 40 politicians sitting at the other end of the hall, second-guessing everything that we say. Senates are a total waste of time and effort. The sooner the Federal Parliament gets off its butt and gets rid of the Senate the better for all of us.

We cannot deny that the preference deals that are done can mean that sometimes members can come into a House of Parliament on a proportionately small amount of the vote. For example, another 95 votes would have meant that Tom Gilmore would be representing my electorate, even though I completely outpolled him on the primary vote. That is a personal example, but the point still remains that those voices would have gone unheard.

Even though I do not know the exact figures, at the last Federal election the Democrats won roughly 200,000 votes and secured eight Senate seats, yet One Nation won roughly 800,000 or 900,000 votes and secured one Senate seat. We talk about elected representatives within our Federal and State Parliaments, but the point remains that a great many people are not heard simply because of party politics, political deals, preference sharing and on. Those issues have to be addressed if we want to stop seeing these things impacting on our Parliaments.

I agree fully with many of the statements that were made by the member for Warwick and the member for Greenslopes. They were good statements and they are quite correct. Even though they are right that if these referendums were to come up all the time then the vote of the city would far outweigh that of the bush, we have to take a good, hard look at our representative democracy. We need to take a good look at the way preference deals work and at things like the Senate, so that we ensure that the people, rather than the political party front, are heard.

I do not ever want to see a time when there might not be any political parties, but I believe that we have to address those issues. If we do not address them, people will continually feel frustrated that they are not being heard in Parliaments such as this.
