



Speech by

**VAUGHAN JOHNSON**

**MEMBER FOR GREGORY**

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Hansard 1 December 1999

### **ELECTORAL AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr JOHNSON** (Gregory—NPA) (10.09 p.m.): I rise tonight to support the amendment put forward by the honourable member for Warwick. I endorse some of the remarks made by my colleague the honourable member for Toowoomba South. It is very gratifying to look around the Chamber and see the my good friend the member for Fitzroy. Earlier tonight I was speaking with the honourable member for Mount Isa, Tony McGrady, the Minister for Mines and Energy. Behind me is the member for Callide and the member for Warwick. The member for Crows Nest, who represented the former electorate of Roma, is also present.

**Mrs Edmond:** Cook.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I am referring to the members who are present in the House. The electorates of Cook, Warrego and Charters Towers will also be affected by this redistribution. If members reckon that my electorate of Gregory is bad news, they should look at the new electorate Charters Towers. What a damned thing that is!

The other night I had to drive from Emerald to Charters Towers, which is 500-odd kilometres. To service the new electorate of Charters Towers, the elected member will have to drive from Charters Towers to Clermont, drive another couple of hundred kilometres across one of the worst roads in creation to Alpha and then drive another 80 kilometres back to Jericho. As Mike Horan just said, often one drives those distances in the middle of the night. A member might fly into a place such as Emerald at 6 o'clock in the morning and spend all day there. Then in the middle of the night he or she will drive to Longreach, which is another 400-odd kilometres. We know that our electorates are big and we know that we have to do that. It is a part of our representation program.

However, as Mike Horan said a moment ago, the people in large rural electorates are disfranchised. It is absolutely paramount that the people in this Chamber recognise what being a rural member of Parliament is all about. I do not begrudge what a city or regional member of Parliament can achieve for his or her electorate. However, the distances, the remoteness and the isolation involved in the large rural electorates adds to people's feelings of disfranchisement, and they are disadvantaged.

Some rural people live in very difficult situations. A lot of station properties cannot access rural power and many are not serviced by bitumen roads. Many properties do not have a frequent air service. Many women teach their kids in isolated remote communities through School of the Air or Distance Education, or those who can afford to hire a governess. Often, the only woman on an isolated station will be the manager's or the owner's wife. The manager or owner and three or four ringers make up the remaining population of the station. It is a real man's world, although more and more women are coming to the country to work in rural communities.

Tonight Tony McGrady and I were talking about how tomorrow some of us in the Chamber will celebrate the tenth anniversary of our election to this place. Tony said, "All jokes aside and with respect to our colleagues, some of them haven't got a clue about what we put up with when representing our electorates." My colleague the member for Fitzroy has just spoken on similar issues. Our constituents want access to their local members. Some members can sit in local shopping centres on a Saturday morning. People will come up to them, say g'day and ask them questions. We cannot do it that way.

We have to be realistic. One night a couple of years ago, the Minister and I debated this issue on the 7.30 Report. In all sincerity, I say that this issue is about equal and fair representation of all communities. I remind members of the areas in question, especially the five big electorates but also electorates such as Callide, Fitzroy, Tablelands, Western Downs, Cunningham and Warwick. In many ways the minority provides for the majority. The productivity of the rural remote areas, especially in the mining and agricultural industries, is creating development opportunities and job opportunities for many people on the eastern seaboard. That productivity results from the sacrifices that are made by a lot of rural people. We should not be penalised because of the distances involved in the areas where we live. We should not be penalised by having our lives further dislocated.

To give members an idea of what I am talking about, every bullock that comes out of the western country provides three people with a job, whether it be at AMH at Dinmore or Townsville, or CMG at Rocky. With the wool industry, perhaps only a few people in the west produce wool. The shearers will shear the sheep and then the wool is sent south. However, then there is a huge flow-on effect involving mills, ports and so on. There is a value-adding effect.

As Tony McGrady said tonight, unless one has a very solid relationship with one's wife and family, representing one of those huge electorates can be an absolute recipe for disaster. Unless a good mate stands behind you and your family is with you all the time, it is a very difficult job. As Mike Horan said tonight, one can travel from Longreach to Birdsville, which is some 700 kilometres, another couple of hundred clicks back to Bedourie and another couple of hundred back to Boulia. At Boulia one is nearly home—it is only another 560 kilometres away, which is not far for a bloke like me because I am used to it. However, members should think about how people can be disfranchised because of the dislocation that is caused by distance.

**Mr Reeves:** What are you proposing?

**Mr Johnson:** The honourable member should listen for a second. I will give members an idea of what the new electorate of Gregory will involve once the electoral boundaries of the electorate of Warrego are changed. The electorate will stretch from Charleville to Longreach, which is 530 kilometres, and then it is another 600 kilometres to the top of the Arcadia Valley. One then goes north nearly to Winton and west to Birdsville/Bedourie. It is nearly impossible to represent that electorate correctly. Every year I drive 70,000 to 80,000 kilometres. At 80 kilometres an hour, that equates to nearly 100 days spent in a motor vehicle, averaging 10 hours driving a day. On top of that, I have my parliamentary work and work in my electorate office to attend to.

A moment ago Mike Horan said that he can attend two or three functions in his electorate in a day. However, the people who represent the big remote electorates, and even smaller rural electorates, cannot do that. Members must remember that whilst we try to provide the best representation possible, the people are not getting the same representation that the people of smaller electorates get. Whilst I do not begrudge the smaller electorates that representation, a fairer system has to be put in place that will be more equitable. We need a system that will give members and constituents a better quality of life.

At the end the day, a member can have all the mobile phones, faxes, computers and radios in the world, but that will not make the job easier. Whilst it will enhance the operation of the job, the constituents of those large rural areas want to have access to their local members of Parliament. I say to members on both sides of the House that we have to act in a realistic way to establish an equitable system.

As the member for Crows Nest said a while ago, back in the days of Ned Hanlon, electorates were a lot smaller. In 1989 when I was first elected to represent Gregory, it covered 440,000 square kilometres. It now covers 330,000 kilometres, but after the redistribution it will cover 370,000 kilometres. My point is that it is totally impossible to give the people of the electorate the representation that they deserve. The Times, They Are A-Changin', but it is to the detriment of people from the large rural electorates. I cannot emphasise that enough.

**Mr Reeves:** You're saying, "Go back to the gerrymander." That's what you're saying.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Are you naive or what? Many people on the Government side of House represent those types of electorates. I would like to see the member sit down over a cup of tea or a beer and listen to their concerns. I can tell you now that Tony McGrady, Warren Pitt, Jimmy Pearce and Steve Bredhauer and a few others on that side of the House—

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Mickel): Order! It would be better if the honourable member addressed his comments through the Chair.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will. It is very annoying when an honourable member interrupts with an absolutely ludicrous interjection.

The common cause of all honourable members is to represent people fairly. Just because people want to live in Birdsville, Bamaga, Mornington Island or wherever, they should not be disfranchised because of the difficulties imposed on their local member. I believe there will be

agreement to refer this Bill to LCARC. I hope that it is treated favourably so that we can once again have more equitable electoral boundaries so that members can represent their constituents fairly.

Some of the people in my electorate probably never see me from one end of the year to the other, and this point was similarly commented on by the member for Toowoomba South. However, we do the best we can. For example, some nights honourable members might get on the phone and ring up six or eight people. For example, I could pick names out of the phone book of people from Muttaborra, Birdsville, Winton or wherever. That is the best representation we can give. The people want to hear from us. I say to honourable members on both sides: let us be fair about this. After all, this Bill is about fair representation of the people of Queensland.

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