



Speech by

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ELECTORAL AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CUMMINS (Kawana—ALP) (3.30 p.m.): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the issue before the House today. As we are well aware, the legislation was introduced on 5 September last year under the previous Beattie government. Reforming how-to-vote cards should result in an improvement in the quality of the information that voters have before them when they cast their votes at both state and local government elections. Obviously, there are various opinions about how-to-vote cards and their distribution. On election day, many electors refer to it as 'running the gauntlet', as they are sometimes faced with half a dozen or a dozen candidates, party representatives or supposed Independent candidates, all offering how-to-vote cards in the hope that they will give them an advantage. Many registered voters actually resist the offer of how-to-vote cards. It is obvious to all that some voters do not enjoy the experience of having how-to-vote cards thrust at them.

There are various forms of voting in our democratic system. The bill refers to two levels of government. There is first-past-the-post voting, which can occur in some local government elections when there is more than one representative for a division or a ward. If more than one councillor is needed for a ward or a division, it becomes a first-past-the-post situation, not just in that ward but in that entire council, whether it be a shire or a city. There is also optional preferential voting, for example, the last state election on 17 February this year. Many of us remember the successful 'just vote 1' strategy. We also remember the divisive and disastrous preference deals that were done by some poor political gamblers on the conservative side of politics, who were umming and ahing about whether or not to swap preferences with One Nation, one of its offensive offshoot parties or, of course, the turncoats who declared themselves supposed Independents. At the next federal election we will see a different form of voting, that is, compulsory preferential voting.

To give an example, by the end of this year citizens of the Maroochy shire will have faced all three forms of voting within a two-year period. They will have had first-past-the-post voting at the Maroochy council elections in February 2000, optional preferential voting at the state election in February 2001 and, without guessing the date, compulsory preferential voting at the federal election before the end of this year.

Many people across Queensland and, in fact, across Australia do not have the interest in or passion for politics that many within this House and their supporters have. Many do not understand politics. It is quite interesting to read various comments and opinions in letters to the editor stating that a first-past-the-post voting system is far superior to an optional preferential or a compulsory preferential voting system. I do not agree with that opinion, because with first-past-the-post voting complaints start to come in that the candidate was selected by a minority of people and not a majority. However, if it is only a two-horse race, a majority will be found one way or the other unless a considerable number of votes are invalid.

Many citizens of Maroochy find the process quite confusing, as I think any Queenslander or Australian would if, in two years, they had faced three different styles of election. Hopefully, the changes before us will address and improve the quality of how-to-vote cards, giving clear guidelines on authorisation and similar things. It will never stop people trying to push the legislation or the law to its limits. While we may be naive enough to say that it is up to the good fortune of some, others will always try to take that electoral advantage.

I agree with some of the comments made by the member for Southern Downs. I believe that in our generation we will see a future for electronic voting or a different style of voting from what we now know. That may be 10 or 20 years down the track. Some may disagree, but if one had described the Internet 20 years ago, many of us would not have understood. I hope that in 10 or 20 years democracy as we know it will survive. While the way that we lodge our votes or select our representatives may change, I hope that it will still be done through a democratic voting process.

The member for Hinchinbrook raised many issues concerning improvements to telecommunications and information technology. I think we could see an improvement in the voting system that could nullify much of the how-to-vote card legislation that is before us. If one was going to vote from one's home via computer screen, one would not need such a card. Probably in the lead-up to the polls there would be a bombardment of information, whether it be hard copy through the letterbox or soft copy through the computer.

Mr Springborg: More nuisance emails.

Mr CUMMINS: More valuable junk mail or emails, as the member suggests. Another idea suggested was that how-to-vote cards could be displayed in the polling booths. While this idea has some merits, it has some weaknesses. With the three-sided booth, who gets the priority position? Who goes to the top left-hand side, who goes to the top right-hand side and who goes to the side? Again, the same arguments would apply. As I said, hopefully within our generation we will see improvements to IT and electronic voting.

I also agree with the opposition spokesperson about the ludicrous American presidential elections, where many states differed on how to select their leaders. That really cast doubts over their democratic system. That comes back to the issue of compulsory or non-compulsory voting, which, of course, is another tin of worms.

Putting up photographs of candidates in a booth soon fails if there are more than six candidates. At the recent by-election following my vacating a seat on the Caloundra City Council there were 11 candidates. It will be interesting to see the number of candidates that will contest the Gold Coast City Council by-election following the success of the new member for Surfers Paradise. Once there are more than a couple of candidates it becomes difficult. In fact, on polling day it can become quite painful for people who do not want to put down 11 preferences. As we know, as the number of Senate candidates has grown over the years, we have moved to above the line and below the line type voting. People can either nominate a party or every candidate—I think up to 120 in New South Wales or another state. I do not think many voters would have gone to the extreme of nominating them all.

It is a bit of a pain on election day not only for the voting public but also for the candidates. I have met some sadists who say they enjoy it. I find it very painful, especially if it is a summery day. But there is another way around the member for Hinchinbrook's point concerning beating the monsoons or the cyclone season, and that is something I hope to see introduced in either this term of state parliament or the next—a four-year set term. We could have set dates instead of leaders choosing to go to the polls at a time of political advantage.

One positive from the American system is that they know that on the first or second Tuesday in November they will be going to the polls. Local government presently holds elections in March every four years. For the state elections I would suggest a month in each year following the local government elections. Local government is to go to elections in the year 2004. If the state government were to go to the polls in the year 2005 and the federal government in the year 2006, we would have a year off. I think the general public would enjoy a year off from politics and voting. Of course, that would be Utopia, but we can work towards it.

The federal government has many ideas, and many people in state government probably would not agree with me. But we could hold state elections one year, a federal election the following year and local government elections the next year. March is probably not the best time of the year. It would not be held in September, because that would be during the football finals. I think Jeff Kennett is the only person who has called an election on the grand final weekend. I think he lost that election and I do not think it will ever be done again.

Mr Springborg: Not July, either, for the Granite Belt.

Mr CUMMINS: There are obviously some festivities in those areas. In all seriousness, after the football season has finished, if we looked towards October and November, people could get it over and done with before Christmas. It would allow a lead-in time for the following year's budget. Of course, the only negative would be that we might be working half a year with the budget of the previous government, which may not be returned. But there are ways to change budgets. Hopefully, those issues can be addressed.

How-to-vote cards will be an issue that will be discussed long and hard, with opinions from both sides. Anyone with a political belief always has an opinion on the whys and wherefores of how-to-vote cards. Hopefully, this goes a long way towards addressing many of the inconsistencies that have been

raised before. In the future there will probably be new ways for people to work within this legislation. We will soon know, because we have two or three years before the state and local government elections are called again—touch wood. I commend this bill to the House.
