



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 16 May 2001

ELECTORAL AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (4.27 p.m.): I rise to support the legislation before the House and to just very briefly raise a couple of issues which impacted on the Fitzroy electorate on the 17 February election.

Two issues of concern are the boundary changes and the impact that they had on different parts of the electorate and problems that can arise when the Electoral Commission has failed to do enough homework to ensure an understanding of the impact on shiftworkers of a lack of pre-polling opportunities.

I will speak firstly about the changes to the boundary, which caused some confusion. My electorate office received many calls in the days leading up to the election as a result of a letter that had gone out from the Electoral Commission advising people that they now were in the Fitzroy electorate and where their polling booths were.

A lot of confusion was created as a result of a letter from the commission that went to people at Glendale, Glenlea and Rocky View Estates. Those areas are to the north of Rockhampton and were in the electorate of Keppel. They were informed by the Electoral Commission that their nearest polling booth was at The Caves. Those people could access the polling booth at The Caves; but in the past, most of those people who live in those estates voted at Parkhurst State School, which is situated in the Keppel electorate on the eastern side of the Bruce Highway. The western side of the Bruce Highway is in the Fitzroy electorate. So those people just could not understand why they could not continue to go to their usual place of voting, which was Parkhurst, and vote on 17 February. So through the local media I got the message across that people could vote at the Parkhurst school—as a result of the intervention of the returning officer for Fitzroy, who took action and ensured that that polling booth was a joint polling booth, which it should have been in the first place. There would not have been any confusion had the Electoral Commission done its homework, realised that there was a problem and fixed it.

There was also a similar problem in a little community called Banana in the Banana Shire. As a result of the boundary changes, all localities to the west of the Burnett Highway were moved into the Fitzroy electorate, and localities on the eastern side of the Burnett Highway remained in the Callide electorate. The Burnett Highway runs right through the township of Banana. The school was in the Callide electorate, but most of the population of Banana lived in the Fitzroy electorate. No research had been undertaken and there was no understanding by the Electoral Commission of the impact of those boundary changes. All of those people who lived in Banana just across the road from the polling booth were required to vote absentee. Of course, that caused a lot of confusion, a lot of anger and a lot of frustration. On at least two occasions I wrote to the people who had been affected by the boundary changes, and there was a lot of media attention, but they just did not understand; they became a little bit confused, particularly the elderly people. I understand that there was a lot of frustration and a lot of anger because people who, for years and years, had voted at the school across the road from where they live—their local polling booth—had to vote absentee.

I notice that one of the problems that can arise when we have changes to electoral boundaries is that people do not really understand where they have to vote, and the commission does not do a lot

of homework. Those problems will be fixed, and they will be fixed for the next election. However, they should not occur if the commission is doing its job.

There was also a bit of a problem in Mount Morgan, where the polling booth for local authority elections is usually the state school. But for state and federal elections, the polling booth is usually at the community hall. However, because something was already planned for the community hall on election day, people had to go to the primary school to vote. So there was a lot of confusion there, as well.

All I am saying is that, although I realise and accept that the Electoral Commission did not have a lot of notice, it needs to do a little more work and a little more research. What is wrong with getting on the phone and talking to people such as the local member and saying, 'These are the changes. Are there any issues?'

There is a more serious matter to which I have been giving consideration over the past few weeks in terms of bringing it to the attention of the House, and I think this debate provides a great opportunity to do just that. I believe that the Electoral Commission has failed badly, because it has not done the research and it has not understood the changes that are taking place in the workplace. Today, more and more people are working 12-hour shifts. Many people in coalmining communities, such as Dysart, Middlemount, Blackwater and Moura, are just not able to get along to a polling booth on election day. If they do, it is because they have received cooperation from the mining companies. They have to travel distances of 35 to 40 kilometres and then return to work. In the past, those workers have done that because they have had cooperation from mining companies. But for some reason, this time we had a bit of a hiccup, particularly with BHP.

In Blackwater, we had a prepoll booth at the courthouse. At Moura we had a prepoll booth at the QGAP office. When we realised that there was a problem at Middlemount—because we have a QGAP office there, and we had Queensland government employees working there—we were able to set up a prepoll booth there. Even though that occurred during the last week leading up to the election, it gave shiftworkers the opportunity to vote; because during that period, the shifts changed over from day shift to night shift, so everybody in Middlemount was given the opportunity to vote and there were no problems.

However, in Dysart, a very serious issue arose that caused me to make contact with the Electoral Commission to get some advice, because I believed that BHP was contravening the provisions of the Queensland Electoral Act. I believed that BHP was deliberately interfering with workers' rights to vote on that Saturday. BHP had said to its workers, 'Under no circumstances will you be allowed to leave the mine site to vote.' The union intervened, and I also made representations to BHP. But BHP, with its typical head-in-the-sand, arrogant attitude, refused to allow those workers to leave the mine site to vote. BHP thought it was pretty smart. It advised the workers that it had made the decision to provide them with an application form for a postal vote. BHP actually put out a memorandum which stated—

According to our records you are rostered to work on Saturday, 17th February 2001, the day of the State Elections.

If you have not already done so, we have enclosed an Application for Postal Votes which must be received by the Electoral Commission—

not the local returning officer—

... no later than 6pm Thursday 15th February 2001.

That demonstrates clearly to me that the company had no idea what it was talking about. BHP was given information from union representatives in the area about the process, but because it wanted to show its arrogance and persistence in having everything done its way, it got it wrong, and in a big way. BHP even put notices on noticeboards saying the same thing.

I ask members to forget about the point that BHP made about faxing applications to the Electoral Commission in Brisbane. Even if the workers had faxed their votes to the returning officer in the electorate of Fitzroy, those idiots at BHP, those smartypants out there, the managers who are running the place, could not grasp the idea of how long it would take to turn these votes around in the mail. Even if the votes were faxed through on the Thursday—depending on what time the returning officer received them on the Thursday and was able to get them in the mail on the Thursday—the votes would get to Mackay on Friday. No mail deliveries are made on Saturday and Sunday. Therefore, the applicant would not get his or her postal vote until the Monday, which would be too late for them to vote. Even if by some freakish event the workers did get their postal vote on the Friday, they would be at work on the Friday and Saturday between those hours.

One issue that really stands out as a big problem—and I believe that it may have impacted on the outcome of the vote in my electorate—is that the people who had lodged their application forms were advised that they could cast their vote, have it in the mail by 6 p.m. on the Saturday, and it would be accepted. The problem is that we do not have a post office in Dysart that works on Saturday or Sunday. Therefore, the actual vote would not have been stamped at the post office until the Monday.

So if the vote in the electorate was really close and there were 30 or 40 votes that decided the outcome, those people—and I am talking about probably 100 to 150 people who were involved in this process—actually could have influenced the outcome of the election. I believe that is a glaring problem that the Electoral Commission has to consider. It caused a lot of anger and a lot of frustration in my electorate.

I just cannot understand why the Electoral Commission could not take advice from somebody like me about the problems that existed in that area. The Electoral Commission did not want to listen to what I was saying. As a member parliament, I had to be very, very careful; I could not push the issue. All I could do was bring it to their attention. A lot of my constituents could have missed out on a vote simply because of the system that is in place, the way that the commission handled it and the arrogance and stupidity of BHP, which is known for that, so I really do not make any apology for saying it.

In central Queensland we accept that BHP has lost the plot when it comes to looking after workers. The thing that really got to me was that we have lost over 100,000 men and women who fought for this country so that our people can have the right to vote, yet a multinational like BHP deliberately frustrated and even refused to allow voters of Queensland to go to the polling booth. I would like the Attorney-General to look at that issue and ensure that that type of thing does not happen again. We simply have to pre-poll in Dysart. However, when companies like BHP make such a mistake and the Electoral Commission, for whatever reason, fails to understand what the issue is, we have to get it right. We cannot deny people their right to vote.

In closing, I must say that as a unionist and as the local member, I was pleased that the union and the workers, at the Saraji mine in particular, made the right decision. At 5 o'clock they said, 'Thank you very much, but we're going home because we want to support our local member.'
