



Speech by

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VOTING SYSTEM

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (5.30 pm): I move—

That this House opposes any changes being made to Queensland's voting system before the next state election, unless those changes have bipartisan parliamentary support.

Queensland Labor wants to cheat its way to the next election. Optional preferential voting has been used in Queensland for the best part of two decades. Optional preferential voting is used in New South Wales and, despite the fact that the Labor government there is heading for certain defeat, even New South Wales Labor will not stoop so low as to rig the electoral system. Only the corrupt Queensland Labor government would do that. It says a lot that the New South Wales Labor government has more integrity than Queensland Labor. It will certainly lose the next election, yet it will not try to cheat the voters. The only reason Queensland Labor wants to change the system now is to force Greens preferences to go to Labor. This is a desperate, last-minute attempt by the Premier and Labor to cling to power by cheating and rigging the system. In his final report on the Fitzgerald inquiry, Tony Fitzgerald wrote—

A fundamental tenet of the established system of parliamentary democracy is that public opinion is given effect by regular, free, fair elections following open debate.

A government in our political system which achieves office by means other than free and fair elections lacks legitimate political authority over that system.

He wrote that in 1989. Twenty years later, the same concerns about the potential for the voting system to be changed to suit the government of the day have arisen. This Labor government thinks it can change the goalposts whenever it suits it to meet its political desires. It was the Labor government that changed the voting system in 1992 and now it wants to change it back because the Left side of politics is so divided between the Greens and Labor. Labor knows that it is facing political defeat because those who vote 1 Green will not choose to put Labor at No. 2 if they do not have to. If there is anything we remember from Premier Peter Beattie it is 'just vote 1'.

The argument from the current Premier that optional preferential voting at state elections results in a high informal vote at federal elections does not stack up. Let us examine the facts. The Premier has gone on record as saying that when there is a proximity of federal elections to state elections there is a higher rate of informal votes. Yet when the 2010 federal election occurred we had not had a state election for nearly 18 months. In 2001 and 2004 the federal and state elections were held in exactly the same year, but I have not seen any evidence to show that the rate of informal votes increased markedly in 2010 compared to 2004 or 2001.

In the 2010, 2007 and 2004 federal elections, Queensland had an informal vote rate that was below the national informal vote rate. In the 2010 election, the Northern Territory at 6.19 per cent and South Australia at 5.46 per cent both had higher informal vote rates than Queensland at 5.45 per cent. Northern Territory and South Australia both have compulsory preferential voting at a state level. In 2007 the Northern Territory at 3.85 per cent, South Australia at 3.78 per cent and WA at 3.85 per cent all had a higher informal rate than Queensland at 3.56 per cent. The Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia all have compulsory preferential voting at a state level. On those numbers alone, it is

clear that the argument that somehow optional preferential voting is causing high informal votes in Queensland is simply not true.

New South Wales and Queensland are the two states running optional preferential systems for state elections, with New South Wales introducing it in the early 1990s and Queensland introducing it in 1992. The research shows that New South Wales and Queensland, the two states with optional preferential voting, have the lowest levels of informal voting among all the large states for state elections. Let me repeat that: the two states with optional preferential voting, New South Wales and Queensland, have the lowest levels of informal voting among all the large states for state elections.

Has this system of optional preferential voting really affected the level of informal voting at the federal level? At the 1984 federal election, in Queensland there was a 4.5 per cent informal vote and at the 1987 federal election in Queensland there was a 3.4 per cent informal vote. Those levels were higher than the three federal elections preceding the introduction of optional preferential voting. While some would argue that trend data would support the argument that optional preferential voting has somehow caused a rise in informal voting at the federal level, to automatically assume that OPV has somehow caused that does not correlate when, as I have previously stated, other states without optional preferential voting have greater rates of informal voting than Queensland.

At the state level, Queensland has a significantly lower level of informal voting and has remained steady at around two per cent over the past two decades. This level of informal voting is at risk if we move back to a compulsory preferential voting system. However, what did the 'brains trust' and Premier-in-waiting say about preferential voting on ABC Radio this morning? I see him sitting there now in the Premier's chair. He cannot wait to occupy that chair. The member for Greenslopes and former Attorney-General for Tuvalu is already in the chair. He said that the informal vote is increasing in Queensland and New South Wales from the federal election. He said that the Australian Electoral Commission found that and that it has been suggested that there is a correlation between optional preferential and increased informal voting. However, he did not give any real evidence for this correlation, other than to try to spin that the advantage is not necessarily with the Labor Party, other than that somehow the two systems—federal and state—confuse people and increase informal voting. I think that is insulting to the more than two million voters across Queensland. Antony Green, the highly regarded political analyst, wrote—

One innovation that has remained more or less unique to Australia has been preferential voting. (It is better known outside of Australia as the 'transferable vote', or in its single-member form, as the 'alternative vote'.) In almost all other countries, you get the right to cast a single vote for your party or candidate of choice.

Why is this suddenly an issue when it was not an issue during the 2007, 2004 or 2001 federal elections? I will tell you why. It is because this government knows that without Greens preferences it cannot win on its own merits. What is more, the Premier would have us believe that the federal Electoral Commission has indicated that the two different voting systems at a state and federal level have, as her Attorney said this morning, led to some confusion and a high rate of informal voting at the recent federal election. That is surprising, as voters may have been equally confused by the different voting systems for the Senate and the House of Representatives.

In the instance of the Senate, we all know that there is a choice. You can either vote 1 above the line or vote full preferential below the line. In the House of Representatives there is no choice and all boxes must be numbered. It could be argued that the high informal vote suggests that there should be voting choice for both the Senate and the House of Representatives, which could reduce the high House of Representatives informal vote. The Queensland Senate informal vote was 3.5 per cent, an increase of 1.16 per cent, and nationally the informal vote was 3.75 per cent, an increase of 1.2 per cent. The Queensland House of Representatives informal vote was 5.45 per cent, which was the third highest after New South Wales and South Australia and an increase of 1.89 per cent. Nationally the informal vote was 5.5 per cent, an increase of 1.6 per cent. Interestingly, the largest informal vote increase was from the paragon of intellectualism, the ACT, with 2.35 per cent for a total of 4.66 per cent.

Of course, if there is a will to reduce informal voting we would be happy to support further voter education. Surely if Labor's motives were pure it would support voter education over rigging the electoral laws. Any changes to electoral laws must be bipartisan or risk being seen as dictatorial and nothing more than election rigging. The electoral laws are the foundation of our democratic system. In the world there are states and nations where governments change electoral laws to suit themselves, but none that I would want to live in. If at the election the voters of Queensland are waiting with baseball bats or chainsaws to throw out this toxic long-term Labor government after nearly 20 years in power, those opposite should have the integrity and backbone to cop it on the chin. Labor should not manipulate the voting system of this state in an attempt to rot its way back into power.