




Speech by

Hon. Stirling Hinchliffe

MEMBER FOR STAFFORD

Hansard Wednesday, 11 May 2011

ELECTORAL REFORM AND ACCOUNTABILITY AMENDMENT BILL; ELECTORAL (TRUTH IN ADVERTISING) AMENDMENT BILL; ELECTORAL REFORM BILL

 **Hon. SJ HINCHLIFFE** (Stafford—ALP) (Minister for Employment, Skills and Mining) (8.23 pm): It is with a little bit of reluctance that I rise to contribute to this cognate debate. I was not intending to contribute to the debate, but having heard some of the extraordinary misrepresentations of the government's bill by members from the other side I could not resist. I had to draw the House's attention to the extraordinary lengths to which the opposition has gone to draw a very long bow to try to create a case against the Electoral Reform and Accountability Amendment Bill. While I am on my feet I might refer to a couple of other matters, but I will start with that particular concern.

Maybe I can set the context by agreeing with the member for Toowoomba South. I had the opportunity to hear in part the contribution made by the honourable and learned member for Greenslopes. In his speech, he set out the contribution that Labor governments and Labor administrations have made to the advancement of democracy and to democratic reform in this state. This is another step in that direction. As the member for Mount Isa suggested to us not long ago, it will level the playing field. It will also ensure that all Queenslanders have a similar ability to contribute to our democracy through the exercise of their vote and through the ways in which they can contribute to supporting candidates or political parties of their choice. No matter what their means, this provides them with a fairer ability to contribute.

A number of speakers opposite suggested that the public funding element of this legislation is somehow a derogation of democracy and that that funding would be better spent in other ways. If that is the case, if democracy is not worth the price, we should pack this parliament up. If that is the case, this is a great waste of public expenditure, all members opposite should give their pay back and we should all go home. I can understand that they might be moving towards that thought, as they have decided that, as there is not one amongst them who is capable of being a leader, they will outsource their leadership. Given our democratic process, the outsourcing of that leadership is an example of their belief that that process is not worth it and that it is not the way forward. I think it is a disgrace that in this state the so-called conservatives are abandoning some of the strongest Westminster traditions. Through this Electoral Reform and Accountability Amendment Bill the Labor government is progressing one of the clear and important traditions of that system by making our democracy fairer and more accessible to the community. This legislation does that by providing a level playing field and a greater opportunity for all people to contribute.

On the theme of allowing a greater number of people to contribute to our democracy, I will mention one other element of this cognate debate before I leave the debate to the rest of the chamber. The member for Beaudesert has introduced the Electoral Reform Bill, which contains a grab bag of interesting concepts, but there is one in particular upon which I will reflect and about which I will put some comments on the record. It is the suggestion that there should be a movement away from the compulsory aspects of our electoral system. No doubt the Deputy Premier will concur that I am a great pedant. I will be a pedant

about one particular aspect of this bill. In his legislation and his contribution to the debate tonight, the member for Beaudesert has reiterated the idea that in Queensland we have such a thing as compulsory voting. In fact, we do not have compulsory voting. As part of our electoral system, we have compulsory attendance at a polling booth. No-one is forced to vote if they do not wish to, but the reality is that the vast number of people who attend polling booths take up the opportunity to participate in our democracy. Isn't that a much better thing for the value and worth of our democracy? It means that our governments have a strong and genuine mandate from across the population.

In contrast, in those parts of the world that do not require compulsory attendance at polling booths—basically everywhere other than Australia and Belgium—it is the significant minorities who are the people who support and contribute to the electoral process. I think that weakens the strength of those democracies and it weakens their government's ability to claim appropriately a mandate to undertake the governance of those policies. That is why, in defeating the Electoral Reform Bill as proposed by the member for Beaudesert, I reiterate and confirm my commitment to that compulsory attendance at a polling booth as well as the commitment of the Australian Labor Party and this government. The compulsory participation in our electoral system is one of those fantastic obligations that is part of our political, social and legal system. They include such obligations as jury duty and respect for the law. Those obligations in our community are very important and any derogation of them would lessen our democracy.

To that end, I would reiterate that one of the features in the political systems of democracies with non-compulsory voting—with voluntary participation in the polling process—is that the extremes come to the fore. In those processes, political parties and political leadership appeal very strongly to their base to get them out to vote and we see extreme positions being taken. We see this in the United States. One of the great criticisms in the United States at the moment is that the politics have become so extreme and so extraordinarily divided. In many ways, they have moved away from the centre ground, further alienating the very people who need to be engaged in the political system. On that mark, I support the retention of the compulsion to be engaged in the political process. I support the reforms that are fundamental to the government's Electoral Reform and Accountability Amendment Bill. Those reforms are justifiably about supporting fairness and a level playing field for all participants in our electoral system. That is yet another step forward in democratic reform and democratic improvement to the greater political democracy that this state enjoys.