




Speech By
Curtis Pitt

MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

Record of Proceedings, 22 May 2014

ELECTORAL REFORM AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (4.20 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Electoral Reform Amendment Bill 2013. I join the Leader of the Opposition and my colleagues in strongly opposing this retrograde and dangerous legislation. This LNP government has no shame when it comes to reducing transparency in our Queensland democracy. They have form when it comes to attacking the most vulnerable in our society, and this is a Premier and a government that has learnt nothing when it comes to donations and cash for access.

The timing of this legislation could not be more telling about the twisted priorities of this government. I fear they really do live on another planet. This legislation is being debated in the shadow of three concerning developments. First, the information coming out of ICAC in New South Wales including specific revelations about donations made to the Queensland Premier in his previous role as Lord Mayor of Brisbane. Second, it is also being debated in the wake of the government's moves to kneecap one of the most respected institutions in Queensland—the anti-corruption watchdog, the former Crime and Misconduct Commission. Third, the Attorney-General—the very person responsible for this legislation—is bringing in changes that would make it easier to keep large political donations a secret at the very time that he is being questioned about his role in awarding a tender against the recommendations of his department and at double the cost to the taxpayer.

It is almost farcical that, when the Queensland community, including the legal profession, said loud and clear that the government's attacks on the independent anti-corruption watchdog should not be progressed, this government's response is to make it easier to make large cash donations to politicians and keep it secret. It is absolutely farcical that, as we hear about the stunning revelations from ICAC, this government's response is to make it easier for lobbyists and big business to make secret donations and peddle access to power.

This legislation illustrates the twisted priorities of this government. This bill on the one hand makes it easier for their business mates to make large donations and not have to declare those donations at all. They remove spending restrictions for elections, giving more influence and power to those with money. What is in it for the rest of Queensland? New requirements that will make it harder to vote, especially for the most vulnerable in our community. The real intention of these laws is to deny the rights of every single adult Queenslanders to cast their vote—all the while being able to say they are keeping compulsory voting in place.

The Newman government have proven that they will sack you, they will cut your vital services and now they think they can deny your right to vote. This legislation has the potential to rob a person of the vote that they have had their entire adult life. Just because some voters come from disadvantaged backgrounds or do not have the same capacity as others, it does not mean they have any less right to vote in an election.

The provisions of this bill which will require voters to provide proof of identity are regressive and unjustified. The most important tenet of democracy is that people are able to vote. Unwarranted

obstacles should not be put in the way of Queenslanders wanting to exercise that right. Any policy decision which makes it more difficult to vote reduces the legitimacy of governments and damages the quality of our democracy.

Appropriately, it has been said that this is 'a solution in search of a problem'. It is a disproportionate response that will only further marginalise certain groups of Queensland voters. If there was evidence of widespread voter fraud, there may be some argument to institute a voter ID requirement. However, there is absolutely no evidence that this is an issue. The LNP says it is making these changes under the guise of 'protecting against electoral fraud', but there is absolutely no evidence of electoral fraud in the current system. A 2009 federal green paper reported on 10 cases of multiple voting referred to authorities from the 2007 election. That is 10—not 10,000—across the entire country. In the 2012 Queensland state election there was one case.

Why doesn't the Attorney-General listen to his own department when it says 'there is no specific evidence of electoral fraud'? After the 2012 Queensland election, the Electoral Commissioner referred just one person to the Queensland Police Service for electoral fraud—just one person. That would not have changed the result in a single Queensland electorate—not even Bulimba which was decided by just 74 votes. In the absence of any evidence of voter fraud, we should therefore act in the interests of maximising the number of people voting and minimising the obstacles in their way.

While the Attorney-General suggests that it is not difficult or cumbersome to provide evidence of identity, many people do not have the relevant papers and are unable to obtain them. This is the case for many Indigenous people, people with a disability, the elderly, the homeless and young people. Submitters to the committee suggested that up to 40,000 voters could be impacted negatively by these proposed changes. Mick Gooda, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, stated in his submission to the committee—

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face difficulties in obtaining formal identification and may have insufficient documents to meet the proposed requirements. A 'vicious cycle' is said to exist where the lack of a birth certificate prevents people from being granted other forms of identification, however individuals cannot obtain a birth certificate because they cannot satisfy the identification requirements to be granted one.

I have heard some members opposite say that concerns about voter ID requirements are a storm in a teacup. Well, I say that I know with absolute certainty that this unreasonable and unnecessary requirement will significantly affect Indigenous people in my electorate, particularly in the community of Yarrabah. I have seen firsthand how the lack of a birth certificate has prevented some Indigenous children from registering for organised sport. Many adults will face a similar issue in terms of being granted other forms of identification that would meet the requirements of these proposed laws, such as a driver's licence, a passport or a recent account or notice issued by a public utility. So, if you do not drive a car, do not travel overseas and are not the account holder for your electricity bill, there is every chance you will not have the appropriate identification. I have heard people say, 'Everyone has power on at their house so why wouldn't they have an electricity bill?' Well, there are still significant overcrowding issues in houses in many Indigenous communities so a person may not be the account holder or even be a full-time occupant of that house.

This bill will end up disenfranchising many of my constituents. Many Yarrabah residents will be badly affected because they may not have the right documents. There is a reason why there is a specific Indigenous Driver Licensing Unit within Queensland Transport, because we know how important having a licence is to a person's employment prospects and general independence. This unit is needed because there is a distinct underrepresentation in many Indigenous communities in terms of driver licence holders. Again, the Social Justice Commissioner said—

... it has been estimated that only 38 per cent of Indigenous people in some local government areas in Queensland have a drivers licence compared to an average of 90 per cent of the rest of the eligible population.

I have also heard some people say that they should just get an 18+ card. It may not sound like much to some but the price of an 18+ card these days is \$58.05.

This is an even bigger issue in other Indigenous communities, particularly on Cape York and the Torres Strait. It is already harder for many Indigenous people in remote areas to vote, and any attempt to make it even harder via these proposals is not right. The member for Cook should be doing everything within his power to make it easier for his constituents to vote; unfortunately, he is supporting this bill which will make it more difficult for them. I know the Labor candidate in Cook, Billy Gordon, knows it is a real issue for those communities. I do note that people who turn up to vote but are unable to present identification are able to use a declaration vote. I quote Mr Gooda again—

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attempting to vote may feel intimidated by the requirements to fill in extra paperwork and being treated differently to other voters, a realistic possibility given the figures about the lack of identification in our community I mention above. The declaration process may also have the effect of making people without identification feel

further marginalised and may make them reluctant to complete the process. I worry that intending voters may not continue to complete their ballot if required to go through the declaration vote procedure.

This sort of reactionary and discriminatory measure is copied straight out of the playbook of the extremist right wing of the American Republican Party. It is also completely in line with the LNP's history in this state, given that they have never seen an electoral system they did not want to rot. Joh Bjelke-Petersen ran a massive gerrymander that kept him in power despite never winning more than 40 per cent of the vote. The votes of people in conservative areas were worth much more than the votes in working-class areas.

Times may have changed, and thankfully the LNP could not get away with such a flagrantly undemocratic bill in 2014, but they are doing their best to reduce the ability of the elderly, people with a disability, young and Indigenous people to vote on the basis that they are more likely to vote for Labor than other sectors of the community. As I said, the conservative parties in this state have never seen an electoral system they did not want to distort and they have shown that again here this week.

No-one who cares about political transparency, no-one who cares about enfranchising the disadvantaged and no-one who cares about the quality of our democracy would even entertain the idea of supporting this bill. This bill rips away safeguards on the disclosure of electoral donations. It makes it harder for people to vote for no discernible reason beyond electoral advantage. This is absolutely the last thing that any electoral reform bill should be doing. The Labor members in this House are making a stand against the Newman government and their attempts to muzzle potential voters in our state. The fact that 74 members of the LNP are not and will almost certainly vote for this bill speaks volumes.