




Speech By
Steve Minnikin

MEMBER FOR CHATSWORTH

Record of Proceedings, 26 August 2014

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Democracy

 **Mr MINNIKIN** (Chatsworth—LNP) (11.26 am): History it is often said can turn on a critical moment or invention. Around 2,600 years ago, when ancient Greeks lived on the southern eastern fringes of Europe, they laid claim to an invention that, according to John Keane, now ranks in historical importance with the wheel, the printing press, the steam engine and the cloning of stem cells. Born of resistance to tyranny, their claimed invention at first caused no great stir. Few spotted its novelty. Some condemned it for bringing chaos into the world. Nobody predicted its universal appeal. The invention was a potent form of wishful thinking that is still with us today. The Greeks called it *demokratia*. Winston Churchill said in 1947 that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

It is very rare to rise in this chamber and support the effort of all 89 members. Regardless of our political and ideological beliefs, we all share one binding belief. That is the importance of a robust democracy. I listened intently to as many maiden speeches as I could and a recurring theme of all members was to try to make a difference to not only our local constituencies but to society overall. We all share a strong belief in the necessity for robust debate in order to have the democratically elected government of the day perform.

The democratic process is hardly perfect, but it has proven to be resilient and produces the most desirable form of government. It is the purpose of this speech to defend it with gusto. Poll data reveals Australia's waning interest in politics and, of far more concern, a decline in support for the actual concept of democracy itself. It reveals a significant decline in support for democracy over the past seven years.

An Australian National University, ANU, study conducted in partnership with the Social Research Centre found satisfaction with democracy slumped from 86 per cent in 2007 to 72 per cent when attitudes were surveyed again in June of this year. Early this year the annual Lowy Institute poll of Australian attitudes found 40 per cent no longer believed democracy is the best form of government. The Lowy Institute poll asked respondents to share how engaged they were in Australian politics and what they thought of the survey results. According to the Lowy Institute's Alex Oliver—

We have had long decades of prosperity and no major wars. I think people have lost touch with what democracy means. I think people have to modify or lower their expectations of what democracy is—it is adversarial and full of compromise. I think people have unrealistic expectations.

The reality is that modern Australia over the last two decades has been well served by the democratic process because we have had nearly 23 years of continuous economic growth. The early reforms of the Hawke-Keating years followed by the outstanding efforts during the Howard-Costello years have led to a period of unmatched prosperity for all Australians. Tragically, we only have to tune into the nightly news on television to see what other forms of government are achieving. Democracy is a fragile, precious gift. Over the past century more than 100,000 men and women have died

defending the ideals, traditions and values of the Australian way of life. What holds this way of life together? It is the democratic system of government we choose to adopt. As I wrote in my maiden speech, what makes me so proud to be a Queenslander and an Australian is that we have a robust democracy decided by the power of the ballot box and not by the sound of Kalishnikovs. We should never take this fact for granted. Indeed, we are one of the very few democracies that have been forged through ink on paper rather than blood spilt on the battlefield. Democracy is a precious gift that has been taken for granted by too many Australians.

I concur with the comment that Terry Sweetman wrote in the *Courier-Mail* on 17 August that 'It is truly bizarre that we send our best and finest to far-flung places to plant democracy in barren fields when so many are willing to let it wither at home.' Why, then, did nearly 20 per cent of eligible voters—about three million Australians—effectively opt out of the democratic process at the last federal election by either failing to enrol to vote, not showing up to vote or voting informally? There is a very big difference between apathy and disenchantment and disengagement. I am always reminded of the famous line that democracy is sometimes hard to observe, but I sure know anarchy when I see it.