




Speech By
Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

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**ELECTORAL (REDISTRIBUTION COMMISSION) AND ANOTHER ACT
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (8.26 pm): I rise to oppose the Electoral (Redistribution Commission) and Another Act Amendment Bill 2015. I want to touch briefly on the three objectives of this bill. Firstly, we have heard from the architect of the bill that the membership of the Redistribution Commission is to be increased from three members to five members. The second objective is to determine the number of electorates, subject to a maximum increase of up to five additional electorates—so increasing the number of electorates from 89 to 94. The third objective is for the Redistribution Commission to have the capacity, at its discretion, to increase the weighting in electorates from two per cent to four per cent.

I indicate that only 16 submissions were made to the inquiry into this bill by the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee, which I chair. I think that demonstrates the interest that was shown in this legislation that is before the chamber tonight. On 25 August in Parliament House the committee held a public hearing on the bill. The committee also travelled to Mount Isa; Weipa; Napranum, which is an Indigenous community close to Weipa; Bamaga, which is up in the cape; and Cairns.

I thank the committee members for travelling to those areas. That showed the commitment that the committee had in getting out into rural areas so that people in those areas could get an understanding of the bill that was before the committee. It was an enjoyable opportunity for me to go to some of these Indigenous communities again. I had travelled to some of them in my past career in the Senate. Some of those areas had undergone some changes. It is always a joy to visit those Indigenous communities. I thank Brett Nutley, who is employed by the Queensland parliament, for his assistance in organising the appropriate access into those communities.

Some of the previous speakers to this bill have said that the objects of this bill originate from the Fitzgerald inquiry. The Fitzgerald inquiry noted that there were concerns about the electoral boundaries, which were seen to be favouring the government of that time, allowing it to retain power with minority support. It was a system under which the electoral boundaries were determined that was of particular concern.

I turn now to those amendments in the bill that increase the size of the Redistribution Commission. The member for Mansfield—and neither did any evidence that was presented to the committee—made no case whatsoever to increase the composition of the commission. In fact, the Electoral Commissioner, when giving his evidence indicated that, if that were to happen, there would be a need to cut staff. During the hearing into this bill by the committee, Mr van der Merwe indicated that there would be a need to cut staff. He stated—

The Electoral Commission runs a very tight budget. If I have to put two extra staff on I am going to have to make some cuts somewhere along the line.

Once again we will see the opposition go down the path of more jobs cuts in the community. Where do those opposite stand on this? They are pushing this agenda all the way through which will mean more job cuts for Queenslanders.

I now turn to the proposal in regard to the number of seats in the Queensland parliament and the weightage of the original seats from two per cent to four per cent. I ask members to look around this chamber and count how many vacant seats there are. I can count. I went well in maths. I count three. If it was put to the Electoral Commission that the number of seats be expanded to five, there would need to be substantive changes to this chamber. There would be disruption and, no doubt, cost to the taxpayers to make that occur.

Secondly, since being elected this Labor government has had its eye, as indicated by the Attorney, on jobs for Queenslanders. Conversely, those opposite are focusing on jobs for more parliamentarians and to reintroduce the gerrymander in this House. There has been a lot said about representation. There are 30 Queensland federal members and 12 senators. Do the sums. There are 42 representatives in Queensland who quite adequately go about the state. Admittedly, for about 20 weeks a year they are in Canberra so they are outside their electorates, not like some of the members here who are closely associated with the electorates that they represent. I make that point.

One witness concisely summed up what this means in terms of jobs and what people are thinking about this particular bill. I refer to the Hon. Tony McGrady, the Mayor of Mount Isa. He provided evidence to the committee and said—

I do not think people know or particularly care.

...

I think the average punters out there are more interested in jobs and the economy than politicians fiddling round with electoral boundaries or increasing the number of politicians because there are more important things to do than to be ... putting this on the agenda at a time when we have major issues in the resources sector and the unemployment figures are rising.

That is a learned colleague who has been in this chamber, was a Speaker and is now Mayor of Mount Isa. Interest in this bill was extremely scarce. At no stage did the committee observe any groundswell of public support for any increase in the number of electoral districts in the state of Queensland. Thirdly, should this bill be accepted, we will return to the bad old days of the Joh era where the principle of one vote, one value is further eroded by placing more weight on the value of voters in rural seats to those in the majority of the 84 other seats in this state.

It might be rare for us on this side to use examples of Liberal members' contributions but on this rare occasion I do. I reflect back to 1991 when the member for Toowong, Mr Beanland, then leader of the Liberal Party, stated this in his contribution for the electoral system we currently have in this place—

It is quite apparent to everyone that today Parliament is being asked to rubber-stamp a new gerrymander for this State. An examination of the proposal and an analysis of its defects reveals that even EARC admits, on page 169 of its report, that a 1 per cent arbitrary rule would make little difference but a 3 per cent allowance would overcompensate and produce unfairness. Therefore, the commission plucked out of the air the possibility that enrolments could vary by as much as two to one, which would allow phantom voters to be counted as real voters in a number of western and northern seats.

This is the real issue in respect of this weighting being increased from two to four per cent. He went on to indicate, and I concur and agree with his comments—

... no allowance for the high number of non-English speaking people who may be voters in a number of city electorates, the high transient populations in a number of city electorates, and the problems caused to State members in those electorates in communicating with their constituents.

These views were also canvassed and expressed before the committee. Fourthly, this bill is deficient. It is a fundamental disaster. The drafter has missed any opportunity to fix a remedy. Nowhere in the bill does it provide for any guarantees to increase the number of electoral districts in the parliament—nowhere whatsoever. I think the architect of this bill agreed with that position. It merely provides a mechanism for the Redistribution Commission in considering whether the number of districts should alter.

Opposition members interjected.

Mr FURNER: But there is no guarantee—no guarantee, you knucklehead!

Honourable members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Ryan): Order! We will wait for the House to come to order. Member, I think I detected some unparliamentary language there. I ask you to withdraw and I also remind you to direct your comments through the chair.

Mr FURNER: I withdraw it. Therefore, we could end up sustaining the number of seats we presently have or adding somewhere between one to five seats. Once again, there are no guarantees in this bill whatsoever. Professor Orr argued against further diluting the one vote, one value principle

which is presently only diluted by the existence of the five additional large districts. He applied the example of while Mount Isa has a population density about 1/6,000th of the inner seat of Brisbane, an electorate like Mount Isa is very difficult to service. He expressed concerns with the practical impact of this objective of the bill and said—

If the proposal were adopted, an electorate like Mount Isa would shrink physically—rather than expand to the southern border, as it risks doing. It may need barely 10,000 electors. If all five of the vast electorates shrink, a sixth north-western electorate will certainly have to be born. Votes in those electorates may then be worth two to three times more than those of other Queenslanders. I fear that stretches contemporary ideas of citizen equality to breaking point.

Effectively, this bill is as useful as an ashtray in a motorbike. I reject the bill.