




Speech By
Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Record of Proceedings, 2 December 2015

**ELECTORAL (IMPROVING REPRESENTATION) AND ANOTHER ACT
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (5.27 pm): I rise this afternoon also to speak to and oppose the Electoral (Improving Representation) and Another Act Amendment Bill 2015. As the chair of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee, I say that it was unfortunate the committee was not in a position to go further as we did in our previous bill, which was similar to this bill, in terms of going through a correct, thorough process. Certainly we called for submissions and we only got five-odd submissions on this particular bill. It was good to have people like Professor Orr, who is in my opinion an expert witness in terms of providing submissions to this particular bill. He certainly provided his expert evidence in examining the contents of what it would do should it be passed. Other members also had commitments that made it impossible to hold a public hearing. That is the nature and the reality of what occurred in terms of the committee meeting its obligations of going through a thorough and lengthy process, which is what the committee structure would normally do in this parliament.

The mover of the bill, the member for Mount Isa, advised that the bill would ensure that Queenslanders would have more equitable and improved access to representation. He indicated that the bill would address the issues of population density and distance which are seen to limit the effectiveness of representation in the Queensland parliament for people in the large and lightly populated electoral districts of Queensland. I shine a sympathetic light on the member for Mount Isa and the other four members of those large regional seats, because they do have a task ahead of them. In previous careers and roles I have seen the tyranny of distance in those vast regional parts of Queensland, so I am somewhat sympathetic and quite knowledgeable in terms of what they experience on a regular basis. When I reflect back in my career in the Police Union as an industrial officer, I thoroughly enjoyed my fortnightly travels into some of those country locations and particularly meeting with the partners and children of police men and women. They are such genuine and decent people in those country locations. I imagine that when those five regional members are touring in their areas they have the same opportunities and experiences that I did, and I thoroughly enjoyed meeting with those people.

The objectives of the bill are similar to those of the Electoral (Redistribution Commission) and Another Act Amendment Bill 2015, which unfortunately was not passed on 28 October this year due to a variety of reasons, one of which was that it did not have the support of the crossbenchers. When the committee held its deliberations it went to Mount Isa, Weipa, Cairns and the Indigenous communities of Napranum and Bamaga. Some telling facts came from Mount Isa. The member for Mount Isa was, of course, unable to meet the committee face to face and had to give evidence over the phone. We accepted that on the basis of his busy workload, being the member for Mount Isa. When we arrived at Bamaga it was interesting to hear the arguments from Indigenous and Torres Strait Islands mayors, because the view was put to the committee that possibly there should be a new seat up in the cape somewhere across the line of the Lockhart River over to the other side, as opposed to a change in the

current distribution of seats as presented in that particular bill. Had the opportunity arisen, it would have been interesting for the committee to go up into that region to see what the communities thought of this particular bill now before the House.

Professor Orr, who provided expert evidence to the committee on this bill and the previous one which was defeated in October, said that the bill does not explain how or why the bill proposes to legislate specifically for an increase of four seats. He also observes that he can only speculate as to whether doing so might have any impact on the issues identified by the member for Mount Isa in introducing the bill and by the proponents of the previous bill in relation to limitations on representation in large remote districts. If it did have any impact, he observes, it may be on a 'short-term, stopgap' basis. So there you have an expert who appears before the committee on a regular basis indicating that providing four extra seats, as provided for in this bill, would only be a stopgap exercise. In my opinion, this is a correct observation when compared to the previous failed bill which provided for an increase in the weighting—or, in the words of Professor Orr, 'phantom voters'—and this bill fails in setting any defined relief for those five larger regional seats. In his contribution to this bill, the member for Mount Isa indicated as well that it may be the case that there may be little or no impact as a result of adding four extra seats as proposed by this bill. With the greatest respect to the member for Mount Isa and those other four members in the larger regional seats, I wish to reflect on the evidence given to this committee in Mount Isa on the previous bill. The member for Mount Isa provided detailed evidence on his day-to-day experiences as the member for his electorate. He said—

In a typical week I might be in the car for 50 per cent of my time and 80 or 90 per cent of that time that I am in the car I am out of mobile range. I can drive anywhere up to 10½ hours to get to the edge of my electorate.

That is a true statement, and as parliamentarians we understand that that would be the case in some of these regions. It would be great if we had a federal government that was more committed to providing better telecommunications to the regions of Queensland and other parts of the nation to make sure that people like the member for Mount Isa and other members in those regional seats have reasonable access to their constituents. But that is not the case. The member explained the hardships he experiences when travelling. He said—

I have slept in my car twice this year not because I like sleeping in my car, but I was trying to get home and the roadhouse and the motel in the town I was passing through were shut. That is just the life when trying to do this job properly. It is a pretty large personal problem as well trying to juggle these things. The first time my travel budget ever ran over was in the last six months. I was out of pocket \$8,000, which I was not really happy about.

You cannot blame him for that, and that is one of the reasons the Independent Remuneration Tribunal handed down a decision to enhance the travel entitlements of those members in the five regional seats so that they can represent their constituents.

Professor Orr's submission goes on to outline a number of measures which might offer improved representation in the large remote electorates without diluting the one vote, one value principle, such as pairing members. He did advocate this in a hearing on the previous bill as well, and it is a model that is featured in other locations around the countryside such as the ACT and Tasmania, which is known as the Hare-Clark system. I do not know whether we are ready for that and I do not know whether that is a system that would be entertained by this parliament.

In closing, I want deal with the argument that we have senators in the states and territories to assist in members' electorates. That is a complete fallacy, and as a previous senator myself I am in the best position to argue that. Outside of sitting weeks senators do other work such as being members of committees, and they travel throughout their states and throughout the nation—and in many other cases also around the world—to deliberate and gather evidence on their particular portfolios. I was responsible for just under 500,000 constituents out of five duty seats, so it gives members an example of the workload in the Senate. I oppose this bill.

(Time expired)