




Speech By
Hon. Cameron Dick

MEMBER FOR WOODRIDGE

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**ELECTORAL (IMPROVING REPRESENTATION) AND OTHER LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. CR DICK** (Woodridge—ALP) (Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services) (3.35 pm): I rise this afternoon to oppose the Electoral (Improving Representation) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill because I do not believe expanding the parliament at this time is the appropriate way to improve representation. I join with my Labor parliamentary colleagues and my cabinet colleagues—the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and Minister for Training and Skills and the Minister for Transport and the Commonwealth Games—in the comments and contributions they made to the debate this afternoon.

I have read the bill and the explanatory notes, and I think it is fair to say that the explanatory notes could not be described as being a very extensive document. It is quite short in compass, and I do not believe it appropriately canvasses in the detail this parliament requires the arguments to support an expansion of the parliament at this time.

One issue I want to address at the outset is this argument about geography and geographic size. This is an argument that is constantly put in this parliament—that we need to adjust our democratic system on the basis of the geography that people represent and not the people whom the members of this House represent and the needs of those people whom we are required to advocate for, argue for and represent in this place.

The argument that is constantly put in relation to the seat of Mount Isa is that it requires there to be a change to the electoral system in Queensland. The Mount Isa electorate is very large at some 570,000 square kilometres, but there is a tolerance in our current electoral system that allows the member for Mount Isa to represent a smaller number of people than other members of the House. In fact, an analysis of the last election shows that 50 per cent of votes cast in the electorate of Mount Isa were cast in the city of Mount Isa. That means that 50 per cent of votes were cast in one city—a city of some 22,000 people. It is not a very large city compared to other regional cities in Queensland, but 50 per cent of votes were cast in one place. I accept that there are smaller communities throughout the electorate of Mount Isa. Hughenden comprises another 3½ per cent of the electorate. I do not accept the argument set out in the explanatory notes that—

Contemporary problems facing those living in these particular areas—

that is, electorates with weighting so they have smaller numbers of constituents than the rest of us—

are as challenging as those that applied 25 years ago. ...

I do not believe that. I do not believe with the explosion in technology over the last 25 years that that is the case and that those problems cannot be overcome by additional facilities and technology. It is the number of people we represent which is the cornerstone of our democracy—one vote, one value. That is a value that has been held very importantly by the Australian Labor Party for many years. It is

the needs of our communities. I can tell members of this House that an electorate like Woodridge which I represent has many needs. It is one of the most multicultural communities in Queensland. There are 214 nationalities and ethnicities in the city of Logan, and on many days most of them have a presence in the Woodridge electorate. It is a community with great needs, with many people living on the margins and many people living difficult lives.

It is the needs of those people that have to be properly expressed through resources provided to members of parliament. As I have said in the parliament before, we have had days when 18 people have been lining up out the door of the electorate office simply seeking the signature of a JP. I do not believe geographic demands cannot be overcome through appropriate resourcing. I believe it is an argument for more resources. I do not begrudge any member of this parliament who represents large electorates—I do not begrudge any of them—seeking greater resources. That is something that I would personally support. I do not think the argument has been made there.

I certainly do not think the argument has been made that there needs to be a change to the electoral Redistribution Commission. There is no satisfactory explanation as to why that system needs to be changed. I believe the member for Mansfield has conceded there is a flaw in the proposal. He acknowledges that, by requiring the consent of all leaders, the establishment of that new commission will become a victim of politics. I believe that if a leader of a political party wishes to act unreasonably, they could hold up the establishment of that entity. The member for Mansfield has foreshadowed an amendment saying that if that system fails there needs to be a fail-safe, a circuit-breaker—that is, there needs to be a motion of the House: more politics. That may be a matter that the member for Mansfield will explain, but the problem that this amendment seeks to solve has not been properly explained. It has not been properly put to this House why the system needs to change and what the flaw has been in the operation of redistribution commissions since the Fitzgerald era and since the electoral reform bill was put through this parliament by the Goss Labor government. I believe the system has acted effectively and delivered fair outcomes for Queenslanders, and fairness needs to be at the heart of this.

The government, of course, opposes the expansion of the parliament to create four new jobs for members of this House when our focus should be on creating jobs for Queenslanders. I thought those matters were put very clearly by the Minister for Transport and the Attorney-General. That is the priority of our government. The priority of our government is to create the business environment for the private sector to grow in Queensland, for business investment to flourish for those new sunrise industries that the Minister for Science and Innovation—the minister leading the Advance Queensland program for this government—the member for Algester, talks about at length to create that environment, the transition that our Queensland economy is in. That is the focus of this government. I am certainly focused on the new opportunities for research and commercialisation of research—research going from bench to bed to business, the three Bs. That is very important for me as the Minister for Health considering the significant amount that the state invests in research to develop new cures, new treatments but also new industries and new jobs for the future.

The other flaw I see in the bill is that it has never been satisfactorily explained why the parliament needs to increase by four seats. As far as I can see it is not articulated in the explanatory notes. Why four? Why not three? Why not seven? What is the rationale? Is it because we can all fit into the chamber without additional cost? Is that a rationale for expanding? Is it an arbitrary figure? I would ask the member for Mansfield to address that later in the debate or in the consideration of the clauses in detail. It seems to be an arbitrary number. Whether and to what extent that takes pressure off regional members of parliament remains to be seen. I do not support it on that basis, nor do I support the idea that the redistribution would not occur until after the writ for the next election is issued. That would entrench the disparity that already exists in seats across Queensland. Some seats are 16 per cent over quota.

Mr Ryan: Outrageous!

Mr DICK: I take the interjection from the member for Morayfield that it is outrageous. Some seats are over quota while other seats are considerably under quota. It would disenfranchise some Queenslanders because their votes will not be equal. There will be disproportionate impacts on how people vote.

Ms Grace interjected.

Mr DICK: I take the interjection from the member for Brisbane Central, my ministerial colleague, that it is back to the bad old days. Perhaps that is not the intention, but certainly it would be a perverse outcome if that were to continue. For those reasons I oppose the bill before the House.