



ELECTORAL (ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS AND OTHER MATTERS) AMENDMENT BILL

The Hon. A. PICCOLO (Light): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on this very important bill. It is a very important bill by virtue of the rights it seeks to take away from our citizens. I think that we take our democracy for granted at times. At times, we assume that we do not have to actually be here to protect or strengthen our democracy and that it will just be around for us when we need it.

Well, when you look overseas, that could not be further from the truth. Over the last 10 years, we have seen a decline in democracy across the world—a decline in liberal democracies and a decline in citizen participation in various nations. These are not just nations that we normally associate with what you might call either Third World republics or despotic countries but also the biggest democracy in the world, in a Western sense, namely the United States. There are an increasing number of reports coming out of America about

individual states that are creating laws about the voting franchise to ensure that it minimises the opportunity for certain people to participate in the elections. In America, unfortunately some political parties have the view that, if you do not like the way that people are voting, the best thing to do is not to change your policies or improve what you are doing but to make sure that those people who do not like what you are doing do not get a chance to vote. It truly has been a campaign in America to minimise the franchise of African Americans, who, generally speaking, on most occasions would vote for the Democratic Party.

In those states where Republicans hold the reins, and because of the unique way in which the American political system operates, and even though they have a federal election, the electoral rules for the federal elections are actually controlled by individual states. So they have electoral boundaries that are drawn in a way that minimises the impact or the effect of particular voter populations. In fact, the Playmander has its origins in America, where I think it was called 'the salamander'. I cannot remember

the member's name, but certainly the electorate was drawn in the shape of a salamander to make sure that a certain voting outcome was achieved in a particular state.

I cannot remember which state – it was probably Alabama or Louisiana or one of those more progressive states in the United States that have a good record in democracy. The point I am trying to make here is that laws drawn to reduce the voting franchise are, by their very nature, anti-democratic.

They undermine one of the most fundamental rights in our democracy, in our society, and that is the right to vote. In my view, voting is not just a right but a responsibility. It is important that we all participate in that process to make sure that people make their contribution towards protecting and strengthening our democracy.

If it is a responsibility of ours to make sure we do participate in the democratic process, then it is incumbent on governments of any persuasion to make sure that we make it as easy as possible for people to participate. The reality is that people comply with laws and do the right thing when you make it as easy as possible for them to do so. These proposed changes to the law will make it harder for people to do the right thing, for people to participate and they will make it much more difficult for people to do the right thing, which is to participate in the electoral process.

I am not suggesting that the electoral process is the start and end of our political process, but it is certainly an important part in order to engage people in that process. This proposed

provision to close off the electoral roll sooner can only have one effect: to reduce the number of people who will be eligible to vote on election day. That is simply the only impact it can have. It will have the impact of disenfranchising a whole range of people in our community from participating. Some of the effects have been covered by the other speakers very well, but it is important to emphasise that, if passed by this parliament, this bill will have the impact of reducing the capacity of people in my electorate to participate in the electoral process. Who are some of these people?

Certainly young people are generally more mobile, and therefore we need to make sure they are on the electoral roll. People going on to the electoral roll for the first time are very important. We have heard a number of speakers talk about the declining number of younger people enrolling, which is sad to hear because the young people I speak with are fully engaged in community life and civic life and are keen to exercise their political rights. We need to make sure we make it easier.

For a number of years, and I assume it still happens, the Electoral Commission participated in a program of going into schools, speaking to year 11s and 12s, and getting young people to start enrolling. Even though their enrolment does not become active until they are 18, at 17 they can put their names on the roll ready to vote, and it is a very good thing to do that. That is an example of doing the right thing and making sure we maximise the capacity of people to participate in our electoral process.

We have First Nations people, and I have a significant First Nations community in my electorate. This bill would have the effect of discriminating against that group of people by closing off the rolls early. By doing that, we are setting the electoral pendulum back prior to the referendum of 1966-67. We are going back to the days where we said, if you were a First Nations person, you should not be participating in our political process. That is the effect of this bill. We have mentioned people with disabilities and other vulnerable people in our community – older people and people who, for a whole range of reasons, would need the extra time to make sure they could participate. Another group I would like to mention is new citizens. If we want new citizens to fully integrate into our community, engaging them in the political process is extremely important because, when they exercise their right to vote, they feel a greater sense of belonging to this country, their new country. I seek leave to continue my remarks

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Before lunch, when I started to speak on this matter, I ended up talking about the importance of making the rules very simple to ensure that everybody in our community who was eligible to vote has a capacity to vote on election day. I then talked about the importance of new citizens being able to vote on election day. As I said – and I am sure there is quite a bit of evidence to support this – if we are trying to assist new citizens in this country, as I was once myself, to participate in the political process, we need to make sure we make it as easy as possible for them to do that as it is

for other people. I think that any new law that would have the effect or impact to preclude them from participating in that process would be a retrograde step. In terms of the young people I alluded to earlier, certainly my experience has been that young people are interested in our democratic process and that they are also interested in a whole range of issues.

Some of the issues young people raised with me through my Youth Advisory Panel I am sure they would like to take to an election and to also participate in that election. For example, my young people have a strong interest in sustainability. In fact, tomorrow I will be going to one of my local schools and undertaking a tour of a whole range of sustainability initiatives undertaken by young people at the school. Another school is visiting to learn from them, so young people are not only talking about things but they are actually doing things in our community. It is an important political issue and one issue that my party has quite different policies from those of the government, particularly at the federal level. I think that the young people in our community should have a right to voice their opinion and also right to voice their vote on these issues.

Young people are particularly concerned, like other members of our community, about mental health, particularly the mental health of young people and the impact of COVID on their lives, but there is also an increasing sense of powerlessness in our young people. They feel they have less capacity to influence the things that happen to their lives. COVID is one example, but there are a whole range of events that happen in our society. I will come to a couple of other

issues that are impacting my particular community, such as increasing pressures on them to achieve at school and the importance of getting a good ATAR, to get a good university education, to get a good job, etc. While there are an increasing number of pathways to get to university, there is certainly pressure on young people to achieve that. One of the things that has come up in my Youth Advisory Panel when they talk about this issue is the provision of mental health services, and that is certainly a view of young people in my community.

It is important to have the capacity and the ability to make judgements on election day about this because it does impact them—that is, there are insufficient services being delivered to young people or available to young people for mental health issues. Dr Naomi Rutten, a local GP who specialises in mental health—in fact, her practice is now a mental health practice—cannot take new people on her books for about six months, and this is at the primary care level. The waitlist is endless. This is one of the issues that young people would like to ensure they have an opportunity to express their view about. More so than my generation, young people place greater weight on respectful relationships, not only between genders but between people of other cultural backgrounds, sexuality, etc.

They have a much greater understanding and a greater acceptance of people from a whole range of different backgrounds, and relationships between people have to be much more respectful. We have had some recent examples of some rather disrespectful language, which has been made public. Young people actually do

value that and they want to see laws change and policies change, and for that to happen they have to be able to vote. I think they should have the right to vote, and any law that takes away that right by the way it impacts on them is wrong. Climate change is another major issue that young people raise with me. They certainly do not support the current lack of policies at the federal level in relation to climate change and they would like an opportunity at both the state and federal levels to have their say on that.

The cost of further education is another issue they raise with me and how this generation is burdened with a debt once they leave university, unlike previous generations. That is certainly having a negative impact on their forming their own households and investing in a new home, etc., because this debt is an enormous burden on them. In my electorate, they have a particular interest in public transport. At the moment, the lack of trains is causing a huge problem for students in my area, not only for those who are trying to get to study but also for those who study and do some part-time work to support their education and living. The lack of good substitute services is causing quite a few difficulties for young people, amongst others. Recently, when I was at one of the bus stops people waiting told me they were concerned about the length of time the bus takes. If you are able to get one of the express services, that is fine but, if you are not, it can take up to an hour and 40 minutes to get to the city and back. If you go somewhere else for work, it takes even longer. One of the other issues which has been raised with me by young people and which I am sure they would have a strong view on and would want to

vote on on election day—and I think this is probably one of the reasons this government is trying to make sure as few young people as possible are able to vote on election day—is all the various cuts the government have made to TAFE that are impacting directly on our young people and their families. In my electorate, the government have closed down courses available to local young people and moved them to the southern side of the city.

People say, so what? Well, for a lot of people who perhaps do not have a car of their own and need to use public transport, etc., it makes it very difficult to access TAFE, particularly at a time when we are trying to ensure that young people enter vocational training because of a lack of skills, which has been foreshadowed. Not only has this government closed down programs in my area but it has also moved some of the programs online, which are then run by interstate companies, making it more expensive as well. This government's lack of commitment to public vocational education that is accessible and available to all, is an issue young people hold dear, as do their families, because the increasing costs and the increasing cost of transport, etc., are often borne by the families.

That is an issue I believe they should have a right to express their view about on election day. When you look at these issues and the views of young people, in some ways it makes sense that this government is trying to make sure they do not vote because they are certainly not going to get these young people's votes. They are not going to get the votes of those people who wait hours for an ambulance. They are

certainly not going to get any in my town, where we only have one ambulance service and where people do not feel safe because of the lack of health services.

These people want to vote and want to have a say in the election. What the government is doing here is trying to make sure it removes those people from the roll in an indirect way, preventing them from having their say on election day. If that was not enough, for the last year and a half our society has been turned upside down by COVID-19. It has disrupted all our lives. It has hurt some of our lives. I am one of the fortunate ones in terms of impact on me, but there are a lot of other people who have been greatly impacted by COVID-19, particularly a lot of older people in my community who are living in greater isolation. One would think that with so much change and impact from COVID, the government would be putting its attention towards addressing those issues.

Also, if this Premier believes he is doing as well as he thinks he is, then why is he trying to reduce people's capacity to vote? If he is doing a really great job, he should be saying, 'We will make enrolment as easy as possible because I am going to win as big as I can.' I think this is really an admission that this government wants to actually get off the enrolment books as many people as possible because they are not confident, because they have not done a good job.

Certainly, the commissioner and Professor Spurrier have done a good job leading this state—that has been quite clear—but when you look at other things the government has not

done that. Very quickly, I would like to discuss the issue of print media. This is just another nail in the coffin of regional papers by this government.