

President; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Bruce Donaldson; Hon Ed Dermer; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Ljiljana Ravlich; Hon Ken Baston

LOCAL GOVERNMENT VOTING SYSTEM

Urgency Motion

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths): I have received a letter in these terms -

I wish to advise that pursuant to Standing Order 72 I will move at today's sitting the following motion:

"That this House considers as a matter of urgency the adverse impacts of the new voting system upon Local Government."

The letter is from Hon Robyn McSweeney. The member will require the support of four members in order to move the motion.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [3.43 pm]: Thank you, Mr President. I have had to borrow some glasses, because I left mine at home, so I am hoping that I can see what I have in front of me! I move the motion standing in my name.

In the local government elections that were held on Saturday, the voter turnout was the lowest that it has been for a very long time since postal voting was first introduced. When people had to vote in person in local government elections, the voter turnout was about 22 per cent. When local governments moved to postal voting, the average voter turnout was about 38 per cent, and in some local governments it went up to about 60 per cent. However, in the most recent local government elections, some put the voter turnout at 30 per cent and some put it at 35 per cent. It was certainly very low. This was, in part, because of the government's forced change to the local government voting system from first past the post to proportional preferential. A proportional preferential voting system is very easy to rot, in my humble opinion. It is very clear that that is what occurred in the local government elections that were held on Saturday.

When the Local Government Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2007 came into this house, it was sent to a committee. What Hon Bruce Donaldson and I said at that time was very prophetic. We detailed why we did not like the proposed new voting system. We believe that the evidence and the submissions that were put to that inquiry showed clearly that there had been no call to change the local government voting system. It was simply blatant political posturing. There was no reason to change the local government voting system, which had worked well for the previous 10 years, other than the fact that it was Labor Party platform, policy and philosophy. The proposed change to the local government voting system ignored the recommendation from the Local Government Advisory Board that the current first past the post voting system be retained. There was overwhelming opposition by many local government authorities to the proposed change, and there still is. There has been no public benefit from this change. In fact, the public has been let down badly, because, in my opinion, the Department of Local Government and Regional Development, whether at the direction of the minister or not, did not educate the community sufficiently so that people would know whether they had to tick the box or number the box. Therefore, people just did not bother to vote in this election, because it was too difficult. There was also a clear lack of consultation with local government authorities. When Hon Jon Ford was the Minister for Local Government, I attended a function as shadow Minister for Local Government. There must have been at least 300 local government people at that function, and they all said that they had not been consulted enough. They said also that they believed there was no need to change the voting system.

They also raised their concern that the change to the local government voting system would lead to political interference. It is clear from the local government elections on Saturday that there was political interference by union members, who used their numbers to get elected to local government. I believe - the minister can correct me if I am wrong - that three out of the five candidates from Alcoa were elected to the local government in their area. If that is not political interference, I do not know what is.

The proposed changes created three types of vote counting, because there was not just first past the vote and preferential proportional, but also preferential. Evidence from New South Wales and Queensland shows that political factional and alliance groups have an influence in elections. While it is recognised that there is some political influence in local government elections, that is very much under the radar; it is not overt. We believed that the political influence would become overt once this system was in place, and that certainly seems to be the case.

An extract from a Western Australian Local Government Association advertisement that was placed before this change states -

Councils are highly likely to be hijacked by party politics or by directed alliances under the State Government's plan to force changes to the Council election system.

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It would mean that instead of representing the direct interest of ratepayers, Councillors would become political party stooges that vote on issues as directed by their party.

If that is not the case, why would union members want to get into local government? Why would they want to stand on a platform of being union members and seek to use their influence as union members? There must be a reason. The advertisement goes on to state -

Consultation with the community on significant projects would become irrelevant as ultimately any decision would be determined by Councillors voting on party lines.

God forbid that should ever happen in local government, because local government is the grassroots of the community. The community should be where local politics remains. Local government should not be run on party lines.

I will read into the *Hansard* the wording of an advertisement by the Western Australian Local Government Association that appears in today's paper. The headline is "Count the Votes and then Count the Cost of the New Election Process". There has been a cost. It reads -

The first elections under the proportional preferential voting system in Local Government are now complete however it could well be weeks before we realize the full impact of what this change will mean for the sector.

Already there is some indication that voter turn out has declined with the first year of the new process which is in direct contrast to the trend of recent years. And this is at a time when WALGA has invested more resources than ever before in encouraging voter participation including a Statewide television advertising campaign.

The State Government should be ashamed at giving the reason that it was "Labor Party policy" to introduce the new system. Governments are supposed to govern for all and the overwhelming majority of Councils did not want this change.

That was made very clear in the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs report. It continues -

It should be no surprise though that the new system has set back the election process in local communities. It is more confusing for electors, facilitates manipulation and was imposed by the State Government who then all but walked away from supporting its implementation.

For example the Electoral Commission of WA organized staff to advise Councils on running in person voting only for there to be reports that the software provided did not work. Meanwhile Councils running postal elections have received claims from individuals that they have been sent multiple voting packs from the Commission.

I would like the minister to comment on this when she responds. I have heard that, in my own area of Bridgetown, individualised voting ticket systems were sent out with the Electoral Commission voting slips. I would like to know whether that should have been done. I cannot confirm that it happened, because someone merely told me, but it seems to me that the Electoral Commission should be sending ballot papers only with information that is allowable under the Electoral Act and not allowing personal voting tickets and information from intended councillors to go out with the packs. Down the track somewhere the Electoral Commission should be able to send out voting slips and a separate packet containing information from the candidates. That report certainly needs checking. The WALGA comment continues -

In addition, the new system requires electors mark a number in each box on the ballot paper. However, adding to the confusion, if there are only two candidates then you are requested to mark only one box. This situation is exacerbated if there are Mayoral elections as well as Councillor elections in your area and you are sent ballot papers for each with conflicting instructions.

Also as predicted by WALGA, the change in voting system has helped facilitate greater manipulation of Council elections by major political parties and well-financed interest groups.

The most public example of this was reported on the front page of the West Australian concerning four of the State's biggest unions attempting to have their representatives elected to various Councils from which to oppose Alcoa.

Now of course the unions could have run campaigns to elect their representatives under the previous first-past-the-post however that process, because of its simplicity, would have been more transparent. Backroom deals, running mates and dummy candidates have little use in the first-past-the-post system but are essential to being elected by the PPV system.

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Under the first-past-the-post electors know exactly who they voted for. However under the preferential system this is not always the case and under the proportional preferential system the outcome is even more clouded.

For example under the preferential system, many people still do not understand that a vote for an independent candidate almost always ends up going to a candidate from one of the two major political parties. Indeed in State and Federal elections people at times vote for an independent candidate because they do not want to give their vote to either of the major parties - but ultimately they do, that is how the preferential system allocates votes.

However the most concerning potential consequence of the PPV system is that Local Government could lose its connection with the community as has occurred with States and Federal governments.

If Councils also become slaves to the two-party system then the community will have lost its voice - replaced by the machinations of faceless and distant political heavyweights who decide both who will represent community interests and their agenda.

I remain optimistic that any candidates elected on a ticket contrived by a political group will choose to serve the interests of the communities they represent. At worst this is naive, at best hopeful, but the alternative is to accept that communities no longer count in our system of government.

What a terrible indictment on this government coming from Councillor Bill Mitchell, the President of the Western Australian Local Government Association. We knew this would happen. Hon Bruce Donaldson, who was the first President of WALGA, and many members on this side of the chamber who have been councillors knew it was very plain that this sort of thing would start to occur. In my own area, a very good man was knocked out of the council because a pressure group got together and put a ticket out. They did it because they were opposed to a biomass plant going into the area. I hope, in the same way that Councillor Bill Mitchell does, that once they become councillors they will realise that there are many and varied issues. However, Councillor Derek Dilkes would have been elected under the first-past-the-post system. It transpires that he was not re-elected to local government on Saturday under the PPV system. I feel very sorry for the community, because he is like many councillors in country communities who work extremely hard. They put in many hours of work that nobody knows about. They are very kind and caring and committed to the community. They are not single-issue people. I am not saying that those people who were elected in my area will be single-issue people, but the fact is they all got together and put out a ticket. That can be done under preferential voting, but proportional preferential voting will change the landscape. I think that is a great shame for local government.

I have mentioned before the lower return of postal votes. Only a third of the postal ballots mailed to more than one million voters across Western Australia have been returned.

Hon Ljiljana Ravlich: Who said that?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Councillor Bill Mitchell said it yesterday.

Hon Ljiljana Ravlich: We have not got the final figures from the Electoral Commission and we will not have them until Friday, but keep going.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: We might not have the final figures, but I believe that the figures will probably come out at about 32 or 33 per cent; I do not think it will be 40 per cent. In some areas where there has been a really hot issue, there could be a 70 per cent return because people might want to oust sitting councillors. However, I think the minister will find that with this change to preferential proportional voting, the system will become political.

HON BRUCE DONALDSON (Agricultural) [3.59 pm]: The house would be fully aware that I voted against the Local Government Amendment Bill 2006. I did so for a number of reasons, and some of those fears have come to fruition. There are three systems of counting votes. One is first-past-the-post voting, the next is preferential voting and the next is proportional preferential voting. I hope that by the time the Parliament comes back after the fortnight's break, the Minister for Local Government will have been given figures that will show how many voters were involved in first-past-the-post voting. In the ward in which I voted, there were only two candidates. The system was for first-past-the-post voting, so I could mark only one of two boxes.

The second system of voting is the preferential system. A number of wards had votes cast in the preferential system - the old system that was in place for a number of years - and a number of wards had votes cast under the proportional system. An overwhelming number of electors in Western Australia would come under those first two categories. An argument that was advanced for a change to the voting system was that the new system would be more democratic. The evidence given to the committee at that time was that the first-past-the-post system would apply to three or four major councils; that is, the system would apply to more than 400 000

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electors, or about one-third of electors in Western Australia. Therefore, it is quite hypocritical to say that WA needed a change because the system was undemocratic when one-third of electors can put a number one in a box on the ballot paper. Concerns were expressed about tickets being run in a proportional representation system, but the same concerns can be held about the preferential system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some tickets were put up to simply take vengeance on either a company or persons.

The recent trend with postal voting has been in direct contrast to the trend of recent years. This is worrying. When I was in local government, I always advocated for a move to postal voting in the hope that people who would not go along on a Saturday to cast their vote may vote from home. I thought that this system may produce a better voter turnout than had been occurring, because the turnout had been very low. In the big councils like Stirling and Wanneroo, nine or 10 per cent of people voted, which is not a good enough sample of electors. The number of people voting increased when postal voting was introduced. I am very sorry to see the trend go the other way now. Whether the method of voting was the sole cause of the low turnout, or whether it was the result of confusion, I do not know. I am interested to see the informal vote result involving people who were sent postal voting forms and became confused. However, it has been said that some unions were running tickets in councils to oppose a particular company. That is anecdotal evidence, and it will be interesting to see the wash-up of that process down the track. Let us be honest about it: such tickets have been run in the eastern states. Rightly or wrongly, it is within the law and people can do what they like to create that situation.

Local government will have to look very closely at the message that was given by voters at this election. Was it complete apathy? Was it confusion about the new voting system? Was it the change of time for the vote from May to October; have voters not become accustomed to that date yet? Was the result a reflection of the fact that we have been in a situation like a federal election campaign for 12 months, and maybe people had switched off? People said, "What the heck? We've got to go and vote again, and we'll be voting again in a few weeks' time!" I do not know. I think there was a hiccup in Victoria Park, and the wrong ballot papers were sent out to one ward -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That is not an issue with the system.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: No.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That was an Electoral Commission administrative function.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: I realise that. I was not suggesting otherwise.

At the end of the day, the house needs the answers concerning the break-up of how voters cast their votes and the message they sent. I do not know how that will be tracked. There was no exit polling, and it is difficult to know the intention with postal voting. Maybe somewhere along the line the Minister for Local Government will ensure that the local government department will use the figures from the Electoral Commission to look at that issue.

I notice that the president of the WA Local Government Association is floating the idea of compulsory voting with member councils.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It is from one extreme to the other! He has really changed his tune.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: He is a very forward, progressive thinker.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I have a lot of time for him.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: That issue has been around for a long time in local government. The compulsory voting issue has been talked about for at least the last 18 years, but without a groundswell of support. Does forcing people to the ballot box make the system more democratic? People cannot be forced to vote. They can be forced to go to the ballot box in one form or another. Twenty per cent of people do not turn up for state government by-elections. Those people may get fined, I guess, unless they have some very good excuse for not voting. Australian local governments are getting a bit carried away at the moment as they think they might get recognised in the Constitution. If that ever occurs -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: They will. If Labor is elected, that is exactly what will happen.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: That suggestion has been around for a long time. To what extent or how that is progressed will be interesting to see. If that is to be the case, there will be a very strong message -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Would you oppose it?

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: I was all for local government being in the Constitution.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Would you support the Labor position?

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Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: I would have supported any party, as I believe that local government should be recognised in the Constitution. After all, it is the third sphere of government. I hate the old cliché that it is the government closest to the people, but -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Anyway, it is good that you would support it.

Hon Norman Moore: Not everybody on this side would support it.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: No. A lot of people would. I have not lost the brainwashing from local government. I was mixed up with the Australian Local Government Association for a few years representing Western Australia, during which time this issue was debated quite strongly. I have not lost that support for local government. If local government is recognised in the Constitution, it will bring a number of other changes with it. Local government will have to look in its own backyard first.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: There would be an Australian council of local governments, too, of course.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: There is now. There is an association for local government from all states.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It is not the same.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: Oh, yes. The association has a meeting in November every year, as the minister knows. This year I think it is meeting in Darwin or Alice Springs. It is a gathering of Australian local government, and councillors from all over Australia attend. Some pretty good debates occur at those meetings. At the moment, both state and federal governments tend to think, "Who is local government at the end of the day? They are creatures of our state." Local government is not recognised as other than that.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: They should be recognised.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: Different ministers from different governments have said, because of legislation, "Local government is a creature of ours; we established you, and we will determine your outcome at the end of the day." I hope that when the minister gets the figures back from the Electoral Commission, she can give the house an overview of the numbers at this election in the interests of this house.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Yes.

HON ED DERMER (North Metropolitan) [4.08 pm]: I listened, both today and through the debate on the bill to change the local government voting system, to the proposition that somehow first-past-the-post was a superior voting system, and that having a preferential or proportional system would introduce party politics into local government and, in various ways, be less democratic than the first-past-the-post system. I strongly hold the view that the opposite is true. I do not believe that Hon Robin McSweeney has effectively demonstrated any adverse impact from the use of preferential and proportional voting at the most recent local government elections. I found her claim that there had been evidence of rotting extraordinary, and I hope that she does the right thing with that evidence and puts it forward to the proper authorities to be assessed.

I will endeavour to explain why it is a very valid point to say that both preferential voting and proportional representation voting are more democratic than the first-past-the-post system. It is clear that two of the nations that have done the most to advance democratic institutions in the world, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, have first-past-the-post voting. People might put that forward as evidence that they more or less invented modern democracy. I understand that a third nation, Switzerland, at least until recently, also has used first-past-the-post voting. However, what we are talking about are the prototypes of democracy. They adopted first-past-the-post voting, I think, because it is a relatively simple system. The closest I have heard to a merit for the first-past-the-post voting system is its simplicity. I agree that it is simple, but I will put forward a case this afternoon to make it very clear that first-past-the-post voting is less democratic. It is far more open to rotting and manipulation than either preferential or proportional representation voting systems. In an election for one vacancy between two candidates, obviously there is no difference between any of the three systems. There is only one vacancy and the candidate with the largest number of votes will be elected. First-past-the-post voting becomes very problematic when more than two candidates are involved. If there are three candidates, a candidate can be elected with 33.34 per cent of the vote. That means, of course, that 66 per cent plus of voters went to the trouble of voting and made a very deliberate decision to reject that candidate but the candidate was imposed on them contrary to their will. If there are four candidates for a single vacancy position, it means that just over one-quarter of the voters can achieve their will of having one candidate elected and just under three-quarters of the voters will have wasted their votes. Even though just under three-quarters of the voters did not want that candidate, their will would have been overcome by just over one-quarter who might vote for one of the four candidates. Mathematically, this continues. If there are five candidates, obviously just over 20 per cent of votes will be enough to get the candidate elected and, correspondingly, it continues.

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Where this becomes a very serious problem for some of Australia's neighbours is among various Pacific Island countries where there has been very serious political instability. In my view, the adoption of first-past-the-post voting has contributed to that. In some of these countries, there are a very large number of candidates. If, for example, there are 10 candidates, a person can be elected with just over 10 per cent of the vote. That results in a very small number of people being represented and the votes of a very large number of people excluded. Their vote is essentially wasted if there are a large number of candidates, because on first-past-the-post voting, if there are 10 candidates, a candidate can be elected with little more than 10 per cent of the vote. That does happen. That means, of course, little more than 10 per cent count of those who vote. If there is optional voting, that can be a very small percentage indeed. I think this contributes to the instability in the Parliaments of Pacific Island nations where candidates can be elected with a very small proportion of the vote. They have found themselves open to being persuaded to change parties and allegiances once they have entered Parliament. That leads to further absurdities in which there are rules preventing Parliament from undertaking a lack of confidence in the government vote within a prescribed period.

To put it very simply, if there is first-past-the-post voting and three candidates contest a single vacancy, just under two-thirds of the voters can have their votes wasted and the area can be represented by just over a third of those who voted. If there are more than three, it becomes a more serious problem.

Hon Norman Moore: When did you change your mind on preferential voting?

Hon ED DERMER: First-past-the-post is open to -

Hon Norman Moore: You used to be totally opposed to preferential voting because you reckon the Liberal Party and the National Party -

Hon ED DERMER: Hon Norman Moore has been here much longer than I have. The Labor Party has not been opposed to preferential voting in my time. It is interesting because Hon Norman Moore reminds us that preferential voting in Australia - which I think is an excellent system because it overcomes that problem I referred to; that is, prevents a situation in which a person is elected with the support of less than half the voters, which occurs often with first-past-the-post - was introduced by Prime Minister Billy Hughes. I understand from a work by Antony Green "History of Preferential Voting in Australia" -

Hon Barry House interjected.

Hon ED DERMER: I think it was during his Nationalist phase because the by-election for the electorate of Swan in Western Australia occurred in October 1918, so it was post the 1917 referendum split in the Labor Party. By then Billy Hughes was a Nationalist. Billy Hughes' problem was the invention of the Country Party, so Hon Murray Criddle might be interested in this. In the seat of Swan by-election in 1918, a 21-year-old candidate from the Labor Party, Edwin Corboy, was elected with 34.4 per cent of the vote, with the Nationalist candidate receiving 29.6 per cent and the Country Party candidate receiving 30.4 per cent. I wish, retrospectively, Mr Corboy all the very best. However, this is a very clear example of how first-past-the-post failed the people of Swan because the majority of them were conservative voters and, in the end, the will of just over a third of voters prevailed over the will of just under two-thirds. The preferential voting system ensures that a majority of the voters, if not by their primary vote, at least by their preference, have the final say over who represents them. That to me is democracy, and that is why it is a much better system than is first-past-the-post. First-past-the-post voting is given to rotting. For example, in local government there might be a hot issue in the town and certain candidates want money spent on a new stadium and others do not. Under first-past-the-post, the simplest thing for a candidate who has minority support to do is to encourage a dummy candidate to run on the same platform as his opponent to split the opponent's vote and in that way manipulate first-past-the-post voting so that he can prevail. I wish I was not under this time pressure because these examples might benefit from further illustration.

It is important also to recognise the advantage of proportional representation voting. I have demonstrated that preferential voting makes sure that at least 50 per cent of the voters are represented by the successful candidate. With proportional representation voting, voters can ensure that even more than 50 per cent of voters are represented. If, for example, there are two vacancies to be filled by proportional representation in a field of however many there might be, just over two-thirds of the voters will have their vote count either in the primary form or by preferences. The vote of two-thirds of the voters is not wasted in the proportional representation system. If there were three candidates in a proportional representation election, three-quarters of the voters would have some say in determining the outcome. In that way, even fewer voters would have their vote wasted than they would under either preferential or first-past-the-post. Preferential is clearly preferable to first-past-the-post voting.

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HON PAUL LLEWELLYN (South West) [4.19 pm]: I was a member of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, which looked into the Local Government Amendment Bill that sought to change the local government voting scheme. In fact, we split the bill and referred part of it to the committee so that it would receive fair scrutiny. The urgency motion states -

That this House considers as a matter of urgency the adverse impacts of the new voting system upon Local Government.

The words “adverse impact” are an assumption. The motion must be evidence based and must not make an assumption. What evidence is there that the Local Government Amendment Bill (No. 2) has had an adverse impact? Who has done the evaluation? How can we test the evaluation? They are the principles that we must use to make a judgement rather than to make an assertion. Having said that, it is clear that the proportional and preferential voting system that has been introduced will change the way representation takes place in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it supports the majoritarian principle. The majoritarian principle is when the majority of people support the candidate who has been elected. Hon Ed Dermer outlined the majoritarian principle fairly clearly. Through a preferential system, the majority of people elect a candidate. That representation is more robust than is representation achieved by the first-past-the-post system, whereby a small number of people can elect a candidate. That is a structural failing of the first-past-the-post system. Secondly, another important principle when considering the amendment to and the operation of the Local Government Act is the principle of proportionality. Proportionality allows a candidate, when there are more than two or three candidates, to be elected by preferential and proportional voting. That ensures that the candidate is elected in proportion to the community’s sentiments. The principle of proportionality is important and should be reflected in local government elections, as it is in this house. Through the proportional voting system, the representatives of local government will be more diverse. That is an important principle.

The number of people who turn out to vote will impact on the proportional and majority systems. Voting is voluntary at the local government level. Western Australia is not the same as all the other states. The Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs examined which states have voluntary local government elections and which do not. I will not go into it detail, other than to say that on page 18 of the committee’s report is a summary of the electoral systems of local government in the other states. Voting is compulsory in New South Wales for electors who are enrolled on the state electoral roll; it is compulsory in Victoria for those people who are on the electoral roll for council elections; it is compulsory in Queensland; and it is voluntary in South Australia and Tasmania. That suggests that the principles of proportionality are changed when voting is either compulsory or voluntary.

I now refer to some of the arguments made against the preferential voting system. It is said that it is too complex. We can check the evidence to determine whether people believe that marking a number in a box is more complicated than ticking a box in one, two or three boxes. I do not think that the electors find putting a number in a box too complex. That is evidence based. We can and should check the number of people who have defaulted in the recent local government elections to find out whether a greater or lesser number of people defaulted in these elections than was the case in past elections. This motion has been moved too soon. Another argument concerns the low voter turnout. I took the liberty to look at the Electoral Commission’s website. The early figures indicate that the turnout - that is, the responses that were sent by mail - was 34 per cent or 35 per cent, and in 2005 it was 38 per cent. That is in the same ballpark, given that the date of the election was changed. That does not demonstrate a major failing of the new system. Statistically, it may be a small decrease, but it is not a strong case against the preferential voting system. The lack of voter turnout is not an argument against the changes. The number of informal votes will provide evidence of whether the system is too complex, and that is measurable. The number of complaints received by the Electoral Commission is another parameter that can be measured to determine whether the new system has had an adverse impact. To date, 79 complaints have been made to the commission, compared with 72 complaints at about the same time for the last elections. Most of the complaints were about the electoral advertising material and not the voting system.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: Ask the local governments.

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: I am merely presenting a factual account of why the current electoral system for local government has not, on the basis of the evidence, had an adverse impact. The one area that remains somewhat in dispute is the politicisation of local government elections. It was argued that local government would become dominated by political parties. The Shire of Denmark, where I live, is dominated by real estate agents and land developers. Maybe we should not allow members of the Real Estate Institute of Western Australia to run as candidates in local government. Maybe people from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia should not be allowed to run for local government in groups, which they certainly do. Members can guess which party they belong to. This matter must be decided on the basis of evidence and not on

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conjecture and assertions. The proof of the pudding of the Local Government Amendment Bill (No. 2) and the new local government electoral system will be in the eating.

HON LJILJANNA RAVLICH (East Metropolitan - Minister for Local Government) [4.28 pm]: I am quite pleased that Hon Robyn McSweeney has moved this motion today to look at the adverse impact that the new voting system has had upon local government. Everything I have seen indicates that there has not been an adverse impact. Some members opposite might be ideologically opposed to the democratic workings of local government and to holding democratic elections for local government. In a democracy, people vote for the people they want elected. The argument that the change to the voting system would bring the world to an end did not eventuate.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: What's this?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Members opposite are saying that there is something wrong with the preferential and proportional voting system. That system has been used to elect members of the Legislative Assembly since 1911, members of the House of Representatives since 1918, members of the Legislative Council since 1987, and members of the Senate since 1949. If members opposite are saying that at the next federal election they will not vote using the existing system but will use a first-past-the-post system because it is a better system to use, they should go right ahead.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: And Bill Mitchell does not know what he is talking about, does he?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: It defies logic. It defies logic also that members opposite have not put pressure on any government to change either the federal or state voting system to a first-past-the-post system. One would think that the first-past-the-post system was the only system that ever existed, and that it has stood the test of time, but it was first used in WA in the 1997 local government elections, and only five elections have occurred under the system since then.

Having said all of that, Hon Robyn McSweeney, asks "What's this?" Bill Mitchell made a press release, which is quite amazing. The background to this press release is that the Western Australian Local Government Association spent some \$700 000 on a campaign against the changes to the electoral system. I have a lot of time for Mr Mitchell, and by and large we get on well. However, that does not mean I accept the position of Mr Mitchell and WALGA on absolutely everything. The simple fact is that this press release is laden with incorrect statements that are purported to be fact. The release reads -

Already there is some indication that voter turn out has declined with the first year of the new process which is in direct contrast to the trend of recent years.

In fact, we will not know the results on voter turnout until this Friday, when the Western Australian Electoral Commission presents a final report on voter turnout and a range of other issues, such as the percentage of informal vote. We can speculate all we like, but until such time as we receive the report from the Electoral Commission, that is exactly what we will be doing - speculating. The press release goes on to say -

It is more confusing for electors, facilitates manipulation and was imposed by the State Government who then all but walked away from supporting its implementation.

Nothing could be further from the truth. My understanding is that there was very little confusion amongst people who had to fill out the ballot papers. In fact, the preliminary figures indicate that the percentage of informal vote was about one per cent - no different, as I understand, from that of the last first-past-the-post election in 2005. That would not indicate that what has happened is a disaster. That indicates to me that people understand the voting system - it is used in the state and federal elections - and they are very intelligent people. So, that statement is technically wrong.

To suggest that the government imposed this legislation and simply walked away from it and left it in the lap of the gods is also not correct. The Department of Local Government and Regional Development worked very hard. It prepared software in conjunction with the Western Australian Electoral Commission, and it was provided free to all local governments to assist them with the count. A lot of legwork was done with local governments and there was a lot of confidence in local governments that the software would work. Trial counts were conducted with all local governments that were running their own elections, with the department assisting, either in person or via a telephone connection. The department also conducted candidate information seminars and a broad-based community awareness campaign. Trained staff were made available to support returning officers on election night. The response was very positive, to the extent that all the in-person voting counts were in by 11.30 on Saturday night.

Certainly, the voter turnout in different parts of the state was variable, but that is no different from the way it has always been. In Victoria Park in 2005, the voter turnout was 34.8 per cent, compared with 38.3 per cent in 2007.

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In Kalgoorlie-Boulder, the figure in 2005 was 33.08 per cent, compared with 36.6 per cent in 2007. In the Town of Vincent, the 2005 figure was 34.3 per cent, compared with 36.7 per cent in 2007. The voter turnout in Northam was significantly higher at 50 per cent. I do not want to speculate what the final figures will be for postal and personal votes. Why should I speculate? The Western Australia Electoral Commission will provide that information for us. The press release goes on to say -

Under the first-past-the-post electors know exactly who they voted for.

To me, this implies that they have no idea who they were voting for under the new system. If I take Ron Yuryevich, the Mayor of Kalgoorlie-Boulder, as an example, he lost on one occasion under the first-past-the-post system and has won his seat under the current system. I do not know what that suggests, but to say that people have no idea who they are voting for under a proportional or preferential system does not add up. The simple fact is that people are intelligent. We know they are capable of making decisions and actively participating in a democracy, as they should. There is nothing to fear from this new system, even though some members opposite tried very hard to run a fear campaign. The simple fact is that everything went as expected.

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [4.38 pm]: It is interesting that the minister has said that governments are elected by the proportional system. Only the Legislative Council and the Senate are elected by proportional representation, but not governments. Governments are elected by preferential voting only. What have we achieved here as far as democracy goes, and is it democratic? What are local councils about? They are about local people feeling they can stand to represent their regional areas. A healthy outcome is each individual feeling that he or she has the right to stand for election to council, and that any issues a person brings can be heard and voted on accordingly. Going the other way, proportional representation will introduce groups and party politics into local government, which is a shame. I know Hon Ed Dermer made some points about fairness in a case where there may be 10 candidates standing for a seat, and a candidate can be elected with less than 10 per cent of the vote. That could be argued, but if there are 10 candidates standing for one seat or ward, I am sure each of them would be standing on pertinent issues and would have the opportunity to promote those issues, and people would support them according to how they thought. I think that it is a healthy outcome to have that side of democracy up there. That is a very simple form, and it is very important to keep local government simple.

I refer now to the *Broome Advertiser* of 18 October and an article titled "Alliances in council poll". It alluded to what was happening in the election in Broome. It stated that there were groupings of existing councillors. The article also alluded to the existing councillors Graeme Campbell, Allan Griffiths, Chris Mitchell and Robert Lander, who have backed one another for re-election. New candidates Shane Wood, Shelley Eaton, Corina Martin and Mikka Poelina have formed a second block. The remaining candidate is John McCourt. The article states, in part -

Br Wood said that under the system alignments and associations would need to be formed to get elected.

I think it is quite sad that that has to happen if a person wishes to get elected to local government. The article continues -

"It means it's very unlikely that someone standing alone without some agreement amongst a group of candidates will be successful under the preferential system," he said.

In June this year, WA Local Government Association president Bill Mitchell said proportional preferential voting with its inherent preference distribution mechanism was open to manipulation by big political parties.

That is something I have also alluded to. It continues -

"The new system caters for candidates who can organise dummy candidates, running mates and factional allegiances and the groups best placed to do that are the major political parties," he said.

"Party politics has largely been kept out of local government in this State but this new system of voting is almost certain to result in communities losing control of their councils to the major political parties."

Ms Eaton works three days a week as an electorate officer for State Labor MLC Shelley Archer and Ms Poelina has also worked out of Ms Archer's office.

But Mrs Eaton said her name had not been put forward as a party nomination and she would not be lobbying for Ms Archer's cause.

"I'm looking at running with others who are like-minded in the community . . .

Ms Martin was once employed as an electorate officer for Labor MLA Carol Martin.

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The article was in the local paper. It appears that party politics has already entered Broome for it to get into the press with stories like that. I find that quite disappointing.

Hon Ljiljana Ravlich interjected.

Hon KEN BASTON: I can assure the minister that one of my officers wanted to stand for local government and I would not let him. I said that I did not want people -

Several members interjected.

Hon KEN BASTON: When I said that I would not let him, I meant that I did not agree with it. What would people say? They would say that Ken Baston was trying to influence local government. I think people who stand at that level should not be connected to a political office, thank you very much.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.