

MINING AND PASTORAL REGION - ELECTORAL ISSUES

Statement

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [10.01 pm]: Members will recall that on 21 June this year I informed the house that I had made a submission to the inquiry into civic and electoral education that was being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the federal Parliament. My emphasis in that submission was on indigenous electoral issues as they relate to my electorate. I wish to inform the house that I was invited to and appeared before that committee on 21 September and gave evidence to support my written submission. In that evidence I stated that I had three areas of primary concern regarding my electorate: the need to provide identification for enrolment purposes, particularly with regard to how it affects the indigenous population; the lack of education of those who live in rural and remote areas of Western Australia, particularly with regard to their right to be on the electoral roll and their right to vote; and the way in which the Australian Electoral Commission roll is purged on a regular basis. The details concerning these issues are contained in my written submission, so I will not go into them in any further detail.

In general, the committee members were courteous and canvassed the various issues I had raised in my written submission. However, I was attacked by one member of the committee over the issue of the purging of the electoral rolls of remote communities, and for having regard to the cultural issues of Aboriginal people if we want them to vote. The federal member was very rude and constantly interrupted me to the point at which I had to ask him to let me finish my explanations. He appeared to have no idea of the situation in remote Aboriginal communities. If his attitude typifies the thinking of the right of federal politics, it is no wonder that the indigenous people are facing problems with regard to their right to vote.

The Australian Electoral Commission recently advised my office that it had received a call from a federal member regarding the electorate I had previously lived in. The commission informed me that I had been purged from the electoral roll. I had been purged because the federal member had phoned the electoral commission and said that I no longer lived in the federal electorate. When I told the commission that I understood the process was that the commission had to find evidence that I no longer lived there, and that it is required to do that by providing at least three letters, the commission's excuse was that because I had left that address, it was useless sending me mail. I told the commission that I had put in place a six-month referral of my mail at the post office. I then received the letter from the commission informing me that I had been purged from the roll. In my submission I stated that this type of thing happened and yet the state and federal electoral commissions said that it did not. If I can be purged from the electoral roll - I know my rights - I cannot imagine what would happen to the indigenous people in the north west.

Hon Jon Ford: You are a member of Parliament!

Hon SHELLEY ARCHER: I am a member of Parliament but I have been purged from the electoral roll. That was not very nice of the commission. It was fascinating that the Australian Electoral Commission rang my office to warn me that the federal member had doxed me in for not changing my details. I told the Australian Electoral Commission that I had forwarded it to my new address, but naturally it could not find that anywhere.

The points I made in my written submission to the committee were that the itinerant nature of the life of many people in remote areas, combined with a lack of understanding of the processes involved, meant that the incorrect removal of people's names from the electoral rolls remained a possibility, and that electors in remote communities would be unaware that they had been removed from the roll. The federal member asked if I was saying that a different principle of roll purging should apply to remote communities. I said that I had anecdotal evidence to prove that purges of the roll do occur. I advocated that some consideration within the law and the administrative remit of the Australian Electoral Commission be given to the realities facing Aboriginal electors in remote locations. It bothers me that the federal member of Parliament displayed such little understanding of the lives of the Aboriginal people in our remote communities. I understand that he represents remote communities in Queensland. Not everyone in remote communities can read, and often individual postal addresses are unavailable. Some people ignore official mail, or, if even they do not ignore it, many of them cannot read it or have difficulty understanding it. I have substantial anecdotal evidence to show that electoral purges are conducted constantly. Federal members of Parliament send letters and have indigenous people purged from the roll, in the same way that I was.

On pages 3 and 4 of my written submission to the committee I said that the evidence suggests that the low turnout at remote polling places relates partly to the importance placed by Aboriginal people on various traditional cultural activities, and to many practical exigencies, such as keeping food on the table. Thus absences from polling places may be caused by family funerals that are held in sorry camps at other locations, as well as hunting and fishing. I described a number of barriers and difficulties faced by indigenous people when voting and concluded that it might not be possible to address some of those issues given the cultural importance indigenous people placed on some activities. For example, it is unlikely that voting will be given precedence

over sorry business. This rather unexceptional analysis of some of the issues facing indigenous electors, and my amplification of it to the committee, induced a response from the federal member. He said that this sort of paternalistic approach to Aboriginal people left him very unimpressed, as did the observations I made on pages 3 and 4 of my submission. The federal member of Parliament went on to conclude, quite wrongly, that I was advocating that the electoral laws should be relaxed in favour of people from an indigenous background. I did not say that. What I said, and will continue to say, is that the state and federal electoral commissions need to take cultural issues in remote communities into consideration and provide polling facilities to those communities at an appropriate time. My written submission referred to absent and postal voting facilities being made available to all electors but stated that they were not well understood by remote Aboriginal peoples.

I am concerned to ensure that some of the most disadvantaged members of our communities have their say at elections, by both voting and being enrolled to do so in the first place. I hope that the committee, and perhaps even the federal member of Parliament, will get the point about the need to have regard for the realities of life in remote communities.

House adjourned at 10.10 pm
