

## MINING AND PASTORAL REGION - ELECTORAL ISSUES

### *Statement*

**HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral)** [9.54 pm]: I rise to inform the house this evening that I have recently made a submission to the inquiry into civic and electoral education presently being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the federal Parliament. My emphasis in that submission is on indigenous issues as they relate to the Mining and Pastoral Region. The electorate of the Mining and Pastoral Region covers an area of over two million square kilometres. There are currently about 68 000 electors on the electoral roll of the region. Of those numbers, approximately 2 700 persons, almost all Aboriginal, vote at one of the 60 remote polling places from Bidyadanga to Blackstone and Warburton. The Assembly districts for these remote polling places are the Kimberley, Central Kimberley-Pilbara and Murchison-Eyre electorates, and they have the lowest overall elector turnout rates in the state, at about 75 per cent. The state aggregate turnout was 90 per cent at the last state election. It has been estimated that about only half of those on the roll at those remote polling places cast a vote at the last state election. The turnout rates in the three state electoral districts with remote polling places was between 42 per cent and 54 per cent at the last state election.

Further, an estimated 15 to 20 per cent of indigenous citizens in these remote communities are not even enrolled, compared with estimates of five to seven per cent of unenrolled people across the rest of Western Australia. However, at the last state election, the overall rate of valid votes cast in the Mining and Pastoral Region was fractionally higher, at five to seven per cent, than the overall state figure. Governments need to do more to ensure that some of the most disadvantaged members of our community do indeed have the opportunity to be enrolled and to vote.

There is a range of traditional, cultural reasons that the turnout of Aboriginal electors at remote polling places is so poor. Absences from polling places may be caused by anything from family funerals in other locations, towns or remote communities, to being in sorrow camp, or at their traditional hunting, fishing or other cultural activities. Another impact on people's ability to vote in these remote communities is the fact that elections are generally held in the wet season. Consequently, getting to polling places can be difficult or impossible because communities can be cut off due to flooding, and the only means of transport to communities may be by aeroplane. At the last state election, a major Aboriginal sporting event was being held at Fitzroy Crossing, which meant that quite a number of indigenous members of the community were in Fitzroy Crossing and did not realise that they could vote there.

For some Aboriginal voters in remote communities, English is not even their first language. That makes it even more difficult for them when they are being asked questions by the Electoral Commission employees before they are allowed to vote. Questions such as, "Do you live in the electoral district of Kimberley?" can cause confusion to the itinerant people because they do not understand the concept of the region of Kimberley, when they know they are from Bidyadanga, Warburton or Ringer's Soak, for example. When asked whether they are from the Kimberley region, they say, "No, I'm not", and therefore believe they are unable to vote. Another real problem is the question, "What is your name?" It can have cultural overtones if a voter has had to abandon his or her name as a result of a death in the community. The Northern Territory government provides Aboriginal interpreters at polling places. This is not done at state or federal elections in Western Australia, even at remote polling places. A program must be implemented so that the WAEC provides interpreters to all these communities. Special education programs conducted by state and federal Electoral Commissions immediately prior to elections are mainly to inform those electors of the importance of any arrangements for the elections. They do not address the issues that directly impact on the indigenous populations in the remote and regional areas. The turnout figures for the remote Aboriginal communities are so poor that the effectiveness of these various activities must be questioned. Even though the Australian Electoral Commission has strict policies about removing electors' names from the roll, the itinerant nature of many people in remote areas, combined with a lack of understanding of the processes, means that the incorrect removal of people's names from the roll happens regularly.

The recent Australian Electoral Commission fliers in newspapers were not written in a language easily understood by Aboriginal people in remote communities, and they are unlikely to be effective in these communities. Furthermore, Aboriginal people in remote communities very rarely read the newspapers, so it is even less effective in those communities. At the moment no-one goes out from either the Western Australian or the Australian Electoral Commissions to remote communities on any sort of regular basis to check on enrolment details on the ground. Due to the problems in these areas, the unproclaimed amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 and the Electoral and Referendum Regulations 1940 will have the effect of making the process of enrolling or re-enrolling much more complex for indigenous people than they already are. Simply adding to the enrolment form 47 different classes of persons able to attest, will make the forms more complicated than they are at present.

Another factor is that Aboriginal people often have trouble obtaining the identification needed for enrolment, and are unlikely to do so if there is a cost involved. The WAEC is developing an electoral education strategy that will target remote communities, but significant funds will be needed to make this work. At the moment the WAEC can afford to deliver its joint civics and electoral education presentation only to the larger schools in remote areas. Aboriginal people, including those in the remote communities, have the same rights in a representative democracy as any other citizen and they have the same right of access to the electoral education programs as the rest of the population. We have an obligation to provide special programs to cater for those needs, and failure to do so disfranchises a group that is already the most disadvantaged in Australian society.

There needs to be a cooperative approach between the state and commonwealth to design policies and programs to address the issues of electoral education for indigenous people, and such programs must reach those in remote communities. Failure to address these issues in a culturally appropriate way with a firm commitment of state and federal funds will leave Australia's most disadvantaged people without a voice about their government. I wish the joint standing committee well in its deliberations.