

**ELECTORAL DISTRIBUTION REPEAL BILL 2001**

*Second Reading*

Resumed from 1 August.

**MR EDWARDS** (Greenough) [4.26 pm]: I rise to speak against the Bill. Some of my comments on the Electoral Distribution Repeal Bill may carry over into the Electoral Amendment Bill that we have debated during the past week or so, because they are intrinsically related. I hope the Acting Speaker will give me some latitude on that. I also hope my argument will bear that out.

We are considering the provisions relating to the numbers in and representation of electoral regions and districts. Responsible government has always been the expectation of the average citizen. Democratic countries throughout the world achieve change by consensus. An attempt was made to evaluate the community's opinion through a referendum. However, that came to nought. The Western Australian electoral system has evolved over many years since the first days of European settlement.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr McRae): Can I clarify whether the member for Greenough is the lead speaker for the Opposition?

Mr EDWARDS: No, I am not. I understand it makes a difference to the time, but I am not the lead speaker in this debate.

The average voter in the street does not expect enormous change, such as that which is presently contemplated, without serious consideration by everyone. I hope the Acting Speaker will give me some latitude if I tend to stray from the subject. However, it has been interesting, as a new member of this House, to observe the debate over the past two days or so and the inflexible and uncompromising position the Government is taking on this issue. Perhaps I am naive in thinking that consensus and consideration are part of what government is about. I have not seen much of it in the past couple of days. The Minister for Electoral Affairs has come into this place with what he calls a mandate to make change and, come hell or high water, he and the Government will make that change. I suspect we will see the same intractability with this Bill. Perhaps I am naive but I hope that, because the recommendations we put forward on the many issues of concern in the Electoral Amendment Bill were well thought out and should have been given more consideration, the Government will give greater consideration to our arguments on the Electoral Distribution Repeal Bill. I have always believed that fairness and equitable representation are part and parcel of what we are about in Western Australia. I define fairness as unbiased and reasonable; equitable as balanced and even, a likeness, similarity; and representation as to serve, speak for, embody and portray. That is what we in this Parliament are about. Changing the electoral legislation by removing eight seats from country Western Australia and putting them into the metropolitan area does not show any political fairness. This electoral redistribution will result in unfairness in country representation. I observed the illuminating speech of the member for Pilbara this morning in which he highlighted the "fair and equitable" processes of Labor Party preselection. So much for fairness and political equity!

I refer to some points raised in the High Court decision. I do not put a for and against position, but merely ask the Government to consider them -

... electorates of equal numerical size are not a necessary characteristic of representative government  
...

to ignore community of interest in the creation of electoral divisions and to insist on mere equality of numbers will be likely ... to produce inequality rather than equality of voting value. It is probably impossible to devise a formula for electoral distribution which will necessarily produce equality in voting value, which will ensure that each vote is of equal weight in an election as a whole or even as between electoral divisions."

...

The aim of facilitating the representation of those who live in the thinly populated and remote areas of the State is clearly a legitimate one.

The last point needs to be borne in mind. It has been spoken of at great length by members of the National Party and other rural members of Parliament in this place. The decision also stated that the Western Australian Constitution contains no requirement -

... that the number of voters in electoral districts should be equal or equal so far as is reasonably practicable.

I would like these points recorded in *Hansard* because it is important that people are aware of them. It continued -

The Constitution contains no express requirement that the number of electors in electoral divisions for federal or State elections should be numerically equal or numerically equal so far as is practicable. . . .

it is impossible . . . to conclude that the Constitution intended that either the federal Parliament or, in the absence of federal legislation, a State was required to have equal numbers of electors in the electoral divisions (if any) in each State.

. . .

I do not think that it is established that in Australia the requirement of equality in the numerical size of electoral districts is so universally conceived as a tenet of representative democracy . . .

My main point relates to the numbers of electoral districts. That has been spelt out in this place ad nauseam, but it is pertinent to decisions about electoral boundaries. In electoral distributions, the numbers are all-important.

Most of my notes were intended for the debate on the Electoral Amendment Bill, but I did not have the opportunity of speaking to that this morning, which is why I have on occasion crossed over from the Electoral Distribution Repeal Bill. I could talk at length on issues such as commonality of interest and community of interest, which also were spoken of yesterday. They are important. Community of interest is integral to the Electoral Distribution Repeal Bill.

**MR BOARD** (Murdoch) [4.36 pm]: The minister in his second reading speech said -

. . . there has been a continual evolution in relation to the electoral arrangements for this Parliament.

That is the case. The Constitution and the subsequent Electoral Distribution Act and amendment Bills show a gradual evolution in the electoral arrangements in Western Australia. However, that electoral evolution has been about expanding the Parliament through the number of members and regions in the Assembly and upper House. Such evolution has been about representation for a growing State and protecting our country regions. The 1947 Act clearly indicated that the metropolitan area would comprise 34 seats and that the rest of the State would be divided into 23 areas. The reason for that was representation. Western Australia at that time had a much smaller population than it has today. That provision was enshrined in the 1947 Act for the sole purpose of protecting the future of this State. There was a need to protect our country regions from certain challenges. The Bill before us will, after it proceeds through this Parliament, repeal that protective electoral system without reference to country people.

The single most important change to our electoral system will have happened without consultation with the Western Australian community. The Government will and has claimed throughout this debate that it has a mandate because it went to the election and indicated that this reform was part of its electoral platform. Today I challenge any member in this House to survey their electors, particularly in the city seats, on this issue. We know what the result in country regions would be. I hope that members in the metropolitan electorates survey their constituents. I will make it a mission to conduct my own referendum in the seat of Murdoch to find out whether people support the principle of taking members of Parliament out of the country regions and replacing them with city members, and I hope that other members will do the same.

It is fair to say that if any individual were asked whether they support the principle of one vote, one value, they would say that they do. The principle of one vote, one value sounds fair and just. It sounds like a principle that we should all adhere to, and we do, in principle. If the question were couched in a different way and people were asked whether they would support taking eight country members out of the regions, making those regions larger and replacing the country members with members in smaller city electorates, they would say no. They would say no for exactly the same reason that I stand here and say no; that is, the principle of one vote, one value is different to the actual application in Western Australia.

This Bill would deny regions the important regional representation that it has previously had in the Government, the Parliament and the Cabinet. Being a former member of the Cabinet, I can tell members that the country representation had a significant impact within our party rooms on the government decisions not only in the past eight years, but also before that. The sheer numbers of the voting power of country representation has resulted in the type of budgetary allocations that have gone to country regions. That representation has resulted in money being allocated to regional roads, hospitals and education.

We heard the argument in the debate on the previous Bill that one member could make the same argument and therefore carry the same weight in Cabinet. However, when it comes to voting, pressure groups and fighting for a slice of the cake that is only so big, often the weight of numbers carries the day. Although the principle of one vote, one value is an important principle, no members, particularly the new country members, can tell me that they believe in their hearts that the country regions would be better off by having fewer representatives. They may be able to justify the principle, but they will not be able to justify the regions having fewer members of Parliament.

Mr Quigley: You cannot say Albany was better off with two ministers who took it into recession.

Mr BOARD: The member will find that Albany has benefited greatly over the years, as have many country towns. I am claiming credit not only for the former Government, but also previous Governments. Many country regions have benefited greatly by the number of representatives that they have had in Parliament, and members opposite know that. In their hearts, no member who represents a country region would be able to say that the country areas will be better off, because they know they will not be better off.

Mr Carpenter: Look at the outstanding member for Albany.

Mr BOARD: He may be able to stand up in front of his constituents and explain to them how they are better off with fewer representatives in Western Australia; however, I do not think that the majority of country people will wear that for a moment. They will not believe that. They will not believe that the Government is making these amendments in the interests of country people. The Government is doing it for other reasons, and they know that; it is very transparent.

Mr Carpenter: It depends on the quality of the representation. At the moment Albany has the best representation it has had since "Drummer" Hall, and they are cheering in the streets about it.

Mr BOARD: That will not wash with the country people around the State. Regardless of how good the representative may or may not be, the reality is that the Government will not justify to country people that taking away country members from Parliament and having less representation in this place than they had before is good for them. Over the next year or two, not only will the country people come out in droves against the Government over this issue, but also it will gain momentum in the city. The Government has not yet realised that, as we did during the forest debate. City people will not be happy with the fact that country regions in Western Australia will have less representation.

Every time there is a cutback to health and every time a police station or a road does not get built in the country, it will come back directly to the fact that the country regions do not have fair representation. Members opposite should mark my words that over the next year or two there will be a snowball effect about decisions that the Government makes today. The Government will regret the fact that it acted so quickly so early in its term of Government to lessen country representation. It will become the Government's Achilles heel.

Mr Watson: The former member for Albany was a cabinet minister and a member of the upper House was a government whip, yet we got nothing.

Mr BOARD: How can the member say that Albany got nothing? Did Albany win the tourist town of the year award? Have massive developments occurred in the schools and agricultural colleges in Albany?

Several members interjected.

Mr BOARD: The member for Albany should conduct a tour around his town and come to grips with what has happened there.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr McRae): Order!

Mr BOARD: The member for Albany can rationalise all he likes, but he knows in his heart that what I am saying is correct.

Mr Watson interjected.

Mr BOARD: It may be that for some strange reason the people in Albany want less representation than they have had before.

Mr Watson: They want proper representation.

Mr BOARD: The member should tell that to the rest of Western Australia. That argument will not wash. The member has underestimated the tidal wave, which the Government thinks is a ripple, which will develop in the city. The forest debate became a large issue for the previous Government, and this issue will become large for this Government. If members opposite think that city people will sit back and watch the country get more and more strangled with less support and fewer resources, they have rocks in their heads.

The Government does not have a mandate. I will show that the Government does not have a mandate. Every couple of months, opposition members will come into this Parliament with the results of their surveys throughout -

Several members interjected.

Mr BOARD: If the Government does not want to conduct a referendum, we will have our own. It will be a balanced one, do not worry about that. We will survey the people of Western Australia. We will ask a simple

question: are you happy to see less representation in the country than before? Do members know what people will say? They will say that they did not realise that the Government was going to rip eight seats out of the country and put them in the city.

Mr Marlborough: When the member brings the petition into Parliament -

Mr BOARD: It will not be a petition, I will survey my electorate. I will write to my constituents and ask them what they think of one vote, one value. I will ask them double questions so it can be a balanced view. I will ask them what they think about taking seats out of the country and putting them in the city. I want to know their opinion. I could be wrong, but I doubt it. The member knows in his heart that the majority of people in this State will be shocked to see the results of what is happening here today.

Mr Watson: You are out of touch.

Mr BOARD: No, I am not. As I bring in the results I will remind the Government every few months of the survey that is developing in Western Australia and the number of people who are concerned about this.

Mrs Roberts: Will there be a poster?

Mr BOARD: If the minister is willing to fund it, we can do that. I want to conduct a survey. How many members have had constituents come through their door, unsolicited, saying that they are dying to get more members in the city, that they have got to get members out of the country and give the country less representation, and that they really need one vote, one value - it is killing them that they have not got it? Members are dreaming.

Mr Marlborough: Over the past 16 years a number have come through my door and told me that they prefer me to run Western Australia.

Mr BOARD: That may be the end result of this. There may be only one member for the whole of the State. He will reside in Peel. There is mirth in the House today but the reality is a serious issue. Changes to the Electoral Distribution Act are serious. This evolution will not create more seats or greater representation - it will do the opposite.

Mr Marlborough: In 1894, Alexander Forrest, who was the brother of John Forrest and seen as more intelligent, represented the West Kimberley region without ever setting foot in the place. He never lived there. He ran the same arguments as the member. Does the member know how many voters the seat had in 1894? 89!

Mr BOARD: It would have probably taken him three months to get there. Even though we have better communications, transport, and a whole range of things that have made representation easier, the challenge to maintain growth and equity for country regions is greater than it has ever been.

Today is a day in which - contrary to what the minister has said about this being a continuing evolution in the electoral arrangements of Parliament - it is more like a revolution than an evolution. It is changing the direction of what our forefathers and other members have done: they increased representation and the number of seats but they protected the country regions at the same time. Today we have seen the repeal of a very important piece of legislation that contributes to the totality of our State and which had some vision for the growth of Western Australia. Members of the House will live to regret their support for diminishing representation in our country regions.

**MR AINSWORTH** (Roe) [4.54 pm]: I have listened to the speech by the member for Murdoch and some of the responses from the other side of the House. The Government has successfully passed its legislation through the House today and we accept that the Government was happy to do that. That is the way it works. I was concerned to see the degree of excess levity shown when the member for Murdoch was making a very serious contribution to the debate. I assure the House that when I say these things I am very serious. That is because the system put in place has worked well over the past 100 years. It has been amended and it has not worked against there being a fair distribution of responsibility between Labor and conservative Governments. The first Premier to be designated as a member of a political party as opposed to an appointment was during the first Labor Government, which began in August 1904. From then until the end of the last coalition Government, there have been 45 years of Labor Government and 52 years of conservative Government. Assuming that this Government lasts for the eight years it would like -

Mr Board: It had half a chance of that but after today its chances are zero.

Mr AINSWORTH: That may be so. If one adds eight years to the Labor Party's 45 year tally, the division between Labor and conservative Governments over the past 100 years is equal, apart from one year. That shows that the system we have had does not disadvantage either side of politics. The longest period of any Government since 1970 was the 10-year period of Labor. The representation given by both sides of this House has been such

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Mr Jeremy Edwards; Acting Speaker; Mr Mike Board; Mr Ross Ainsworth

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that there has been no clamour from constituents in either the country or the city for any change. There has been no call from the public in any way for a change to the system because of any detriment to the city voter from the system we currently enjoy. Neither has there been undue concern from the country that people are not properly represented. Long before my 12 years in this place, country constituents were saying that, no matter which side was in government, they still had to fight that little bit harder to get what they believed to be a reasonable share of state resources.

My constituents and my electorate are my primary concern but, when I look at the whole of the State and see that some constituents have gone without basic services or that the quality of the services they have is far below that enjoyed elsewhere, that is inequity. That has been fairly general across a large part of the non-metropolitan area of the State.

That is the sort of thing that has been very prevalent for many years. I recall that when I first came into this place, I did some research, looking back through *Hansard*, to see what some of my predecessors, representing the area where I live in Esperance, had done. One member, who was a Labor member, and represented the area very well, was the late Emil Nulsen, a very well-respected man in his time who is recognised even now, in many places that are named after him. Nulsen Haven in Perth is just one example, but there are many others in the local area that recognise the contribution he made, not just to his electorate, but also to Western Australia. However, that same gentleman, when representing the region that I am now representing, went to great pains to lobby for basic services - such as rail services. Luckily there is now a railway that actually reaches Esperance. It used to stop half way. At that stage, Nulsen was lobbying hard with his city counterparts, in the same way as country representatives do now, to get a fair share of state resources to give his constituency the sort of facilities that many other people in the State take for granted, and do not expect to have to lobby their member of Parliament to achieve. Nulsen was a minister in a Labor Government, and even then had to work extremely hard to get a fair share of the cake. That just illustrates the point, that, with the best will in the world, when a minority group - which is what country areas are, no matter how large - is seeking a fair share of the State's resources, the balance between country and city representation that currently prevails is necessary. One must not dominate the other; rather, there should be fair balance. Unfortunately, with the Bill that has just been passed, and the repeal of this legislation, a fair balance will not exist in the future.

Debate adjourned, on motion by Mr Day.