

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATION

Grievance

MR M. HUGHES (Kalamunda) [9.20 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Local Government. I was interested in the minister's statement to the house on Tuesday and was encouraged to hear of the increase in the number of candidates from diverse backgrounds and the number of women who were elected to local government as a result of the 2017 elections. These are two outcomes that can only lead to an improvement in the representative nature of local governments. I was encouraged also by the observation that we had one of the largest fields of candidates this year. It was also encouraging to learn from the minister about the increase in voter turnout. Despite these improvements, I would suggest that the representative nature of local government is not in a good place. I grieve, minister, particularly because of the evident continuing low voter turnout in my electorate of Kalamunda, despite the observable general increase mentioned in the minister's statement made on Tuesday.

I will use the 2017 election results as a case in point, because they are not exceptional. I contend that the Shire of Mundaring and City of Kalamunda, both in my electorate, are broadly reflective of the local government voter participation or turnout rates across the state. I have a few statistics for the minister. In the City of Kalamunda, the turnout rate for the recent elections was 38.11 per cent, 29.46 per cent, 37.92 per cent and 28.03 per cent across the north ward, north west ward, south east ward and south west ward respectively. This compares with 30.4 per cent, 23.7 per cent, 32.07 per cent and 22.55 per cent for the turnout in 2015. There are increases. This is from a small base and it remains a small base. In reality, the turnout remains well below 40 per cent for the best performing ward and less than 30 per cent for the worst performing ward. The same is true of the Shire of Mundaring. I will not go into those details, but I can provide them to the minister.

The story does not end with the low level of turnout but is compounded by the impact of the current voting methodology on the outcome of the elections. Under the existing first-past-the-post method, the west ward of the City of Kalamunda had two candidates. The winning candidates obtained 63.4 per cent of the 3 736 valid votes cast in the turnout of a mere 37.92 per cent. Although the turnout was low, the simple choice between two candidates for one place indicated a strong preference for the winning candidate. In the north ward, 13 candidates contested for two places, and with a turnout of 38.11 per cent—reasonably respectable on a comparative basis with turnout rates elsewhere—the winning candidates received 17.5 per cent and 17.2 per cent of the valid votes cast. Together, they received a total of 2 316 votes out of a potential 6 710 of the valid votes cast. That is 34.56 per cent of the electorate who voted for the two winning candidates and 65.44 per cent who preferred other candidates. Although all this is compliant with the existing Local Government Act, its provisions, combined with low voter engagement, give people in local government less than what I would argue to be a reasonable representative voice in their council. It is much less than they deserve.

The evident lack of engagement in the local government processes by the electorate across the state is perturbing. Such a low level of participation is worrisome and undermines the representative nature of local government. It tarnishes the legitimacy of local governments as being truly representative of the communities they seek to serve. This state of affairs is somewhat ironic given that many of the issues that constituents present to me involve actions or lack of action by local government and complaints about the level and quality of consultation and engagement by local government with the electors on major issues of importance both individually and collectively. I remind the minister that the Corruption and Crime Commission, in commenting on notable serious misconduct and corruption in several local governments, notably Dowerin and Exmouth, suggested that these and other cases reflect structural weaknesses in the sector that point to a broader need for the review of the Local Government Act 1995. The Corruption and Crime Commission has, in its view, exposed “breathtaking ignorance” of the role and responsibility of local government councillors. Given the low level of participation and voter turnout it is not surprising that maybe we should question the quality of some of the candidates who present themselves for local government.

I have a particular concern about the extent of the delegation of powers and responsibilities held by councillors to their CEOs and then in sub-delegation to officers for planning decisions. I have taken an active interest in planning matters in my local communities for almost 40 years and I see an overuse and over-reliance on delegated authority. It has been a constant theme and source of discontent in the communities that I have been a part of. It would appear that the closest level of government is often regarded as being distant from the people it is elected to serve. Minister, my constituents are very keen to learn what the government plans for the review of local government and the progress that is being made in this area of great public interest.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Minister for Local Government) [9.27 am]: I thank the member for Kalamunda for his grievance this morning and I acknowledge his analysis of the returns in the municipality of the Shire of Kalamunda and the statistics that he has highlighted. A couple of issues have been raised and I am happy to receive his grievance and to comment on them. Overall, the turnout for the 2017 local government elections

was broadly improved, with a 60 per cent increase from the 2015 returns. Was that good enough? The simple reality is that no, it was not. It was very poor and continues to be poor that, on average, we had a 33 per cent turnout this time around. Although it is up, it is still certainly nowhere near what we all would not only hope for, but also expect of people's participation in turning out to make a decision about the governance of their community, the delivery of services and opportunities that local governments are responsible for. Interestingly enough, as the member highlighted, candidate participation increased. A record number of candidates stood in this year's local government elections and there were improvements in the diversity of candidates who were successful in putting themselves forward, and those who were successful. We have more women represented in local government across the state as result of the 2017 local government elections. That is good to see but we still have a very long way to go, quite frankly, before our local councils reflect the diversity of their communities.

I have always held the view and continue to hold the view that a council that reflects the diversity of its community ultimately makes very good informed decisions on behalf of its community. The member raised a few issues that are very important. I have received criticisms of local government over the period of being both the Minister for Local Government and the shadow minister, and a former councillor for the City of Mandurah and deputy mayor in the mid to late 1990s—before the member for Dawesville was probably at primary school. One of the things I have found out about local government is that everyone has an opinion on it. It is probably the most widely canvassed level of government in terms of viewpoints, but it is very important. As the member would be aware, voting was changed some years ago from a preferential system to the first-past-the-post process, and the member's analysis of it across the four wards in the City of Kalamunda is very interesting. I note his criticism, which I think is valid in terms of analysis, of the ultimate number of votes for a person who was elected as opposed to somebody who was not elected. That is a valid concern. It is interesting to note that, again, the same criticism can be highlighted with regard to councils in the state that have no ward system. The member's council has a ward system, of course, but there are some councils with no ward system. As we know from local government elections this time around, in some places where there is a no-ward jurisdiction, some 21 to 30 —

Mr C.J. Tallentire: Thirty-one.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: There were 31 candidates in the City of Gosnells, for example. If we analysed the figures for those candidates, we would see that only a relatively small number of votes returned candidates to those jurisdictions. What are we doing about it? The interesting thing was that the previous government did not want to touch the Local Government Act; it just wanted to fiddle around the periphery. However, it did go into a very interesting, convoluted, expensive and in the end failed reform process in the metropolitan area with forced amalgamations. We opposed this in the 2017 election campaign; our policy was to refuse to go into an amalgamation process. We are different from the other side and believe that the Local Government Act needs a review, which is why I have initiated an extensive review in two phases. The first phase involves the release of the first consultation paper, possibly as early as next week or the week after. This will focus on a couple of key aspects. The issues that the member has highlighted will be addressed in the second phase, because we have time between now and the election in 2019 to look at some issues that he has raised, particularly those around voter participation et cetera. The first phase will address transparency and accountability, which the member has highlighted in his concerns. I look forward to his contribution and submission, and those of his constituents when that consultation document is sent out. It will look at codes of conduct and disclosure, and it will also make sure that information is available to ratepayers in a timely way. A lot of things are done online now, so there is no reason for information not to be sent out in a quick and timely way.

The second phase of the review—the one of particular interest to the member and his constituents—looks at the participation of local government, the ward systems and issues around a candidate's eligibility. I will be meeting with the Western Australian Electoral Commissioner very soon, along with the Western Australian Local Government Association and the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, to talk about the outcomes of the 2017 election. These talks will also address some issues the member highlighted. It is important that we get the review of this act right. I thank the member for his grievance and for his interest in local government. It is very much appreciated.