

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL 2023**

*Second Reading*

Resumed from 21 March.

**MR P. LILBURNE (Carine)** [12.22 pm]: Today we are gathered here to discuss a bill that will deliver significant reforms for the local government of Western Australia. The Local Government Amendment Bill 2023 is a further example of the progressive nature of the McGowan Labor government's legislative agenda in this place. It is much-needed and long-awaited reform that will recognise the importance of collaboration between local governments, promotes accountability and transparency and acknowledges the unique perspective and experiences of Aboriginal Western Australians. Earlier this month, I was elected to the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation, which scrutinises regulations and other legislative instruments made by local governments. As part of that process, the committee may seek an undertaking to amend a regulation or other instrument. For example, I am interested in the City of Joondalup's Waste Local Law 2017. As members of Parliament of WA move forward with this bill, it is important to keep in mind that these principles must be applied in a way that considers the unique conditions of each district.

Local governments must work towards involving First Nations people in decision-making and this bill will provide a platform for that objective. The inclusion of reconciliation action plans and engaging in native title and land custodianship matters is a step in the right direction. The development of the community engagement charter will ensure a stronger framework for engagement between local governments and the community. For instance, local governments across Western Australia are continuing to work to involve First Nations people in decision-making by recognising and elevating the voice of Aboriginal people in discussions about local issues, developing and implementing reconciliation action plans and engaging in native title and land custodianship matters.

Additionally, this bill will formalise the tiering of local governments to acknowledge the vast diversity of the 139 local governments governed under the Local Government Act. It is crucial to ensure that regulations are matched to the unique needs and circumstances of each local government. This is especially important for financial reporting requirements that reflect the size and complexity of their operations. One such reporting mechanism is the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal, an independent body with statutory responsibilities to inquire into and set remuneration for various senior public officers. This bill also delivers on formalising the tiering of local governments that recognises the immense diversity of the 139 local governments that operate under the act. There are huge differences in local governments across Western Australia, from metropolitan councils with more than 200 000 residents to rural shires with only a few hundred people living in the district. It is important that regulations can be matched to the size and complexity of local governments. Some local governments have more than 1 000 staff, while others are run with fewer than 30 employees. These changes mean that regulations can set different requirements for larger and smaller local governments. The tiering will again ensure that the financial reporting requirement reflects the size and complexity of a local government's operations. Rural shires do not operate with the same level of complexity that many metropolitan local governments do.

The bill will introduce council plans that simplify how local governments plan for future service delivery. These plans are important for local governments to consider long-term needs, risks, threats and trends when planning for services and facilities. The department will provide clear templates for local governments to use or adapt, and the time frame for a plan review will be extended. Council plans will replace strategic community plans and will need to be reviewed only every eight years, allowing local governments to focus on future service delivery. The option provided by the McGowan Labor government is an attempt to reduce red tape for local governments.

This bill will also introduce optional preferential voting that gives electors the greatest degree of choice to indicate their preferences at the ballot box. The use of optional preferential voting will bring council elections more in line with state and federal elections. Preferential voting has been used in state elections since 1907 and in federal elections since 1918. Voters understand preferential voting because they use it in all the other elections. Additionally, the bill includes provisions that will allow local governments to fill a vacancy on a council that arises within a year of election with the next highest polling candidate from the last election to fill a role or purpose. This option will save money for ratepayers because extraordinary elections are a significant cost. For example, a mayoral election can typically cost the same as a full ordinary election because a ballot must be mailed to every ratepayer. Recent local government elections conducted by the Western Australian Electoral Commission have cost on average about \$4.50 an elector. For instance, an extraordinary election of a mayor of a large metropolitan government area could cost more than half a million dollars. Extraordinary elections can also divert a local government's operating resources away from delivering public services.

This bill will also set limits based on a local government's population and recommend the number of councillors who should be present in each council. The proposed reform acknowledges that a council is more like a board than a Parliament, and councils work best when all members work through differences of opinion and find consensus

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to deliver for the local community. The bill aims to provide consistency of representation and formalise the link between the number of electors and council members. The bill before us will mandate that every council adopt a community engagement charter to provide a stronger framework for engagement between local government and the community.

The bill includes regulations to set requirements for how local governments engage with their community, including a ratepayer satisfaction survey, which is to be held at least once every four years for band 1 and 2 councils. The bill before us today will establish a statewide standard caretaker period for local governments. Caretaker periods increase public confidence and trust in the integrity of government. They maintain the separation between elected representatives and public service. Local governments should not be making controversial decisions during the usual election period. Caretaker periods are in place for state government elections and they work.

The bill includes provisions that will address the issue of dubious leases that support enrolment claims, allowing ineligible individuals to run for office or vote in the city's elections. This is an important step to ensure that the electoral process is fair and that the elected representatives truly represent the will of the people. As we know, a person must appear on the electoral roll for a district to run for election to the council of that district. However, the City of Perth inquiry has found that dubious leases were constructed to support enrolment claims, allowing ineligible individuals to run for office or vote in the city's elections. To address this issue, the bill includes measures such as minimum lease periods and exclusions for leases of a very small area to ensure that only legitimate property owners or occupiers will be able to appear on the relevant electoral roll.

Council communication agreements are critical for local government administration. They establish a professional relationship between council members, the CEO and other staff of a local government, which helps to prevent conflict and dysfunction. It is essential to provide council members with relevant information that supports them to perform their duties effectively. The bill will introduce council communication agreements that will set a clear standard for how council members are to seek and receive information. The CEO and council will have to agree on the terms of the agreement, providing local governments with the flexibility to put in place their own agreements or use the default.

Parental leave is an essential part of supporting families and people with children. The bill will provide council members with the ability to take parental leave from their duties on the council to focus on being with their family. The provision of specific parental leave is intended to support a diverse range of people to serve on their local council.

In conclusion, this bill will deliver significant reform that will help local governments to work better for their communities. These reforms will ensure that local government authorities remain accountable, while also creating efficiencies that will ultimately benefit all members of the community. I encourage all members to support the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mrs L.A. Munday):** The member for Murray–Wellington.

**MRS R.M.J. CLARKE (Murray–Wellington)** [12.34 pm]: Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker, and welcome back.

The McGowan government is continuing to deliver the most significant reforms to the system of local government in Western Australia in over 25 years. The Local Government Amendment Bill 2023 will deliver a range of reforms to give greater transparency for and accountability to ratepayers, as well as cost savings and efficiencies for local governments. These reforms will introduce a number of principles into the act, including recognising that Aboriginal Western Australians should have a greater involvement in local decision-making; formally recognising tiering of local governments in the act based on the existing salaries and allowances framework; reforming council planning to streamline the way local governments plan for their future service delivery; reintroducing preferential voting to better align local governments with state and federal elections—this is a great outcome as the community will now have a say in who leads their shire and more people will be given the opportunity to put their hands up for such an important role; the implementation of reforms to the size and structure of local councils, including ensuring that council size is better aligned to the size of the local population; and establishing community engagement charters to set a clear standard for how local governments engage with a diverse range of people within their district.

A local government area with a population of fewer than 5 000 will be able to choose to have between five and seven members on the council. In my electorate, that would be the Shire of Waroona. A local government area with a population between 5 000 and 75 000 will be able to choose to have between five and nine members. For me, that would be the Shires of Murray and Harvey. A local government area with a population above 75 000 will be able to choose to have between nine and 15 members. In Murray–Wellington, I have three shires and a small part of the City of Mandurah. The Shire of Murray is in band 3, so a change for that council will be that it will have a directly elected mayor or president—we have a president in the Shire of Murray—but there will be no change to the council's numbers as it currently has only eight members. The Shire of Harvey is a band 4 council. It will need to reduce its council representation by at least four and also have a directly elected president. The Shire of Waroona is a band 5 council. It has already reduced its number of council members contingent on this legislation coming

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into place, and it will not need to have a directly elected president as it is a small shire with a population of fewer than 5 000 people. The City of Mandurah is a band 7 council. It already has a directly elected mayor and this legislation will have no impact on its council numbers.

These changes are remarkable because they will make councils more transparent in their community engagement with their constituents. There will also be more transparency in the reporting from the CEOs, council members and staff. I know that with the diverse communities in the four shires in Murray–Wellington, it can be challenging to ensure that regional shires meet the needs of everyone. There is a mix of rural and suburban–type living in all my shires, and it can make for very difficult decisions on how to deliver infrastructure and services to the region. I have worked closely with all my shires over the past six years and have seen the difference in the way they communicate messages to their wide community within their own shires.

I particularly like the introduction of the principles in the act, including recognising that Aboriginal Western Australians should have a greater involvement in local decision-making. This is a great step forward towards reconciliation for our First Nations people.

Establishing community engagement charters to set a clear standard for how local governments engage with a diverse range of people within their district is a great policy. I have seen throughout the region that some councils do community engagement well, while others do not do it as well. I believe that bringing the community along on the journey is an important part of local planning for services and infrastructure. It is important to keep members of the community informed and engaged in decisions that will affect them.

I will talk about some projects on which I have worked closely with the community and my shires to deliver for Murray–Wellington. In the Shire of Harvey, we have had achievements of \$10 million for the establishment of rail access to Kemerton Industrial Park and a \$10.5 million investment into Kemerton and Shotts Industrial Parks to create opportunities for business. We opened 19 new drug and alcohol dependency beds at the Palmerston Association facility in Brunswick Junction. We put \$1.75 million into the new Yarloop Community Centre. We have built stages 1 and 2 of the Brunswick River Cottages. We have created female facilities at both the Harvey Brunswick Leschenault Football Club and the Harvey Bulls Football Club. We have done a maintenance blitz and added science labs at all primary schools. There are outstanding commitments for which the Shire of Harvey received funding, but it has not delivered. One is the upgrade of the Harvey Senior Citizens Centre. There is also funding for the Leschenault Leisure Centre in Australind and the Harvey trails and adventure precinct. I hope that as a result of the local government reforms, the Shire of Harvey will start to listen to the community and get on with these projects, which are much needed but are sitting dormant, with the community left in the dark on the progress of these vital services.

In the Shire of Murray, we have invested \$45 million in the Food Innovation Precinct Western Australia and \$33 million in the Bushfire Centre of Excellence, the first of its kind in Australia. We also made a \$10.3 million investment in Pinjarra Senior High School for its performing arts facility and sports hall, which will be opened next term; I am looking forward to that. Other projects have included the extension of Munday Avenue at the back of the Pinjarra industrial park, the South Yunderup sporting pavilion, the Dwellingup Trails and Visitor Centre—millions of dollars have gone into that—and the Bedingfeld Park aged accommodation, with 25 beds for dementia patients. The only commitments outstanding at the moment are the Pinjarra heavy haulage deviation, which is going through planning and environmental processes, and the Ravenswood Community Centre, which is currently being constructed offsite and will be brought in on a truck. Those are the only outstanding commitments in the Shire of Murray, so I am very proud of the Shire of Murray. Over my six years, with every project that we have delivered on, it has got on with building them. All the projects that we have delivered were based on community feedback that those projects were needed. The Shire of Murray does a lot of community engagement. I am very proud of what it does.

In the Shire of Waroona, we have the achievements of the Preston Beach Community Centre, the \$1.8 million funding contribution to the Waroona housing options village aged-care accommodation, the Waroona Community Men’s Shed, the Waroona West fire station and the Drakesbrook Weir upgrades. Again, when the Shire of Waroona got all its funding, it just got on with all its projects—there was no hesitation. There was lots of community engagement. Again, I am very proud of what this small shire of fewer than 5 000 constituents has achieved. Commitments that are outstanding but which we are finally getting on with are the Waroona community precinct revitalisation—that is starting right now—and the Preston Beach all-access ramp. This is why I really love small shires like the Shire of Waroona. I suggested that we get a community reference group together to come up with the best idea on how to deliver that project, and it will have its first meeting next week with residents of Preston Beach and the council to come up with what the community wants to see in Preston Beach. I love small shires that get out and speak to their communities, rather than just doing things off their own bat. Obviously, we have all the slip lanes along Forrest Highway into Binningup, Myalup, Preston Beach and Forestry Road. I am really proud of my great working relationship with the Shires of Murray and Waroona. They deliver and listen to their communities.

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I would like to commend the bill to the house. These reforms are long overdue, but I believe they are going to make a huge difference, particularly in regional communities that have a diverse group of residents, from rural to residential. Shires need to be held accountable. I believe these reforms are going to do that for us.

**MS M. BEARD (North West Central)** [12.43 pm]: I rise as the shadow Minister for Local Government and confirm that I am the lead speaker for the opposition on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023. I note that the opposition will not be opposing this legislation. I first want to acknowledge all councillors and council workers for the enormous contribution they make to our communities, our towns and our regions across Western Australia; it is definitely not an easy job. What was highlighted in the speeches of many members yesterday is that local government is probably the hardest, least well funded and most highly regulated level of government. I have seen that as I have travelled throughout my electorate and gone to council meetings at which councillors have been confronted by groups of people who really have a lot to say, and they have had to manage that. It is a difficult challenge; I do not envy them at all.

Shires and councils are one of the major employers in many towns and regions. Especially in a lot of smaller towns, they are the employer of choice for a lot of people. They provide lots of opportunities and pathways for local people and, in many cases, are the glue that holds it all together. They are a critical part of the community, particularly as we move further away from the metropolitan area. They are often the place where people start their careers. As members would know, regional councillors are definitely the heartbeat of their communities and they are all things to all people, so I commend them for that.

I think we also need to remember that councillors are often faced with making difficult and contentious decisions. As they say, you can never keep everyone happy all of the time. However, it is particularly difficult for the cohort of people who live in very small towns, because there is only one supermarket to do their shopping or one post office, and if they have just announced something that they need to do but people are not going to be happy about, they cannot escape any of their constituents in any way, shape or form. There is a fair bit of pressure on a lot of people who sit on councils, especially when there is a lot of work to do and a lot of difficult decisions to make. Just last night, I spoke with the council CEO of one of the towns in my electorate, who said that he would be playing “Fireman Sam” that night. He was going to help out with training for the bush fire brigade after work. These are the kinds of things that happen; people go above and beyond when they work in local councils throughout our state. That is a credit to them.

Another thing we need to note is that councillors often run small businesses and have limited staff, so they are multitasking, especially as we get further out of the metro area. Many councillors are also the ambulance drivers, fire brigade crew or officials at the yacht club—they wear multiple hats across their communities. This makes it difficult for them in terms of managing their time and the challenges of the decisions they make or direction they may or may not take within their shires. Their workloads are definitely increased. A reduction in the number of councillors across smaller communities will potentially result in an increase in the workload of councillors. Despite having smaller populations in these areas, people really are spread out across large geographical areas.

It is no secret to anyone that it is getting harder and harder to get people to put up their hand for local government in a lot of cases. It is difficult at election time. One aspect that I think is a challenge for that cohort of people, and it is something that we do not often consider, is their mental health and the support for our councillors in that space. A lot of them are very busy people who may have their own businesses, work in the education system and have another half a dozen hats, so it is often difficult for them to make decisions during difficult times, especially when dealing with situations like natural disasters. There have been many examples—Yarloop, the Kimberley, Kalbarri—when they have had to not only deal with their own personal disasters, but also work on behalf of the community during what are usually very volatile times. It is a tricky time. I sometimes question whether there is enough support in that space, when they may feel like they are the only ones with their backs against the wall and that they are not getting the support they need from their communities, for lots of reasons. We know how challenging and relentless public scrutiny can be. There is no reprieve from that public pressure, especially when one lives in a really small town or small community. It can be relentless.

Review and reform is always important and should lead to improvements in efficiencies; I believe this bill will achieve that. However, in our very large and diverse state, we need to be very conscious that one size does not fit all. Flexibility is definitely needed to avoid a cookie-cutter approach for different regions and requirements. There are 17 towns and 13 councils in my electorate, and they are spread across 800 000 square kilometres. The geographical distances are incredible. We have Carnarvon, Cue, Exmouth, Meekatharra, Murchison, Northampton, Sandstone, Shark Bay, Upper Gascoyne, Ashburton, Wiluna and Yalgoo, going out to the Ngaanyatjarra lands on the border. These communities are hundreds of kilometres apart, so when I heard the member for Cockburn saying yesterday that he doorknocks every weekend, I was a little envious! It is definitely a totally different landscape and I think that highlights the vast differences we have in our state and the need to cater for that when we are making decisions and developing legislation that will have to fit across the whole state. Many of these places are

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remote and do not have the services and facilities that larger centres often do. Many of the shire councils are one-stop shops; they are the resource centre or they might have the post office attached. They wear multiple hats, so it is a very different landscape.

I touched on this before, but in some respects it is difficult. There is no anonymity when you live in a small town. In some of the larger councils, councillors can actually escape if they make a decision to do something that people will eventually realise will have a positive long-term impact; they can actually travel to the next suburb and do their shopping, or whatever they need to do, and there is some relief! But there is definitely no anonymity in some of the smaller towns. That, I think, goes back to my earlier comments about mental health.

There have been comments made around the population sizes in the regions versus the very large metro councils. Although on the surface it may make perfect sense, we need to remember the geographical locations and remoteness of some of the smaller towns. Some of my friends and family in Perth have no idea who sits on their council, whereas in the smaller towns even the kids living there know who the councillors are. There is a different dynamic; there is a totally different make-up in terms of where the council sits in the community. In smaller towns, the council building is the main building in the town, which is very different from the city. If I were to ask some of my friends or family members in the metro area where the council building is, they would probably have to think hard about which building it might be. I guess it is just the case that councils often have a much higher profile in smaller locations. My point is that shires in the regions are sometimes more visible and are directly involved at a grassroots level. Those shire councils take on many different roles, particularly in community development and taking the lead on many of the things that other groups take the lead on in larger communities.

There are 110 clauses in the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023, and it is the government's first tranche of local government reform under Minister Carey. There are some non-electoral reforms included in the bill—specifically, standardised meeting procedures, parental leave entitlement for council members and the requirement to publish annual performance indicators for CEOs. Some people have expressed reservations about this when I have travelled around. Although people understand these reforms and definitely support the transparency measures, there is a view that some of this information is generally kept between employers and employees, but I guess the devil will be in the detail. In terms of attracting strong candidates, I guess they just hope that the publication of that information over and above the norm will not deter anyone from wanting to apply for those positions. That is a concern that has been raised in the comments that have been made to me.

There is also a requirement for the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries to establish a panel to approve members to perform the role of the independent person on the CEO recruitment panels. The suggestion was made to me by a few people that that could possibly be contentious, or used for ministerial intervention in some way. I guess there is a bit of a lack of understanding around what that might look like. I understand that the second tranche of legislation will be due in December, or early next year, after the October elections. I also understand that when the Leader of the House was local government minister, he suggested that a green bill for the second tranche be made available; perhaps the current minister might be able to clarify that for me.

For me as shadow Minister for Women's Interests, the provision of parental leave for councillors is a big win for women and families. I really welcome that change. I assume there has been consideration of and provision made for these roles to be backfilled while councillors are on parental leave, to allow continuity of council business, but I think parental leave is a really positive step. The member for Collie-Preston noted yesterday that that is particularly hard in towns; there is no childcare or family support to enable people to step up and take on council roles.

A greater level of transparency for communities will be provided. That is a definite positive, but I imagine that with it will come greater administrative burdens and costs. That is also something that people have been grappling with, but it is offset by the fact that a greater level of transparency will be provided to communities. Online registers and video and audio streaming for smaller communities will also provide more transparency. There is a remote council in my electorate that has already installed videostreaming equipment; the only issue it has is that it still only has 3G, so it cannot hook up any of it! Council members are disappointed, because they are ready to rock'n'roll, but they just do not have the ability to do so from a technology point of view. I guess the regions will ultimately catch up with the technology, which is where we want to get to.

I thank the minister for listening in respect of optional preferential voting and taking that path, which has become the norm for all local government elections; popular votes for mayors and presidents in the larger, band 1 and 2 local governments, will not change. Some councils have noted to me the potential for factions or alliances to result from this change. I refer to a 2014 article in *The West Australian* about the Council Connect forums; I am not sure whether they still exist. The article states —

In a move that could heighten the level of overt party politics in local government, a party email advertising the WA Labor Council Connect forum says it is for “all interested WA Labor members who are committed

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to working through local government to see the ideals, platform and policies of WA Labor applied and realised at a local level”.

That was in 2014; I guess that is where those comments and concerns come from, but whether that forum still exists, I am unsure.

People have also raised with me whether there will be costs incurred by the Western Australian Electoral Commission and councils. Clearly, councils are stepping up to deal with matters that have not been provided for by the state government, including housing; medical professionals, in places such as Quairading; crime patrols, such as those in Belmont, Cockburn, Carnarvon and Halls Creek—a number of councils are providing their own security and crime patrols; childcare services; sporting and recreational facilities—a lot of shires need to step into that space; mid-tier transport proposals; transport planning; and e-scooter regulation management. There are a number of councils making decisions in those spaces, and their workload is large.

The financial implications are worth noting for some of the proposed reforms, such as the live streaming of council meetings, the publishing of various registers, the costs associated with independent members of the CEO recruitment and audit committees, and the impact of the introduction of preferential voting.

Regarding the proposal for mandatory public elections of mayors and presidents of larger local governments, some smaller communities believe it is best for a council to select their president or mayor, and they are worried the change will potentially discourage people from putting their hand up and be afraid to step up into that role. That is one of the fears that they have.

The other issue is backfilling vote counts. I understand that an election is a snapshot in time. The situation that occurred with the upper house member Dawkins is an example and I gather that we will be putting this system into local government. If there was a count back at some point in time, there may be a reason that the person is not suitable for that position anymore, no-one was next in line or the person who would have filled that position may not be available. I am interested to get some feedback about that decision-making process.

Standardising meeting procedures is a positive step, but, in summary, some of the councils that I have spoken with are not happy about some elements.

Generally speaking, however, everyone can see that this legislation is moving in the right direction and will create greater transparency. I understand that the time line to pass this legislation and the new rules should make it effective for the next election in October. A few of the people I spoke with pointed out that implementing those changes in time for that to occur may cause confusion for local governments.

Regarding the removal of wards and the effect on local councils, questions were asked about hamlets, particularly in my area. Kalbarri has a shire office in the Shire of Northampton. Northampton has a shire office as well. Coral Bay has a representative 240 kilometres from Carnarvon. These places have a very small population of residents, but a large number of visitors. Wards also cover off some Aboriginal communities that may have different needs and requirements.

Regarding the protocols around relationships between councillors and staff, we need to understand the detail around that, what that might look like moving forward and how it will fit.

This bill has highlighted that there is a need for greater transparency in communities. It will streamline the reporting process and, hopefully, allow some synergies to occur across the local government space. I want to thank the minister for his work towards the proposed changes to this legislation, and I look forward to the consideration in detail stage, which I think will be later today or tomorrow.

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [1.03 pm]: I rise to support the member for North West Central and make a brief contribution on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023. In general terms, I am relatively happy with it. The minister has done a pretty good job in bringing things together. In general terms, his communication with the council sector has been pretty good over the last couple of years. I caught up with him in Tambellup a year or so back. I think it was good that the minister was out and about getting to know those particular councils. Certainly, many members—including the Leader of the House walking through the chamber—have come through the world of local government.

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Noted, Minister for Local Government!

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Many members on either side of the house have come through the ranks from local government. In some ways, it is not a bad training ground for potential state or federal politicians. I have not had that experience, I have never been in local government myself, but my dad was the deputy president of the Shire of Katanning in the mid-1970s. I remember his level of involvement. Some of the local people who came down on him were not

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happy with whatever issue it might have been at the time and I remember some of that grief. It is important to recognise, as the member for North West Central pointed out, that councillors put themselves out there. They are generally trying to do the right thing by their community, as I think most members in the chamber are as well. At times we receive that criticism and, at most times, we have to grin and bear it. People in the community need to recognise the sacrifices that have been made to people's families and friends and the amount of time that they put in. I thought I would point that out.

My electorate of Roe has 41 towns and 18 local governments that I work with. As I always point out, it is 106 000 square kilometres, which is 5 910 times the size of the member for Mount Lawley's electorate. Like the member for North West Central's electorate, we have our challenges dealing with local governments and communities spread far and wide.

While we are talking about consultation and so forth, it gives us a chance to reflect on what this government has done for representation on a local level. Once again, I want to express my concern about the way the Premier and the Attorney General, who is in the chamber right now, came in here after the 2021 election and said that electoral reform was not on the agenda. They came in here and barged through electoral reform, which was not on the agenda prior to the 2021 election. I was disappointed in the way the government did that because constituents were saying to me that there was no way the government would do that, as we have remote communities out in the lands and there is no way that they could get genuine representation with reform. There is no way the member for Kalgoorlie or the member for North West Central could cover it all; it is not humanly possible. Those remote communities will not be getting a fair deal. I want to once again express my disappointment. The Premier was in Albany prior to the election, and when he was interviewed by Daniel Mercer, he said seven times that electoral reform was not on the agenda. Sure enough, it was well and truly on the Attorney General's agenda, and electoral reform was one of the first things that he came through with. That is very relevant when we talk about representation. We will end up with a challenging situation. Where will the delineation be for members in the upper house? Where are they going to cover? Will it all be about legislation and so forth and not so much about representation? I know that our members of the Nationals WA, who represent the Agricultural Region very well, will continue trying to do the right thing, but I worry about what will happen in the space of the next 10, 12 or 15 years. Maybe the conservative side of politics will get control of both houses and unwind that legislation, because I think that would be better for representation—better for the people of our remote communities and the like. I wanted to make that point before I start.

As I said earlier to the Minister for Local Government, I generally feel that most of these changes are reasonable. From my perspective, it is important to recognise that councillors, like us, are democratically elected. On the optional preference voting, I was interested to hear the member for Cockburn give us a bit of history from 1918. Apparently, the Country Party and the Nationalist Party brought in optional preference voting. I must admit that I was not aware of that. It was interesting to hear his contribution. As many members have pointed out, our state system generally is going down that pathway, so there is probably no real reason why our local government cannot.

I want to point out some of the demands that I think have significantly increased over recent decades. When we look at the provision of local government services, we see that there has been a significant increase in liability for the maintenance and renewal of ageing infrastructure as well as the provision of a range of new services. These increased demands really require increased funding over time. That is the challenge for this government. I remember we had the puppy farming legislation and it was basically, "No problem. We'll bring in the legislation and then we'll hand it over to local government to implement." It is fine to put through the legislation, but if local governments keep being loaded up, there will come a point at which they cannot absorb it. They will not be able to sustain all the increased costs that go with it. That is one thing I want to point out. Some of the other things this government is loading on local governments include climate change and environmental issues. That is fine but remember there is a cost involved. Our local governments seem to be where the buck stops. They are the ones that have to front up and put one of their officers out there at the coalface. They are the ones that have to incur the extra expense.

Another thing that local governments do is provide a link when state governments fund various projects. Local governments have to implement them. As members know, in my past I was the chairman of the Great Southern Development Commission. That gave me the opportunity to be on the Regional Development Council, which is the nine chairs of the development commissions. We worked closely with our local governments. I was also on the Western Australian Regional Development Trust, which oversaw the quality spending of royalties for regions funding. Our local governments were very important in putting those projects in place. There was \$20-odd million in royalties for regions funding for the Esperance foreshore, but the local government was very much involved. It is now still very much involved with the maintenance of it. That project was a fantastic piece of royalties for regions spending, but the maintenance and upkeep of it continue with the Esperance local government. It is a great thing for that community and all our tourists who come through. They love walking up and down the foreshore. As the member for North West Central said, there are now scooters, which is another thing that local government has been drawn into in some ways. All these things add to the package.

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I want to reflect on my local town of Katanning. The multicultural flag project was another great royalties for regions project. Once again, the project was implemented by the shire. We have 42 different nationalities in Katanning. As people drive into town, it is great to see the flags of all the different countries represented in our town. The multicultural Katanning Harmony Festival is on this weekend, and the minister and I will both attend. It is a great celebration of our multicultural community. From that perspective, once again, local governments do a great job in implementing these projects.

I am looking at some statistics that I am sure other members have run through over the last couple of days. There are 138 local governments. They vary in size from 1.5 square kilometres to 370 000 square kilometres. Their populations range from just over 100 to 220 000. Members of the joint alliance of the Liberal and National opposition were out at the City of Joondalup, City of Wanneroo and City of Stirling last Monday. It was interesting to see the size of those local governments, the projects that they are dealing with and the fact that those three large local governments represent nearly a quarter of the state's population. They have a lot of responsibility. Those three local governments represent a quarter of the state's population. We had a great day, getting a handle on what those three local governments deal with. It was very interesting. The number of staff ranges from fewer than 10 to over 1 000, depending on the local government. That is one thing I want to point out to the minister. We have had all these discussions about amalgamations and all the rest of it, really before my time, but I think local government is the most important employer in not only every local government area, but also most regional towns. Local governments provide stable employment, whether it is for a grader driver, a surveyor or whoever it might be.

Local government does a great job in providing stability and it really is a key element of our regional communities. That is another element, from my perspective. When we have our zone council meetings, it is great to see the way that our councils work together. It is great to see the way that Main Roads Western Australia and our local government advisory committees generally work together well, but the funding has to go with it. All our councils work hard, as does Main Roads, to identify projects, but, unfortunately, sometimes the funding does not come through. We must recognise the good work that regional road groups put together information on and some of the issues they are dealing with.

We have discussed CEOs. As the minister knows, they are very important to our local governments. We know that CEOs can wield influence over their elected members, but I think in general terms that it is encouraging that the extra training and skills our councillors are gaining help them to work with our CEOs and not necessarily be overly influenced. I think it is really important. I noticed recently that there are now CEOs coming from outside the local government circle. They are starting to appear from commercial businesses, the mining sector and all sorts of places. I think that is a good thing. It is good to have a bit of diversity in that circle.

I think it is really important that councillors cannot just turn up to a council meeting and read the agenda while they are sitting there. They need to be prepared, just like we are when we go to a meeting or when we want to talk about legislation or whatever else it might be. They need to prepare themselves because they are representing their community. They need to read their agenda a few days before and ask questions. It works from both angles, from my perspective. Of course, there is more to being a CEO than just knowing the Local Government Act. That is why it does not hurt to have some CEOs who come from outside the sector.

[Member's time extended.]

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** What I have seen lately from some city council's is red tape. I talk to a range of people in meetings and the like who are slightly exasperated at different times by their dealings over a property development, rezoning or whatever it might be. There is a certain level of exasperation about all the layers that sit below the actual councillors and the CEO and about how hard it is to cut through, I suppose you could say. I think that sometimes wears down people and sometimes it shuts down development. People can sustain it for a few months, 12 months or 18 months, but after a couple of years they just cannot handle it anymore and they say, "Oh well, I'll go off and spend my money somewhere else. I'll go and buy some shares or do something where I just have to bank the dividend cheque rather than do a development that might actually help out the community." From that perspective, I think it is important that the minister, the department and everyone involved is always keeping their eye on the red-tape scenario.

Certainly, the other part of it that I want to mention is this evolving scenario whereby our regional councils especially are now having to delve into issues that are not really within their remit, but they do not have a choice. They have to look at supplying a doctor. We saw on the front page of *The West Australian* a few weeks ago the situation in Quairading. The Quairading council was out there advertising with a \$1 million price tag to retain a doctor. I have several shires in my electorate that are doing the same sort of thing. They provide housing, funding, subsidies and all the rest of it. It is a bit of a challenge, when, really, to be honest, it is not actually the core business of a council, but it has evolved that way, just like accommodation. I am sure that we will speak about that further this afternoon in our private members' business motion on housing, but certainly it seems to be falling more so



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onto our councils to provide accommodation at different times. That is an issue that I would like to see change over time. Our councils are getting loaded up with those different elements.

Obviously, we have our table of the way councils have been affected and which councils have been affected by the change to having a directly elected mayor or president or changes to wards. Obviously, the wards system is not as prevalent as it used to be, but I think the member for North West Central made a couple of good points, and that is that where we have smaller areas, localities or hamlets, the ward system was actually good in a way because the representative could go in to bat for that locality. As I said before, my dad was a councillor. He was on the west ward of the Katanning shire council. I remember clearly that he was there to represent those people to the west of the town, I guess. But, at the same time, I think wards are probably not as required as they used to be, so I can fully understand that. Having spoken to a couple of my local presidents and the like, I know that many of them have already adapted. This legislation will not really affect their lives because they have already adapted. They have reduced the number of councillors and they have rearranged things. They are quite comfortable with many parts of this legislation. From that perspective, personally, I am quite comfortable with the people electing their mayor. I think it is a good way to go. There cannot be any accusations of branch stacking or factions or whatever you like so I think that is good.

I have just a couple of final comments. The issue about council meetings and videostreaming is fine. I agree. I think it was handy in COVID times, but never underestimate being face to face. I think that is the number one priority, if possible. Of course, once again, internet connectivity is the challenge we have out there in the regions. Once again, especially in an area like the North West Central electorate, that is a real challenge.

**Mr D.R. Michael:** Maybe you shouldn't have voted for Tony Abbott with the mess they made of the NBN.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I think the member is branching out to a fairly large subject.

**Mr D.R. Michael:** You brought it up.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I am sure, having been in government for six years and having a surplus of \$6 billion in the last budget, it would not do the government any harm to maybe put some money towards improving connectivity in regional areas. I think I will leave Tony Abbott out of it and focus on this government and its \$13 billion of surpluses over the last three years. Quite frankly, our connectivity is not much better in the regions and, in some places, it is actually getting worse. Anyway, I digress.

I think the transparency and accountability measures, which was the eleventh point of the minister's second reading speech, are important. I think that the twelfth point, setting a new requirement for publication of performance indicators, is a reasonable step, from my perspective. But I would like to make one other point about the spilling of a council that the minister made at the first point on page 3 of his second reading speech. I suppose, once again, the cost is an element that is going to be a bit of a challenge. I suspect that will not be required too often, minister.

But, in general terms, as the minister would understand, I am in favour of a majority of these changes. I also look forward to seeing, I guess, the second tranche of the legislation, but most of my councils are relatively comfortable with the changes and therefore I am comfortable. As the member for North West Central said, we will not be opposing the bill, but, as always, we look forward to just asking a few questions along the way. In general terms, we are relatively comfortable.

**DR K. STRATTON (Nedlands)** [1.28 pm]: I stand today to speak in support of the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023. I welcome in particular its purposes for greater transparency and accountability for us, as ratepayers. I also welcome the facilitation of good culture in local government and greater consistency that, in some councils, will require, and even perhaps force, outward-focused leadership. I also welcome the cost-saving measures and other efficiencies for not just local governments themselves, but also the stakeholders and ratepayers with whom they engage. Ultimately, these reforms are designed to strengthen how local governments work to deliver services to local communities across Western Australia.

I want to focus on three particular aspects of the bill; namely, the introduction of the principles in the act, which includes the recognition that Aboriginal Western Australians should have greater involvement in local decision-making; the reintroduction of preferential voting to better align local governments with state and federal elections, but also to ensure there is a greater say for those ratepayers who participate in voting in local elections; and, finally, the reforms to the size and structure of local councils, in part to ensure that a council's size is better aligned to the size of its local population. Serving as I do inside the golden triangle, many of my local governments will be impacted by that. Those reforms to size and some of the responses of local councils indicate that these reforms invite us to consider what leadership and service looks like for the councils that will be required to make those changes.

I want to start with an introduction of the principles of the bill, which include a recognition that Aboriginal Western Australians should have greater involvement in local decision-making. This might include actions and

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responses such as recognising and elevating the voice of Aboriginal people in discussions about local issues, developing and implementing reconciliation action plans, and engaging in native title and land custodianship matters. The suburbs in my electorate are served by five key local councils. Like all my parliamentary colleagues, I attend citizenship ceremonies with each of those councils. It has been heartening, even in two years, to see the embedding of the practice and the offer of a welcome to country in most of those ceremonies. Over the past two years, I have observed a consistency in welcome to country being provided and not just as an acknowledgement, as important as they are for us all to make and provide.

I acknowledge the leadership of the previous Mayor of the City of Subiaco, Penny Taylor, for ensuring that there was consistently a welcome to country at all the city's citizenship ceremonies, not just on the specific January date— noting the irony of that being the only citizenship ceremony that had a welcome to country. She felt it was important for all new citizens in our community to connect with a welcome to country, and to experience it and to see it as being usual best practice.

At the last Town of Cambridge ceremony I attended, the elder who provided the welcome to country talked about some of the significant local places and what they meant to his family, including some of the lakes and waterways in the Town of Cambridge that my colleague the member for Churchlands is well familiar with. It was a wonderful and important connection to make. Even as a local, I learnt lots of new things about the traditional meanings of those places. The Town of Cambridge elected this year to shift the date of its January citizenship ceremony, noting that it wanted to ensure that the ceremony was held on a day that could both acknowledge and celebrate what it means to be a new citizen, while recognising the difficulty and complexity of 26 January. I said to Mayor Keri Shannon at the time, and I repeat it here, that I acknowledge and appreciate the town's leadership and courage in making such a decision, which it made relatively late when it understood that this was a possibility, keeping both new citizens and traditional owners at the heart of that decision.

It would be wonderful to see all local governments create and adopt a reconciliation plan. The Town of Cambridge is in the process of forming a working group to develop its very first reflect reconciliation action plan. Last year, the Nedlands council agreed to start work on a reconciliation plan to overcome past perceptions: in the words of one councillor, the council was racist and needed to be encouraged and supported to work harder to be a place that is inclusive and welcoming to all. It is unfortunate that this was not passed unanimously, with one councillor not in support of the City of Nedlands developing its first reconciliation action plan. However, despite his protestations, the reconciliation plan is now in progress, with a RAP report expected in the coming months. Changes that have been suggested for the city are an acknowledgement of country at the beginning of council meetings and other city events—that is, an acknowledgement as its starting point, not necessarily a welcome to country—and the flying of the Aboriginal flag outside council buildings.

It might be true that the seat of Nedlands has a very small Aboriginal population. We are home to the University of Western Australia, including Dandjoo Darbalung at St Catherine's College, which is an Indigenous support program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who reside in Perth while they complete their studies. In Noongar, Dandjoo Darbalung means "mixing together" and it is symbolic of the way that freshwater and saltwater mixes in the Swan River estuary across from the college. I have been a frequent visitor to St Cat's and I congratulate it on how inclusive it is. The physical space itself includes a fire pit, communal study spaces, room for arts and creativity, room and space for family to visit and stay, and a diversity of living spaces to meet students' cultural needs, as well as dedicated staff to ensure that students are welcomed and supported. With my previous university academic hat on, I know how important those measures are to ensuring that we retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in tertiary education.

Nedlands is also home to many statewide health services, including Ronald McDonald House Charities, providing services to many Aboriginal people and families from remote communities. It is important that all our civic institutions, including local councillors and councils, make residents and visitors to our community know that they are welcome and that reconciliation and inclusivity is at the heart of that welcome. Reconciliation action plans are always relevant and always meaningful. I welcome the invitation that these reforms make to all local governments, wherever they are, to show inclusive, consistent leadership when creating structures and systems that ensure that Aboriginal voices are included and welcomed.

This bill provides for the introduction of optional preferential voting. Optional preferential voting gives us as ratepayers, as electors, the greatest degree of choice to indicate our preferences at the ballot box. The optional nature of this is for the voter, not the council. Voters will be able to choose to preference as many or as few candidates as they wish. There will not be any preference flows other than what electors put on their ballot paper. Of course, voters already understand how this system works because it has been used in state elections since 1907 and in federal elections since 1918. This change will bring greater consistency, this time across three levels of government. My colleague the member for Cockburn spoke yesterday about some of the benefits of preferential voting. I want to add briefly to that and indicate some of the benefits of preferential voting, with my social work hat on, I dare say.

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Preferential voting will be good for ensuring a diversity of candidates. It will improve the diversity of representation and ensure that our councillors are more representative of the entire community and not just people with perhaps a one-platform interest or a particular social standing. To be honest, really, the only concerns that have been expressed about preferential voting are by current councillors. If they were truly representative, we could perhaps argue that this should not be of concern to them. It certainly will not increase partisan politics—that already exists in local government—but, rather, will improve representation and diversity, which is currently being perverted by how easy it is for people to run tickets. We have heard that preferential voting also provides us with the ability to backfill positions instead of having extraordinary elections. From 25 November last year to 16 March this year, nine extraordinary elections were held for the local government areas of Stirling, Swan, Canning, Wanneroo, Albany, Cottesloe, the Cocos Keeling Islands, South Perth and Northam. As a ratepayer, I have voted in two extraordinary elections in the past 18 months—one for mayor and one for a ward councillor.

The third point I wish to talk to is the implementation of reforms to the size and structure of local councils, including ensuring that council size is better aligned to the size of the local population. This impacts on one of my local councils. The bill will deliver on the proposed reform to better align the size of councils across WA with the population of the local government's district, providing us with more even and equal representation. As we have heard before, the bill will set limits based on local governments' populations. For a population of up to 5 000, there will be five to seven councillors, including the president. For a population between 5 000 and 75 000, there will be five to nine councillors, including the mayor or president. For a population above 75 000, there will be nine to 15 councillors, including the mayor. This change was a recommendation of a panel report to government in 2020, and these values were refined through the multiple opportunities that were made available for public submissions, public comment and local government comment.

We see, of course, that councils typically work best when all council members can work through differences of opinion and find consensus on how best to deliver for the local community. Unfortunately, we do not see that on this issue. The City of Nedlands, as reported in *The West Australian* of 16 February, blocked a full council spill from occurring at the upcoming council elections in October this year. Instead of the council making a decision on what is, of course, acknowledged to be a very complex and difficult decision—I do not take away from that—it instead leaves that decision to our very able local government minister, who will decide how and when the council sheds four of its elected representatives. The council agreed to keep its four-ward structure and reduce its numbers, but it did not support an officer recommendation to put all 12 councillors and the mayor up for re-election this October as a means to cut the number of elected positions and let ratepayers make a decision about who would fill those positions. As a ratepayer and someone who votes in local council elections, I find this disappointing, as I will not necessarily get a say in who will represent me either as mayor or at a ward level. It is fair to say that that decision is perhaps a little bit more about self-preservation than leadership or representing the ratepayers. One councillor noted that councillors were being asked to sacrifice their own council on the altar of the minister. I want to be very clear that this bill is based on a very significant, extensive and long body of consultation. There was public consultation and workshops with sector peak bodies, the Western Australian Local Government Association and Local Government Professionals WA. The opportunities to participate and shape the principles and details of the bill have been numerous.

I also briefly note that the introduction of specific requirements and changes that will make councils and council proceedings more accessible and inclusive is welcome. The requirement to video stream council meetings for bands 1 and 2 and make audio recordings of council meetings for bands 3 and 4 is welcome because it will make council meetings more accessible to ratepayers, including those of us who are sitting in Parliament on the days that councils meet. This will serve to broaden the number and diversity of people who will watch and, therefore, participate in council processes and decision-making. It will also enable complaints and disputes about conduct at meetings to be investigated and resolved more quickly and fairly, because video and audio recordings are a definitive reference source. It will mean much less ambiguity about the facts of any complaint. This is an important measure to support the establishment of the new inspector in the second tranche of local government reforms.

Similarly, the standardisation of meeting procedures for all local council meetings across Western Australia will make meetings more streamlined and more accessible for ratepayers, because council meetings will have greater consistency, known standards and inclusions, and set parameters. Currently, it can be confusing when local governments have different rules and processes, including for how residents can raise issues at local council meetings. It is inconsistent and confusing, and different rules can make council meetings seem mysterious or unwelcoming, and it is unclear how people can participate. This reform will provide ratepayers and stakeholders with greater clarity on how meetings are to be conducted and will establish one set of rules for raising questions and making deputations at meetings. This will be of benefit for everyone, particularly people and stakeholders who might engage with different council areas.

Finally, the inclusion of parental leave will mean that the make-up of councils can be more diverse, inclusive and welcoming to people with caring responsibilities.

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I have a couple of examples of great leadership culture and service by local government that I would like to now highlight. These are things that the reforms will work to embed. I would like to congratulate the Town of Cambridge for its decision to decline the rezoning application from Christ Church Grammar School for the Mt Claremont playing fields. The council declined the request to rezone the fields from parks and recreation to residential, and that means that the playing fields will remain as open, active space. Girls' sport and participation in sports is growing in the western suburbs, and retaining those playing fields will mean that sport is much more accessible and inclusive for girls and women.

[Member's time extended.]

**Dr K. STRATTON:** Of course, last week in this place, I raised a grievance with the Minister for Planning to ensure that the council's decision was enshrined. It will be, and those playing fields are now safe for the community and sporting participants to continue to use.

I would also like to provide an example of what happens when local leadership is at its best. On Monday, I had the honour of being invited to tour and meet some of the service providers and participants at Ruah Community Services' Northbridge branch. That centre highlights the very best possibilities of what happens when local government serves the entire community, including the most vulnerable in our community, and does so with dignity and respect, which is exactly what the Ruah Northbridge centre does. I was provided with a tour of the building, which has many physical symbols of how people from diverse backgrounds are welcome. Ruah flies the Aboriginal flag, the Torres Strait Islander flag, the rainbow flag and the transgender flag. We were made to feel very welcome as we entered the building. It has a wonderful sense of space and is welcoming and homely. The staff are very experienced and compassionate, and they provide a wonderful voice for the people they serve. The services they provide the participants in that building provide some of the daily dignities that many of us perhaps take for granted—a hot shower, fresh clothes on our backs, a hot cup of tea and a biscuit to go with it, and access to the essential services that co-locate at the Northbridge centre, such as Services Australia. Of course, they provide assistance with housing support and the intersecting issues that have an impact on people's lives. As I said, everybody is welcomed, and I certainly witnessed this to be true. Participants spoke with a great sense of pride, belonging and welcome. They feel that their dignity and privacy are upheld, and they demonstrate a great respect for the space. This is, of course, how I have always known Ruah to work. I had the privilege of partnering with some of its research staff in the 100 Families WA project. It is a very inclusive, problem-solving and human-centred organisation in the way it delivers services. I would like to pay my respects, too, to the CEO, Debra Zanella, who has created that culture at Ruah. She has extended its long history of providing very inclusive and compassionate services.

I will also make a shout-out. I ask for a little liberty here, the day after World Social Work Day, because many social workers work at Ruah. Yesterday was an annual celebration of the contribution that social workers make to creating change for individuals, families, communities and nations. They do all they can to make the world a more inclusive, more accessible and kinder place.

I will finish by saying that, of course, as well as introducing the reforms in this place, the government is continuing to work on the practical implementation of the reforms through the development of guidance templates, public information and transition plans. Again, it is an invitation to our various local governments to demonstrate their outward-facing leadership and create and maximise the opportunities being offered to them.

**MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont)** [1.49 pm]: I rise today to also make a contribution to the Local Government Amendment Bill 2023. The element of this bill that is of particular interest to me and I will be talking about is the reform to introduce principles within the Local Government Act 1995 that recognise Aboriginal Western Australians and the fact they should have greater involvement in local decision-making. That is particularly timely given that we are no doubt going to a referendum, hopefully in October this year, to decide whether we will provide Indigenous Australians, our First Nations people, with a Voice, and place a lens on the legislation that impacts their community, which I think is right. I am deeply committed to seeing that outcome. I truly hope that that is the outcome. It will be a great disappointment if the referendum does not succeed. When I saw that that provision had been included in the reforms in this bill, I decided that I would speak about it because it is an opportunity to highlight how important it is.

I am lucky to have rich diversity of people in my community of Belmont. Fantastically, a large group of Indigenous Australians call Belmont home; indeed, they have done so for many, many generations. I regularly meet with a number of different elders throughout my community, and I have spoken with them about their views on the referendum. I cannot say that I was shocked when they indicated with great bitterness that they did not hold much hope for change as a result of the referendum. Knowing their stories as I do—many of them are members of the stolen generation—I completely understand their point of view, but they are 100 per cent adamant that change has to happen. It is important to them that change happens. They want to see deeper acknowledgement of the problems they face within their community and better outcomes for their community. Equally, they understand that this is a very significant moment in our history, which signposts the Labor government's commitment to righting historical wrongs.

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Bringing my contribution back to my local community, after I was first elected to Belmont in 2017, I went to my first citizenship ceremony and was horrified to learn that there was no formal welcome to country. I thought that was pretty outrageous. I contacted the chief executive officer of the City of Belmont and pointed out that it was incredibly inappropriate and, to his credit, he rectified the situation immediately. I am glad to say that welcome to country is a staple at all City of Belmont events, as it should be. I take this opportunity to point out that the City of Belmont works very closely and collaboratively with many of the elders in our community. Recently, I was really lucky to be invited as a community member to observe our Aboriginal advisory committee group that is part of the City of Belmont. It was wonderful to be present and to listen to some of their concerns. The fact that the advisory group meets regularly and that the City of Belmont takes its role seriously of walking down the path of reconciliation hand in hand with the elders is fantastic. At the meeting, I referred to the yes vote in the referendum, about which we had a discussion. A lot of the elders said, “We can’t see why people would be voting against it, Cassie.” I told them that I agreed, but with great disappointment I pointed out that our local RSL was advertising that it would be running a no campaign. I told them that the community needed a counterargument because the local RSL was blatantly—I have seen its email—running a no campaign. That is appalling and it reflects so badly on the RSL. It ought to be ashamed for running that campaign, quite frankly. The silver lining is that the wonderful women who are part of the group and the elders who I have subsequently met are really galvanised to run their own campaign. I look forward to inviting people from my community to hear why we should be voting yes at the referendum. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we have an obligation to make sure that it succeeds. If we fail this time, it will be many generations before this opportunity again goes before federal Parliament.

I refer to an article that I printed this morning in which Indigenous advocate Noel Pearson said that a no vote would be catastrophic and would prompt him to “fall silent”. He said —

If the advocacy of that pathway fails, well, then a whole generation of leadership will have failed, a whole generation of Indigenous leadership will have failed because we will have advocated coming together in partnership with government and we would have made an invitation to the Australian people that was repudiated.

I ask members of this house to take on board what Noel Pearson said. As a member of state Parliament, I know that this is a federal matter, but I feel very strongly that we all have a duty and an obligation to speak to our community about how necessary reform is. I will be making it very clear how I will be voting when the time comes.

I was pleased to see today that the federal government has come to an agreement with a very reluctant coalition—no surprises there. Labor has had to make concessions around pamphlets being distributed on the no vote, which is quite disgraceful, but, of course, no surprises there. This morning I did some perfunctory internet research on who would be opposed to this, and, of course, the Liberals are opposed. In fact, the federal shadow Minister for Education, Sarah Henderson, has likened public support of a Voice to Parliament in the schooling sector to a form of indoctrination. Needless to say, she is not Indigenous, but she is adamant in her views. An article states —

Henderson said she was “concerned” about reports on the debate in schools, arguing its public backing wasn’t “consistent” with the national curriculum.

That is very disappointing, but, again, it is really not surprising that she would say that schools, public universities and the like should not be involved in this debate. I would argue that it is beholden on each and every individual in the community to talk about how vital it is to have this debate and a positive outcome for the community.

At the same conference at which the shadow Minister for Education spoke, Professor Megan Davis from the University of New South Wales was a keynote speaker. As a member of an expert panel of advisers to the federal government on the referendum, she said that it is absolutely the role of universities to support the Voice campaign. As stated in an article, she said —

“I don’t really stomach that we are mere facilitators of the debate ... universities say they don’t want to be political, but the decision not to take a stance for Uluru and the referendum for a voice to parliament is a political decision,” ...

I wholeheartedly agree with those comments.

It was interesting that one of the original people involved in creating the Uluru Statement from the Heart recently came to Western Australia and spoke at a Labor Party event. He said that we all really need to think about how we will feel the day after the referendum, if it fails.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

[Continued on page 1312.]