

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House Electoral System

Melbourne – Wednesday 21 May 2025

MEMBERS

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Sarah Mansfield

Evan Mulholland

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Sophia Moermond.

The CHAIR: I declare open this public hearing of the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House Electoral System. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit and Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee. Next to me is Christopher Crewther, Deputy Chair and Member for Mornington. We have also got Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston; Evan Mullholland, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region; Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria; and Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

We welcome Ms Sophia Moermond.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore, you are protected against any action for what you say here today. If you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

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You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Sophia, we will start with a brief opening statement to the committee, followed by some questions.

Sophia MOERMOND: Okay. Thank you for inviting me to contribute. In WA we have just had an election where a lot of the electoral changes were new and for the first time, and because of that there were some issues. Electoral changes need to be carefully considered. WA has implemented several of the changes this last term, with one of the major ones being the abolition of the electorates. Previously the regional vote carried a greater weight than the metropolitan vote, and that was one of the points that were used to justify getting rid of the electorates as such.

I was an MP representing the South West in Western Australia, and when this was being debated in Parliament I received a lot of emails and phone calls from those in my electorate who were opposing that. WA is a large state with different climates and different environments. We go from a moderate climate in the south to a tropical climate in the far north. In my opinion this alone requires local representation. We need people in the upper house who understand the different conditions and environments that are faced by our constituents. Victoria seems to be slightly more compact than Western Australia, with less climatic variance, so it may be less of a factor for you.

One of the criticisms that featured strongly by getting rid of the electorates was that we were going to have a much more Perth or metro area centric style of governance. This is already an issue, with the regions feeling that they have much less infrastructure in place compared to Perth. We are looking at health care and education being the two main areas that they feel they miss out on. If people do require very specific services, they have to travel often for several hours to be able to come to Perth, and if they are in the far north they have to basically catch a plane to get to Perth in a reasonable time. I also feel that having the vote in the electorates carry more weight was one of the things that helped balance out that Perth-centric style of governance. I also understand that if you are going to introduce electorates, you need to be aware of the cost associated with that, and I am sure that that is something that you will be considering as well.

In closing my statement, I would like to just say that the electorates improve regional representation, which is a positive. One of the things that our Labor government has just recently introduced is ministers now to represent those areas, though they do not necessarily live in those areas. I also understand that when we are voting it is most fair to have one person, one vote but that sometimes other circumstances need to be taken into account for that.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you very much. We will go to questions now. We might start with Sarah Mansfield to my left.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I am interested to know: do you have any information on how many regional MLCs were elected at the election versus metro?

Sophia MOERMOND: The same amount. There were six electorates, and they had six MPs each that were elected. So we had an upper house of 36 people. The reason why it was weighted is that the regions have a much lower number of people living in them, so therefore for a region to get six MPs, it showed that they needed less people, I guess, to get six MPs elected for that region. Does that make sense?

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. I guess I was just wondering at the most recent election how many MLCs who were successfully elected live in regional areas or can represent that regional perspective in the new Parliament.

Sophia MOERMOND: Okay. I do not have that answer. I have not studied the people who have been elected.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. That is okay. One of the things that we have been talking about here is that if we looked at an option of becoming a statewide electorate, that would lower the quota required to get in and therefore give smaller parties and independents a greater chance of getting a seat. What are your reflections on that?

Sophia MOERMOND: Yes, that does seem to be the case. I would say that that has happened in Western Australia as well, where I think it went down from 4-point-something per cent to 2-point-something per cent.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Okay. Do you feel that, even with relatively large regions, having a system where there is some sort of regional break-up rather than a statewide electorate still has value in terms of geographical representation, even if the electorates are very large?

Sophia MOERMOND: I do. Yes, I do believe that. Western Australia is a massive state, and when you speak to our regional MPs here, we all do a lot of kilometres during our term. Even if the electorate is still quite large, I do think that regional representation is better for the people that live there.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther.

Chris CREWITHER: Thank you very much, Ms Moermond – I hope I pronounced that correctly – for giving evidence today. Earlier we had a witness, Malcolm Mackerras AO, who noted that he believes the election in WA was a success and that Victoria should copy the WA electoral system. He gave a further submission following his initial submission based on that. You may obviously differ on that, noting you got more preferences than the AJP but were not elected. Parties like the National Party got 5.4 per cent this time around versus 2.8 per cent last time around but went from three representatives down to two representatives. Do you think the statewide system is therefore less representative of regions, and of regional WA, as it might potentially be for regional Victoria? Do you think it is problematic to get around a whole state when it is one state region?

Sophia MOERMOND: Yes, it is. It was already sufficiently difficult to cover the electorates that we had and to be aware of all the issues in them. I realise that there will be different opinions about this, by the way, and because I did represent a regional area I am probably biased towards that. Like I said, I had a lot of emails and phone calls at the beginning of the term when they put through these changes, where people just were not particularly happy. I have seen the issues that we have in those regions to get adequate funding for hospitals, child care and even homelessness. Those problems were not addressed properly, I feel. I think that by having

less representation for those areas they will start to lag further behind the services that we have available in the metro area.

Chris CREWETHER: Yes. Do you believe that because of the way the system is now structured there is less of a counterbalance in the upper house to the lower house, where the lower house may be more favouring towards places like Perth and Fremantle, the larger population centres? What is your view on that?

Sophia MOERMOND: Yes, I would say that. I would have to see it in action as well to be able to really provide you with an informed opinion on that. I do believe that the Perth metro area will be favoured, and Fremantle as well for that matter, simply because the metro area has been favoured for a long time over the regional areas. I do not know if abolishing electorates in the upper house is going to make that better or worse, but I suspect that that would worsen.

Chris CREWETHER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We will go to Nathan first, and then we can come to Evan.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Ms Moermond, for appearing. You may or may not have caught the discussion with Dr Kevin Bonham previously, but one of the things we were talking about and obviously a critical question in our considerations is the question of what the right quota is for any given system. There is a lot of debate about whether a party on 0.1 per cent, 1 per cent or 5 per cent – what is the number at which you should be elected? Dr Bonham I think made the case – and other witnesses have – that in essence there is a very limited number of parties that voters can know well and that particularly with micro-parties, even if a party is called Legalise Cannabis it can be difficult for voters to understand where they might vote on other issues. And then he particularly made the point that with surprising frequency MPs from micro-parties leave their parties mid-term and then act as independents, and I think in his words they then have no mandate at all. I just thought I would give you an opportunity perhaps, with some experience and understanding of those things: would you push back on Dr Bonham's points?

Sophia MOERMOND: No. Not really. I actually think there is a case to be made for members of the upper house to not be part of a party so that they would not necessarily have to toe the party line to represent their electorate, and that might give them the opportunity to speak more freely and represent their constituents based on what they want, not necessarily what the party stands for. Does that answer your question somewhat?

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes. It does. That is a valuable perspective. I have a second, different question, and again, this follows from a discussion with Chris Curtis earlier today. We were talking about the difference between an MP's geographic accountability to the area they represent and then the notion that in a statewide system it would not really change much, because you then would be accountable to communities of interest, which would be people organised in other ways that are not geography. I just thought: you have had the experience of, by the sounds of it, being quite focused on and accountable to a geographic region and then running in an election where you did not have those regions. How was that experience? Did you then try and appeal to communities of interest? How did you go about trying to secure support from an entire state of 3 million people?

Sophia MOERMOND: It is an interesting question. There are a lot of factors involved there. I ended up being quite controversial during my term, which was unexpected. It was unexpected to be a politician in the first place; it was not my intention to be like that. As a result of that I did not get any support really from the mainstream media here in Western Australia; they pretty much blanketed me out, so it was hard to reach my voter base. I achieved that mainly through my own social media and working with the alternative media or independent media here in Perth. Their reach was quite broad, so that led to having support from within my electorate, within the Perth metro area and some of the larger regional centres like Albany, Geraldton and Port Hedland. But it was not really reached via the traditional methods, through TV advertising, radio advertising or even the mainstream media here, like the *West Australian* – they did not really cover anything of what I did. So it was challenging to reach those other areas, because there is only so much you can do in the way of travel because it is such a large state. So having a low percentage is good, but reaching your constituents is harder, because it is so stretched out.

Nathan LAMBERT: Perhaps, as a follow-up question, if you do not mind, Chair – and I had some brief personal involvement in the special WA Senate election, which posed the same challenges; it is very big state to

campaign in when there are a lot of voters who are obviously spread out geographically: do you think that being controversial helped?

Sophia MOERMOND: In some areas it did. Some people were very much in support of my opinions. It was not a conscious choice, by the way, to do that; there are reasons, which I think are very valid, for why I did the things I did and said the things I did. And this is quite personal as well – I have had a lot of health issues over the years, some of which can be linked back to vaccine damage. As a result of that I did not want to be vaccinated with a very new technology as such, and in the end a lot of people agreed with me on that. So whilst the decision to do so was initially what I felt was for my personal safety and wellbeing, it turned out that there were a lot of people who had similar concerns and agreed with me on that, and that made the news at the time and definitely appealed to the freedom community in Western Australia. I imagine you have a similar community in Victoria as well who were not particularly happy with the mandates and the lockdowns in particular. You guys really suffered in Melbourne with that, and that must have been tough.

Nathan LAMBERT: I have got one more question.

The CHAIR: Okay, we will go with Nathan – another follow-up.

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes, just one further follow-up. Just coming back to that question of the geographic organisation exactly as you were just alluding to there – you were organising around a community of interest or a specific issue. You were a South West Region representative previously. Was that still part of the way you ran in 2025? Did you try and draw upon that geographic support despite the fact it was now a statewide ballot?

Sophia MOERMOND: Yes, I did, mainly because the people there knew me, more so than the people in the other areas, and throughout my term I had made many contacts and spoken to a lot of people in my electorate, so I definitely needed them to try and help me get elected. What was also then interesting about this election is that we, as a group of independents, formed a group ticket to get a box above the line on the ballot paper, and it was by coincidence that the two other MLCs that I ran with were also from the South West. So for all three of us it made the most sense that we focused a part of our campaign at least on the contacts that we had already made and the reputation, I guess, that we had built over the term in that electorate.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. That is very helpful.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. You are okay for a question, Evan?

Evan MULHOLLAND: I am all right.

The CHAIR: Yes. Beautiful. Okay, if there are no other questions, we will leave it there. Sophia, thank you so much for appearing today and providing us with some evidence. If there is anything else you would like to provide the committee, please do not hesitate to email it through.

Sophia MOERMOND: Thank you for having me, and good luck in coming up with a solution.

Witness withdrew.