

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*)

Peter Rundle, Deputy Leader, the Nationals WA.

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 community or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

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

I would like to welcome Mr Peter Rundle MLA, who is the Deputy Leader of the National Party over there in WA.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by the same 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.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automatic captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if said quietly.

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.

Peter, what we might do is get you to just do quite a quick statement to the committee, because I know that you are short of time there, it being a sitting day, and then we might have time for a couple of questions, hopefully.

Peter RUNDLE: Okay. Good morning. Good to be with you all. I have just come from our committee briefing, and I am about to chair the community and justice standing committee at half past 10 our time. Certainly our leader Shane Love asked if I could join you, and I am more than happy to answer any questions, obviously, in relation to the new upper house structure, which is only really coming into place as we speak. In actual fact our upper house changeover is tomorrow, so as of tomorrow we will have 37 members of the upper house in the Legislative Council in Western Australia, who will be representing the whole state, aside from our former structure of six regions, three of which were in the regions and three in the metropolitan, as compared to your, I think, eight regions, three in the regions and five in the metropolitan. I think it might be best if you ask me questions, and we will go from there.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, would you like to ask the first question? Then I might go to you, Nathan.

Chris CREWThER: I am happy to ask that. Thank you very much, Mr Rundle, for giving your evidence today and your time. Noting the results in 2021 versus 2025 – in 2021 you got 2.8 per cent of first preference votes and had three seats, versus 2025, when you had 5.4 per cent of first preference votes but got two seats – what are your reflections on the current new system at the statewide level? Do you see that it is problematic for parties like yours?

Peter RUNDLE: I think that is a good summary. I think it is problematic, and the National Party, which as you know represent regional constituents, are probably the ones that will suffer the most under this current scenario. It is the argument that we had in the Legislative Assembly, mainly, in relation to this new legislation which the government brought in in the last Parliament. We have got the challenges of representing, as you guys well know, the distances and the challenges of representing the regional electorate versus the population in

the metropolitan area. Compared to Victoria it is a slightly different scenario as far as distances and sizes of electorates go, to some extent. My own particular lower house electorate is 120,000 square kilometres, but we have got electorates up to 800,000 square kilometres in the lower house. The most problematic thing to me is that now there is no moral obligation for a member of the Legislative Council, the upper house, to cover any particular part of the state, so I am very curious to see how this plays out. From my perspective I had the ag region covering my electorate as well in the previous Parliament, or the one that finishes today. I had two Labor members, two Nationals members and two Liberal Party members. If I could not get to something – an opening or whatever it was – I knew that hopefully someone would be there to represent the Parliament of WA, if you like. So the challenge now is you have got 37 members who have got no real tie to any part of the state. But certainly from a National Party perspective it is problematic because we do not get that large percentage, as you pointed out – 5.4 per cent of the vote, so that was two quotas out of 37 – and so that is a challenge for our party and our future representation in the Legislative Council.

The CHAIR: We will go to Nathan next.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Rundle. Just going to the exact topic you have just been discussing, which has been a point of debate and discussion throughout our hearings – the degree to which upper house members, when you have regions, have geographic accountability to that region. If you go to statewide, you are trading something off against other things. It has been put to us by other witnesses that it does not matter, because the parties will just do it themselves anyway. Is it your experience in Western Australia so far that the parties are just going to assign MPs to different areas and basically self-initiate or self-organise a regional-based system of representation anyway?

Peter RUNDLE: Good question. I spoke about a moral obligation. I am sure the National Party will assign our two Legislative Council members to cover some parts of the state, or as much as humanly possible, aside from also scrutinising legislation and all their other duties. Without getting too political, we have seen that the Labor Party, the current government, lost quite a few regional seats in the lower house, and now ministers have been allocated to nine different regions around the state, perhaps as a way of saying that they are going to give better representation in that perspective. I will be curious as we go into it over the next few months as to whether the Labor Party and the Liberal Party actually allocate people to those particular areas. I know the Liberal Party with their preselection have actually kept the old regions, if you like, and preselected a person from North Metropolitan, East Metropolitan, South Metropolitan, Mining and Pastoral, Agricultural and South West, so for the three regional and the three metro regions they have actually preselected, prior to the election, people that will purportedly represent those areas. That was quite an interesting development as well.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. That is very helpful. I have got a couple other questions, but Chair, maybe other members would like to go first.

The CHAIR: I will go to Sarah first, and then if we have got time, I will come back to you.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for that perspective on, in your view, the importance of that regional representation and the link to a geographical area. Putting aside some of those challenges that you have outlined, in terms of the result and the number of seats relative to the proportion of the first-preference votes received, it could be said that 2025 more accurately reflected the proportion of the vote the Nationals received. What are your reflections? From the perspective of the upper house achieving proportionality, what are your perspectives on the outcome of the election?

Peter RUNDLE: That is another good question. Really the argument that we had in the Legislative Assembly about the legislation was that the Attorney-General at the time was arguing that a vote in one location is worth four times as much as a vote in another location, if you like. So a Kalgoorlie might be worth four times as much as a vote in metropolitan Perth. Certainly proportionality is one argument.

Our argument as the National Party, representing regions, was that other things need to be taken into account – distance, geography, representation of Indigenous communities who might live 2500 kilometres from metropolitan Perth. The question is who is going out there to represent them, because no-one, as I said, has got an obligation that that is actually their area to cover. That was our argument.

But your comment about proportionality – certainly, as it stands now, proportionality is well represented. It is really about this political ‘city versus country’, ‘metro versus regional’ divide. And being a National Party

member driving 50,000 or 70,000 km a year, you sort of feel that it is pretty tough trying to cover that area properly, and now I have not got the backup. I have got offices closing around me of former upper house members who were representing that region. So now I am getting loaded up even more.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We might have time for one more quick question, but I know that you have got to go. So whatever you need to do, just interrupt us and let us know. Evan, did you have one?

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes. I just have a really quick one. I want to follow up on what you were just saying about how people are closing their offices because they are now on a statewide ticket. Unlike New South Wales and more like WA, our upper house MPs do have electorate offices. Victoria is, I guess, a bit unique in the fact that we also are there to serve the community; we are not just a house of review. So how has that experience been? Do you envisage a similar thing might happen in Victoria under a statewide model?

Peter RUNDLE: As I said, in Esperance, which is the largest town that I have got in my electorate, which is a 10-hour drive from Perth, there is one upper house member who has not been re-elected, so that office is closing. But there is also another office closing in another location. From my perspective, what I see developing over time – maybe I am being cynical – is that we will have 37 upper house members who are potentially located in West Perth near Parliament House and who see their main job as reviewing legislation. That is what I worry about developing over time, and as a regional member that really concerns me. As I said, some of the other parties may have plans as well to have pseudo representation, if you like, out in the bush, and how they deal with it, how they travel and how they allocate people is going to be interesting. We are only really in the early stages of it, but that is what I worry about – that we will end up with those 37 people staying in the metro area saying, ‘Well, I haven’t got an office out there. I haven’t got a moral obligation to cover any particular outlying Indigenous community or a town 3000 kilometres from Perth.’ That is the challenge. Whereas I see from a National Party perspective, which is obviously biased towards the regions, that we will still try and allocate it, but we have only got two members to cover a massive state and to back up our lower house members.

It is a really political argument about proportionality, as you said, versus representation of the constituents. It is going to be very interesting, but I worry about how it is going to pan out over the next four years. It is not a model that I would recommend, because I think it is good to have that – you have obviously got the three regions out there at least as back-up, I suppose, for your lower house members. I do not quite know how that all works, but I am assuming there are offices located out in those three regions et cetera.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes. It certainly helps some Nats MPs with big electorates, being able to have an upper house MP on the other side. But I will throw over to Nathan if we have got time.

Peter RUNDLE: I have got time for one more.

Nathan LAMBERT: I have got a very simple one for you. I was not aware of the ministerial arrangements for regions, which are very interesting, that you have alluded to. Have they been mirrored in the shadow ministry?

Peter RUNDLE: There are 17 ministers, or 16 ministers plus the Premier, so nine of those ministers have been allocated a particular region which aligns with the development commissions. We have nine development commissions around the state. I am a former chairman of the Great Southern Development Commission. Each of those nine ministers have in theory got coverage of a region, if you like. That was really a response to the government losing several members in the lower house and realising that perhaps they needed to have a presence. That is my political response at this stage.

Nathan LAMBERT: I am just interested in whether they have shadows; do they have formal shadow ministers in opposition?

Peter RUNDLE: No, we have not at this point in time allocated shadow ministers to those, because I guess we have lower house people, both Nationals and Liberals, that are sort of representing the majority of the state anyway.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you – very helpful.

The CHAIR: All right. Fantastic. We will leave it there. Peter, thank you so much for your time. We know you are busy. If there is anything else you would like to add for the committee, do not hesitate to send it through.

Committee adjourned.