

‘FOUR MORE YEARS?’ – THE CASE AGAINST LESS FREQUENT ELECTIONS¹

Graeme Orr

Queensland’s politicians want to extend their job security. A proposal for fixed, four year parliamentary terms is being debated Friday. By tradition, our state elections happen every three years at the maximum.

Sheltering our representatives behind guaranteed four-year terms is a wretched idea. There are two main problems. First, it undersells democracy. Second, given Queensland’s history and institutions it will further concentrate power in the hands of an executive which faces minimal accountability.

Before putting the ‘case against’, there are a few important facts to remember. A fixed three year term would be a fine idea. It would give predictability of election dates and remove the free kick the Premier has to call an election to suit his or her party.

Four year terms are another matter. Both Labor and LNP support it, and some business lobbies also want longer terms. The proposal may not be partisan, but it is driven by elite concerns. Although almost certain to pass parliament, four-year terms will require your support at a referendum, likely to be held in 2016. It is not a fait accompli. A proposal for four-year terms was narrowly rejected by electors in 1992.

Queenslanders were wise enough then to not increase the power of the executive. Here is why we should reject four-year terms today.

First, there is democratic principle

Regular elections allow us to recall poor or ailing governments and MPs alike. The ballot is a precious commodity. The 19th century Chartists, who did so much to democratize our system, went so far as to call for annual elections. There is nothing democratic about reducing the frequency of elections. It assumes a corporate model of government, where power over the state is locked in and top-down. Cabinet is pictured as a board of directors advised by lobbyists and bureaucracy. There is a myth afoot that elections affect the economy. As if people are so captivated by election campaigns that they rein in their spending and productivity! There is no evidence of this. Admittedly, when governments are in caretaker mode a few major decisions are postponed. But that is a small price to pay for what elections permit: the chance to recalibrate the political system and legitimize the direction of government. Ironically, proponents of four-year terms will play on prevailing concerns about politics. They will throw furrphies into the debate, about the cost of elections. They will implicitly appeal to cynicism about electoral democracy. Most MPs deserve our respect, if not our agreement. They toil to help constituents and to scrutinize legislation and policy. My criticism is of the system, especially the degree of Cabinet power, rather than individuals let alone parliament itself

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Second, we need to look at our own backyard

The proponents of this reform will invoke the other Australian states that now have four-year terms. They may even point to the rollicking chaos of national politics, with its three year terms and high turnover of pugilistic leaders. 'Four year terms will calm things down', they will say. Does anyone really believe our leaders will be less attentive to polls, or less concerned with public relations, simply because an election is a year further off? Those pathologies are not caused by the length of parliamentary terms. They arise from the culture and interplay of contemporary politics and media. Imagine if the limping Bligh government had had an extra year before its electoral massacre. Imagine if the Newman leadership had an extra year to remind us how out of touch it was. Elections allow stale or arrogant administrations to be reined in. Queensland, more than any other jurisdiction in Australia, needs regular elections. We have no upper house. This means no review of legislation or questioning of government from a chamber not dominated by the governing party. We have no proportional representation. So parliamentary majorities swing wildly between Labor and LNP. Geographically dispersed minor parties like the Greens or Family First get no look in. We do not even have a bill of rights. So there is minimal judicial review of legislation in Queensland. On top of all this, media attention to state politics is very patchy. Gone are the days of state based current affairs television, for example.

In short, Queensland's institutions are already set up to centralize power in the leaders of the governing party. History bears this out. Bjelke-Petersen, Beattie, Newman: their names are by-words for 'strong', not consultative, government.

Lengthening the life of parliament, and hence the government, might work tolerably well elsewhere as a trade-off between electoral democracy and government 'on behalf of' the people'. In Queensland, where democracy has had its share of challenges, it is a step too far.