

THE COCKED-UP AND COOKED-UP REFERENDUM

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The Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) is to be complimented for holding a forum in the old Upper House chamber last night (14 March). It was the first opportunity for me to hear opposing sides and expert commentary about the referendum proposal on parliamentary terms. The other 80 or so people present were in the same situation. I arrived genuinely uncertain about my voting intentions on Saturday.

This lack of opportunity for public engagement is one of several deplorable aspects of the process which invites citizens to make a significant determination about the shape of future government. This was excused by Mr Ian Walker, the Shadow Attorney-General and author of the original Bill - which was then supported by the ALP as it progressed through the committee stages. He explained that the rules precluded government or opposition spending taxpayer funds to promote the cases for and against change, beyond the derisory three-page documents mailed out to all voters, printed on the letterhead of the Electoral Commission Queensland. They had to rely on community organisations to engage people, which seems unrealistic when the more pressing issues of local government campaigns are dominating the media.

Others have already noted the subtle difference in type-face between the two cases, to the benefit of the 'Yes' case. The 'No' document is hardly a faultless piece of argumentation either, including inexplicably partisan references inviting voters 'to remember the ALP Bligh Government' intended as some sort of pejorative, balanced by an equally portentous comment about the Newman government – the first damned for asset sales and the second for its arrogance. The tone was inappropriate to the independence of the Electoral Commission.

The 'No' case document does, however, make the stronger point about the limited institutional restraints in Queensland which make it hazardous to weaken the current levels of accountability by increasing the length of parliamentary terms. This is the main focus of the 'No' case.

The main focus of the 'Yes' case addresses the benefits of certainty associated with setting a fixed date for elections, while noting the financial benefits and convenience of lessening frequency. Chris O'Brien, the only non-committed contributor on the ASPG panel, noted in passing that there were actually two questions to be considered (without himself indicating any voting intention). I pressed on this – noting that there was an issue of certainty / 'fixedness', and a separate issue of length of time; you might logically approve one and not the other. Mr Walker in response agreed that this had been raised at earlier forums. It was indeed a binary question produced by the parliamentary process which did indeed require a single answer. He then made the startling observation when pressed by David Muir, one of the 'No' protagonists, that Parliament could act independent of any referendum result to secure the benefits of certainty - "Taking the politics out of election calling' in the phrase used in the 'Yes' document". Mr Walker declined when asked to give an undertaking to advocate such a change entrenched by statute if the 'No' case prevailed on Saturday.

This for me sealed my determination to vote No, despite the arguments of the business community and trade union leaders as well as the major parties. Their arguments rely more on certainty than the time period. Queensland has a poor record in terms of accountability and history might repeat itself. I wouldn't want to give up the opportunity to cast a ballot until four years have elapsed if other opportunities concerning certainty are within the purview of Parliament itself.