



***AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF
PARLIAMENT GROUP
(Queensland Chapter)***

FOUR-YEAR FIXED TERMS

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 14 MARCH 2016

Brisbane

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Mr GIBSON: I welcome you all to our Australasian Study of Parliament Group Queensland Chapter's first function for 2016. My name is David Gibson and I am chair of the ASPG Queensland. We have been overwhelmed by the response for this tonight. We are particularly grateful that you made time in your busy schedules to be able to come along and hear what four-year fixed terms are about, both the for and against cases.

I begin by acknowledging the patron of the ASPG, our Speaker, who has very kindly provided a great deal of support for this and through his office. So we thank Mr Speaker and his staff. I also recognise Ms Di Farmer, who will also be our moderator for tonight. I will speak a little bit more about her in a moment.

To both current and former members of the Legislative Assembly who are here tonight, welcome, particularly representing the government, Mr Mark Ryan, and the opposition, Mr Ian Walker. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we gather here today, the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. I pay my respect to their elders, past, present and emerging and acknowledge the important role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to play in our community.

There are a couple of housekeeping points that I need to raise. If you have a mobile phone, now is the time to put it on to vibrate or silent. In the event of an emergency, please do your best not to throw your arms in the air and scream, but just follow the attendants and, depending on the type of emergency, you will be directed as to where we need to go. If you require the rest rooms, they are simply out the back door. Both of them are on the left-hand side. The ladies' is immediately to your left and then further down you will find the gentlemen's.

I now want to introduce our moderator for this evening. Ms Di Farmer MP is the member for Bulimba and the Deputy Speaker. She was previously chair of the Finance and Administration Committee when it conducted its inquiry into the introduction of four-year terms for the Queensland parliament in late 2015. That included consideration of the Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Amendment Bill 2015 and the Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Referendum Bill 2015. I would now like to hand over to our moderator, Ms Di Farmer, who will introduce our panellists and give an overview of this evening's format.

Ms FARMER: Good evening everybody. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and our distinguished guests as mentioned. I thank the Australasian Study of Parliament Group for the opportunity to moderate this debate tonight and it is wonderful to see such a strong interest in this really very important issue, which we are all going to vote on this Saturday.

As David said, I was the chair of the Finance and Administration Committee that conducted an inquiry into four-year terms. We were referred this inquiry in September last year after parliament passed a resolution for the investigation after Mr Ian Walker MP, the shadow attorney-general, introduced the Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Amendment Bill 2015 and the Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Referendum Bill 2015. Our inquiry took us through 11 different public forums across the state, we received over 1,000 responses to a survey and we conducted a number of hearings with members of the public, businesses, community organisations and academic experts, one of whom is one of our speakers tonight.

We made our recommendations to parliament on 9 November. If anybody has not seen that report that was made by our committee, they can go to the Queensland parliament website. The Committee of the Legislative Assembly provided a response to some of the recommendations in the report and that was tabled in February this year. That report is available on the Queensland parliament website.

I would like to introduce you to the panellists tonight and then I will tell you a little bit about the format. We have seven speakers tonight: Mr Ian Walker MP, who is the LNP member for Mansfield and the sponsor of the two bills that I mentioned previously, is currently the shadow attorney-general and shadow minister for justice, industrial relations and the arts; Mr Mark Ryan MP, who is the Assistant Minister of State Assisting the Premier and also the Labor member for Morayfield; Mr Robbie Katter MP, who is the state leader of Katter's Australian Party and the member for Mount Isa and he is currently a member of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. Professor Graeme Orr is a Professor of Law at the University of

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Queensland and is a leading expert in electoral law in this country. He has published extensively on the topic and contributed regularly to parliamentary inquiries and reviews, including our own parliamentary inquiry into this matter. Graeme has twice been an associate to Federal Court judges and was admitted as a solicitor to the Queensland Supreme Court. In addition to being a regular media commentator, Graeme is currently the international editor of the *Election law journal* and a board member of the *Australian journal of labour law*. Mr David Muir is a partner at HWL Ebsworth Lawyers and a longstanding member of the ASPG Queensland Chapter. David was an elected delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention and is also a member of the Accountability Round Table. Mr Chris O'Brien is a senior political reporter for the ABC based in Brisbane. He has worked in radio and television news since 1987 and contributes regularly for the ABC online. Chris is a regular fixture on the Queensland campaign trail and has moderated a number of state leadership debates. Ms Catherine Pham is a senior policy adviser at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland. She is committed to representing the interests of Queensland businesses. As a qualified town planner, having worked on projects in Australia, South Korea, Germany and China, Catherine has a breadth of experience looking at how companies remain globally competitive. Catherine's portfolio with CCIQ includes innovation, infrastructure, workforce, planning and tourism.

I am going to be asking each of our speakers to address us tonight for five to seven minutes. I will ask each speaker to come up here to address the audience and at five minutes let them know that five minutes is up and then I will tell them when seven minutes is up. There will be a particular order of speakers and at the end of that time we will be inviting the audience to ask questions and I will be moderating that discussion. I will ask you to allow the speakers to have their say while they have their five to seven minutes and then we will welcome what I am sure will be a very interesting debate afterwards. I will ask to speak to us first Mr Ian Walker MP.

Mr WALKER: Thanks very much, Di, and I am so glad to be here to able to talk to the case for the yes vote for the referendum on 19 March. It is ironic, I suppose, in some ways that we are holding this debate in this beautiful room—one of Queensland's most beautiful rooms—where the former Legislative Council used to sit. The council, of course, voted itself out of existence in the 1920s and its existence or otherwise has been part of this debate as it has rolled out. I might come back to that later. It is a tremendous historic room in which to be holding this debate. This is the room which, of course, the leaders of the G20 first assembled when they came here for G20 a year or so ago.

I appreciate the ASPG for putting on the forum. It is a little bit difficult for us to get the message out. I should make it clear to you that there are constraints on the government in the broad sentence of that word on prosecuting the debate. The Referendums Act has a specific provision that the government is to do no more to prosecute the case in a financial sense other than post the yes or no cases to each elector. Beyond that it is to spend nothing. That means that getting the message out there is a matter of seeking the assistance of our friends in the press and other organisations such as this to be able to speak to people about this issue.

It is an important issue for me. I believe that it is important reform that we need in this state. It was my bill that was introduced to the parliament that got the ball rolling. That represented putting into effect my party's policy. The LNP has had for some years a policy of supporting fixed four-year terms and we thought in this parliament, where things were finely balanced and where there was an opportunity to talk across the chamber and with the crossbenchers, it was as good a time as any to get cross-party support—and the government acknowledged that we should—to have this important chance recognised.

Not only was it my party's policy, it also came from my own experience as a minister in the last government. The reality is that no matter how good or accomplished or ready you are to go in a three-year term, it is about at the end of the first year that you have found the key to the executive washroom, it is the second year when you can actually do things and the third year you tend to hide under the desk because there is an election coming around the corner and you do not want to do anything to frighten the animals. You end up effectively and practically getting one year of substance out of a three-year term. I think that is exceptionally poor value for money for the taxpayer and for the elector. I do want to prosecute it. As Di said, it went through the system. At the time I introduced my bill the government had also indicated its intention to look at the issue. As it went through the parliamentary committee the two came together: the bill that we introduced and the government's willingness to approach the issue. The parliamentary committee reported favourably and in the end my bill passed with amendments from the government, which were largely those recommended by the parliamentary committee that we were willing to accept.

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The bill in broad terms will provide for a four-year normal cycle with an election in the last Saturday in October every four years. I was very careful in my bill to preserve, of course, the other circumstances in which it would be necessary and appropriate for the parliament to be prorogued earlier than the four years and to go to the people. Those are situations where the government cannot form a majority on the floor, where supply is denied or where there is effectively a motion of no confidence in the government. I have also included any other reserve power that the Governor presently holds so that there is no issue of taking away any other head of power to prorogue parliament, with the normal cycle becoming the four-year cycle. Of course, it does not apply to this term. The next term will be a broken cycle to bring it to an October election. So it will be a period of time, some time between three or four years, that will take us to October and then we will get to that regular pattern.

The time for the election was originally March, but the parliamentary committee suggested October because it takes it away from the regular local government elections, it is in a time that is not a school holiday or another busy time for the state, it is a time when it is not too darn hot to electioneer in North and Far North Queensland and it did seem to be an appropriate recommendation of the committee to take up to rely on that as being the standard cycle.

Four year terms have been supported by those on the yes case team, and that is the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Queensland Council of Unions, the tourism peak body, former mayors, Mal Forman, Tony McGrady and elders like Everal Compton supporting the case from a community base. I am sure that Mark will talk in more detail about why a fixed four-year term is beneficial for the state but I just wanted to deal with two quick arguments which are often thrown up against it. The first is the snouts in the trough argument. For example, you are only doing it to feather your own nests and help yourselves in an 'institute yourselves', 'ingrain yourselves into the government' cycle. All I can say is that in the end for politicians it is a zero-sum gain. You might be gaining four years in or you might be condemning yourself to four years out. There is, in fact, no net gain to politicians. It does not advantage politicians. I think it advantages the state and advantages the community and politicians, in fact, could be doing themselves a disservice.

The other argument is that an upper house is necessary in order to move forward with this change. I do not think that is necessary. I think it is based on a fairly romantic view of upper houses. Firstly, if you want to talk about an upper house come back in about 50 years time when we have sorted out the detail, because although it is the policy of my party to have an upper house following a referendum, it is not a policy of other parties and so getting an agreement on that is going to be difficult and getting the details worked out is going to be difficult: how many more politicians; think of the old argument about we don't want to pay any more polities; how are they going to be elected; what are the relative powers of the houses. More than that, I think the sort of romantic notion of an upper house consisting of people relaxing over a gin and tonic looking at legislation in a measured way is probably not what it is going to be. If there is an upper house it will either reflect the colour of the lower house, in which case it is likely to be a rubber stamp, or it will be going alone in which case it is likely to do the opposite. I think take that argument in that context. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms FARMER: Thank you very much, Ian. I would like to ask Robbie Katter if he would like to take the microphone.

Mr KATTER: Good evening. There were very good points made by the previous speaker and there are some legitimate points for a four-year term. Under an effective parliamentary system I would probably be a fan of it myself. The argument I would like to prosecute here this evening is the fact that our system is failing us. I think that there are some inherent failures in our two-party system that has swallowed up all the individual groups that we have in the political spectrum and that the risk is that we fall under corporatist influence far too often. I would like to go through some examples of that. I believe that individuals have been disenfranchised in the process which is why we have the revolving door in these walls of parliament. I think there is a general dissatisfaction with the government they are getting. Under normal circumstances, if we had a good, robust parliament where people could freely speak their mind and represent their individual electorates, a four-year term would keep the leaders on their toes, performing and governing by consensus through a broader cross-section of the House and I think we would be a lot more satisfied with giving them four years to run.

There are undeniable virtues in terms of planning and the longevity of the agenda for any given government. There are definitely some positives. What we need to acknowledge, which is the far greater point, is that there are some real failures in the system at the moment, which is no disrespect to any single politician. I think it is just a system that is built to have more accessibility to other user input interest groups

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within the House and I think that is muffled somewhat by having the dominant two-party system. I think examples of that are where you get influence. I do not think anyone would appreciate the virtues of having a supermarket duopoly in Australia and I think the fact that we see that is evidence that there is a lack of capacity for the two-party system to get out from under the influence of those large corporate giants. I am sure we all have our own examples of that. It is pretty easy for an oil company or a supermarket duopoly to have a foot in both camps with their largesse and if there are no spoilers in the middle with the crossbenchers or other minor parties that could hold the balance it is pretty easy for them to dictate terms. However, if there is more competition in there it is very hard for those people to operate because they cannot have a foot in four or five camps. That is why I think there is a heavy corporate influence which has been really unhealthy in our system and I think it has had far too much influence on dictating the terms of what goes through the House and I think it is playing a role in disenfranchising the individual. They are punishing governments and probably in some cases unfairly, but certainly the turnover that we are getting is increasing.

We went through a period of 50 or 60 years where we had only two changes of government in Queensland. Whether we agreed with the politics of the man at the time, I think it is funny to reflect on the fact that Sir Joh as the premier said that if you can't do it in three you don't deserve a fourth. I would have thought that the criticism would be made that that would be the sort of person who would manipulate the system to work in their favour to role their agenda out. Perhaps it was reflective of the time. It was less bureaucratic back then and you could not get things through faster, but I think stretching that out to four years encourages the behaviour where you can roll things out slower and you have that extra breathing space. I think timing is a real problem today with trying to roll out the agenda in the first year, but I am not so sure that four years is going to fix that. I think we will still be hitting the same handbrakes. I would like to work back the other way and put pressure on the government and political parties so that when they come in they hit the ground running and there is that pressure to perform. Perhaps that is easy for me to say, never having had a position in government. I am sure it is very difficult. Complementing that activity of inaction by running that into four years a big risk.

The obvious arguments on not having the upper house bolts onto the argument that I have just given you about not having enough competition in the parliament with a binary system operating where it is either/or. If you do not have that genuine competition and you do not have the upper house, you do not want to deny the voters the opportunity to express their democratic right. Mathematically, that is what you are doing by stretching out to four-year terms. It needs to be acknowledged that we are a very unique parliament, but it also needs to be acknowledged that there have been some failures in our political parliamentary system. I strongly believe that there are some shortcomings. I think a good way to resolve that is to keep governments on their toes by giving them less opportunity to stretch out their terms. I grant you that we have some shortcomings and I do see some virtues in having that extra year in terms of planning.

The last point I would like to make is that the referendum we are having in March can be split into two questions: fixed terms and three or four years. They are two different arguments. Fixed terms have a lot of virtues that I would agree with, including stability, but the four years is a different point again. There is one last point that gets caught up in this, which is that often these debates are misled by saying simple government is stable government. Simple government, if it has a big majority, can have a good agenda or a bad agenda, but often can lead to a strong agenda that lends itself to being punished by the voting public at the next election and repealed in the next 12 to 18 months with the new government, which creates by itself a length of uncertainty because everyone says that if a much tighter parliament gets consensus, there is a lot better chance of the legislation getting through that parliament, which gives a more stable environment to the business community. I point that out. Thank you.

Ms FARMER: Thank you very much. I call Catherine Pham to take the microphone, thank you.

Ms PHAM: I thank the ASPG for the invitation to speak on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland. The CCIQ has long held the privilege of representing the business community in Queensland. Tonight, I am delivering a message on their behalf. If Queensland were to adopt fixed four-year terms, businesses would be able to better plan around state elections and make employment and investment decisions sooner and with greater confidence. We hold a large amount of quantitative data that I will touch on shortly, but it is the qualitative data that speaks volumes. I have a few words from business owners that I would like to share with you in my opening statement. One states—

In my 18 years of operating business in Queensland, there is always a significant decrease in business decisions during and after an election period. The economy stops.

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Another business owner writes—

Our business historically drops to around 50 to 70 per cent turnover for a period of one and a half months. However, in the last two cycles the period has been three months.

Lastly—

Surprisingly, even as a bridal store we see a decrease in sales as people put purchases on hold. It has been a consistent theme whenever major political changes occur.

It is those stories, straight from the mouths of business operators, that demonstrate that while we maximise the time between state elections we are minimising the disruption to our economy. It will enable governments also to sufficiently facilitate good long-term economic planning. Political uncertainty leads to businesses putting investment and employment decisions on hold, which is a double whammy for the economy, because consumer spending and confidence is also lower. Equally important, the fixed four-year terms stop governments having a partisan advantage when it comes to choosing an election date.

In the pulse survey undertaken late last year, results convincingly indicated that 78 per cent of businesses consider there to be a negative or significant negative impact on the state economy as a result of state elections. That is almost four in five businesses. Another point I have is from a business owner who describes what he is seeing—

All businesses go into a period of conservatism coming into election times. Governments go into election mode and businesses are left in the middle, trying to predict and gamble on who will win and what policies they will have to operate under. The short election terms have significant negative impacts on business' ability to plan long term.

Most worryingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the pulse survey results show that the area of business most negatively impacted was in total sales revenue. Fifty-eight per cent of businesses indicated that that is where it hurts them the most. Obviously, this has an impact on their profitability.

What is it that businesses attribute to the drop in sales? They cite lower consumer confidence in spending as the No. 1 reason for such a decline. This is closely followed by changes in policies and then the uncertainty of future large infrastructure projects. Businesses simply delay all major decisions and seek the outcomes of the election before they make any decisions. This period of disruption and the stop-start growth that affects their bottom line does not do anything for job creation prospects, it does not do anything for the confidence to invest and it certainly does not do anything for our state economy.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that when we canvassed our membership base all options were put on the table. We asked them to indicate whether they would like to see no changes to the current arrangement; we asked if they liked three years but fixed; we asked about four years not fixed; we asked about four years with partial fix; and we asked about the full four years fixed. All five options were proposed and the four years, fixed for the entire term, prevailed as the most strongly supported option. Two in every three businesses supported this move. It is, indeed, the certainty around this option that is favoured by businesses. Without this fixed component, perhaps there would be no difference between the three years and the four years; there would be very little difference. A fixed term and a fixed election date will take the guessing game out of when the next election is going to be. Businesses and governments, for that matter, can get on with planning and they can get on with delivering.

I also want to stress the importance of four-year fixed terms for allowing the serving government greater opportunity to deliver on their election promises, to put the policies that they went to the election with into play and adequate time to implement them, review them and improve upon them. This is what businesses need and this is exactly what they are calling for. Greater confidence in the government and certainty in the government from the public and also from the business community is what will drive investment, economic confidence and job creation for Queensland.

It has been 25 years since Queenslanders went to the polls to decide on this same matter. Twenty-five years ago, it failed to secure enough votes and if the no case wins again then it is another major opportunity that we will miss. Referendums do not come by very often, so who knows when the next opportunity will be. With the last 10 terms in Queensland government averaging just two years and seven months, businesses are calling for the people of Queensland to get behind them, get behind the bipartisanship of this yes case by both two major political parties, the unions and industry groups, to change this unsustainable situation that we see here in Queensland. Thanks, Madam Chair.

Ms FARMER: Thank you very much, Catherine. I now call on Mr David Muir.

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Mr MUIR: Madam Chair, ladies and gentlemen, the first time I was invited to speak in this place was in support of a democratic model for a republic in 1998 and then in 2013 in support of accountability at the Open Government Policy Forum. Tonight, I return to advocate three good reasons to vote no to fixed four-year terms. The three good reasons—and I am emphasising ‘good’ for a reason—are enhanced democracy, government accountability and fairness for all Queenslanders.

Democracy has its origins in the Greek word meaning ‘power of the people’. The ballot box is the only opportunity for most Queenslanders to exercise any power. As noted history Geoffrey Blainey says, it would be a harsh penalty to deprive voters the right after three years to dismiss an incompetent or lacklustre government. Governments in Queensland are already more powerful than any other state government in Australia, because Queensland has no house of review. A yes vote will cause the people to be more remote than ever from the political processes. It is one more year without recourse to the ballot box and this equates to 33 occasions over the next century; another nail in the coffin for democracy.

Failure of accountability makes our Queensland parliamentary democracy a scary place. This begins with the absence of an upper house and, as Ian Walker mentioned earlier, some who are advocating for it will be here tonight. Imagine a parliament where laws in regard to your personal freedom can be passed in one day; only in Queensland. What happens if a tyrannical premier gets to power—unfettered power? Parliamentary committees cannot save us, as they are not entrenched and can be ignored, as recently occurred in the enactment of the WorkCover legislation under the previous state government. The Speaker cannot save us, as demonstrated by the Bligh government’s nobbling of the power of the Speaker in cahoots with the LNP opposition at the time. The CCC cannot save us, as demonstrated by the action of the previous government in reducing its powers and effectiveness, and narrowing the definition of ‘corruption’.

We also need an upper house for engagement with the community, as well as accountability. It is not a coincidence that every other state parliament in the country has, in recent times, debated one of the biggest social issues of our time, euthanasia law reform; not in Queensland. Why not? Because we have only one house in our parliament and that house is dominated by the executive, so access and opportunity are denied in the debate of such important issues. It is not fair that access is denied to parliamentary debates that can occur in other state parliaments.

In response to the yes case arguments, three years is long enough to get things done. Governments need to be ready to govern at the beginning. If the government is good enough, it will be re-elected. An extra year of bad government could cause enormous economic and financial cost, much more costly than the cost of a ballot box. Unions and big business do not need to wait for the ballot box; they can get access to ministers at any time. An extra year extends and enhances the power and influence of the already influential; hardly fair.

Fixed four-year terms for local government is a chalk-and-cheese comparison, as local government does not have the power over personal freedom, the power over police, the power over health and education. It is a ridiculous comparison. We want honest government with integrity and a clearly communicated plan. You do not need an extra year to gain honesty, integrity and a clear vision. The yes case is built on the quicksand of convenience and power play; not the bedrock of merit and evidence.

I will also comment on what I say is an unfair referendum process. The government and the opposition have done little to promote debate in the community on this referendum question. I hear what my friend Ian Walker says about that, but my belief is that there has been a campaign to run dead on promoting the fact that there is a referendum. There are still a lot of Queenslanders who do not even understand that there is a referendum on. That is a scandal, in my view. The Electoral Commission of Queensland was instructed not to change the formatting for the yes and no cases, despite the yes case being described as ‘good reasons’, with more prominent font and headings, ignoring the requirements of fairness under the Queensland Referendums Act 1997. Also, holding the referendum at the time of the local government elections has potentially confused the two levels of government, bringing together two different issues at the one polling event.

Historically, Queenslanders have fought for democracy, accountability and fairness. In 1917, the Queensland people voted no to a referendum question to abolish this upper house. In 1922, the Queensland government used trickery to stack the upper house with a suicide squad that voted to abolish it. In 1988, the Queensland people voted no to fixed four-year terms for our federal parliament. In 1991, the Queensland people voted no to four-year terms in state parliament. In 1999, the Queensland people voted

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no, by a big margin, against an undemocratic model for a republic that denied the ballot box for the head of state election. In conclusion, let us protect this legacy of democracy, accountability and fairness of past generations and vote no for the sake of the future generations of Queenslanders. Thank you.

Ms FARMER: Thank you, David. I now call on Mark Ryan.

Mr RYAN: Good evening, everyone. Thank you, Di. A few speakers have remarked on the irony of being in this place. It is almost quite ominous. Some of the speakers have touched on the reasons for that irony. Quite a few things that happen in this space actually contribute to the accountability and transparency of our parliament and our democracy. The robust estimates process takes place here. Committees meet here—and I will touch on improvements to the committee system that have been proposed by the Committee of the Legislative Assembly shortly. The opening of parliament with the Governor exercising those powers entrusted to him happens in this place. Also, we have Chris O'Brien here from the media. A number of media conferences take place in this space providing additional transparency and accountability for our democracy. So when we meet in this space I think it is quite ominous that all of those other things that are enhancing our democracy and our transparency are taking place in this space as well. It is actually great we are having this debate here in this place as well because that in itself is contributing to good government.

This referendum is ultimately a question for the people. It is not a question that can be answered by the yes case or the no case or the government or the opposition or the Independents; it is for the people of Queensland. It is important that we have that robust discussion. It is ultimately a question for the people, and that is what good government is about: consulting and listening.

We heard just before that the last opportunity that the people of Queensland had to contribute to this particular matter was 1991, a generation ago—25 years ago. If history is any guide, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the people of Queensland. It may be another 25 years before this discussion is had. That would be, judging by the colour of our hair, more than the time that Ian will have here and more than the time that Robbie will have here or more than the time that I will have here, but Di has still got a full head of semi-coloured hair, so Di will be around to see that.

We have to be really serious about considering the arguments of this debate. Let's look at how we can improve our current system. Let's look at how we can make it better. Like Ian and Catherine and those other people supporting the yes case, I firmly believe that this reform will provide for better government; it will provide for a better community; it will encourage economic growth; it will support industry and business; and, as we have seen from other key stakeholders, it will actually provide a better outcome for Queensland.

I am going to speak about four key points. The first one is about this is providing better government. The second one is about consistency; it brings us in line with other states and local government. The third is a financial argument; it saves money. The fourth is that it takes the politics out of calling elections. In relation to that first point about providing better government, what I hear so often when I am out in the community is people saying, 'Come on, just get out there. Make a decision. Stop fighting. Make sure you get the best decision for Queenslanders.' This debate is all about taking the politics out of providing good government. It is about less politics and more governing. As we heard from Catherine, there is some key anecdotal evidence from her members which support the argument that flows from providing better government and taking the politics out. We can grow the economy. Business can have better confidence. Business can invest more. Business can plan their future plans. We can have better infrastructure planning and delivery. It is quite topical to say that because just yesterday the four-year state infrastructure plan was released, which is a much needed thing for industry and a much needed thing for our construction centre. I know that the people at Engineers Australia have been crying out for a number of years for a forward plan. It is quite ironic that it is a four-year infrastructure plan and, of course, Engineers Australia and the construction industry are very pleased to see that.

It also provides some certainty for our public servants, those people who do not know when the election is going to be called who have to quickly go into caretaker mode, who might be working on some core policies. That makes it more difficult for our public servants to deliver good government as well. There are many reasons for taking the politics out of providing government.

The second point is that it brings us in line with other states and also local government. Every other state has a four-year term. Every other one of them other than Tasmania have a four-year fixed term. Queensland is not unique because the ACT and Northern Territory also only have one house of parliament but they have four-year fixed terms, and we have not heard about how their democracy is failing. In fact, the example in the ACT shows how robust that democracy is.

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The third point is that it saves money on elections. That is just a simple mathematical equation. If you go from three years or the average of two years, seven months to a four-year fixed term you will have fewer elections over a period of time which will save money overall to the Queensland taxpayers.

The important thing about that as well—and do not ever lose sight of the ability of people to be able to run proper campaigns because they are able to better plan their campaign over that fixed four-year period. The advantage that is associated with the major parties—and Robbie spoke about the issues that he has with the major parties. The benefit that the major parties have with the current system is that they have a tactical advantage that it is flexible. They have a tactical advantage that an election can be called at the direction of the majority party in parliament. Having a four-year fixed term allows those other stakeholder groups, those other parties, to actually better plan campaigns ahead of the next election, to actually better direct their resources. In one way, looking at four-year fixed terms from the point of view of an Independent or a minor party, they are actually able to contribute to democracy.

Finally, it takes the politics out of calling an election. It is a fixed time, so we will not ever have an election on summer school holidays again.

Ms FARMER: Thank you very much. I now call on Professor Graeme Orr.

Prof. ORR: Good evening, everyone. I am verging on 50 years of age and I find myself in the unfamiliar position of opposing a referendum for constitutional reform. As Robbie Katter said, our system is hardly perfect. It could do with reform but, unfortunately, this proposal—fewer elections without any compensating checks and balances—is regressive. I will briefly give the key reasons to vote no.

First, it dilutes the democratic birthright of the ballot. The chartists who did so much to win the vote for all over a century ago wanted annual elections in parliaments. The world is more complex today, even allowing for a faster process of consultation and movement, than it was in the Victorian era. But in modern times, as has been pointed out, governments with a clear agenda have managed to move mountains in a three-year term. Whitlam, Keating, Howard mark 4, the Newman government all made their reform mark in three years. Reducing the number of elections is not a democratic move. Democracy is not primarily about efficient government in some corporate sense; it is about representative government.

Secondly, and I think more tellingly, think about Queensland's political framework and culture. We have no upper house of review. The Labor government that abolished the unelected Legislative Council saw fit to entrench the three-year term precisely because that would be the only safeguard against elected dictatorships. There is no judicial review of legislation, we have no proportional representation at all. In fact, we have far fewer registered parties than anywhere else in Australia and less representativeness in parliament as a consequence and we do not have an entrenched committee system, even though that was meant to accompany this referendum. In short, we have minimum checks and balances. Not surprisingly, we have had a culture of strongmen premiers, from Messrs Gair through to Bjelke-Petersen and on to Messrs Beattie and Newman.

Then there is the question of fixed terms. With respect to Catherine, the question of people going into an economic shell around election time is a furphy. It has been debunked in many international studies. Money does not just evaporate. It is only a minority of industries, those dependent or reliant on government funding or very specific policy decisions, who find unfixed terms difficult. In any event, as we have said on this side, in normal times, fixed terms are a good idea, but industry and public servants can have fixed terms without a referendum. The British parliament fixed its term in 2011. Dr Tracey Arklay is here and said in the regional press last week that this referendum was about stability versus accountability. Yet when we fix terms in constitutional concrete, as this referendum proposes, as Victoria found out when its Liberal minority government crumbled recently and as our Premier unwittingly pointed out as she threatened an early election last week, be careful what you wish for. This referendum could consign the present hung parliament to four years of instability, not stability, with no path to a circuit-breaking election short of the opposition and the government agreeing on a time and a rationale to pass a kind of general purpose no confidence motion, one where the opposition would also have to promise not to sweet-talk Mr Katter and the Independents into supporting them to form an alternative government in the meantime.

I want to thank tonight's organisers, Di and the ASPG and David, because this is about the closest we have come to officially organised voter education for this referendum. On the grounds of a woeful process alone, as David Muir said, this proposal does not deserve to pass. I know people with PhDs and lawyers who are not even aware today that it is being held. So what chance can the average citizen have, who knows nothing about manner and form entrenchment or how the Queensland Constitution differs from

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the national? This vote has been hurried to piggyback on council polling day. It has involved nothing but the century-old model of 1,000-word black and white yes and no cases, even though there are multiple recent reports of the Australian parliament that stress the importance of proper education and the use of modern media in a long-term process to ensure deliberation before referendums. Instead, what will we have? We will have a million Brisbanites rocking up to vote for the Brisbane City Council election next Saturday, many hundreds of thousands of whom will go, 'Referendum? What referendum? Oh. Here's my party's how-to-vote card. That'll tell me what to do,' because Brisbane local elections are partisan unlike the rest of Queensland.

I want to stress that the real problem with this proposal is not captured in the cynical line: 'It is about job security for politicians.' Most MPs are decent and hardworking. Nor is it a partisan issue. I have worked with the Greens and Labor on various issues in the past. Ian Walker and I have sparred in newspapers and online videos on opposite sides of this debate and one day he will be a very affable and very good Attorney-General and helping the Katter party with the 'no case'—the first time I have worked with them—has impressed me with their sincerity. The underlying problem is not with individuals, not with politicians as politicians or people; it is with systems. If this referendum passes, our constitutional framework will be virtually identical to the Northern Territory, not the other states with their upper houses, their proportional representation, some of whom have charters of rights and some even have competing state based newspapers. Our constitutional framework come Sunday morning if this passes will be identical to the Northern Territory, and how well has that panned out?

To the cynical argument that it will give some sort of certainty of elections and save costs of elections, as Mark said, I will do the maths. It will save about \$1.7 million a year. I have a 13-year-old who is champing at the bit for a first chance to vote. I know that sounds nerdy, but it is my family. How can I go home tonight and say, 'For the chickenfeed of \$1.7 million a year on average I would vote to dilute your capacity and future generations' capacity to vote?'

This referendum is a charter for further entrenching executive power. It should be defeated and then we can go back to the drawing board that we should have gone to in the first place for a rational compromise and discuss if not an upper house, then voting system reform or at least a legislatively fixed three-year term.

Ms FARMER: Thank you. I now call Mr Chris O'Brien.

Mr O'BRIEN: Monday night, 5 January 2015: I was playing tennis. I was on holidays. I got home at about nine o'clock and my colleagues were on Twitter, which in this day and age is terrifying for a journalist. 'What are they tweeting that I don't know,' is the first thing you always think. Well, of course they were tweeting that word had got around that the Premier, Campbell Newman, was calling an election the next day. I got no sleep that night. I had to pack a bag, I had to tell my wife my holidays were over and off I was going on the campaign trail. I have heard many erudite discussions and arguments for and against this particular issue. Not one single person has had the decency to consider that it wrecked my holiday. Lest you think I am being partisan, Peter Beattie did it too me, too, in 2004. I was fast asleep when he called the election. I was on holidays on that occasion as well having a sleep in and had to rush in to work. I am joking, of course.

Let me say this very seriously. As a journalist who works daily to cover Queensland politics, it is not my inclination to offer an opinion for or against this particular debate. In fact, as a journalist who observes and does not take part in the process, I do not even think I have a right to have an opinion. I have a right as a voter, but that is a whole different thing. As a journalist, I have no right to say to either side of this debate that one side is better than the other.

What I will do is say something professional about the way politics is reported in this issue and two quick personal thoughts. The professional thing to tell you is this: words cannot describe how ridiculous, distracting and fatuous political journalism is after about the two-year mark of every term of the Queensland government. I say that not as an opinion or as a covering remark. I simply say that is the case. It is beyond description how stupid it gets. I think you would advise me, therefore, not to report the speculation about early elections every two years after an election. I accept your advice. I do not think we should either.

Unfortunately, fantastic as I am—and even as a former president of the Queensland parliamentary media gallery and current secretary-treasurer—I have no control over what my colleagues report. I simply say to you that two years after every election we have the ridiculous carry-on of saying to premiers, 'Are you going to go to an election?' And they turn themselves into pretzels trying to neither confirm nor deny.

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They do not want to rule it out. They do not want to say it is going to happen, and it becomes a distraction. It should not. That is our fault as an industry. Unfortunately, for one reason or another we have less and less space in papers, on TV and radio these days, and instead of reporting what governments are doing we spend a lot of time at that point on speculation. That is not a reason for changing the system. I simply give that to you as an insight into what goes on in journalism.

Let me finish with two personal thoughts and then I will hand over to you for your thoughts on this. I ask this question of the learned panel tonight: is there an arbitrary nature to the numbers that we are talking about; that three is okay but four is not? Is there any empirical data that supports that? Is there any law to the universe that God created that three is great and four is rubbish? What if annual elections had been happening all this time? Would we be saying going to two years is far too long. We cannot have that. At the other extreme, I believe there are some jurisdictions around the world that have five-year terms. If we had had four year terms all this time and we are saying, 'That is too short; let's go to five,' would we be having the same debate? I think it is the longer-ness of it that people are arguing about. I just throw that out there.

The other one is philosophical; it is not professional or personal. This is purely philosophical. This might even sound naive and quixotic. Whatever happens with this debate on Saturday I hope the result is on its merits. I am very pleased that no-one here tonight has talked about rubbish politicians. I am very pleased that no-one here tonight has talked about bad governments per se. It has been very distressing to see on social media that a lot of the no case has come not from the formal no case but from outside: 'Let's not give them another go.' It seems to me distressingly negative and cynical and I do not want to be a part of that if we just have this view that governments of all descriptions are so rubbish we don't want to give them anymore time. I am very glad that is not part of the official debate tonight.

Finally, is there anybody from the ECQ here tonight? No? Good. I think we can all agree tonight that fixed terms are okay. I think we sneak out, replace the ballot papers and make it two questions. I will just leave that with you.

Ms FARMER: Thank you very much to all of our speakers. I happily congratulate the ASPG again for selecting such diverse speakers. I think we have had exposure to a good range of views here with many different points being raised. We are going to open up the floor to questions now. There is a microphone here and I will take questions by a show of hands. You may wish to ask a particular speaker a question or you may wish to ask all of the yes people a question or the entire group.

Mr DARBY: I represent Queenslanders for Constitutional Monarchy Association, which opposes the referendum proposal, as we successfully opposed another referendum not so long again. I would like to address a question to Rob Katter, MP for Mount Isa. Sir, you would have noticed that many of the arguments for four-year terms are also arguments for having no elections whatsoever. You and your distinguished colleagues may also have come to the view—and this is where my question lies—that there is a mindset which says there should be two major parties taking turns and all that elections are for is to decide whose turn it is. That is my question to you, Sir.

Mr KATTER: I am pretty sure I have an idea of where you are coming from with that. I am not sure if I can add too much to what has been said in the question and I hope I do it justice. I would probably just be rehashing what I said before. I feel the system is perhaps not working as it should, and I would be very happy to see a Greens party, a country party and a few other parties in there creating some attention and choice and driving consultative governments. If you will allow me my opinion, I think there is complacency. I think if I am sitting in one major party I would rest on the fact that there is a good chance—a fifty-fifty chance—that I will be in government if not this term then the next term. I think that can lead to complacency and I do not have to be too different from the other party; I just do not have to be as bad. I think it drives some cynicism in the system and some interest groups are not represented as strongly as they should be. I think that is where the system is failing us. I hope that does justice to your question.

Prof. SCOTT: I have affiliations with the TJ Ryan Foundation. My question goes back to something that Chris O'Brien alluded to, and that is the notion of whether we are really looking at two questions—one is certainty and the fixedness of the term; and the other is the length of the term. It seems to me that voters are not being given the chance to be in favour of a three-year fixed term; they have been required to have an opinion on both at the same time.

Mr WALKER: That position has been put a number of times to me as the debate has gone around the state. The difficulty is that it is not open to us to put a multiple choice question. The way the system works is that you have to have a specific piece of legislation upon which people either say they want it or they do not want it. There is not the option to have numerous pieces of legislation and a preferential system

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as to which you want. That is the system we have. I suppose those of us who were thinking through the issue thought that was the best outcome for the state and therefore that was the proposal we put. So you either accept it or you do not, and if you do not we come back with another proposal that looks as though there is one that makes sense.

It is very easy to complicate this issue. A lot of the debate tonight has been about all the other things that are wrong with the system. There are plenty of things wrong with the system. No one referendum will introduce an upper house, bring in proportional representation, make sure the minor parties are represented, dilute the power of the major parties, make sure there is certainty and keep everything stable. We are not going to be able to do it all in one hit.

For me, this is a pretty simple proposition. From where I sat, personally experiencing a role in government and being a minister in government, I reckon people would have got better value out of me if I had four years to do things than three years and in doing so I do not reckon I would have trashed democracy. I think it was still an opportunity for me to do that at the end of four. I think it is a fairly simple question that can be made complicated by those who think about these things in so many ways. It is a simple proposition. It is a single proposition, but I think that is a helpful thing as people make a decision.

Ms FARMER: Would any of the other speakers like to comment?

Mr MUIR: Can I challenge that view that you cannot deal with the issue separately. My view is that you can ask separate questions. The fact of the matter is that we have a double-barrelled question here, and I think that is one of the unfortunate features of it. I think there is a sense in the community of wanting some certainty and not allowing expediency for the Premier of the day to choose the date at their convenience to have an election. I think there is an appetite in the community to remedy that.

I think that ought to be a question about whether we have fixed terms. In our current constitutional arrangements that is every three years, and I would have thought that question would be asked in the context of the constitutional arrangements we presently have every three years. I think that would address some of the concerns in the community about expediency in politics.

I make the point that, if you are going to put your hand up to govern the state, I think you need to be ready to do it. It is just not good enough to put your hand up to govern the state and then spend the first 12 months trying to work out what you are going to do. I do not think that is good enough. We need a higher standard and a higher level of confidence in our political life.

Can I digress slightly to say that I think part of the problem—and I think Chris alluded to part of the no case that you might hear in the community—is trashing politicians. I think that comes from a view that unfortunately in our country—as opposed to the UK or the US—and particularly here in Queensland there is a very strict discipline in our major parties. Crossing the floor of the parliament is an unusual circumstance and you do it at your own risk. In the Westminster system or the Congress, on issues they feel strongly about people will cross the floor and they are allowed to do it without retribution. What that leads to is more honesty in the views that are expressed by our politicians. I think one of the problems we have in this country is that people are getting up and saying things they do not really believe, but they are saying it because of the constraint of their political party. The major political parties have that huge discipline and I think that is a big problem.

The other is that we do not have many conscience votes. We need a parliament that actually represents the community; that allows those big social issues to which I was referring to be debated. It is extraordinary that in every other state parliament these debates are happening but they are not happening here. I think that is not good enough. I think it is all about getting the confidence and throwing off those shackles of discipline.

Dr ARKLEY: I am really interested to ask the yes case why they did not look at the committee system in Queensland. I have a long memory of Queensland history and one of my real concerns is that accountability argument—it is something that I am really concerned about—and entrenching the committee system so that the government of the day, because we have a history of strong territorial governments in Queensland, cannot decide that they do not like what the committee is doing and sack members. So to entrench the system so that the committee gets a chance to deliberate on bills, to stop the urgency motions that get passed that are used quite often to speed up the process. There are lots of worries that I have about that when you consider Queensland's history. That is not being partisan; is on both sides of the House parties have done that. So I would really like to know your thinking about the committee system and why you did not decide that it was time to entrench that so that at least we have some surety there.

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Ms FARMER: On the part of the yes case, that is probably more relevant to Mark.

Mr RYAN: Thanks for the question, Tracey. That is an issue that has been discussed quite heatedly during this debate. One thing that some people have not seen yet is a report that just came out from the Committee of the Legislative Assembly, which talks about this very issue—the issue of entrenchment and how we can enhance our committee system to provide greater oversight, greater accountability, greater transparency. Ian has a copy of it here if you want to have a look later on.

One of the things that the Committee of the Legislative Assembly considered was that very point of entrenchment. One of the recommendations that they made will not go as far as what you would be advocating, I would imagine, but recommends statutory entrenchment of the committee system rather than just sitting and standing orders. I imagine you would probably argue constitutional entrenchment of the committee system. But it is progress. As we have seen throughout Queensland's history, that fine line of making sure that we enhance our systems and create greater transparency is a long process.

Dr ARKLEY: Sure, but it is an important one.

Mr RYAN: I do not dispute that at all. One of the other things which David Muir might be interested to read in the review of the Committee of the Legislative Assembly as well is the fact that the committee is supporting the view that parliamentary committees should be allowed to initiate their own inquiries. That is not the same necessarily as an upper house being able to initiate its own inquiry into a matter of conscience or other social issues. Nonetheless, it is proposed to expand the scope of what committees can do now, which will provide a forum for those discussions and debates about these societal issues and hopefully, of course, enrich our democracy in the process.

Mr WALKER: Thanks, Mark. I must say that we did think seriously about the entrenchment issue when the committee recommended it. The difficulty is that, if you entrench it, particularly if you constitutionally entrench it—in other words, if there then has to be a referendum to change that again and that is probably the only way to protect it properly—then you have to say, 'I'm going to entrench a system that should last for, say, 100 years,' because you are not likely to be able to change it once you put it in there. The difficulty is—and I know, having served in the last parliament and now this one—that it is a very different sort of committee system when you have a 78-seat majority than from you have a 45-seat majority. It means that you are going to have to decide what sort of issues committees might need to look into in 20 or 40 years that have not even existed yet. The difficulty is, if you entrench anything worthwhile in the detail, you are likely to have to change it within a generation—or you put in something that is so that pathetic that it does not matter much anyway. Maybe all you can say is, 'There shall be seven committees,' or something, because once you give them names you are going to miss something that is going to exist. You would not have had an innovation committee if you had had this referendum 40 years ago.

So it becomes, I think, a rather senseless exercise, because we would have to reduce it so much to the bare minimum that you are not entrenching much at all so that was, I think, our reasoning.

I accept, however, the argument that—and I am sure that there would be few who did not accept it—the committee system needs improving, needs constant improvement. As Mark pointed out, this review—if you have not seen it, it was tabled in February—starts along that track. There is still a long way to go. Again, can I say do not chuck out one reform for the sake that it does not solve everything that is wrong with our system. That has to be accepted. But for a referendum that did that would take a long time to argue and a long time to write down.

Ms FARMER: Would anyone for the not case like to say something?

Mr Muir: In terms of Ian's point about 'Don't chuck out some positive reform', I think it is a cart-before-the-horse argument. I think that we need the other reform first and then we can, in a safe environment, move to the reform that Ian is promoting, because I think that it is unsafe to move to that reform at the moment until the other accountability measures are in place.

Prof. ORR: I take the point that I think is being made that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good, but I do not see a lot of good in this proposal either in the way that it runs together two distinguishable and distinct issues—the fixed and the length of the term. I think we just have to accept the argument that it is regressive. We do not have any other checks and balances in place. So I would not be opposing this referendum if I were living in a different jurisdiction.

Finally, I think Chris made some good points about the length being a bit arbitrary, how it is two years in the US, five years in the UK, three or four here, but he also talked about the issues in the media, the so-called media political industrial complex. Those are issues around the western world. We only have to

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see what is happening in the United States currently. They are running fixed terms and so on, but the real issues are not going to change. Extending the Queensland parliament by a year is not going to change any of those things. Those kinds of things lay far deeper, if you like, than the question of whether governments have three or four year terms. We are not going to wake up with a Nirvana simply because public servants have got some extra time. We still have the problem now of the politicisation of the senior Public Service. I argue it is not that we have to change and reform all of them, but without reform to any of them, moving to a four-year fixed term is dangerous.

Mr HAMILTON: My name is Dennis Hamilton. I am a retired person, but I do have a question. We have heard a little bit about perhaps the no case has been supported by people rubbishing politicians. That is a little bit of a side issue, but my question is do you not think it says loud and clear that increasing the interval between elections is saying that the politicians do not trust the voters?

Ms FARMER: Would you like anyone in particular to answer your question or are you happy to take comments from any of the speakers?

Mr HAMILTON: From wherever.

Ms FARMER: Who would like to take that one?

Mr RYAN: Thanks, Dennis. You have the best job around. Retirement and asking politicians questions. Well done. Dennis, this is a matter which will be decided by the people ultimately. I do not think we are fearful of their decision at all. If it gets up it is because the people want it. If it doesn't get up it is because they don't want it. Elections are hard work, but at the end of the day we are only here because people vote for us. We have to make sure that we maintain that respect, honour and trust that the electorate put in us. If you are doing the wrong thing, if you are not representing your community right, generally the people get it right and they throw you out.

Mr WALKER: Mark got it right there. It is the people's decision. If they want it, they want it, if they don't, they don't. Whatever happens we get on the bike. I just make a point in passing that the question of fixed three-year terms has been raised. That is, in fact, something that can be done without referendum. That is just an interesting thing to throw into the mix. We could fix three years without it.

Ms FARMER: Robbie Katter has just had a word to me. He actually needs to leave early so could I just thank Robbie. Chris, did you want to make a comment.

Mr O'BRIEN: As a journalist, could I ask you to elaborate on that last thing that you said and could I pin you down, and maybe Mark as well, would you be willing to do that? If this referendum fails will you investigate the mechanism for fixing three-year terms as the next step after that?

Mr WALKER: I think we have to wait to see what the result of the referendum is. I think at that stage people may well be sick of talking about the issue or give us the message that they don't want us talking about ourselves, they want us to talk about other things. I think you would have to sit calmly, look at what the figures were and see where the sentiment had been. As I understand it, and Mark may have a different view, I think we can do that without a referendum, I think, the entrenchment in relation to three-year terms. My gut feeling would be that in anything like that it would be always good to get the view of the people rather than to go solo.

Ms PHAM: Speaking on behalf of the business community, we did actually make our survey question complicated. We did have five options. We had to not do anything at all, we had three years fixed, we had four years no fixed term, four years partial fixed and then four years full fixed. The three options, which were the four years, actually favoured more strongly than the three years fixed. I guess among the chatter there is a consensus that maybe the fixed component of it is actually more favourable than a longer term, but not so in the business community. Obviously there is the importance of the fixed part, but there is favouritism towards extending the life of the term as well.

Prof. ORR: Without drowning you in constitutional law, it is clearly possible to legislatively fix a term with a simple majority. That is what the UK parliament did in the Con-Lib-Dem government in 2011. There are some arguments about whether you could just legislatively fix it because of what premier Bjelke-Petersen did some years back, although I think the courts would accept that you could legislatively entrench something without a referendum because that was always the case. But I can see that the business argument is in a sense the argument against democracy; the argument that we should have the most power and predictability in government for as long as possible. That is not the argument from representative democracy. The argument from representative democracy is to counterbalance the weight of questions of efficiency and business above all.

Dr REYNOLDS: I am also, like the last speaker, retired. Although seven and a half years in this parliament as the honorary research fellow is worth retiring for. I just wanted to make a comment that we seem to have forgotten a bit of Queensland history here. The norm in Queensland is not for three-year governments; the norm is for governments to roll over for, in some cases, 20 years. That has nothing to do with the electoral system being gerrymandered or jiggery-pokery. It is about Queensland political culture. It has been around since the formation of the party system in the 1890s. I genuinely haven't decided which way I am going to vote, but as far as that goes there is an air of unreality about all this for me as a former political scientist and a lecturer in Queensland politics because the political culture argument seems to put this in quite a different kind of perspective. Whether it is three years or four years, if you have a government that is going to run for three or four or more terms, all you are doing is just sort of adding a bit on at the end. Thanks.

Prof. ORR: You might be saying that sounds like the yes case, but I would say the opposite. You could suggest to me that there is a culture traditionally in Queensland, and I think that is historically the case. But you could not have said the last two elections that had been the case and I think we can find a volatility all around the industrial Western world, so maybe history is not always a sure guide to the future. I have always thought of compulsory voting as a conservative methodology in the sense of the sort of people who decide elections, particularly people of my age living in the sort of suburb I live in with two kids. They turn up at polling booths. They are required under the law to turn up and they are traditionally less likely to kick out a government unless they are really peeved off with the government. That creates that kind of stability which we have traditionally seen in Australia. To me it is all the more reason why you might want to have more regular elections rather than fewer elections, because you may end up getting a government that has been pretty stable for a long time and then gets out of hand. It was certainly an accusation made when the Howard government gained a Senate majority.

Ms FARMER: Thanks, Graeme. We were scheduled to finish around about now, but I appreciate that we started a little bit later. I think there is one more question up the back.

QUESTIONER: Hello. My name is Shaun and I am a justice student. My question is to Catherine and any of the other panellists who are interested. Catherine, you raised the point that the election cycle causes disruption to the economy and that negatively impacts businesses. You centred your argument around state elections, but you did not consider local and federal elections as well. We had our last local elections in 2012, we had our federal elections in 2013 and the last state election was 2015. Based on your argument that you presented to us, we would have had economic disruptions in 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016 for our national election. Essentially, my question is this: In considering that we also have local and federal elections as well, how much will the proposed changes from the referendum really impact businesses positively or negatively?

Ms PHAM: Thanks, Shaun, for the question. If we sent out this survey on the federal elections and not just the state elections, I would assume that the results would be the same. I could not speak on behalf of the business community on local elections. Like I said, it does not hit some nerve amongst the voters. But federal elections and state elections I assume would have the same sorts of effects. I know at CCIQ we were a little bit worried this year with the local elections, the federal election is coming up and the possibility of a state election as well. We do quarterly surveys, Pulse surveys, which monitor how the economy is going. It would be interesting to see—and we have not done this yet—whether there would be a drop in economic activity or not. To answer your question, if at the time around a federal election it would be the same sort of economic detrimental impacts that you would see around a state election as well.

Dr REYNOLDS: Madam President, may the House divide?

Prof. SCOTT: I think the applause-o-meter has already given us a result, hasn't it?

Ms FARMER: We are not making any decisions here tonight. We are going to have to finish up unfortunately. I again would like to thank our speakers—Mr Ian Walker, Mr Mark Ryan, Robbie Katter, Graeme Orr, David Muir, Chris O'Brien and Catherine Pham. Thank you very much for that very informative rank of views and thank you to all of you for taking part in this. As we all acknowledge, this is a very important question. Some of you may have already made up your minds. Some of you may have come along tonight so that you could be informed for Saturday, but well done to all of you for taking part. I am going to hand back to David. Again, thank you very much and thanks to the ASPG. This is a great campaign that is a really important one.

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Mr GIBSON: Thank you, Di. Could I thank you for being our moderator today. I think you have done a fantastic job and I could only wish that I was sitting in the House and watching you being Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure you do a fine job there as well. Again, I want to thank our panellists. We appreciate the efforts you put in to tonight. I want to thank everyone for coming along. If you are not a member of the ASPG—if you are not on our database—we do have membership forms. As I indicated, we hold three of these forums a year. We try to pick topics that are interesting, that are relevant and that are generally not a blood sport. The tone with which we had the discussions tonight reflects exactly how we approach them. If you would like to be involved, please do. There will be membership forms out in the supper area. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.