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Queensland Electoral Reform Discussion Paper Submission

Firstly, please allow me start by thanking the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice and his Department for the opportunity to contribute to the discourse surrounding electoral reform in Queensland. I believe it to be of critical importance that Queenslanders are able to weigh in on this debate; if participation in democracy is mandatory an ability to help shape our electoral system is vitally important. There are many issues about which the Attorney and the Newman Government have sought comment. To my mind this shows the Government's intentions to be consultative are true. This submission will not seek to comment on all matters arising from the discussion paper; however, there are some issues on which I have a clear view and look forward to making them known. It is my intention to discuss the issue of compulsory versus voluntary voting as well as caps on electoral donations and campaign spend.

Voting in Queensland: Compulsory or Voluntary?

This particular issue is emotive and is one that has engendered much debate, discussion and in some cases consternation. I believe many of those who were critical of its inclusion in the discussion paper fail to realise that it is not government policy, rather, truly indicative of the Government's consultative tendencies. I note that many senior members of the Gillard

Government were critical of this subject's inclusion in this discussion paper the irony of such criticism is not lost on many who are aware that the Rudd Government included the same topic in their own electoral reform discussion paper. Australia is one of 32 countries that has compulsory voting and is one of 19 who enforce their system.

My personal view is that Queensland should continue with compulsory voting with allocating preferences remaining voluntary. There have been good men and women who have fought for and made the ultimate sacrifice in our name to protect the way of life that we hold sacrosanct; people across the globe campaign for the right to vote and the system of democracy that we have and that we should be so incredibly proud of. I believe it would be an affront to the sacrifice that people have made or have been prepared to make. We are blessed with great freedoms in this country. We have the freedom to choose which political party or candidate we vote for. We have the freedom to participate in the political process and put ourselves forward as representatives of our communities. This is a freedom that we must never allow ourselves to take for granted. I preface my next statement by saying that I'm aware it seems oxymoronic; however, I truly believe from that freedom there are certain obligations which arise. One such obligation is, I believe, to participate in the electoral process. Being forced to the polling booth once a year (assuming that the state, federal and local government elections occur in consecutive years) is a small price to pay for the freedoms we have.

Mandatory participation ensures governments have greater legitimacy and local Members of Parliament are truly representative of their communities, not simply those who are politically interested. Those members of our society who truly object or do not feel that they can support any candidate are welcome to, and do, submit an informal ballot paper. I also believe that it will ensure a higher level of political debate and discourse. Where voting is voluntary political parties need simply campaign on one issue or focus on one interest group. If everyone has to participate in the process political parties are obliged to have broad ranging policies that will appeal to the community at large. This is evident in the policies of

both the Liberal National Party and the Labor Party. Minor political parties campaign for a small percentage of the disaffected vote and as such their policies appeal to such sectors of the community. It also means that major political parties are able to respond to single-issue campaigns and address them as part of a broader platform.

Another benefit of compulsory voting is that political parties do not focus their efforts on encouraging people to vote, rather on communicating their policies to the voting public. Political parties in the United States of America and the United Kingdom focus significant amounts of their time and money to 'get out the vote' campaigns.

In the early days of the Australian Federation we had voluntary voting and participation had dropped, at one point, to below 30 per cent. I'm not suggesting that if we were to introduce voluntary voting in 2013 we would see such marked drops; however, it is worth noting that there is the potential to see significantly reduced participation. It entrenches inequality and threatens the legitimacy of governments. This is bad for democracy.

Political Donations: Restrict or Regulate?

There has been much debate in the community and in political circles in recent times regarding political donations. The Bligh Labor Government introduced significant and severe restrictions on political donations in Queensland. It is my view that the restrictions that were placed on political donations were particularly onerous and one might even go as far as to use the descriptor 'draconian'.

I believe that it is important the public is aware of the source of political donations. This ensures an open democracy and people are able to cast an informed vote. This is why I believe the key here is ensuring effective regulation and accessible information as opposed to heavy restriction. To continue to impose restrictions serves no real benefit.

Changes should be made in this area. I feel it is entirely appropriate to make political parties and candidates publicly declare the donations that they receive but if a person has the capacity and the will to donate \$10,000 (for example) than they should be able to, provided the voting public is aware of the donation. Donations could be listed on either the political parties' websites or the electoral commissions and could take on a very simple format that wouldn't be onerous for the candidate or political party to conform with.

Date	Donor	Amount	Candidate	Political Party
1/1/2011	Joe Bloggs	\$10,000	Joe Smith	The Political Party of Politicia

To restrict donations is to impinge someone's freedom of political speech; as such, I believe that there must be reform in this area.

In terms of corporate and union donations I believe it would be appropriate for the board/management to seek the approval of shareholders/members at each annual general meeting to contribute to political campaigns. I don't believe it necessary for the corporation or union to disclose amounts but it would be necessary to disclose the political parties that they might be donating to. This has the potential to demonstrate a corporate/union conscience with regard to funds that has not been seen before, to my knowledge, in this country.

Campaign Spending: To Cap or Not To Cap?

I believe that caps on campaign spending can have their benefits. I think there are times when candidates and political parties have spent overly-large amounts of money on campaigns. I would have no objection to seeing an increase in the cap – perhaps to \$100,000; however, I do think a cap is a positive. It ensures that candidates are placed on an equal footing in terms of their ability to campaign and communicate with the electorates because one candidate cannot simply outspend them by significant amounts.

I have some concerns with regard to third parties participating in campaigns. I believe it is important that all groups in our communities are able to participate in democracy; however, I believe the cap of their campaign spend should be reduced to \$50,000, and potentially decreased further.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and make a submission. I think it is vital that the Queensland public is able to contribute to discussions regarding electoral reform.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Verity Barton', written in a cursive style.

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