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Title:

Talk for 5KA - Wednesday 26 November, Leader of the Opposition, Mr Dunstan

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TALK FOR 5KA - Wednesday 26th November

Leader of Opposition, Mr Dunstan

Good evening. It's now been more than a month since the bill that to give us far more equitable electoral boundaries in this State - the Constitution Act Amendment Bill - left the House of Assembly for the Legislative Council. It was presented in the Legislative Council by the Chief Secretary on the 21st of October, and it's now the 26th of November. During the intervening period there have been seventeen full sitting days during which time ^{ONLY} twelve members have spoken. ^{THEN} There have been days when the debate hasn't even got off the ground. And one speech by a member for Southern, Mr Kemp, although it only lasted about forty minutes, somehow became extended over two days.

In the vain hope that it could persuade the government to treat the bill seriously, the Opposition in the Council has forced eight divisions on whether the debate should be adjourned or not, but the voting, on party lines, was lost each time. So would it be unjust to call this behaviour laggardly and irresponsible? Of course it wouldn't. The Council's behaviour - or at least the LCL Council members' behaviour - is laggardly and irresponsible for very good reason. Having been controlled by unequal interests since 1856, the LCL members have never before had to deal with a bill which comes so close to providing a fair electoral system for the Lower House, and they don't like it. We have thus had the spectacle of Councilors arguing not only against the bill - one member called it "a catastrophe" - but also against the Electoral Districts (Redivision) Bill it had previously voted though and which set the terms on which the Electoral Commissioners redivided the State.

Now there's very little the Opposition can do about the procrastination, hesitation, or agonized caution the Government Legislative Councilors have expressed in their approach to the bill. It is quite clear that the LCL Councilors are disturbed and divided over the prospect of a less privileged LCL position in the Lower House, but it is even clearer that the minor changes to their own electoral boundaries consequent on the Lower House redistribution are what are seriously worrying them. They may not be able to save the Lower House from modernization, but they do feel that they should make some effort to protect the status-quo in their own chamber.

The Chief Secretary, Mr DeGaris, this afternoon accused me of ^{IRRESPONSIBLY} criticizing the laggardly progress of the bill in the Council. He said I was doing this "purely for political purposes". What arrant nonsense! The fact is that an overwhelming majority of South Australia want to see their State's electoral system normalized, and they want to see it done quickly. And one of the real, biting, smarting reasons why the LCL majority is cooling its heels for as long as possible is that the new redivision has brought home to them the fact that in the seats of Midland and Southern there remain,

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respectively, the urban areas of Elizabeth-Salisbury and Reynella-Christies Beach. And it's a strange thing, but the conservative Councilors have never really been able to abide large sections of urban population that are not divided on socio-economic lines to ensure that the status-quo survives. Perhaps they understandably fear that some day, through natural population growth, the numbers will turn against them and they will lose what they have so ^{CAREFULLY} ~~carefully~~ guarded for over a hundred years—the privilege of a property holder's restrictive franchise, and boundaries that at the moment mean that 37 percent of the state can elect 12 members, while the 63 percent of city voters are able to elect only 8 members. If anyone's motives are to be questioned, it is Mr DeGaris's. To use his words, "purely for political purposes" is he trying to stifle ~~critical~~ debate on the nature and function of Council procedures.

What we really want from the Legislative Council is responsible legislative behaviour and a commitment to democratic action and representation. And these are matters that have been historically absent in that House, to the detriment of the State and its people everywhere.