

## AZERBAIJAN — CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

### *Statement*

**HON LIZ BEHJAT (North Metropolitan)** [5.21 pm]: This evening I rise to inform the chamber of an amazing opportunity I was recently given—to attend as an independent political observer for a referendum process in the nation of Azerbaijan. Before I speak to the chamber about the wonderful opportunity I was given, I welcome into the President’s gallery Ms Aydan Rzaeva, the newly appointed honorary consul for Azerbaijan here in Western Australia, and Mr Seymour Aliyev, the media adviser for the Azerbaijani government, who is visiting from Baku. Unfortunately, Mr Khanlar Fatiyev, a member of Parliament and leader of a delegation that is here for the commemorations that I will be speaking about a bit later on, was unable to join us, but I welcome the visitors into the President’s gallery.

As I said, the purpose of the visit to Azerbaijan was as an independent political observer for a referendum held on 26 September. I was asked to be part of the delegation, which was headed by Western Australian Senator Chris Back, and included Mr Craig Kelly, the member for Hughes in New South Wales, and the former member for Cowan, Mr Luke Simpkins. We were asked to join with international observers from 18 organisations present in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, for this process, making a total of 117 international observers. Much like me when I was asked to join this delegation, members may not be quite sure where Azerbaijan is, and what its history is. In the short time I was there—just over a week—I learnt much about a country that has much potential and should be on the map for all of us to visit. In an alphabetical list of countries, the only country between Azerbaijan and Australia would be Austria. That means that we are very close in that list, and there is a lot that brings our countries close together.

A constitutional referendum was being held, and 29 questions were being asked. It was a very interesting process for us to observe. Voting is non-compulsory in Azerbaijan, unlike here in Australia but, very interestingly, of the 10.5 million people resident in Azerbaijan, with just over five million eligible to vote, the statistics show that, in a voluntary capacity, 69.7 per cent of those eligible turned out to vote on that day. Although the official results will not be released until 21 October, early indications are that 91.2 per cent voted in favour of the critical questions that were asked. The questions ranged from whether the President of Azerbaijan’s term should be extended from five years to seven years to whether the age of people who can stand for Parliament should be lowered. I think that is a very good thing. Up until now in Azerbaijan, the age to vote has been 18 years but, to be elected to Parliament, a person had to be 35 years old. A question was asked about whether that age should be lowered to 18 years as well. Other questions were also raised around the appointment of vice-presidents and the extension of presidential terms. At the moment, they are limited to two terms and they will extend that further to allow presidents to serve for more than two terms.

It was a very, very well organised voting process. Some criticisms have been made of Azerbaijan, as it is a new democracy that we saw emerge after the collapse of the Soviet Union some 25 years ago. It had a very short taste of democratic government between 1918 and 1920. For two years it appreciated independent rule, but it collapsed after the Soviet Union’s invasion. It needed to make some changes, which is why there were so many questions in the constitutional referendum. Again, unlike here in Australia—I think we could learn some very good things from the process—people have to show identification to vote in Azerbaijan. Also, once people vote, they are sprayed with invisible ink on their thumb to ensure that they vote only once. That is something else that I think we should be talking to our Electoral Commission about here in Australia. When we were there, we visited about 20 polling stations during the day to observe the process.

**Hon Kate Doust** interjected.

**Hon LIZ BEHJAT:** Hon Kate Doust, a person’s finger is sprayed with invisible ink—rather than indelible ink—and if it is held under a black light, it will shine. So if the person goes to the next polling booth to cast a second vote, they cannot do it because they will see it. I think it is a very, very good system.

The process was transparent. There was certainly no military or police evident at any of the polling stations we went to; people were given freedom. At the close of the polls, we saw the commencement of the counting of the votes. People had certainly thought long and hard about what they were doing. They had been sent information packages prior to the election. On some of the ballots that we saw, people were not just voting yes or no all the way down the page; some were voting yes to some questions and no to others, and others they chose not to answer. I think it was a very transparent, democratic process and Azerbaijan is to be congratulated for the conduct of that election. It shows that under the New Azerbaijan Party and President Ilham Aliyev, who has been President since 2003, its democratic rule is very popular. His father, Heydar Aliyev, was the founding president of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. He was elected in 1982 and he served for 10 years until his death in 2003. He is certainly revered by the people of Azerbaijan, which is evident by the Heydar Aliyev Center—a museum—that we were lucky enough to visit.

I will not have enough time this evening to tell members about all the wonderful things that I saw in Baku. However, I can tell members that it is not that far from Australia! It is only a quick 11-hour trip to Qatar and then two and a half hours north of the Caspian Sea, and then members will be in Baku! It is a most wonderful city. It is very modern, but it still holds onto its ancient history in the old city. An interesting thing I found about the structure there—members will know this from other speeches that I have made in this place—is that 95 per cent of the population of Azerbaijan is Muslim, and they are largely secular Muslims. They live in very, very good harmony with other religions such as Christianity and Judaism. That is certainly evident in the wonderful relationship that Israel and Azerbaijan have from a trading and cultural perspective. I think there are some lessons for other democracies to learn from Azerbaijan about how people of different religions can live harmoniously together.

Members may think they have heard of Baku because some wonderful things have been happening there. In June this year the Formula 1 Grand Prix of Europe was run in Baku, and we saw that track. In 2012, the Eurovision Song Contest was held in Baku., In 2015, the European Games were also held in Baku. More than 40 European countries competed, and more than 6 000 athletes were in the city at that time. For members interested in real football—the round ball game—the UEFA Euro 2020 tournament will take place in Baku. A lot is going on in that country.

The architecture is fantastic, the climate was wonderful, but most of all the people of Azerbaijan are amazingly warm and wonderful. A large delegation from Azerbaijan will come to Western Australia on the weekend, and on Sunday morning we will be at the Flame of Remembrance at Kings Park to commemorate 25 years of independence for Azerbaijan. I have invited all members to attend—some are coming and some are unable to—and I would encourage them to do so. Australia has a very good growing relationship with Azerbaijan. Domestic conflict has arisen because of the occupation of some Azerbaijani territory by Armenia. Australia's position on that is that sovereign countries should have their own territories and not be subject to occupation by other countries. I also believe that should be the case. Unfortunately, throughout the country there are a number of displaced Azerbaijanis. The federal Minister for Foreign Affairs met with the Azerbaijani foreign minister to talk about that during their recent time in New York. I certainly recommend Azerbaijan, and I can say yaşasın Azərbaycan—long live Azerbaijan!

*House adjourned at 5.31 pm*

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