

Submission to the Expert Reference Group on the Size of the Assembly

-For the serious consideration of the Expert Group, attached is an editorial headed "The Nation's Heart Could Get Dearer" from a Victorian regional newspaper. Though the views were expressed over four years ago, little except a few names has changed. The third party, the Greens, is even back now to a single member.

After reading the terms of reference and the Group's paper, I hesitated to send a submission at all. The last term of reference requires the Group to "recommend options for increasing the size of the Assembly". Neither here nor elsewhere is there provision for recommending options to retain or reduce the Assembly's size.

Yet the "guiding principles" of the ACT Electoral Commission as quoted in the Group paper would fit a 15-member as well as a 21-member Assembly.

It would be tempting to hope that the terms of reference represent merely careless drafting, but the Government's expressed views and the whole tenor of the Group paper confirm that all that is missing is the size of the rubber stamp.

Arguments for a bigger Assembly put weight on Canberra's having "State" as well as municipal functions. This pays insufficient regard to the ACT's status as a very small enclave in New South Wales territory. The wedge of ACT land south of the suburbs has only a tiny proportion of the Territory's population. ACT representatives and their constituents need only go "around the corner" to meet. There is, thus, far more wear and tear on people in State electorates.

The Group's paper says: "While the Assembly is sometimes described as being more akin to a city council, it carries a wider variety of responsibilities than any Australian city council".

If that is true, it is only because the people running the ACT have chosen to take on the trappings of a State. As to real and unavoidable responsibilities, how can the ACT Assembly claim to have to fulfil more responsibilities than a body like the Brisbane City Council ?

If the ACT Government is "charged" with too broad a range of functions, that is because it is self-charged. The Group paper talks as if that range of responsibilities is somehow God-given. The ACT should, as the majority of people in Canberra indicated, have the functions of a major city council, without the parliamentary embroidery.

Probably the best parallel that can be drawn- the capital /seat of government of a nation with separate State governments - is Washington DC, which has a

population in excess of 600,000. The "metropolitan area", of which the District of Columbia is a part, has 5.7 million.

The US Congress has ultimate authority over the whole of DC. While it has allowed certain powers of government to be carried out by locally elected officials, Congress maintains the power to overturn local laws, and exercises greater oversight of the city than exists in any US State.

If the Assembly or the political parties think that the ACT is badly off, they should look around a little. Not only do citizens of the US capital city lack full control of their local government (the Mayor and 13-member Council), but- worse still, one might say- they have no voting representation in the Congress, not even a senator.

The conclusion is that the ACT is a small enclave already excessively larded with politicians. It follows that there should be no increase in the size of the Assembly.

EwanLetts

The Nation's Heart Could Get Dearer

Car number plates can be revealing about the people who devise them. In Victoria's case, we always liked "The Garden State".

Emboldened by receiving no bad reaction to her number plate "Canberra- Heart of the Nation", a Liberal ACT Chief Minister introduced another, worded "Canberra-Feel the Power". This one was voted down by over 95% of participants in a local newspaper poll, and the plate promptly disappeared.

Not so lucky was the ACT electorate when more than 70% in an official plebiscite voted against a State-type parliament. Ignoring the popular vote, the two major parties in the Federal parliament joined forces.

As a result, there is now an ACT parliament with 17 members and all the trimmings: Speaker, Deputy Speaker, 5 ministers including Chief and Deputy Chief, Opposition Leader, shadow ministers, political advisers, public service departments and, of course, car fleets.

All this to administer a medium-sized city where almost half the work-force is directly employed by government.

Why are we turning the spotlight on Canberra just now? It's not only because the ACT is the next cab off the electoral rank, scheduled to go to the polls on October 18 for a new 4-year term.

In the last few days, it has emerged that the current Chief Minister wishes to expand the parliament by 47%, from 17 to 25 members. Although this is Labor policy, the party is seeking to avoid the spotlight in the face of an impending election and a lack of bipartisan support for the initiative.

The Opposition Liberals have a new leader, who is happy with the status quo on member numbers. The Greens, on the other hand, sensing a chance for a better shot at the balance of power than their present single member allows, are all for an increase, though they will settle for a 23 o/o rise (to 21 members). That is also the Democrats' position.

Any change would involve the Federal parliament amending the Self-government Act. In reaffirming his determination to expand the Legislative Assembly, the Chief Minister (Mr Stanhope) says he wants the ruling government to have more ministers. Complaining that the Howard Government would not consider a change, he states: "It maybe that the Rudd Government is more willing to pursue this issue and other reforms".

Not satisfied with having the lowest unemployment rate (2.6%) of all Australian jurisdictions, Mr Stanhope wants to reduce it further by boosting numbers in the Assembly. His take on the ACT's importance borders on the bizarre: "Canberra is home to the 13th largest economy in the world - the Australian economy". For comparison, we note that Strasbourg is "home to" the EU arliament. But, despite having industrial production well ahead of Canberra's, its city council claims no credit for the massive size of the European economy.

Perhaps the most interesting contribution to the debate comes from close to the ACT, in a rural setting. The mayor of the NSW country town Queanbeyan, himself a candidate for a lucrative ACT parliament seat, says that any increase in the Assembly's size would be costly and of no benefit to the community.

He draws not only on his experience as a rural shire councillor, but also compares the ACT with the outer-suburban city of Blacktown, which has a similar population and is governed by a council of 15. Looking at Canberra's needs, he is unable to see how increasing the Assembly size would bring any improvement to municipal services such as roads, transport, parks or other facilities.

A new group contesting the election is the Community Alliance, which traces its origins to dissatisfaction with the way the Stanhope Government prepared for and managed the disaster visited on the city by the firestorms which destroyed hundreds of homes. The Alliance claims that the ACT is run better when one political party does not have a majority in its own right, and thereby a monopoly on policy.

Whatever the truth of that theory, ACT electors - and Australian taxpayers generally - can expect higher parliamentary expenditure if a party favouring the Assembly's expansion attains an absolute majority on October 18.