



Introduction

United Voice considers this review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly to be a valuable opportunity to contribute to ensuring that future territory parliaments have the time and resources to know their diverse and growing constituencies.

As an industrial union *United Voice* has the experience based “insight into the current capacity of the ACT Legislative Assembly and the ACT Ministers ability to perform their functions” called for in the discussion paper.

We are also an organization who seeks to empower our socially, ethnically and economically diverse membership to advocate for themselves through democratic processes. In this capacity we have practical concerns that the current Assembly structure limits the access of many Canberrans to their elected representatives.

Canberra is a more complex and diverse place than it was at the inception of self-government and this reality is reflected in our membership. Over half of our members come from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, 60% are working women, and a significant number are employed in precarious casual or part-time work arrangements.

The size and structure of the Legislative Assembly needs to be changed to facilitate greater interaction between an increasingly diverse community and their elected representatives.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Assembly should be significantly expanded to give all Canberrans the opportunity to access their parliamentary representatives.

Recommendation 2: Revised electorate boundaries should be tied geographically to town centres to better reflect their particular character and concerns.

Recommendation 3: That the Assembly establishes a system of electorate based offices.

Recommendation 4: The size of the Executive should be expanded to facilitate greater focus within portfolio areas.

Recommendation 1: That the Assembly should be significantly expanded to give all Canberrans the opportunity to access their parliamentary representatives.

The ACT Legislative Assembly has the most comprehensive responsibilities of any intermediate parliament in Australia. Those responsibilities necessitate a substantial legislative workload that reduces the capacity of Assembly members to interact with the community. When balance is maintained between legislative work and community advocacy it combines the best of local and state systems to provide stable and responsive government to the territory.

The increasing size and diversity of the community is creating tension between the time members are required to commit to Assembly based work and their capacity to know their constituencies. A sensible increase in the size of the Assembly would address this growing imbalance and restore a more appropriate level of direct access to members.

Population Growth

The ACT has grown significantly since self-government. The 17 Assembly members now represent 100,000 more Canberrans than they did in 1989.

A particular strength of the Territory's combined local and state government has always been the capacity for members to directly engage with the constituents who are affected by state level policy. This is the foundation of which our successes in healthcare, education and employment have been built. Those successes are, in many instances, leading the way for state legislatures in Australia.

The current ratio of 1 member to every 22,000 resident's limits community access to the Assembly and makes it difficult for members to maintain the close relationships with their community that have for decades informed highly successful government policy that is targeted to the specific needs of the Canberra community.

Assembly duties

The difficulty of access caused by the growth of each member's constituency is compounded by the extensive committee duties undertaken by non-executive members in the Assembly system.

A central role of the Assembly is scrutiny of the Executive. To fulfill this role the 4 government backbenchers sit on an average of 3 committees.

Previous reports have found that this workload impedes the ability of the Assembly to fully perform its scrutiny function.

Absent from these reports is an acknowledgment that the time spent on these roles also detracts from the time MLAs can spend in their individual constituencies.

Diversity

The ACT is a more diverse community than it was at the inception of self-government.

Economically the community has diversified significantly. At the inception of self-government Canberra was largely comprised of public sector employees and people working to support them or provide services to the public sector. In 2013 Canberra is no longer, as is often suggested, a town of and for public servants. It is a much more diverse and complex economy, with a healthy and growing private sector.

Workforce engagement has also changed significantly over this time. *United Voice* represents many of the large and growing community of workers who support the 15% increase of women in the workforce since self-government. Childcare workers and cleaners face the challenges of working without flex time and on lower than average wages in a city that is used to catering to the needs of public servants.

Canberra is also a more culturally diverse place than it was at self-government. As an organisation where more than 50% of members come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds *United Voice* know it takes more time and resources to establish relationships with communities from non-English speaking backgrounds or those who come from countries without a history of democracy.

We also know that the result of this investment is the full engagement of new communities in the civic life of our multicultural city.

Not only has our population grown since self-government but adequately representing their needs has become more complex.

Full engagement with the community can only occur when Assembly members have sufficient time to be out in the electorate building relationships. Within the present Assembly structure the only way this can occur is by increasing the number of members to reduce Assembly workload and constituent to member ratios.

Recommendation 2: Revised electorate boundaries should be tied geographically to town centres to better reflect their unique character and concerns.

In the quarter century since the inception of self government Canberra's town centres have developed distinct identities. The young families raising kids in the greenacre development of Gungahlin have different interests to the ageing communities of Weston Creek and Belconnen or the established suburbs surrounding Lake Burley Griffin.

Each of these distinct communities needs representation that can focus on and advocate for their concerns.

Representation

At present Molonglo is the most disadvantaged by the division of electorates. The current 7 member electorate covers three town centres each with disparate social and infrastructure needs.

Whilst it has a higher level of representation, the Hare Clark system encourages members to engage across the electorate. This prevents them specialising in the unique needs of individual town centres and constituencies.

Electorate boundaries which separate feeder suburbs from their town centres has a significant impact on the members of *United Voice*. A high proportion of our members live in the feeder suburbs of the town centres where they work. For low income workers this has significant advantages including reduced cost and time involved in transport, greater access to interconnected community services and a greater sense of community identity.

The ability to live within a town centre reflects Canberras historical commitment to the local provision of services. With increasing complexity in the community ensuring the longevity of this policy will require electorate boundaries which allow Assembly members to engage with and advocate for the specific needs of the diverse communities which populate each centre.

Growth

Establishing electorates around town centres and their feeder suburbs would also provide a strong long term strategy for reducing the need for significant future redistributions.

Canberra has 5 town centres; Belconnen, Gungahlin, Canberra Central, Woden Valley / Weston Creek and Tuggeranong

At present the established outer suburbs of Belconnen and Tuggeranong have stabilised ageing populations of around 90,000.

Canberra Central and Gungahlin have populations around 20,000 people lower than this but are expected to grow substantially due to urban infill and green acre development over the next decade.

Woden Valley/ Weston Creek would be the smallest electorate but is expected to almost double in size as the Molonglo Valley developments take place.

We note that it would not be possible at present to achieve this outcome with equal numbers of representatives whilst meeting the reviews preference for the maintenance of an equal value vote.

However, the benefits to the community of this model and its long term viability as a method of division suggest that short term strategies towards achieving this end result are worthy of consideration.

Recommendation 3: That the Assembly establishes a system of electorate based offices.

The location of all Assembly members within a secure centrally located building presents an impediment to access. An expanded Assembly would increase the potential for access to representation by making permanent electorate based offices feasible.

Communication

Community based electorate offices decrease the formality of engagement between constituents and their local members.

Many problems faced by the community do not fit obviously within the framework of government services. Personal contact allows complex problems to be fully explained, but also for the Assembly to use its resources to build capacity in constituents to navigate government independently.

This is particularly important for culturally and linguistically diverse constituents and those with a disability that impairs their communication. These groups are especially reliant on government services and are significantly disadvantaged when phone is the only way in which to contact members on timely and specific problems.

Whilst it is possible to arrange to meet with Assembly members in the community, high workloads often make it difficult for members to be out of the Assembly for long periods of time. This poses an access problem for those with limited time or transportation.

Accessibility

In some sectors *United Voice* represents, over three quarters of members live in the feeder suburbs of the town centre in which they work. This has significant disadvantages in terms of engagement with the Assembly. In industries where flexible working arrangements are not possible it is impractical to travel to another town centre during business hours to engage with Assembly members.

In Molongolo, this is compounded by the size of the electorate. Many Assembly members use their limited time outside of the Assembly to hold regular electorate based stalls. In Molongolo, attending one of these events can mean travelling between three different town centres.

In an expanded Assembly the lowered burden of Assembly based work would allow for non-executive members to spend time in Assembly office fronts in these local town centres.

Electorate based offices would overcome many of these difficulties whilst capitalising on the time members in an expanded Assembly would gain for constituent consultation due to lowered Assembly workloads.

Recommendation 4: That the size of the executive should be expanded to allow ministers greater specialisation in their portfolio area.

As an organization that deals regularly with government our experience supports the findings of previous reviews which call for an expansion of the executive.

As previous reports have found, the range of responsibilities of a minister in the ACT Assembly far exceeds that of ministers in other similar sized legislatures.

The ACT's growth, both in population and diversity, only compounds existing limitations by increasing the complexity within each portfolio area.

The concentration of responsibilities for multiple areas of government mitigates against the minister developing the level of specialization that would allow them to comprehensively engage with the breadth of any given portfolio. This, in turn, leads to greater reliance on their departments to provide and implement solutions with limited ministerial input or scrutiny.

This is inconsistent with the concept of accountability and control by a democratically elected representative. It also presents considerable risks in the translation of the government's policy intent into action.

United Voice believes that all Canberrans would benefit from an expansion to the Assembly Executive to ensure that Ministers are only responsible for the management and monitoring of a single directorate. This would allow for closer management of directorate activity and afford greater time for pro-active consultation within individual portfolios.

Conclusion

An expanded Assembly is not a political luxury but a democratic necessity. Access to parliamentarians is currently impaired by workloads, geography and an increasing diversity of community needs and concerns.

The intent of this submission is not to influence the exact placement of lines on a map or the number of positions on a ballot; it is to request that changes be made to ensure the longevity of the responsiveness that has characterised a quarter century of territory government.

United Voice knows that there is significant value in acting now to ensure that the Legislative Assembly has sufficient capacity to remain connected, relevant and accessible to future Canberrans as they go about their daily lives.

Lyndal Ryan
ACT Branch Secretary
United Voice
40 Brisbane Ave, Barton ACT 2600
Phone: (02) 61201202