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Dear Redistribution Committee Members

Submission in favour of making minimal changes to the current boundaries

On behalf of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch), I am pleased to attach a brief submission in relation to the redistribution process under way.

I and perhaps other members of our Management Committee will be available to give oral evidence should public hearings be held at a later stage in the process.

Yours sincerely

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Convenor  
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (ACT Branch)

**Avoid altering the present boundaries more than necessary while aiming for their continued suitability in 2004: just move Nicholls from Molonglo to Ginninderra**

*The importance of keeping boundaries as stable as possible*

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch) has been a strong supporter of minimising changes to ACT electoral boundaries, so long as the boundaries still provide for broadly equal representation. In particular, in 1996 the ACT Branch was among organisations submitting that there should be no change at all as a result of that review.

We observe that there has been widespread acceptance of current boundary arrangements, with no significant level of expressed dissatisfaction or public clamour for any major structural alterations. Certainly in 1996, when it was decided to maintain the current boundaries, there were few dissentients and their arguments were without substance.

This is not surprising as voters would rather have consistency of representation and a situation where incumbents and aspirants to Assembly places are encouraged to focus on developing policies that will result in improvements. That is a much more attractive proposition than regularly having political parties devoting inordinate amounts of energy to trying to extract electoral advantage from a redrawing of electoral boundaries.

Under the Electoral Act, three criteria relating to proposed electorates that must be given due consideration by the Redistribution Committee are economic, social and regional community of interests, means of communication and travel, and physical features and area. These criteria are clearly intended to help identify natural communities and groupings of suburbs, taking account the physical and social geography of the ACT. As these patterns are essentially unchanged since the last redistribution, it would be very disturbing to voters to find major changes at the next election.

The Redistribution Committee is also required to give due consideration to the boundaries of existing electorates in making its proposed distribution. In the current circumstances, where population shifts have been fairly minor, the inclusion of this criterion reinforces the evident intention to promote stability of electoral boundaries, and to discourage any thought of a substantial redrawing of boundaries.

Significant upheavals in boundaries require major administrative effort to effect, including provision of explanatory material to the voters affected. They are unlikely to be impressed to learn that there has been a major re-engineering of boundaries when they see current arrangements as working perfectly adequately.

The appreciation by voters of a high level of stability in electoral arrangements goes back to the start of the campaign for our voter-empowering Hare-Clark system. Expectations of stable boundaries were repeatedly placed before the people when we were deciding the nature of our future electoral system. For example, in the 1991 pamphlet **How to make your vote really count**, the Hare-Clark Campaign Committee prominently contrasted *stable boundaries* under Hare-Clark with *frequent boundary changes* under single-member electorates.

In the official case for the Proportional Representation (Hare-Clark) System sent to voters in 1992, the following comments were made in relation to *stability* (bold type face has been introduced to emphasise the key words in the current context):

A voting system should also provide *stability*: a government with broad support should not be 'held to ransom' by parties with a very small share of the primary vote, **nor should voters face constantly-changing electoral boundaries.**

Under the ACT version of Hare-Clark, a quota of at least 12.5% of the vote will be needed to win a seat; this will exclude parties with very little popular support. **Boundaries will seldom change.**

The *tiny electorates* under the single-member option were listed as one of the reasons that option did not suit the ACT at all, and after indicating that even minor local issues would inevitably involve a number of electorates, the Hare-Clark case commented:

Population growth would require constant boundary re-drawing - or more members!

To highlight this aspect as a key advantage of Hare-Clark, the opening summary in the official case contrasted Hare-Clark's offer of *a wide choice of local candidates within stable boundaries* with *continual destabilising boundary changes* which would arise under a system of single-member electorates.

Two-thirds of Canberrans chose the Hare-Clark option on Saturday 15 February 1992, and a similar majority voted to entrench the key principles of the Hare-Clark system on Saturday 18 February 1995.

This historical background further underlines the view of the ACT Branch that in performing its functions, the Redistribution Committee should pay particularly high regard to *the boundaries of existing electorates*. We simply haven't experienced the types of population shifts that could only be addressed by a complete recasting of the way our electorates are put together.

*Brindabella should remain unchanged*

Both October 1999 and projected October 2001 enrolments for Brindabella remain comfortably within the statutory maximum tolerances, so no change is necessary.

Completely excising Pearce, Chifley and Torrens from Brindabella to bring all Woden suburbs together within Molonglo would leave Brindabella well short of the statutory minimum enrolments expected on the day of the next general election. Cutting away just Chifley and Pearce would still leave Brindabella's projected October 2001 enrolment short of the minimum acceptable.

The only way in which the numerical criterion could be met next year would be to shift just Chifley into Molonglo. However, this would break a strong community of interests that is evidenced by physical proximity, and public transport routes and major roads in the area.

In the view of the ACT Branch, the benefits from retaining the current boundaries for Brindabella are therefore overwhelming and we ask the Redistribution Committee not to contemplate tinkering with them.

*Shifting Nicholls into Ginninderra would result in the meeting of all statutory criteria*

The ACT Branch recognises that the projected enrolments for the electorates of Molonglo and Ginninderra will be outside the statutory maximum tolerances on election day in 2001. Our goal would be to ensure, as far as is possible so far in advance, that any boundary changes now made did require further alteration in 2004.

In the regrettable absence of official enrolment projections extending to 2004, to carry out further analysis the ACT Branch has consulted the official ACT Government population projections and age profiles of voters through to 2008. This material can be found at <http://www.act.gov.au/government/demography>.

Over the following three years, stronger continuing growth is anticipated in Gungahlin than elsewhere. A population reduction is expected in the North Belconnen suburbs and the population in South Belconnen should remain steady, leading to a modest increase in Ginninderra enrolments because of a slight ageing in the local population profile.

The most straightforward change involves moving a single contiguous suburb from Molonglo to Ginninderra, for that leaves it possible that both new electorates would appear natural in their layout and have some prospect of exhibiting sufficient community of interests. Given the configuration of Belconnen's suburbs, the three possible additions to Ginninderra are O'Connor, Lyneham and Nicholls.

The ACT Branch points out that O'Connor and Lyneham are very closely linked to central Canberra, not only because of their proximity and the periods when they were developed, but also because of transport connections. Further, there are major physical features in the form of the Black Mountain Reserve and the Bruce/O'Connor Ridge that cut these two suburbs off from the closest of their neighbouring suburbs in Ginninderra. For these reasons, shifting either of them could only be considered very much as a last resort.

On the other hand, Nicholls is not physically cut off from Giralang in such a stark way. In the absence of completed infrastructure in Gungahlin, its residents are quite likely to travel to the Belconnen city centre and to have other contacts with Belconnen suburbs. The existence of bus routes 51 and 52 between Nicholls and Belconnen confirms that there would be adequate means of travel throughout a Ginninderra electorate slightly augmented so that statutory enrolment tolerances were met in October 2001.

The ACT Branch submits that just Nicholls can be added to Ginninderra without infringing the requirement that the Redistribution Committee give due consideration to the five listed criteria dealing with maintaining community of interests and stability within electorates.

Furthermore, the transfer of Nicholls would place Ginninderra 1.76% under quota in October 1999 and an anticipated 2.21% under quota on 20 October 2001, while Molonglo would be 1.30% above quota last October and an anticipated 2.23% above on election day. The meeting of the statutory enrolment criteria makes the shift of Nicholls suitable for further exploration.

The official forecast population increase over three years from 2001 in Nicholls is about 1650, around one-third of that for the whole of Gungahlin. North and South Canberra combined anticipate an increase of around 2,000 people while Tuggeranong's increase is

expected to be slightly above 2,000. North and South Belconnen overall are expected to shed 250 people and Weston Creek 600.

Anticipated effects across different age groups at the sub-regional level are set out on pages such as <http://www.act.gov.au/government/demography/awestoncr.htm> and <http://www.act.gov.au/government/demography/anrtcantb.htm>. Bearing in mind present relationships between numbers of adult residents and those enrolled, if Nicholls is transferred from Molonglo, it is likely that Ginninderra will be about 3% below quota in 2004, with perhaps Molonglo a little more than 3% above quota.

It should therefore be possible to retain Nicholls within Ginninderra for at least two elections in accordance with the emphasis the ACT Branch would like to see on stability of boundaries.

*Any seven-member Ginninderra electorate would be unsatisfactory.*

Turning Ginninderra into a seven-member electorate along lines that have recently been canvassed in the media would require the influx of about 25,000 voters from Molonglo.

Weston Creek is separated from Ginninderra by the Stromlo Forest and does not have direct public transport connections. In the view of the ACT Branch, its community of interests with Ginninderra is so slight that there would be a major public outcry over any attempt to combine the two localities.

In addition, the whole of Weston Creek would add fewer than 18,000 extra voters to Ginninderra in October 2001. The balance would require either a split of the Gungahlin suburbs or, even less in keeping with the maintenance of community of interests, electoral separation of the inner northern suburbs.

All combinations of suburbs including Weston Creek and what is now Ginninderra should be ruled out both because they rate poorly against the geographic criteria that the Redistribution Committee must consider and because of the disruption and dislocation they would inevitably entail.

Another prima facie possibility is the addition of at least all of Gungahlin to what currently comprises Ginninderra. However, Gungahlin will have fewer than 15,000 enrolled voters in October 2001.

Any attempt to join Gungahlin to Ginninderra would therefore also involve moving 10,000 or more voters in six of North Canberra's suburbs (Lyneham, Downer, Dickson, Watson, Hackett and probably O'Connor rather than Ainslie). These suburbs have very strong links with the core parts of Central Canberra that are in the electorate of Molonglo.

The ACT Branch submits that the disruption caused to the inner northern suburbs by breaking a natural community of interests would far outweigh any improved synergy created between Gungahlin and what is now Ginninderra.

We therefore recommend that following this review the Redistribution Committee simply propose that Nicholls be shifted from Molonglo to Ginninderra.