

Review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly

Introduction

Ideally, the ACT Legislative Assembly should be able to work co-operatively without the division into Government and Opposition. This division, at a practical level, means that almost half the members elected by the people of Canberra do not have any direct involvement in government decision-making. They can contribute only by participating in Standing Committees and by criticising the Government. This seems inefficient, especially in a period when there is little ideological difference between the main parties.

In reality, there is little likelihood that present political parties will accept a more-collegiate style of government in the ACT and this is not part of the terms of review. There is also no question that, currently, Ministers are unable to handle the workload adequately for various reasons, including the fact that half the Assembly members are not able to hold ministerial positions.

The comparison of numbers of representatives with the overall population is not a sound basis for estimating the numbers of representatives required. Canberra is a compact space with a uniform range of issues. The fact that it does not have separate local councils means that there are efficiencies in administration that mean fewer elected representatives are required.

Harry Evans

Having just read Mr Evans submission, I heartily endorse his comments and could not say it better:

Before the question of the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly is treated simply as a matter of the ratio of population to number of members, and an increase in size as a foregone conclusion, consideration should be given to whether the current system can overcome the alleged problems.

There appear to be two grounds advanced for an increase in the size of the Assembly: the need for more representatives of the electors, and for more ministers and therefore a larger pool from which to draw them.

The first argument ignores the culture of Australian political parties, whereby members almost never publicly differ from the line of their parties and certainly never vote against their parties, regardless of what their electors think. More members would not equal more representatives of the electors, but more publicly - funded party operatives to cajole their electors.

As for the second argument, even with 25 members in the Assembly the pool for the appointment of ministers, the majority party or coalition, would still be too small.

There is a better solution. As the Commonwealth Parliament has to pass some legislation to make any change, it should be asked to change the system in the ACT to one more appropriate to a small jurisdiction. The so - called "Westminster system" is inappropriate for such a jurisdiction. The ACT (Self Government) Act already embodies significant departures from the Westminster model, by having no equivalent of a state governor and the Assembly directly electing the Chief Minister. Further departures would be beneficial.

There should be a chief executive (however titled) directly elected for the same fixed term as the Assembly, with power to appoint a specified number of heads of portfolios who

would not be members of the Assembly and not necessarily party members. They would appear before the Assembly and its committees as required.

The Assembly would remain at its present size and concentrate on legislating and inquiring, without worrying about shifting the couple of votes needed to change the government. The chief executive would not have to worry about losing those votes.

The sterile game of government versus opposition, with a shadow government under the imperative to oppose everything and their tiny backbench faithfully following, would be abandoned. After a time members would rediscover their role of representing their electors and realize that they do not have to vote for things they do not really believe in. This situation would better suit a legislature elected by proportional representation.

The ACT is different from the states. Let it set an example of creative difference.

Electoralates

Any increase in the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly should provide for growth over the next decade. At this time, it is estimated that all suitable land will be developed and no further greenfields site will be available. Rather than the continual shuffling of suburbs in and out of electoralates every few years, it would be preferable to put a flexible long-term plan in place. Those districts that are still developing could initially have fewer members with a view to an increase when the district is complete to equal the number of members in established districts.

The current practice of determining electoral districts based on even population composition may work satisfactorily across most of the country but it does not acknowledge the structure of Canberra with its various town districts: Gungahlin, Belconnen, North Canberra, South Canberra, Woden, Weston Creek, Molonglo and Tuggeranong. Residents of the Gungahlin suburbs that are part of Ginninderra and those of the Woden suburbs that are part of Brindabella would, quite reasonably, tend to feel unrepresented as those electoralates largely cover Belconnen and Tuggeranong respectively, both of which are very large in their own right. Furthermore, matters of concern can be peculiar to specific districts.

It would be desirable to determine satisfactory electoral districts based on the ultimate expected size of the various town districts without having to add or subtract small sections. The aim should be for each electorate to have the same number of representatives in the long term. Provision should be made for those electoralates that are still being developed to have fewer representatives until such time as the district is complete, when it will qualify for the extra members.

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