

Sent: Thursday, 23 August 2007 4:42 AM

To: Elections

Subject: newly-published enrolment particulars support keeping Farrer in Molonglo

Please find attached an objection by the Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch) to the proposed changes in ACT electoral boundaries as set out in the July Statement by the Augmented ACT Electoral Commission. I am available to assist the Augmented Commission with any further inquiries that it might wish to make.

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Newly-published enrolment information greatly strengthens the case for not altering current ACT electorate boundaries

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch) acknowledges the significant improvement in the 2008 electoral boundaries as proposed by the Augmented ACT Electoral Commission following this year's opportunities for Canberrans to make their views known in writing and orally.

Many will join us in applauding the fact that the electors of Palmerston have been spared the unnecessary disruption of being moved out of Molonglo prior to next October's general elections. Others will welcome the Augmented Commission's firm reiteration of the desirability of retaining communities of interest as much as possible, and of avoiding making grandiose plans for a future that might be quite different (for instance, were there a change in the number of MLAs), when legislative requirements refer just to the current situation and that projected for the next polling day.

The ACT Branch also appreciates the publication in the July statement by the Augmented Commission of additional information about enrolments somewhat along the lines that we suggested were important in our objection to the previous proposal.

However, we draw different conclusions from that extra material about enrolments than does the Augmented Commission. In our view, it greatly strengthens the case for retaining the current boundaries rather than moving Farrer from Molonglo to Brindabella, and we urge that course upon the Augmented Commission in the absence of convincing additional countervailing information.

The ACT Branch notes in particular that on the past two occasions, when expressed in terms of quotas, the election-day projections in relation to Molonglo were greatly overstated, by around 0.8% of a quota in 2001 and 1.0% in 2004.

A more modest overstatement by 0.3% of a quota occurred in 1995 and in 1998 there was an understatement by 0.1% of a quota, arising as earlier rapid growth in parts of Brindabella came to an end. We note that in any repetition of the last case, Molonglo would still remain within allowable tolerances in October 2008. In other words, all the additional information assuages fears about Molonglo's likely status in October 2008.

Of course, the most relevant information in terms of possibly describing differential growth patterns is the most recent as, among other things, it reflects the extent to which any ongoing changes in trends are not fully captured in the projection methodology. This could arise because of increases in the numbers of children approaching enrolment age, changes in family patterns of settlement within suburbs or other predominantly-demographic factors, or it could be driven more by net effects in each pre-election flurry of notified changes of address just before the rolls are closed.

Closer inspection of the tabulated data on page 11 of the Augmented Commission's report shows that the assuaging phenomena of 2001 and 2004 arose because election-day enrolments for both Brindabella and Ginninderra were noticeably higher than projected numbers, while those for Molonglo were around the anticipated mark.

This indicates that the projection methodology hasn't been adequately capturing changing phenomena in Brindabella and Ginninderra to the degree achieved in Molonglo. In fact, the discrepancies arising from underestimates in the smaller electorates increased in both absolute and relative (to either the quota or projected enrolments) terms from 2001 to 2004, and it would therefore require something especially noteworthy to start reversing or completely obliterate that trend.

The key task now is to establish whether there are solid grounds for believing there has been a major turnaround subsequently that brings with it some real uncertainty about whether the legislated tolerance limits would be at serious risk of being breached in October 2008 if current boundaries remained unchanged.

Without access to the details of enrolment data, the ACT Branch is unable to conduct the type of multivariate analysis that would attribute such past sizeable discrepancies principally to changes in family composition, or to greater pre-election movements than anticipated, or other potential key explanatory factors.

However, through ACT Administration's ample expertise, it should be possible for the Augmented Commission to explore whether the unmistakable evidence of the immediate past has been superseded by new phenomena tending to point in a different direction (either specific events or observations, or a convincing reason for a greater propensity for accuracy in the projection methodology in Brindabella or Ginninderra).

Unless sound reasons for asserting a complete break from what has transpired at the two most recent elections can be identified and clearly articulated, it would be premature to move Farrer between electorates. Electors in that suburb should not be inconvenienced as long as projected figures and the most relevant associated evidence from the past about their likely accuracy continue to indicate that Molonglo will remain within tolerance limits for at least three months beyond polling day.

The ACT Branch submits that, if the Augmented Commission wishes to persist with its proposal to shift the electors of Farrer from Molonglo to Brindabella, it bears the onus of demonstrating what new phenomena create tangible uncertainty in relation to Molonglo in a direction different from that experienced in both 2001 and 2004.

Our hope is that the Augmented Commission will undertake the requisite investigations of why 2001 and 2004 projections for Ginninderra and Brindabella were noticeably understated, instead of jumping at likely shadows on the basis of some abstract or generalised uncertainty surrounding available empirical information.

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch) remains quietly confident that if this is done with some energy and rigour, the electors of Farrer will be left to vote in Molonglo in October 2008. That is certainly what we recommend on the basis of the additional helpful empirical evidence about how well the projection methodology appears to perform in practice that was made available in the July statement of the Augmented Commission.