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Sent: Friday, 18 January 2013 1:22 AM
To: Elections
Subject: Submission on the size of the ACT Assembly

To the Expert Reference Group on the Size of the Assembly:

Is increasing the number of Members of the ACT Legislative Assembly justified? Why or why not?

No.

The task of administering the ACT was handled by a single politician - the Federal Minister for Territories - until 1988. (While an advisory body of local politicians did exist beforehand, it had no powers of note). The Minister for Territories also held other duties: in 1988, Arts, Sport, Environment and Tourism; previously also Heritage; and other Territories, both Internal and External. Further, no Minister for Territories was ever a Member for an electorate in the ACT.

The satisfaction of the residents of the ACT with that system can be demonstrated by recalling that two plebiscites rejected the idea of self-government, in both cases by large margins.

The assumption behind increasing the number of Members is that it will reduce the workload that each Member will need to fulfill. This assumption is false. Since all Members have full voting rights, all lobbyists must lobby every Member: increasing the number of Members will merely increase the amount of work that professional lobbyists will need to do. Should this exceed their current ability, then more professional lobbyists will be recruited. Ordinary Canberrans cannot do this, so our voices are drowned out. Increasing the size of the Assembly will make this problem worse.

Additionally, every Member must interact with every other Member of the Assembly - by increasing the number of Members, the task of networking with other members will increase exponentially, crippling the ability of the Members to negotiate. The larger numbers will create the need for new positions: for example the party whips that are needed in all larger bodies. Again, this increases the workload.

The most important task a politician undertakes is representing their electors to the government. As a public service city, Canberrans have a far better understanding of how to deal with bureaucracy than the citizens of any other Australian city, and are far more likely to understand appeal processes, the FOI Act, and the role of the Ombudsman, than our counterparts elsewhere. This reduces the workload on our politicians substantially, and should be considered when judging the size of the Assembly.

The small size of the ACT also means that increasing the size of the Assembly reduces the resources available to Members and Ministers, as the expense of extra politicians and their staff reduces the money available to implement policies. This in turn forces our politicians to spend time working out which essential services must be cut to make the needed savings.

Finally, the claim that the Assembly is overworked rings hollow should you consider the under-utilization of experienced Members - an example being Mary Porter in my own electorate of Ginninderra, who has never been a Minister despite her long and sterling service. The previous assembly had 4 Green MLAs but had no need for any Green Ministers. Chris Bourke though was made a Minister directly on being elected by count back - despite having no experience as a MLA, much less a Minister. When senior MLAs can be left to rust, all claims of overwork need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

What number of electorates should there be and how many members elected from each?

A current failing in the electoral system is that the electorate we vote in is unlikely to be the electorate that we work in: and transport infrastructure crosses between electorates. Given the importance of parking, public transport and roads, a single electorate is needed to ensure that MLAs are appropriately representative.

Given the terms of the Review, the single electorate of Canberra should have 5 members: this will reduce the workload markedly (as explained above).

James Walker