

Your local voice

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Submission in Relation to the Review into the Size of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

I am writing on behalf of the Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) in relation to the review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

For Community Councils to comment on the proposed size is extremely difficult as we exist to represent a consensus within our community. Of all the issues that face Councils this would likely be the most difficult one to find a representative position. I know full well that the views within the community extend from continuing the mantra of “We never wanted Self-Government and we just should give it back to the Commonwealth” to “We need local members with their own seats” and anything in between.

The ACT is unique in Australian State and Territory political management in that we have no local-government council. This is unlike any of the States or the Northern Territory. So our situation is different. It is a problem for the ACT government how to balance the so-called “State” responsibilities of policing and law, education, and health (to name the big three) with the provision of services usually expected from a local-government council.

People are interested in the “Big Three” areas, but generally only when they are directly involved in one or more of these three strands. To WCCC, the Assembly seems to concentrate too heavily on these areas at the expense of daily issues such as planning, roads and, for want of a better term, the public domain and garbage.

Nevertheless WCCC recognises that the present adversarial system of political government in the ACT is here for the longer term, and while we would all like to see a more robust local-government council-type of Assembly with people from all sides of politics responsible as Ministers, we know that this will not

happen since alliances are formed by the major parties so that they can govern by themselves or as a coalition.

So the next question is, How do we make the system better? Having an Assembly of seventeen (17) members means that nine (9) is the number for a majority, and with five (5) Ministers (soon to be six (6)), that means that most of those elected on the winning side will become Ministers. Six out of nine does not provide much choice.

So how do we move forward?

The most important issue for Community Councils is the preference for their community to stay within the one electorate. During the ACT Electoral Commission's review of electoral boundaries last year there were some passionate pleas for communities to be kept in one electorate. This was highlighted by the number of submissions received from the Gungahlin community advocating this preference. We have also seen what has happened to the Woden community, which was split across two electorates [Molonglo and Brindabella], and how that community has suffered from a lack of support from the ACT Government in relation to community needs. That community still has no Community Centre.

One other matter to consider is the geographic make-up of suburban Canberra. The various districts are clearly delineated by natural boundaries, so splitting of suburbs or parts of suburbs into another electorate can alienate the affected residents from their neighbours. A simple reflection on each district confirms this.

Weston Creek is the smallest district in suburban ACT in terms of population, and we would want its integrity as a single, whole unit to be maintained in any future review of electoral boundaries. To split our 22,000 residents between two electorates would mean that the residents would have no effective voice in the ACT Legislative Assembly. The Weston Creek Community Council would see this as untenable.

The discussion paper presents an Assembly of either 21 or 25 members. Council doubts that an increase of four (4) members would alleviate any of the issues raised before. WCCC considers that a Legislative Assembly of either 25 (five electorates of five (5) members each) or 28 (four electorates of seven (7) members each) would provide sufficient members to allow an effective Executive to manage both the "State" and "local" matters that the ACT government has to deal with.

WCCC considers that the 25-member proposal would likely allow a closer representation of each district than exists at present. We could have, for example, Woden and Weston Creek, Belconnen, Gungahlin, Tuggeranong, and the Inner North and South combined. Obviously the first matter is getting the maths right. It is the maths on the number of electors which creates all of the tension as we scramble to add and subtract to get to the correct number in each district.

What is needed here is some creative thinking to get a better outcome for everyone and try to make the “maths” secondary to the needs of each community or district. We see disparities in electorate size accepted in the Federal system, for example where some electorates in Tasmania have a much lower number of electors than most other electorates in the rest of Australia. At the 2010 Federal Election there were 71,350 voter registrations in Denison and 71,122 in Franklin. Compare that with the ACT, where there were 123,647 electors registered in Fraser and 124,294 in Canberra. Here we see a huge disparity as Franklin has only 57 percent of the electors that Canberra does. And yes, we understand that this is a quirk of Federation.

Currently, we use a + or – 5 percent to “balance” the ACT electorates. Why can’t we increase this to 10 percent, which would allow greater flexibility in electorate size and, hopefully, ensure that a larger number of more representative electorates would more closely follow district boundaries. WCCC has not, at this time, done any calculations but believes that this would be a good start to achieving the aim of keeping whole communities within a single electorate.

Council would be pleased to discuss submission at any time.

Tom Anderson
Chairman
Weston Creek Community Council