



PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA (AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY BRANCH)

LEAVE THE BOUNDARIES UNCHANGED AND SUGGEST SIMPLIFICATIONS OF FUTURE REDISTRIBUTION PROCESSES OF THIS KIND

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Australian Capital Territory Branch) submits that there should be no change to the existing electoral boundaries, and urges the Redistribution Committee to recommend that in future the process in which it is now engaged should be capable of being fast-tracked in instances as clear-cut as the current one.

An expectation of stable boundaries under Hare-Clark

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 ACT Branch of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia (hereinafter ACT 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 we were among the organisations submitting that there should be no change at all as a result of that review.

In 2000, along with the Liberal and Labor Parties, we suggested moving the suburb of Nicholls from Molonglo to Ginninderra in order to deal with the projected imbalances at the time of the 2001 general elections if the previous boundaries had remained the same. We added that the best-available population projections at the time indicated no change would be needed in 2004.

The ACT Branch is pleased that the previous Redistribution Committee stated explicitly of its proposed transfer of Nicholls that ‘this is the minimum change necessary to ensure that each electorate is within the required statistical tolerance’ and observed as a more general principle that ‘change should affect as few electors as possible’.

This approach of placing strong importance on maintaining stability of boundaries and avoiding unnecessary disruption to voters is in keeping with the attitude adopted by Redistribution Committees since the first set of boundaries came up for review in 1996. The ACT Branch continues to be heartened that voters’ interests are being placed at the forefront of how the Hare-Clark system operates here, and that flawed proposals calling for extensive change have been duly examined but have received relatively short shrift in the past.

The current boundaries satisfy all the relevant criteria and should be retained

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 of 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. The departures from the quota in April 2003, halfway through the term of this Assembly, were minuscule, at 1.1% and 1.2% below in the five-member electorates, and 1.6% above in Molonglo, well within the 10% tolerance allowed.

Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates put enrolments in Brindabella and Ginninderra at the time of the next election respectively 2.5% and 2.6% below the territory quota, and place Molonglo, with expected inner-city growth very strong in several suburbs, 3.6% above, still comfortably within the allowed 5% tolerance either way. In these circumstances, no changes of significance are warranted, and the ACT Branch urges the Redistribution Committee to wind up the current proceedings as quickly as possible.

Time to simplify clear-cut redistribution proceedings

The ACT Branch believes that beyond retaining unchanged boundaries and reaffirming the sound principles espoused and articulated plainly by earlier Redistribution Committees, the Committee should take the initiative to suggest to the Assembly that a simplified redistribution process might reasonably be undertaken where actual and projected enrolments fall well within the respective statutory tolerances and there has not been public clamour for major changes to the boundaries.

Under amended legislation, submissions would still always be called for. However, when actual and projected enrolments stood well within the tolerances allowed and the Redistribution Committee observed that there was little or no call for change, the Committee would be empowered to make a final determination without having to go through the

unproductive charade of undertaking a full second stage that is a mandatory feature of the current process.

When change is neither required nor called for, there is absolutely nothing to be gained from going through the motions with superfluous elements of an elaborate process originally designed around the extensive inter-party argy-bargy associated with federal redistributions of single-member electorates. Both Elections ACT and ACT Administration as a whole have many more pressing matters to deal with and should not be forced to waste precious resources in the circumstances described.

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