

Woden Valley Community Council Inc.

The logo for Woden Valley Community Council Inc. features a stylized green and blue graphic to the right of the text. The graphic consists of two blue rectangular shapes stacked vertically, with a green curved line arching over them, resembling a stylized 'W' or a landscape element.

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Expert Reference Group on the Size of the Assembly
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Dear Expert Reference Group

Review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly

The Woden Valley Community Council (WVCC) appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the *Review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly* (the Review).

Introduction

WVCC considers the Review as an essential step towards improving the representation of ACT citizens, and improving governance structures for greater community engagement and accountability.

However, in our view, improving the representation of ACT citizens also requires the review and amendment of ACT legislation such as the *ACT Proportional Representation (Hare-Clark) Entrenchment Act 1994* and the *ACT Electoral Act 1992*.

Size of ACT Legislative Assembly

WVCC welcomes the amendments to the *ACT Self-Government Act 1988*, currently before the Commonwealth Parliament, that will enable the ACT Legislative Assembly (the Assembly) to determine its own size and the number of ministers.

WVCC strongly supports an increase in the number of members in the Assembly. Additional members would increase the representation of ACT citizens; allow members to serve their constituents better; have the potential of improving governance structures; and permit a larger ministry.

As Allan Hawke shows in his review of February 2011, 'Governing the City State', with just 17 MLAs for a population of more than 350,000, the ACT is under-represented compared to other jurisdictions when taking into account local and state representation. He argues (p. 33) there is an 'overwhelming sound case' for increasing the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

The Hawke review favours 25 members for the ACT Legislative Assembly, as in the Northern Territory, which has a smaller population of around 230,000 and would reflect the proportionality of the five member electorates in the Tasmanian House of Assembly (p. 32).

Electoral Boundaries

While the WVCC supports an increase in the number of Assembly members and increasing the number of electorates, we believe the terms of reference of the Review should be extended to incorporate a wider review of the electoral system. The *Proportional Representation (Hare-Clark) Entrenchment Act 1994* should be reviewed, and appropriate amendments made, that would enable the electorate boundaries to be aligned with the geographic boundaries of the towns of Canberra. This would address a long-standing concern of WVCC whereby the Woden Valley is currently split across the electorates of Molonglo and Brindabella. The WVCC has found the bifurcation of Woden has resulted in, with few exceptions, inadequate representation by elected members of the Assembly, and the issues facing the community of Woden being 'off the radar'.

Both the WVCC, and many other community groups and citizens, have raised concerns with the towns of Canberra being split across different electorates, through submissions to previous redistribution of electoral boundary reviews. Without a change to the electoral system itself, this issue will remain unresolved.

Local Representation

An increase in the number of MLAs and the size of the ministry will not in themselves ensure better governance, accountability and responsiveness of elected representatives.

A difficulty with the ACT system of government is that the Assembly is responsible for both municipal and state functions. The centralisation of responsibility for municipal functions has meant that, in some respects, services are not provided equally for all ACT citizens or not prioritised to meet the needs of local communities. Without a system of local government, the ACT government has limited capacity to have meaningful engagement with the community on local issues that directly affect them. WVCC contends there is a need for consideration to be given to some form of improved local governance.

WVCC considers it important for ACT citizens to have direct input in determining the ACT's system of government for the future. It should not be left just to the political parties or elected representatives to determine how Canberrans govern themselves.

WVCC supports Professor George Williams' suggestion in his submission to the review of the Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act, for a convention (or similar process) to be held to enable citizens to consider the ACT's long-term governance arrangements. Such a convention could consider issues such as the role of the Commonwealth Government in the ACT, the ACT's electoral system and how the ACT should govern itself.

We note that, subject to the passing of amendments to legislation by the Commonwealth Parliament, a change to the Assembly size could be passed by a 2/3 majority of Assembly members. We would however, call on the Assembly to put any proposed changes to a referendum, to be passed by a majority of electors, as allowed for by the *Proportional Representation (Hare-Clark) Entrenchment Act 1994*. That is, there should be a direct democratic process to amend the democratic arrangements of the ACT.

While the WVCC considers an increase to the size of the Assembly and the number of electorates is long overdue, we believe that the opportunity should be taken to address the unresolved electoral issues of local representation and electorate boundaries in the ACT.

The WVCC would be happy to discuss the issues we have raised with the Expert Reference Group.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jenny Stewart
President, Woden Valley Community Council 28 February 2013