

30 June 2020

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Submission on Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020

I support this bill that provides for a minimum of two electorates for the Northern Territory (NT) in the House of Representatives.

Many years of my working life have been spent in remote communities throughout the NT. Thus I am familiar with the 'tyranny of distance' and the alienation that many people (black and white) feel living in remote areas. I have also completed several post-graduate tertiary qualifications reviewing regionalism within the NT. As well, I have spent almost 40 years living in Darwin. I use these experiences as the basis for arguing for the bill in the following points.

1. Differing demographics throughout the NT.

There are major demographic differences amongst people living in Darwin and Palmerston, to those living in rural and remote areas, such as access to services, health status, employment status, and cultural backgrounds. These 'communities of interest' would be better served by having (at the very least) two representatives.

2. Rights of First Nations' peoples.

The Committee would be aware that about 30% of the Territory's population is Indigenous and most of those people live in rural and remote areas. At the same time, they have unique needs. They should not be penalised just because they live 'on country'. If there was only one representative, it would be difficult for that person to be able to provide the attention that is necessary to their needs.

3. A numbers game.

It has been argued that by having two members, in comparison with other electorates Territorians are 'over-represented'. But if the representation was reduced to only one, then Territorians would be 'under-represented'. (By this, I mean that a single member would represent almost 250,000 people which is significantly more than the average Australian electorate.) Using the yard-stick of numbers per electorate ignores the fact of geography. The single electorate would be around 1.4 million square kilometres, making it not only the largest electorate in Australia but also one of the largest in the world.

If it is considered unfair that the Territory has two members based on numbers, then it is equally unfair that there be only one member. Surely the pendulum should thus swing in favour of providing the democratic right of representation to all Territorians?

As well, I thought the Australian Parliament was encouraging people to live in regional areas? Having two representatives will reflect the attitude that people living in remote areas are valued enough to have a separate representative.

4. Territory rights.

It has always seemed an anomaly to me that just because we are a territory, Territorians do not enjoy the same rights as other Australians. Many important services are controlled by the Australian government (such as national parks, industrial relations, Indigenous affairs, and mining), and our voices are not counted in referenda state votes. To paraphrase Shakespeare's Shylock, 'have we not the same eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions (etc)' as our southern counterparts? Why is it that someone who lives in Sydney or Melbourne is valued more than someone who lives in Yuendumu or Darwin? We sing Advance Australia Fair but there would be nothing fair about a lack of representation in our parliament.

I understand the historical basis of why we are a Territory. But if the basis of Australian democracy is representation, then surely we have the right to be represented equally as anyone else in Australia - not 'less equally' through only having one member.

I thank the Committee for considering my submission and I urge the Parliament to support the bill to guarantee two seats for the NT.

Yours sincerely



Ms Caroline Cavanagh

