

Northern Territory ALP submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral matters inquiry

“ Should the Northern Territory and the ACT be guaranteed a minimum of two members in the House of Representatives?”

We would raise the following points in support of an increase in the minimum representation in the House of Representatives for the Northern Territory to two seats.

- 1/ Population figures / data collection
- 2/ Population projections
- 3/ Redistribution
- 4/ Electorate size 1.3 million square kilometres
- 5/ Equity of constituent access / history of representation

1) Population figures / data collection

Population figures for the Northern Territory as assessed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics based on the 2001 Census may not be a true or accurate reflection of the population of the Northern Territory.

A number of representations have been made to NT ALP members regarding the collection of the 2001 Census and the following needs to be noted.

A/ Timing; The timing of the 2001 Census occurred during the ‘ Dry.’ The Northern Territory is unique in that there are some industries that operate around the clock during this period and a number of administrative tasks by necessity that are non essential are ‘put off ’ or delayed and this has been reported to ALP representatives that while they understood the necessity and obligations attached to the completing the Census they did not complete and return their Census because of how busy and preoccupied they were.

This combined with a Northern Territory General Election put an incredible amount of stress on individuals where a number of non-core activities were put off or in fact delayed. By comparison to the Eastern states it would be akin to holding this activity at the height of Summer a peak tourist and business season.

B/ Sample; The sample itself has been called into question. There have been representations made by the Northern Territory Government to the Federal Treasurer and it is understood that these issues have received enough support from him to instigate an inquiry to examine these issues. Issues related to remoteness, complexity of the form and the actual collection of completed forms from regional and remote localities.

C/ Absence; Absences related to work, education, training, holiday or family related activity could well explain a decrease in the numbers present for a census and the point had been made clear to party representatives.

Territorians engaged in activity interstate or because of its proximity to Asia; in particular Bali and East Timor (where a significant number of Territorians were working on a temporary basis) could be a relevant issue with regards to the resident Australian population. This would not impact substantially on other jurisdictions populations but does have a significant impact in the Territory because of its population size.

During the Bali tragedy it was brought to our attention that dependant on the time of the year there could be up to 500 residents of the Northern Territory in Bali for an average stay of one to three weeks. This variance alone could account for the dip in numbers and may not have been taken into account.

East Timor in particular where at any one time there were in excess of 100 civilian Territorians in city, regional and remote areas of the country that did not complete the census. This combined with interstate travel where people stayed in commercial premises where there are other concerns for them related to meetings etc would be a significant factor as expressed to party representatives.

At this point there were still two domestic plane services a day travelling interstate out of Darwin, other exit areas include Gove, Alice Springs. This does not include International flights.

This is not to criticise the professionalism and commitment of the Australian Bureau of Statistics or other Departments involved in the distribution/collection of the sample or the data analysis. It can be used to question whether these factors were adequately taken into account in the complex formulas that are used to assess and analyse the data. In the Northern Territory this variance has proven to have an adverse effect. The total of which could be attributed to a planeload of people exiting the Territory on a temporary basis.

2) Population projections.

All commentators agree that the Territory is moving into a growth phase where an increase in the population is occurring as a result of the increased investment related to the development of the railway, the gas onshore and their attendant industries.

While the information above (1) highlights areas that could explain an under reporting of the true resident population of the Northern Territory, a true reflection / record for the assessment of the population should take into consideration what the population would be on all available inputs if the parliament were to go full term and reflect what the population projection will be at the time of the next election. Any commentator or Territorian would state that it is likely to be well in excess of that required to satisfy two House of Representative seats on the formula.

3) Redistribution

Territorians could continue to be exposed to this activity on a regular basis because of the inflexibility of the law.

By any assessment this inquiry should focus on the financial and the community engagement cost involved in mounting redistribution potentially on a regular basis.

4) Electorate size

The size of the Northern Territory is 1.3 million square kilometres this immediately raises consideration for the people who are attracted to and who secure election for this electorate.

It is extremely difficult to serve an electorate of over 100,000 people spread over this area without jeopardising the health and well being of the elected representatives.

A number of good quality candidates are discouraged from standing because of the enormity of the task ahead of them and those good candidates who are successful face the size of the electorate combined with parliamentary responsibilities (average of twenty weeks travel to Canberra a year, forty flights). This raises questions of equity and resourcing in comparison to electorates in other states that are 30 sq km and have full infrastructure and services.

Increased charter and mail allowances do not properly compensate for the challenge of servicing such a large electorate.

5) Equity of constituent access

The real question for all Territorians is what access they get in comparison to those fortunate enough to live in those states that were involved in forming our federation.

Access for Territorians to health, education, employment, welfare and other services in particular communication in comparison to other Australians is inequitous.

After the establishment of a Centrelink office in Maningrida there was a subsequent dramatic increase in the growth of benefits that this community received that other Australians have enjoyed since federation.

The Maningrida community had suffered for years without an old age pension; proper health benefits and the like that other Australians have full access to. One can only imagine how much stronger this community and others throughout the Territory would be if like all other Australians they had full access to their entitlements.

The Goods and Services Tax is an example of something that has had a deleterious effect on the Territory and on Territorians who were already paying a premium for their goods and services and have limited ability to pay.

The plight of the constituents of the Indian Ocean Territories should again be highlighted as they suffer from many of the above listed inequities that are experienced by people living in remote and regional areas of the Territory. The residents of the Cocos and Christmas Islands are further disadvantaged by their isolation because travel for them and the provision of many of their goods services are supplied through an airflight schedule that restricts their travel, trade, access to representation and services.

Many of these above listed issues were raised in a variety of submissions from Warren Snowdon and the NT ALP during the redistribution process in the lead up to the last Federal election that established the two House of Representative seats for the Northern Territory, Solomon 28sq km, Lingiari 1.3 million sq km.

On the face of it these issues don't seem to have relevance to arguments for increasing and maintaining the Territories House of Representatives seats but it goes to build a picture of the necessity of representation and not allowing that representation to be diluted or priced out of the reach of those that are most in need of the access to it.

It is interesting to note that the margin that the seat of Solomon is held by is a fraction of the drop in population that caused the seat to be abolished.

Conclusion

Territorians have a proud and long history of fighting for representation. Access to the Federal parliament and the establishment of Self government came about as a result of many years of hard work and agitation by the majority of Territorians to ensure that taxation eventually equalled access to representation.

The Northern Territory has a strong future and as a community shows a lot of promise. We as a community over many years have carried the burden and benefited from the management and development of this unique section of North Australia.

We have as a frontier established industries that benefit the whole nation and at times of crisis most recently in East Timor and Bali have shown our worth to the nation by committing to our neighbours and other Australians in need.

While the parliament is the apparatus that serves the nation the law as it stands and as it is applied does not recognise the inequity in representation that it has created. On a simple measure of social indicators it stands that there should be increased and improved representation for the people of the Northern Territory.

In the interest of certainty, common sense and future growth, the Territory should have a minimum of two House of Representative seats.

This submission supplements and in some instances reiterates issues raised in submissions by Warren Snowdon the ALP Member for Lingiari, Trish Crossin the ALP Senator for the Northern Territory.