

Our reference: DAK/rk

13 August 2003

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Representation of Territories in the House of Representatives

I write to make a submission to the inquiry currently being conducted by the Committee.

Terms of Reference

“That the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquire into and report on increasing the minimum representation for the Territories to provide for a minimum of two seats each for the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory in the House of Representatives”.

Background

The Australian Electoral Commission has determined that, as a result of a population decline in the population of Northern Territory, the representation of the Northern Territory in the House of Representatives by one Member.

This would reduce representation to one Member.

The basis of this decision is that the Australian Bureau of Statistics determined in February 2003 that the Northern Territory level of population was less than 300 people below the level which would allow for two Members in the House of Representatives.

This is a factor of less than 0.0025%.

The Member for Solomon, David Tollner MP, has introduced a Private Member's Bill which would amend the Commonwealth Electoral Act so as to guarantee the Northern Territory two seats in the House of Representatives.

It is a Bill that I intend to support when it is debated in the House.

It should also be remembered that the population of the Northern Territory is projected to return to a level that would qualify it for two Federal Members in 2005.

Were it not for the rigid application of the mathematical formula by the Australian Electoral Commission, perhaps there would be no need for this inquiry.

Submission

There is a history of the Commonwealth Parliament intervening to make special provisions in respect of the Northern Territory.

As the Member for Solomon pointed out in his speech when introducing his Bill to the House:

- in 1922, when parliament first enacted special legislation to allow the Territory to send a representative to attend Commonwealth parliament - albeit without the right to vote
- in 1936, when parliament first allowed that member to vote in this chamber - although only on matters relating to ordinances of the Territory
- in 1958, when the elected member for the Northern Territory was allowed to vote on any proposed law or matter relating solely or principally to the Northern Territory
- in 1968, when the member for the Northern Territory was granted full voting rights
- in 1975, when the Territory, along with the ACT, was allowed to elect two senators to the upper house
- in 1978, when the Northern Territory gained self-government.

The Northern Territory is a vast area, some of it sparsely populated, which is deserving of Parliamentary representation which is at least comparable to that enjoyed by others in Australia.

The removal of one Member for the Northern Territory would undoubtedly place Territorians in the position of having less than acceptable levels of representation.

In the broader context, the whole of Northern Australia is represented by eight Members of Parliament. This vast wealth-producing area is deserving, if anything, of more representation rather than less.

The same cannot be said of representation in the Australian Capital Territory.

Whilst the Members in the Australian Capital Territory represent approximately 110,000 people each, it should be recognised that they represent a compressed and highly urbanised population.

The situation in the Northern Territory is totally different, and the principles applying to it cannot be applied in the Australian Capital Territory.

Recommendation

The Committee should recommend in its report that representation in the House of Representatives for both the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory should be harmonised with two Members for each.

Yours sincerely

De-Anne Kelly BE MP
Federal Member for Dawson