

Protecting N.T Representation

Australian Council of Trade Unions submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020

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Introduction

Since its formation in 1927, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has been the peak trade union body in Australia. The ACTU consists of affiliated unions and State and regional trades and labour councils. There are currently 43 ACTU affiliates. They have approximately 1.8 million members who are engaged across a broad spectrum of industries and occupations in the public and private sector. The ACTU prides itself on its long history of advocacy for and support of Indigenous Australians and their equal participation in the Australian economy and society. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

The ACTU fully supports the purpose of this bill and asks that the Committee recommend that it be passed in its entirety. The loss of the second House of Representatives seat for the Northern Territory is deeply undesirable and we applaud this move to prevent it.



Reasons this bill should be supported

Unacceptable loss of Indigenous representation

Australian unions believe that the reduction of Northern Territory House of Representative seats from two to one would represent an unacceptable reduction in Indigenous representation in the Australian parliament.

While the Northern Territory is the state with the highest proportion of Indigenous Australians¹, this population is not spread evenly between the electorates of Solomon and Lingiari. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Lingiari is the electorate with the highest proportion of Indigenous Australians in the entire country, 40.2%, while Solomon is ranked 7th, with only 8.5% of the population being made up of Indigenous Australians.² In fact, Lingiari is the only Australian electorate with greater than 20% of the population made up Indigenous Australians.³

The loss of this electorate, through the consolidation of Lingiari and Solomon, would result in the loss of the single electorate which can be said to best represent the unique concerns of Indigenous Australians. It is a stark truth that Indigenous Australians suffer from structural disadvantage in Australia and that this causes their life outcomes to be significantly poorer than the wider Australian population. In light of this, we should be seeking a far greater involvement of Indigenous Australians, such as that called for in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in our parliament – not a lesser one. It would be a perverse outcome if our electoral redistribution system was allowed to operate blindly to this reality and further disenfranchise Indigenous Australians within the parliament. It is our belief that this concern alone is sufficient to justify the passage of this bill.

The loss of representation of the diverse areas of the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory is geographically large and diverse. It covers some 1.4 million square kilometres (six times the size of Victoria and twice as large as NSW) and contains metropolitan areas, agricultural lands, rural and Indigenous communities, vast swathes of the Outback and the remote Indian Ocean territories of Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands. This diverse geography is matched by its 250,000 citizens, many of whom live in Darwin but the remainder of which are spread across the variety of communities extant in the NT.

Different communities have differing interests and priorities. Those living in central Darwin and people living on Christmas Island or in an Indigenous Community in Outback NT are living vastly

¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2082.0Main+Features12019?OpenDocument>

³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2082.0Main+Features12019?OpenDocument>



differing lifestyles and have different concerns and needs. Under current arrangements, the two electorates in the NT serve these differing interest well, with one electorate (Solomon) covering the metropolitan inhabitants of Darwin and surrounds with the other (Lingiari) covering the inhabitants of rural, remote, islander and Indigenous communities. The consolidation of these two electorates into one would result in an impossible scenario for the MP selected to represent that electorate. Leaving aside that they would be required to represent easily the most populous electorate in Australia, they would have the impossible task of providing representation for the full diversity of views and needs of the entire Northern Territory. This would make adequate representation unnecessarily difficult and diminish the democratic voice of the diverse NT population.

Focus on indigenous enrolment and participation

Population projections by the Northern Territory Department of Treasury and Finance (as at April 2019) show that the NT is expected to have a population of 251 727 by 2021 which would entitle the Northern Territory to 2 federal electorates by the time of the next redistribution.

There remains however significant and necessary work to do to facilitate and increase the participation of indigenous Australians in federal elections. According to the AEC figures, 23.6 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally are not enrolled, with alarmingly low rates of enrolment in the Northern Territory (32.5 per cent not enrolled). As electorates rely on registered electors to determine their boundaries, the low rate of Indigenous registration is likely contributing to the Northern Territory falling below the quota required for two seats in the House of Representatives. Rather than accepting this reality, the AEC should be given additional funding to increase its efforts to deal with obstacles to Indigenous enrolment and participation.

There is already precedent for representation of under-represented regions

The Australian Parliament, at its formation, already contained examples of the deliberate weighting of representation of regions which, if based purely on population, would have more limited representation. Perhaps the best example is that of Tasmania which currently has five seats in the House of Representatives despite its population being barely larger than that of the ACT (3 seats) and only about double that of the Northern Territory.

Tasmania's representation in the House is constitutionally guaranteed to never fall below 5 members, regardless of what occurs to its population. This was done to protect the interests of Tasmanians, by far the smallest state to join the Commonwealth, and to ensure that their varied interests were properly represented in the Parliament. The Northern Territory is denied this same protection merely because it is not a state and was not able to secure it at the time of federation. For the same reason that the securing of Tasmania's representation remains desirable, we must act to secure that representation for the people of the Northern Territory.



In Summary

The ACTU urges the Committee to recommend the speedy passage of this bill. We believe that protecting the representation of Indigenous Australians and maintaining the equal representation of the diversity of the Northern Territory more than justify the creation of special conditions for the representation of the Northern Territory in the House of Representatives. The existing measures which protect the representation of Tasmanians provide an example of how protections of this sort can enhance and reinforce our representative democracy.

We appreciate the Committee's time in considering our views.

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