Suggestion 30

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Submission to AEC 2023-24 Victorian Redistribution

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This submission in relation to the Victorian Redistribution is about the overall numbers of electoral divisions in the entirety of the Commonwealth. It is a proposal that can save a lot of money each year (ongoing) with minimal impact on real and effective representation in Australia. It also has a strong probability of a significantly improved and more effective and productive parliament overall.

Table of Contents

Preamble to submission

This submission in relation to the Victorian Redistribution is about the overall numbers of electoral divisions in the entirety of the Commonwealth. It is a proposal that can save a lot of money each year (ongoing) with minimal impact on real and effective representation in Australia. It also has a strong probability of a significantly improved and more effective and productive parliament overall. It would achieve this simply by reducing the number of Australian federal parliamentarians by half (which is a restoration or a reset of parliamentarian numbers to those at the time of Federation in 1901). The objective is to refocus attention on the quality of our political servants by reducing the quantity and also their cost burden on the population.

Submission to AEC 2023-24 Victorian Redistribution

The quota system for the determination of the number of members of the House of Representatives and the number of Senators for the State has resulted in an ever increasing number of parliamentarians. This process is at odds with modern communications, technology and management principles. The quota system was fit for the historical purpose of a population that was moving around the Commonwealth but since federation it has continually increased the number of representatives and, on a general assessment, has not increased the quality of the representation for the population. This submission proposes a return to federation parliamentarian numbers. This would have significant benefits, particularly financial and operational.

Historical situation

At Federation (1901) at the commonwealth level, there were 75 seats in the lower house and 36 seats in the upper house (a total of 111)[i] with a population of 3,773,801 people[ii].

The electoral redistribution process has doubled the number of parliamentarians since 1901 and results in an ever increasing number of parliamentarians as the populations increase in each state. This historical process ignores advances in technology, communication and management principles. In business and in government at all levels, such advances have driven programs to improve the efficiency of organisations as they are required to continually review their size, structure and priorities for the benefit of their operational effectiveness. This stands in contrast to the objectives of the current electoral redistribution process as the electoral redistribution process ignores such advances. [iii]

Australia's parliament has been characterised by inefficiency for many years. This is seen in its inability in resolving a growing number of serious issues for the benefit of Australians. For example, our parliament's ineffectiveness in addressing the budget deficit, superannuation reform, tax reform, first home affordability, voluntary euthanasia, the definition of marriage, effective climate change and energy policies, stability in education and training, the treatment of refugees etc. And with an ever increasing size of parliament then its effectiveness will continue to be more and more inefficient and dysfunctional.

A simple solution

By reducing the number of Australian federal parliamentarians by half, back to Federation levels would greatly contribute to a more efficient parliament. This is based on:

- Fewer people to have to achieve agreement amongst.
- Fewer people that need to be across all the facts of an issue for making good decisions as quickly as possible.
- Fewer people to have their say before decisions are made.
- An increased probability that a smaller percentage of politically extreme or fringe parliamentarians would be elected.
- Political parties would be encouraged to be more focused with the increased probability of smaller numbers of far right or far left parliamentarians.
- A possible reduction in political dysfunction with fewer numbers of Senate cross benchers and the resulting horse trading and pork barrelling that can occur.
- Less likelihood of disenfranchised protest votes when "independent" parliamentarians are elected without clarity of their positions across a range of issues.
- Fewer people sitting or heckling in the background of "Question Time" television broadcasts.
- Improved scrutiny of a smaller group of political servants; including scrutiny of allowances, offices, travel benefits, register of interests, superannuation etc.

Very importantly from a financial perspective there would be a saving of about $50 million annually, ongoing each year at the Commonwealth level. These savings are detailed below.

The ever increasing quantity of parliamentary numbers does not mean better government. It is the quality of the representatives and the right spirit being displayed that is vital. If there are fewer representatives, then political parties will be encouraged to ensure that the most suitably qualified people are nominated for elections as there will be a smaller pool of candidates for ministry positions and support functions and each parliamentarian's performance can be more closely scrutinised.

The financial benefits of a reduced parliament size

By reducing the number of Australian federal parliamentarians by half there would be a saving of about $50 million annually, ongoing each year. This saving would include parliamentarian salaries ($25 million), away from home allowances ($4 million), electoral allowances ($5 million), electorate office administration costs ($13 million) not to mention the flow on savings by having reductions in parliamentarian superannuation benefits, special retirement benefits and government and parliamentary support costs (conservatively estimated at $8 million). These numbers are approximate only.

Some comparative examples of world government numbers and representation

Countries can operate very effectively from a governing / representation point of view with smaller numbers of parliamentarians. Effectiveness is not dependent on the number of parliamentarians.

- o The United Kingdom has a 2.7 times larger population and 3.5 times greater number of parliamentarians than Australia and its Corruption Perceptions Index Ranking is 18 compared to Australia's ranking of 13.
- o Madagascar has almost the exact same representation in the lower and upper houses of their government with a similar population compared with Australia yet the Corruption Perceptions Index Ranking for Madagascar is 142 while Australia's is 13.
- o If Australia applied the same level of representation (number of people for each representative) as the United States of America then the total number of parliamentarians would be 40 (for both houses). The Corruption Perceptions Index Ranking for the US is 24 while Australia's is 13.
- o New Zealand has 105 less parliamentarians in their government (with only one house) compared to Australia, and it has a much smaller population. The New Zealand Corruption Perceptions Index Ranking is 2 compared to Australia's of 13. New Zealand has often been acknowledged over recent years as an effective government.

These examples reinforce the importance of the quality of political servants, not the quantity.

Possible arguments that could be used to against a reduction in parliamentarian numbers

"The current (and ever increasing) numbers of parliamentarians has served Australia well."

- What may have worked in the past is not necessarily best for the present or for the future, especially in a rapidly changing world. For example technology, communications and management principles have all radically changed since 1901. It is evident that it is easier and faster to communicate with a much large group of people today compared to the start of the last century. Therefore to maintain the same relative electorate and representation counts and quotas ignores what has happened over the last 116 years.

- There is growing dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of parliament (not just in Australia but governments throughout the world). In Australia the effectiveness of parliament to address the state of the economy and the budget deficit crisis as well to effectively address an ever growing number of issues has led to the election of an increasing number of lower and upper house cross bench parliamentarians who generally do not always help to progress and tackle solutions to Australia's growing list of issues and problems in an efficient way. Added to this is a diminishing of bipartisan agreements between the major parties.

- The Australian government does not exist solely at the federal level. It also has a state and local level. When you add the state and local level representation into the overall count then the representation numbers proposed are significantly reduced. And where the areas of governance overlap between the different levels of government resulting in dual responsibility then invariably each level of government points the finger at the other level of government to justify a lack of cooperation and ineffectiveness.

"The current numbers are required by the constitution and they would be difficult to change."

- The quota system designed for 1901 was (I suggest) to cover the movement of the population between the States and it has served that purpose well. But with an ever increasing population in each state and territory, then the application of this quota system has resulted in an ever increasing number of Parliamentarians. The state parliamentarian numbers and populations in 1901 were very different to what they are today.[iv] As time goes on, the parliament will become more and more inefficient with ever increasing numbers as the population grows larger each year. Based on the current average representation quotas, then the lower house will have 305 members and the upper house will have 154 members by 2061 based on a population estimate of 48.3 million. This would be a total of 459 parliamentarians. [v]

- The constitution allows for changes in the number of parliamentarians. This is reflected by the number of redistributions that have occurred since Federation. In 1901 there were 75 seats in the lower house and 36 seats in the upper; a total of 111. We now have double that number. Based on advances in technology, communications and organisational knowledge, then a return to Federation numbers is recommended for adoption. All organisations and businesses need to operate on a similar basis with regular reviews and organisational changes to minimise costs and to improve efficiency

and effectiveness. Effective representation is much easier to achieve today through current technologies and with our greater population numbers compared to what it was like in 1901 (e.g. in 1901 each parliamentarian had to represent 50,317 on average).

- What is being recommended is a reset to the numbers of Parliamentarians as at the start of Federation.

"It is not just about saving money."

- Surely saving money is important especially considering Australia's serious budgetary situation. Isn't it appropriate to adopt opportunities to save a significant amount of money, particularly if the impacts are minimal and are in fact potentially very beneficial? Remember too that the savings are annual savings and are ongoing savings into the future.
- More importantly it is about the quality of representation and this is definitely not guaranteed by ever increasing numbers of parliamentarians.

"The current numbers in parliament facilitate good representation of the people in each electorate in our Parliament."

- The current numbers do not facilitate good representation. Currently (at a Commonwealth level) each lower house parliamentarian represents about 160,000 people on average. It is impossible for one individual to be able to reflect the views of so many people. Hence the method encouraged in Australia is that of political parties. This pragmatic approach does not necessarily represent the majority views of each electorate. The same issue also applies to the upper house parliamentarian who currently represents about 320,000 people on average.
- The Australian government does not just exist at a federal level. It also has a state and local component. And **representation** needs to be calculated across the state and local government levels as well. When state and local government are added into the mix then the representation is greatly increased because each voter has a federal, state and a local representative. For example in Victoria there are 88 members of the Legislative Assembly (lower house) and 40 members of the Legislative Council (upper house); a total of 128 members of the state government. [vi] There are differences in ministerial focus between the different levels of government however there are still several areas of overlapping and shared responsibility (e.g. education and health). And since each of the levels of government are based on political parties then similar approaches are adopted at each of the levels of government when the same party is in control at both the federal and state levels. However this is not always the case.
- When decisions are required to be made in Parliament, too often the normal course is for each "representative" to vote based on the guidance of their political party. This is followed by the inevitable criticism from many quarters and the usual haggling with cross benchers in both houses. Effectively, in our modern political system, "representation" no longer means representing each community and electorate but rather allegiance to the political party line. This is our political efficiency which is a counter to representation.

"Serious impacts on the continuity of government."

- If the change were to be implemented as part of the redistribution process then it would have no greater impact than a major redistribution which have occurred in the past. The annual and ongoing benefits of the reduction in parliamentarian numbers would start from the next election.

Conclusion

This proposal of resetting Parliamentarian numbers back to what they were at Federation can save a lot of money each year, ongoing with minimal impact on real representation in Australia. Also it has a strong probability of a significantly improved and more effective and productive parliament, simply by reducing the number of Australian federal parliamentarians by half. It also refocuses attention on the quality of our political servants and of political parties. We currently have 226 parliamentarians in Canberra (151 in the lower house and 76 in the upper house). What is being proposed is a restoration or a reset to Federation numbers of 111 parliamentarians (75 lower house seats and 36 upper house seats) through a special national redistribution process.

i https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_federal_election,_1901

ii http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3110124.nsf/24e5997b9bf2ef35ca2567fb00299c59/c4abd1fac53e3df5ca256bd8001883ec!opendocument

iii http://www.aec.gov.au/Electorates/Redistributions/Overview.htm

iv https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_federal_election,_1901
http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3110124.nsf/24e5997b9bf2ef35ca2567fb00299c59/c4abd1fac53e3df5ca256bd8001883ec!opendocument#Table%201.%201901%20Population%20Counts%20f

v http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3222.0main+features52012%20(base)%20to%202101

vi https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/about