

Charles Richardson

LL.B., Ph.D.

PHILOSOPHER

ABN 83 996 159 604

127 Kerr Street

Fitzroy, Vic. 3065

Phone: (03) 9495 6460

Mobile: 04 1056 8308

e-mail: charlesr@ozemail.com.au

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Secretary to the
Electoral Distribution Commissioners
GPO Box F316
Perth WA 6841

Dear Sir,

Enclosed are some objections to the proposed electoral boundaries for Western Australia released by the Commission on 29 June. Please let me know if you require any further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr) Charles Richardson

enc.

2007 ELECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
OBJECTIONS TO THE PROPOSED ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

BY

CHARLES RICHARDSON

I am grateful for the opportunity to present objections to the new electoral boundaries for Western Australia as proposed by the Electoral Distribution Commissioners. While I commend much of the work that the Commissioners have done, I have a general objection to make about the strategy they have followed, plus two specific points of difference: one concerning the proposed boundaries in the Mining/Pastoral region, and one concerning the division of the non-metropolitan area into regions.

Metropolitan versus non-metropolitan districts

My general objection concerns the division between metropolitan and non-metropolitan districts. Taking the official boundary of the Perth metropolitan area, it has enough electors for 42.66 districts, while the non-metropolitan area – including the 34,209 notional electors provided for under the Large District Allowance – has enough for 16.34 districts.

There is therefore a threshold question, as to whether the new boundaries should stick strictly to the official metropolitan boundary, or whether the Commissioners should take the opportunity to even up the average elector numbers by departing from it. The Commissioners state (p. 6) that although the boundary is not binding, they “have not considered it necessary to propose any districts that span the Perth metropolitan area boundary.”

For the reasons given in my initial submission, I would urge the Commissioners to reconsider this question. The policy informing the new legislative scheme is that one portion of the state should not be systematically disadvantaged in representation at the expense of another, and in giving the Commissioners power to make minor departures from the existing boundary Parliament presumably intended that equity would be a key consideration.

However, if the present boundary of the metropolitan area is to be maintained, then I submit that there should be 43 new districts within it and 16 outside – not, as the proposed boundaries suggest, 42 and 17.

A 43/16 split clearly provides more equitable representation. Metropolitan districts would average 101.9% of the quota, while non-metropolitan districts would average 104.9% – a difference of only 3%, as against the difference of 5.6% with the proposed 42/17 split (104.3% and 98.7%). Since the legislation intends, subject to specific exceptions, the implementation of one-vote-one-value, it is hard to see what other consideration could outweigh this gain in equity.

Two other considerations reinforce it: firstly, that a significant number (around 10%) of the electors in the non-metropolitan area are only notional, not real, so it would seem only fair that other things being equal they should be given less weight. Secondly, population growth is faster in the metropolitan area than in the non-metropolitan, so the discrepancy in the proposed boundaries will become worse over time. At other points the Commissioners have taken into

account, as required by section 16I, “the trend of demographic changes”, and it would be appropriate to consider it here as well.

It must be admitted that an advantage of the proposed 42/17 division is that the three metropolitan regions can be equal, with 14 districts each; however, demographic change means that it will be impossible to maintain this arrangement for long, and Parliament surely did not intend that the number of seats in the metropolitan area could only change in multiples of three. The very irregular division into regions that has been proposed in the non-metropolitan area (see below) suggests that in any case the Commissioners did not regard equity between the regions as paramount.

Nor is it possible to argue that the 42/17 split permits the creation of district boundaries that are free from anomalies. Within their constraints I believe the Commissioners have done a very good job in this regard, but some oddities remain: for example, the proposed districts of West Swan (which embraces highly divergent areas at its eastern and western ends), Darling Range (which embraces a huge area at the outer ends of several different suburban corridors), and Goldfields and Eyre (which split the city of Kalgoorlie between them). The point is not that a 43/16 division would be free from such anomalies, but rather that there is no particular reason to think it would be any worse.

Compared to the previous malapportionment, the difference between a 42/17 and a 43/16 split may appear minor. However, unnecessary departures from electoral fairness should always be avoided, and it appears that the proposed boundaries would disadvantage metropolitan voters to a greater extent than necessary.

Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku

Regardless of the view the Commissioners take about my general objection, there are two smaller points that I believe should be addressed. The first is the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku, which the proposed boundaries place in the district of Pilbara.

The primary connections of this remote shire are south-west, to Laverton and Kalgoorlie, and to a lesser extent westward towards Wiluna. Its links to the north-west, where the rest of Pilbara lies, are almost non-existent. The proposed boundaries would leave Ngaanyatjarraku as an isolated anomaly, with little in common with the rest of the district and no practical means of transport to it.

To solve this problem, I suggest the following changes:

- * Transfer the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku from Pilbara to Goldfields.
- * Transfer the Shires of Sandstone and Wiluna from Goldfields to North West.
- * Conduct a swap of territory between North West and Pilbara: the Shire of Roeburne to move into Pilbara, and in return the eastern half of the Shire of Ashburton to move into North West.

These changes would maintain a rough equality among the three districts; Goldfields, North West and Pilbara would have (including the Large District Allowance) approximately 98.1%, 95.1% and 106.9% of quota respectively. They would accommodate Ngaanyatjarraku without creating a corresponding problem elsewhere; Wiluna and Sandstone fit well with Meekatharra and Mount Magnet, and the Shire of Ashburton would be reunited in a single district.

South West and Agricultural regions

The final point is the allocation of districts between the two regions of South West and Agricultural. Since on the Commission's scheme there are 17 non-metropolitan districts, five of which conveniently fit into the Mining and Pastoral region, it would seem logical that the other two non-metropolitan regions should have six districts each. Instead, the Commissioners have placed eight in South West and only four in Agricultural.

I see no reason why the districts of Albany and Blackwood-Stirling could not be transferred to the Agricultural region. While they admittedly fit the description of the South West region, the Act only requires that it be "a region that includes coastal and forest areas in the south-west of the State" (section 16H(1)(d)) – there is nothing to say that it has to include all of those areas.

The two districts in question include substantial territory of an agricultural character, and with their addition Agricultural would still manifestly be a region "in which the land use is primarily for agricultural purposes" (section 16H(1)(c)). It is true that the district of Albany is primarily urban, but no more so than the district of Geraldton, which the Commissioners have placed in Agricultural.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles Richardson