

Wendy Duncan MLA

Member for Kalgoorlie

WAEC

24 AUG 2015

The Electoral Distribution Commissioners
GPO Box F316
PERTH WA 6841

Dear Sirs,

PROPOSED WESTERN AUSTRALIAN REDISTRIBUTION

Thank you for your diligent work in the difficult task of preparing the proposed electoral redistribution for the forthcoming State election to be held in March, 2017. The application of the democratic principle of one vote one value is particularly difficult in a State where there is a considerable imbalance between metropolitan voters and regional voters and vast and diverse areas to be represented. I believe this imbalance can be mitigated with a strong understanding of the links, means of communication and cultural influences that are present in our state.

With this in mind I would like to draw the Commissioners attention to some of the issues the proposed boundary redistribution have raised in the areas with which I am most familiar. I was born in Kalgoorlie-Boulder, have had a long association with its people and brought up with a close connection to the local Wongutha and Ngaanyatjarra people, learning some of their language and knowing many of their elders and families.

I would like to address my concerns under several headings: The loss of one regional seat and the benefit of large district allowance; representation for the people of Kalgoorlie-Boulder; the transfer of Northern Goldfields towns into North-West Central; and the needs of the Aboriginal people of the central desert and Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

1. Loss of one regional seat and benefit of large district allowance

Given the vast area of Western Australia and the very diverse population, industry, economic activity and needs, it is very unfortunate that a recommendation has been made that the number of seats in the region be reduced by one. As argued in The Nationals and Liberals submissions, the same number of seats could have been retained in Western Australia by incremental change.

The Commissioners noted themselves that "since the 2011 distribution the number of enrolled electors in country regions has increased by about 21,000. While the corresponding increase in the metropolitan regions is about 82,000, the number of country electors, as a proportion of total enrolments across the whole State, has declined only marginally."



THE NATIONALS for Regional WA

If the proportion of population between country and city declined only marginally, then I would argue there should be no argument to reduce the number of country seats by one.

I would also note that the abolition of a country seat has resulted in some very large electorates which will make it very difficult for constituents to make meaningful contact with their elected representative. One mitigating factor was the use of Large District Allowances. It was the intention of Parliament in framing the Electoral Act that Large District Allowances be used to mitigate the adverse effects of one vote one value on the vast, sparsely populated areas of the Mining and Pastoral Areas and therefore should be used by the Commissioners in their deliberations. Not only does the LDA have implications in the Electoral Act, but it is also the basis upon which additional resources are available to a Member of Parliament, such as an additional office. To decide that an electorate have an area of 98,000 sq km seems to indicate a deliberate attempt to avoid triggering the LDA and therefore denying electors a better opportunity to access the resources and assistance of their government representative.

2. Representation of the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder

The Commissioners indicated in their report that the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder would benefit from one representative. However, there were few supporting arguments put for this case and it does not seem to be consistent with decisions in other local government areas where boundaries have not been followed. Likewise in the city of Perth, keeping one locality in the same electorate as its neighbour is not seen to be the highest consideration.

There are many benefits for the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder in having two representatives in Parliament, particularly if they happen to be able to access different pathways into Parliament and government. The connection between Kalgoorlie-Boulder and Esperance is also very strong, with Esperance not only being the port for the Goldfields, but also the place of choice for rest, recreation and retirement for many Goldfields people.

To place Esperance in an electorate with a large part of the wheatbelt with which it has no connection has caused considerable dismay in the port town.

3. Transfer of Northern Goldfields Towns into North-West Central

The Northern Goldfields towns of Leonora, Laverton, Leinster and even Wiluna, have a very strong connection and a direct sealed route through to Kalgoorlie-Boulder as their regional centre. They are (excluding Wiluna) all part of the Goldfields Esperance Development Commission area and they all look to Kalgoorlie-Boulder as their regional centre in relation to Health, Transport, Police, Aboriginal Affairs, Justice, Environment, Family and Childrens' Services, Sport and Recreation and many other government activities. To ask these towns and their residents to communicate with a representative based in Carnarvon is unreasonable.

You may argue that the Member of Parliament does not have to be based in Carnarvon, but I can assure the Commissioners that it is extremely difficult to get permission from the Department of Premier and Cabinet to change the location of an electorate office as evidenced by the fact that some Members of Parliament elected in 2013 still do not have an office in a location of their choice.

There is no direct transport route to Carnarvon from the Northern Goldfields and central desert, no direct Regular Passenger Transport Services, and no sealed road between the Northern Goldfields and Carnarvon without taking a very circuitous route. Many parts of the electorate have substandard communication ability. There are many pastoral properties in the Northern Goldfields that still do not have reliable access to internet services.

4. The special needs of the Central Desert and Ngaanyatjarra People

The Commissioners noted improved communications as a mitigating factor in alleviating some of the challenges of extremely large electorates. This may be the case in areas such as the wheatbelt, great southern and south-west but it does not hold true in the remote parts of the proposed expanded seat of North-West Central. Most of the population in these remote parts are Aboriginal people many of whom do not have access to internet or sophisticated devices such as computers or mobile phones. If they do have a mobile phone, range is only available in a few locations and many use pre-paid credit with their devices. Those on low incomes are very reluctant to use their phones for anything other than communicating with family.

In spite of my efforts to effect change, the people of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands do not benefit from 1800 numbers linked to Western Australian contacts. My investigations with telephone providers indicate that the people of the Lands can only have the benefit of 1800 numbers if they are directed into South Australia or the Northern Territory. Therefore offering free call service to this area is not possible.

It is part of the Aboriginal culture of this area to demand a strong and familiar relationship with their representatives before trust is established and communication is possible. Face to face communication is by far the preferred method and I have asked the staff in my office how many calls they receive in the office in comparison to walk-ins in Kalgoorlie-Boulder. Anecdotally, 80% of the contact by my office with Aboriginal people is face to face. I believe it is very important to maintain the link between the Aboriginal people of the Central Desert and Ngaanyatjarra Lands with their parliamentary representative in Kalgoorlie-Boulder because that is what they know and trust. Even if the boundary changes, they will still come into the office in Kalgoorlie-Boulder for assistance and therefore will have divided representation, as the Member in Kalgoorlie-Boulder will not have any travel allowance to visit the people they will inevitably find themselves being asked to serve.

Even though the Ngaanyatjarra Lands are nearly 1,000 km from Kalgoorlie-Boulder, there is a very strong movement of people from that region to the city throughout the year be it to access health services, visit friends and relatives, transact business with

banks and social services, attend funerals or have a holiday. During these times it is not uncommon for them to also visit my office.

I strongly urge the Commissioners not to separate the Northern Goldfields and particularly the Central Desert and Ngaanyatjarra Lands from their regional centre in Kalgoorlie-Boulder.

5. Conclusion

In calling for submissions, the Commissioners asked for alternative solutions to be proposed. I would recommend that the submission made by The Nationals WA be reconsidered and that incremental change be made in electoral boundaries rather than dramatic change. The changes the Commissioners have proposed will be disruptive and confusing for constituents, make it even more difficult for people in regional WA to have a meaningful engagement with their political representative, and deny some of the State's most disadvantaged people ease of access to advocacy and support.

I would also recommend that the Commissioners visit some of the regional areas where there is the greatest concern to perhaps gain a better understanding of the priority concerns of electors.

Thank you for accepting this submission.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wendy Duncan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Wendy Duncan MLA
Member for Kalgoorlie

24 August, 2015