



9 July 2020

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters: Review into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020

About Danila Dilba

Danila Dilba is Darwin's only Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service and provides services to most of the Indigenous population in the region – 70% of the population visits a clinic in any one year. Danila Dilba is a membership based organisation and is governed by an Aboriginal board selected by our members.

Danila Dilba provides both comprehensive Primary Health Care and community services. Danila Dilba currently employs approximately 180 staff and has eight general practice clinics across the greater Darwin region. Comprehensive primary health care encompasses the range of health care offered by general practice but extends beyond that to provide:

- Primary health care services for people of all ages
- Access to specialist and allied health professionals, through collaborative service models
- Primary prevention through health promotion to help people get more control over their health
- Care coordination for clients with complex health needs
- Support for self management and secondary prevention for people living with chronic conditions
- Social and emotional wellbeing services
- Drug, alcohol and tobacco services
- Outreach services to clients
- Support services for young people including young people in juvenile detention and for those with diabetes.
- Family support and antenatal care through the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program and Midwife collaborative model of care.

Submission

Demographics and Size of Divisions

The population estimate for the NT (ABS estimates) falls short of the population quota for two House of Representatives seats by less than 5,000 people and if implemented the reduction to a single seat would make the NT the largest division in Australia by population. The population estimates for the NT are reached through a complex statistical process employed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to account for both the general undercount of population in the census and the specific undercount of Indigenous people in the population.

Professor Graeme Orr described this process as arbitrary and due to fluctuations in estimates ¹. Further, the Northern Territory government's own population estimates suggest that the Territory's population will reach 251,727 by 2021, which is above the quota for two seats.

The one vote, one value argument held up in some submissions to this inquiry is not undermined by the continuation of two seats in the NT. Indeed the opposite is true given that this redistribution would place the NT as the largest population for a Federal division, with 30,000 more residents than the Division of Melbourne. Even more telling is the allocation of a minimum of 5 seats to Tasmania with a population that would warrant only three seats under the population quotas. The impact of rigid adherence to the population quota for the NT on the principle of one vote one value is demonstrated as follows based on AEC data.

House of Representatives Seat Entitlements

	Population	Quotient	Seats	Average population per seat
NSW	8,128,984	47.11443543	47	172,597
VIC	6,651,074	38.54867921	39	170,540
QLD	5,129,996	29.73272740	30	170,999
WA	2,639,080	15.29573244	15	175,938
SA	1,759,184	10.19598033	10	175,918
TAS	537,012	3.11244520	5	107,402
ACT	429,179	2.55164379	3	143,059
NT	247,225	1.43319972	1	247,225

Retention of the two divisions for the NT would bring the average population per seat down to approximately 124,000 and will not make the NT a significant outlier in terms of representation. Indeed, Tasmania would remain the lowest average population per division and the NT would be only slightly lower than the ACT. It is also important to acknowledge that failure to pass this Bill will result in the NT having the highest population to seats ratio with 250,000 people represented by a single member of the House of Representatives. This result also doesn't support the principle of equal vote value.

The current situation is an accident of history rather than a pure application of population quotas. Governments have made decisions in the past to support specific considerations and avoid an undemocratic outcome.

Future population growth NT

¹ <https://www.ntnews.com.au/news/halving-nt-representation-in-federal-parliament-a-travesty-academic-says/news-story/4975f17c09b726160ba1370d626aeea6>

Historically, the population of the NT has increased steadily over time with peaks and troughs driven by factors like economic opportunity, major infrastructure projects, educational opportunities. The Northern Territory government's own population estimates suggest that the Territory's population will reach 251,727 by 2021, which is above the quota for two seats.² This growth projection is supported by official population projections by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which predicts an NT population by 2027 of between 270,000 and 285,000³. Likely population growth in the NT is also supported by the range of COVID-19 recovery infrastructure and employment creation programs along with the emerging projects in gas, renewable energy and mining.

Special characteristics of the Northern Territory

Aside from the demographic issues, the NT has specific characteristics that warrant a more flexible approach to representation arrangements as proposed in the Bill.

Geography

The unique geography of the NT combines with the demographics to make representation by a single member of the House of Representatives unfeasible. The single electorate, incorporating the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island would, as noted by Senator McCarthy in her second reading speech, result in an electorate covering 1.4 million square kilometres – six times the size of Victoria and almost double the size of New South Wales. The sheer size of such an electorate combined with a population base more than double that of the lowest population electorates would make it all but impossible for an MP to be in meaningful contact with constituents to understand their concerns and represent them in the parliament.

The single electorate for the Northern Territory would incorporate one capital city, four regional centres, seventy discrete Aboriginal communities and an unknown number of outstations and homelands. The largest Aboriginal communities, such as Wadeye, may be home to around 2,000 people while the outstations or homelands may be home to just one family group. Even the regional centres are separated from each other by many hundreds of kilometres with transport links that are subject to the economic drivers of airline routes and may at various times have no regular flights or reduced flights. Capacity to cover this vast area is also complicated by weather conditions noting that top end communities may be inaccessible even by charter flight for a significant part of the year.

Diversity

Not only is the NT affected by unique geography, but has enormous diversity of both circumstances and cultures. Understanding and representing the needs that sit with this diversity requires a presence and level of contact on the part of a MP that simply cannot be achieved by one MP attempting to cover the breadth of the NT.

The numerical balance of this diversity also risks the significant proportion of the NT population that lives in Greater Darwin or Alice Springs having their voices heard above those of the smaller numbers residing in any remote community. This would have the effect of losing the voices of Aboriginal people of the NT in the democratic process. Aboriginal people comprise 40% of population of the Division of Lingiari, but would comprise only 26% of a whole of NT electorate. When Aboriginal people have expressed, through the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the strong ambition for a clear voice for Aboriginal people in the parliament, it would be a backward step to abolish the only electorate that has a large proportion of Aboriginal constituents.

Strategic importance

² https://treasury.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/word_doc/0010/688717/NT-Population-Projections-2019-Release-080519.docx

³ [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3222.0Main%20Features122017%20\(base\)%20-%20202066](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3222.0Main%20Features122017%20(base)%20-%20202066)

The Northern Territory holds a place of strategic importance within Australia and the region that supports the need for strong and effective federal representation of the Territory and its issues and challenges. The NT is host to significant defence facilities and presence, to a large presence of Australian Border Force and contains a major port, significant mining operations, intelligence facilities and has a long, sparsely populated coastline. Adequate and effective representation at Federal level is essential to support the NT in fulfilling its strategic role and in ensuring that the voice of all Territorians in relation to these issues is heard.

Conclusion

While some may argue that the NT could be adequately represented under the population quotients contained in current legislation, implementation of the decision to reduce the NT to a single Federal electoral Division would make the NT a significant outlier in the population of its single electorate. On its own in a different geographical and social environment, this might be a manageable situation. However, when viewed in combination with the geographical challenges and geographic diversity of the NT along with its cultural diversity, high Aboriginal population and strategic importance, it is not appropriate or effective for the NT to be represented by a single member of the House of Representatives. There is no logic or principle of democracy that leads to situation where Territorians have one MP representing 250,000 residents while Tasmania has 5 MPs representing just over 500,000.

As Senator McCarthy stated in her 2nd Reading Speech “A single electorate for the Territory would not recognise the different characteristics and communities of interest from Darwin and Palmerston to the remote regions, nor the NT's strategic and economic importance to the whole of Australia.”⁴

Yours sincerely



Olga Havnen

Chief Executive Officer

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<https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary%20Business/Bills%20Legislation/Bills%20Search%20Results/Result/Second%20Reading%20Speeches?BillId=s1262>

