


OUT FOR THE COUNT



The latest redistribution of federal electorates will see Queensland gain a seat in the House of Representatives, while the Northern Territory and South Australia will each lose a member. Peter Cotton uncovers a simmering controversy over the way this outcome was calculated.

The two federal members representing Northern Territory electorates are pushing for legislation to ensure that the Territory keeps at least two seats in the House of Representatives.

Their move follows a recent determination by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) that the number of electorates in the Northern Territory be reduced to one.

The Member for Lingiari, Warren Snowdon, says that while he has no problem with the formula used to determine the Territory's 'representation entitlement', the statistical information used to determine the seat allocation for the Territory was flawed.

"The Constitution states that the latest statistics must be used when the formula is applied to determine the allocation of electorates," says Mr Snowdon. "The statistical information used by the Electoral Commissioner to determine the Territory's allocation was not accurate."

Mr Snowdon says that on the basis of the data used by the Electoral Commission, the Territory fell short of a quota for two seats by just 291 people.

However, he says the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 1996 post enumeration survey indicated that the calculation for the Northern Territory population had a standard error of plus or minus 1,000 persons.

"This standard error means that the population used to determine our seat entitlement could be out by anything up to 4,000 people," Mr Snowdon says. "Therefore, the figure of 291 people is well within the range of statistical error, and in addition to that, we've demonstrated that the Australian Bureau of Statistics' estimates for particular regions in the Territory are not accurate.

"The Bureau's population estimates for the last four quarters have been so varied that if the Electoral Commission had used the figures for

Continued page 18

the June quarter instead of the September quarter, we would have been just above the quota for two seats.”

The Director of Demography at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Patrick Corr, says the ABS did supply the latest statistics to the Australian Electoral Commission, but concedes that, like all statistics, the figures were subject to measurement error.

“If you do a complete count of the population, you get a finite result,” says Mr Corr. “However, if you run a sample survey, because you’re only going to a proportion of the population, there is always a sampling error involved.

“The population for the Northern Territory changes each quarter, and the Territory has population cycles. However, what we observed in the 12 months to September 2002 was that there was a decline in the Northern Territory’s population for three of the four quarters measured. At the same time there was a rapid increase in population for south-east Queensland.”

The Australian Electoral Commission employs a pre-determined and somewhat complicated formula for allocating House of Representatives seats to the states and territories.

“It seems ridiculous that an area covering one fifth of the Australian land mass with 200,000 people should have only one federal representative.”

Essentially, it divides the population of Australia (19,205,190), excluding the population of the territories, by 144. This figure represents twice the number of senators coming from the six states.

The use of Senate numbers in the calculation reflects the constitutional requirement that, as far as possible, there should be twice as many members of the House of Representatives as there are senators.

The result of dividing the Australian population by the number of senators in the states produces what’s called the quota.

On the basis of the Australian population in September 2002, the AEC calculated that the quota for a seat in the House of Representatives was 133,369 people.

The population of the Northern Territory in September 2002 was 197,724. This figure for the population was divided by the quota figure of 133,369 to produce a quota result for the Territory of 1.4978.



Member for Solomon, David Tollner (left), and Member for Lingiari, Warren Snowdon (right). Photos: AUSPIC

Quota figures are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number and therefore the Northern Territory missed out on retaining its two federal members by .0022 of a quota.

Patrick Corr says he understands the concern being expressed about it (representation for the Northern Territory), however he stands by the figures used to calculate the Territory’s representative entitlement.

“You can move the goal posts and measure its population for a different date, but the legislation does not provide for that. It’s very specific,” says Mr Corr. “We must provide the latest statistics of the Commonwealth and we must provide it for a particular month, as set out in the legislation.”

The Northern Territory’s other member in the House of Representatives is David Tollner, who represents the seat of

Solomon. He says the formula used to calculate seat allocation is not serving Northern Territory voters well. “It seems ridiculous that an area covering one fifth of the Australian land mass with 200,000 people should have only one federal representative,” he says.

Mr Tollner points to a Parliamentary Library research paper which he says shows the Northern Territory gaining population. “The numbers used by the Electoral Commission to calculate our level of representation were an anomaly,” he says. “And the decision to cut representation for the Territory doesn’t serve the current push for boosting resource allocation to rural and remote Australia.”

Mr Tollner says he’s proposed legislative change to the Commonwealth Electoral Act before the next election to ensure that there are two members representing the Northern Territory. “I’m making representations to my Coalition colleagues and to Labor members and senators to see if we can get bipartisan support for this move,” he says.

Mr Tollner says he’s also lobbying the minister with responsibility for the Electoral Act, Special Minister of State Senator Eric Abetz.

A spokesman for Senator Abetz told *About the House* that while it was possible that the act could be changed before the next election to assure the Northern Territory of two seats in the House of Representatives, no decision had yet been made on such a change.

The spokesman says Senator Abetz understands the arguments being advanced by the members from the Northern Territory and any decision on the matter would be made well before the next election.

The Member for Lingiari, Warren Snowdon, spent 12 years as the only member in the Northern Territory. He’s not confident that the act will change before the next election.

“There are discussions looking at an amendment to the act to guarantee two seats for the Territory, but I suspect it won’t happen and that this [the reduction of two Territory seats to one] is a fait accompli,” says Mr Snowdon. “I’m equally confident that at the election after next, we’ll be back to two seats in the Territory. That just illustrates the absurdity of the system.”

Absurd or not, Assistant Electoral Commissioner Brien Hallett says the

Commonwealth Electoral Act is very clear about the formula for determining entitlement to representation. "We have a formula and we've got to work with it. There's no flexibility," he says.

The other loser in the commission's recent calculation of the 'representation entitlement' is South Australia.

The number of South Australian seats is set to shrink from 12 to 11, while the number of Queensland seats increases by one to 28.

In the past decade, the south-east corner of Queensland has acquired three new seats: Dickson, Blair and Longman. During the same period, Victoria lost the seat of Corinella and South Australia lost the seat of Hawker.

At the same time, the seats of Dundas and Phillip were abolished in New South Wales, though the seat of Patterson was created: a net loss of one seat.

"Queensland is growing, so it's only fair that Queensland gets more members."

Mr Hallett says the increasing number of seats in south-east Queensland represents a broad demographic trend as people move to that part of Australia. "That's what representation is all about," he says. "To make sure that the entitlement to representation reflects the way the population is moving."

South Australia's Member for Hindmarsh, Christine Gallus, knows what it's like to lose her seat to a redistribution. She was the Member for Hawker in 1993 when the seat was abolished. "It's one of the changes you have to make," says Ms Gallus. "You lose your seat and you say 'OK, where can I best relocate', if that's what you want to do."

Ms Gallus believes a system which aims at putting an equal number of electors in each seat is a fair system. "It's not always an easy system for members representing large geographical areas, but that's the nature of our country," she says. "And, as well as the Northern Territory, there are other big seats, like the seat of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, or Grey which accounts for about 95 per cent of South Australia.

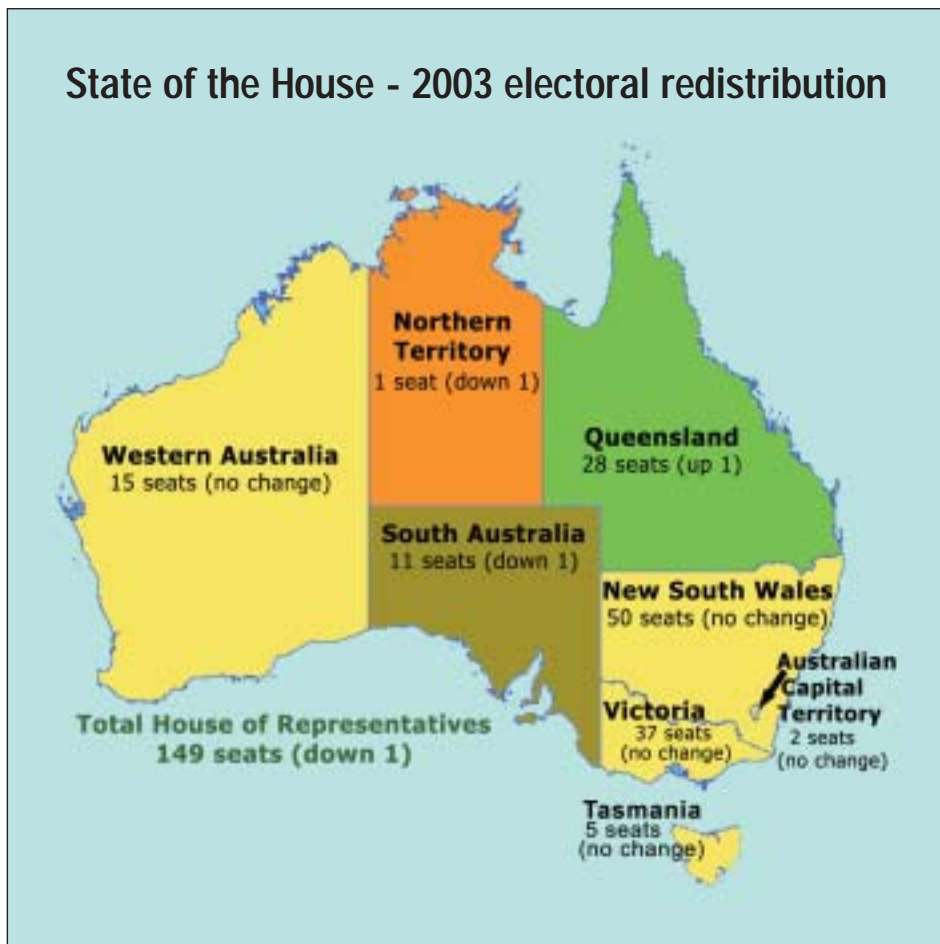
"If the bigger seats were broken up, those new seats would be natural Liberal Party seats, meaning you'd get extra Liberal Party members in the parliament representing fewer and fewer people. That's called a gerrymander and you can't have that."

Ms Gallus says the Gold Coast, which is to get another member, has something that the Northern Territory and South Australia don't have: a growing population—the population of Queensland grew by 2.3 per cent in the 12 months to September 2002.

"We believe in equal representation, that everybody's vote is worth pretty much the

seat will probably be located just south of Brisbane.

And the movement to the south-east corner of Queensland continues unabated, part of a consistent trend. Mrs May says her electorate has many new enrolments each month. "It's not slowing at all," she says. "If it continues, there's a good chance this



Map: © Commonwealth of Australia 2003. Boundaries courtesy of Australian Bureau of Statistics. Produced by Klaus Inveen, Parliamentary Library

same, says Ms Gallus. "Queensland is growing, so it's only fair that Queensland gets more members.

"I'm sorry that South Australia and the Northern Territory are going to lose seats, but those are the rules and we can't change them every time we go through this process just because we don't like an outcome."

The Member for McPherson, Margaret May, says she has the biggest electorate in Queensland, with close to 100,000 constituents. Mrs May expects to lose some part of her electorate in the coming redistribution which will create a new seat in south-east Queensland.

There are currently only two electorates that take in Gold Coast City and only four electorates covering the south-east corner of Queensland: McPherson, Moncrieff, Fadden and Forde. Mrs May says the new

region will siphon off another three seats from the southern states in the next decade."

While Mrs May says the demographics of the Gold Coast and south-east Queensland warrant the region getting another member, she believes reducing the Northern Territory from two members to one will stretch the remaining member.

"I don't know how you resolve this," she says. "People need access to a member, but a member is just a human being and can only do so much. Maybe we should re-examine the formula so that the Territory is assured of two members. I think what's proposed makes it extremely difficult for people in the Territory to get the representation they're entitled to." ■

Peter Cotton is a freelance journalist from Canberra.