

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation

MANINGRIDA



Maningrida Community
PMB 102 Winnellie, NT 0821
T: 08 8979 6555

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020 – Submission from Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, Maningrida, Northern Territory.

About us

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) is a membership-based organisation established in Maningrida in 1979. We represent and serve the Aboriginal people of the homelands and 32 outstations surrounding Maningrida in West Arnhem Land. We are governed by a board of directors that is elected by corporation members every two years.

Our goal is to build our community's financial independence through diverse and sustainable business enterprises, while protecting and honouring our environment, traditional culture and languages.

What we do

BAC manages a range of diverse enterprises and services developed to build our community's sustainability and financial independence.

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation comprises the following divisions:

- Corporate services
- Housing, Homelands and Construction
- Maningrida Arts and Culture:
 - Maningrida Arts Centre
 - Bábbarra Women's Centre
 - Djomi Museum
- Bawinanga Rangers – Land and Sea
- Maningrida Wild Foods
 - Nursery and bush tucker
 - Fishing and crabbing
- Barlmark Supermarket, Tucker Run and Fuel (vehicle and aircraft fuel supplies)

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- Wild Foods Cafe
- Civil Works:
 - Mud Brick Factory
 - Road and Airstrip maintenance
- Mechanical Workshop
- Community Services:
 - CDP Employment Office
 - CDP Activities - mowing, furniture, fencing, homelands maintenance, laundry, Bright Futures, welding, small engine repairs
 - Money Management
- Remote School Attendance Strategy
- Community Patrol

Submission

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) is based in Maningrida, Arnhem Land, one of the most remote corners of the current electorate of Lingiari, which is the second largest electorate in Australia. BAC represents and provides services to approximately 4000 Aboriginal people.

We contend that the suggested redistribution of the NT electoral boundaries illegitimately diminishes Indigenous Territorian's right to representation and ultimately justice.

The idea that one MP could be an effective voice for the most disadvantaged Australians in an electorate spanning 1.4 million square kilometres makes a mockery of representation.

The Maningrida region is home to 12 language groups, with English often being the third or fourth language that children learn. Language difficulties, together with the tyranny of distance and the lack of support to assist with filling out forms have had two severe consequences in our region:

- The census data is not accurate and underestimates the number of people living in the region
- Many local Aboriginal people are not registered to vote. Even when they are, voting rates are low compared to the rest of the country.

This means that our local people are already disadvantaged when it comes to representation. If there is one person representing the interests of all Territorians, reality dictates that those who speak English well, understand government machinations, are easy to see, hear and reach, will be represented. That's not us.

We are Australians who are not easy to reach, see and hear. Representatives must take time and make an effort to reach us to understand our challenges and how government can help. That is their job. How does halving the number of people, to a single person, make it at all possible, let alone probable, that they will effectively represent us?

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Yet, despite our reduced ability to see and talk to our representatives because of distance and the language barrier, we potentially have the greatest need for government to understand our challenges.

These include:

- living conditions akin to the United Nations definition of a developing country
- overcrowding in houses, with very often 15 people living in 3-bedroom house
- one of the lowest life expectancies in the country. Maningrida children have the highest known rate of rheumatic heart disease in the world
- poverty that underlies all other social issues, with West Arnhem having one of the lowest average weekly wage in the country, mostly due to the very high levels of unemployment
- the worst road infrastructure in the country.

These issues need to be addressed and Aboriginal people in remote communities need to have a strong voice in Canberra.

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation and its members already feel that they are currently not being represented adequately: we are lucky to receive one visit by a Federal politician per election year. We are not able to drive down the road to visit our Member of Parliament like it is possible to do in urban electorates.

Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation is one of the oldest, largest and most successful aboriginal corporations in one of the most remote areas of Australia. You would think that depth of knowledge and experience would position BAC as a valued adviser on remote Indigenous issues and opportunities. Government can't take advantage of our ability and desire to share information about effective solutions and programs, or how the government can better target its funds for improved outcomes, if the primary conduit between us and Parliament House is cut in half.

Our access to representation is seriously limited due to distance and removing 50 per cent of any hope of representation would leave us completely disenfranchised.

In short, the proposal to remove a Member of Parliament for the Northern Territory is unjust and unfair and will lead to further marginalisation of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and in Australia generally.

For further information please contact

Ingrid Stonhill

Chief Executive Officer



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