

Submission to the Ministerial Expert Committee on Electoral Reform
By Damien Kelly, Corporate Advisor

(a) which model (whole-of-state electorate or region-based) is preferable to achieve electoral equality

Region-based model is preferable for the Legislative Council, for the reasons set out below. In this context, I respectfully submit that the boundaries of the Perth metropolitan region be expanded somewhat to more accurately reflect what is now an expanded metropolitan area.

(b) the strengths and drawbacks of each model

I note the terms of reference for the Committee, which is to review the electoral system for the Legislative Council and provide recommendations, including “as to how electoral equality might be achieved for all citizens entitled to vote for the Legislative Council”

In terms of equality for all citizens, I make two points:

1. “Equality” is a subjective term which can have multiple, sometimes competing perspectives; and sometimes compensating for inequality in other perspectives of equality. Perfect electoral equality is a conceptual ideal defying reality. One person’s utopia of electoral equality is likely to be another’s dystopia of inequality.
2. The sheer vastness of the state in terms of population (and spread of population centres), climates, topographies, coastal/inland areas, industries (even marked difference in primary industries both agricultural and non-agricultural) and demographics, and the large distances to travel between those vastly different areas, requires an electoral system to ‘equalise’ (or, in light of the first point, aim to more equally distribute) political power between these areas to counteract the political power that the people of one area hold over people of the other areas. This is a crucial concept that is particularly prevalent and important for and in Western Australia.

The existing electoral system for the Legislative Assembly (“LA”) already provides electoral equality in terms of raw (some might even say, crude) population weighting. Most significantly, it is the sole chamber responsible for determining who holds executive government. The existing, region-based model for the Legislative Council (“LC”), which has far less political power and influence than the LA, provides a better electoral equality in respect of the other terms mentioned in the second point above.

One only needs to point to the Australian Senate for an example in relation to the first point regarding “equality”. It ensures equality of representation for the population of each Australian state, just as the LC ensures equality of representation for the population of each Legislative Council electorate ... most importantly maintaining some equality between the highly concentrated population of the Perth metropolitan area and the rest of the state.

In relation to the second point, Western Australia is the second largest country subdivision (state/province) in the world. It covers more than one hour of longitude and, whilst its sheer area is surpassed only by the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in far east Russia, WA is even more vast and varied than Sakha in the terms described in the second point.

In relation to both points, the current regional/metropolitan weighting of the LC provides some balance (but certainly not asymmetry or equality) to the political power that would otherwise be overwhelmingly concentrated in and around Perth ... checks and balances to what is already a Perth-centric political system.

The concentration of political power in the eastern states under Australia's federal political system (to which the electoral equality in the senate for all citizens of each state provides at least some, albeit limited, counter-balance) pales in comparison to the already-dominant concentration of political power in Perth under Western Australia's existing political system.

Moreover, in the context of the Australian federal political system, at least the concentration of power in the eastern states is roughly divided between Sydney/NSW and Melbourne/VIC, with the seating of federal parliament in Canberra and Queensland's growing population providing some further decentralisation of power away from Sydney and Melbourne.

The following anamorphic map of Australia's population distribution between the states and territories (Figure 1) gives a visual sense of this at the federal level. As time and resources do not permit me to do so, I respectfully request the Committee procure a similar map to give a visual representation of the current population distributions between regions in WA.

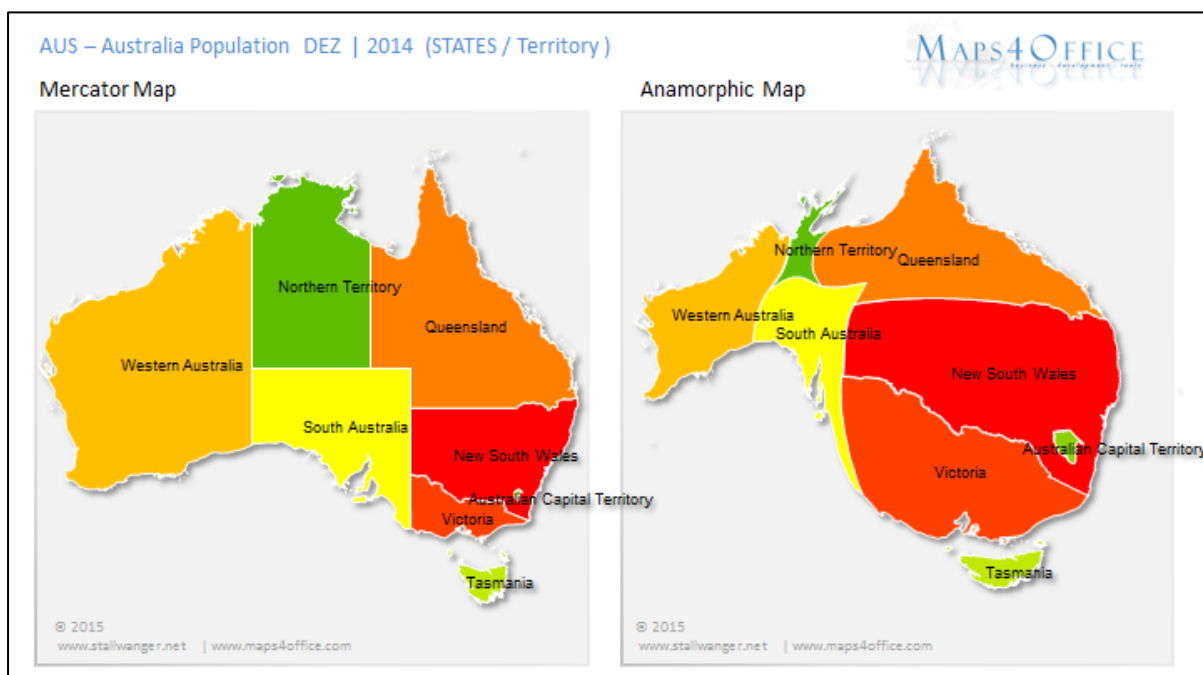


Figure 1 (source: maps4office.com)

History shows that the tyranny of the majority can and does create outcomes that are both unfair and unjust to the minority.

(c) whether any other electoral model, not covered in this Discussion Paper, is better suited to achieve electoral equality, with reasons;

No submission.

(d) what changes (if any) should be made to the distribution of preferences in the Legislative Council's proportional representation system, including group voting tickets.

No submission.