

## Submission to the Legislative Council Review of the State Electoral System by the Tasmanian Constitution Society

The Tasmanian Constitution Society notes:

1. In 1959, the membership of the House of Assembly was increased from 30 to 35 members, the increase then being recommended by a Parliamentary Select Committee "because the population of the State has nearly doubled and the functions of the government have increased enormously". The population (and revenue base) was then c.350,000 (350,343 in 1961)

2. In July-August 1998, the government of the day reduced the House of Assembly to 25 seats, greatly surprising all Tasmanians and alarming many. This was a reduction of 29%, though of course the population had increased greatly since 1959. The parliament has been functioning at only 71% capacity since, to the significant detriment of the governance of Tasmania.

3 In 2014 (*Mercury* 3 May 2014) the Premier of the day in 1998 (Mr. Tony Rundle) stated "By mid-1998 I judged our reform agenda was being thwarted by the hung parliament and nominated August 29 as election day. I recalled the House of Assembly, moving that the House of Assembly be reduced by 10 seats". The Tasmanian Constitution Society holds that no programme of reform, no matter how well intentioned, put forward by any party, can justify a near 30% reduction of democratic representation in a modern democracy (in the event the apparent objectives, the renewal of Government and the guarantee of majority Governments, were not achieved.)

4. Recognition of the damage the attenuation of representation had caused, came in 2010-2011. After the 2010 election the leaders of the three major parties signed an agreement to restore the House of Assembly to 35 seats; Professor Peter Boyce AO, (who had been endorsed by the three Party Leaders (Green, Labor and Liberal) to report on the proposal to restore the House of Assembly to 35 members), reported: "that there was strong community support for such an increase in the members"; the then Opposition Leader, and present Premier assured the Tasmanian Constitution Society "The Tasmanian Liberals are absolutely supportive of returning the number of Members in the House of Assembly to 35 and we will make every effort to ensure the restoration achieves the intended positive outcome for [the] Tasmanian community"(17 June 2010), and the Premier of the day (Lara Giddings) in response to our petition on the matter (petition No. 15 of 2011), declared "The smaller number [of members] has resulted in a reduced representation of the Tasmanian community and fewer members to draw on for Cabinet and Parliamentary purposes" and also that "There is now a general feeling that the House of Assembly is too small and the numbers of Members should be increased".

5. Despite these very promising developments, and assurances, the matter still has not been resolved; restoration still has not occurred, and Tasmania still operates with a House of Assembly of only 71% of its capacity in c. 1960, with a population of c. 350,000 when it now has population of c. 500,000.

6. Given the vital need for effective government in difficult times we feel this attenuation cannot be allowed to continue. One consequence of this has been, we fear, is a decay of respect for elected politicians, deriving from cynicism (perhaps unmerited) at the apparent manipulation of the political system for party purpose. We feel this is largely undeserved, but very damaging to our political culture. Restoration of the House would remove this and allow an infusion of new talent into the governance of Tasmania.

7. There may be an objection to the apparent cost of the restoration in "difficult times": it is true this much delayed reform may attract criticism, but this would be unfounded. As noted the population (and revenue base) was 350,343 in 1961 shortly after the establishment of the 35 seat House of Assembly - it is now c. 500,000 with a proportionately expanded revenue base. The economic objection cannot be sustained, but the democratic reform can, and must be. We urge the Legislative Council to consider this important matter and to recommend that appropriate steps be taken to restore the House of Assembly to its former membership, so that Tasmania can advance with a restored and re-vitalized Parliament.

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