

Madeleine Ogilvie



YOUR INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR NELSON

The Secretary
House of Assembly Restoration Enquiry
Parliament House
Hobart Tas 7000

22 February 2019

Dear Ms Hesford,

Submission to Enquiry

I attach a submission to the House of Assembly, Select Committee on House of Assembly Restoration Bill.

Yours sincerely,

Madeleine Ogilvie BA LLB GCM

Together For Nelson



Restoration of Tasmanian Democracy

The restoration of the size of the Tasmanian House of Assembly is a serious democratic project that has been for too long left languishing and leaderless in the backrooms and corridors of our important Parliament. It is true there is nothing we like less than spending money on politicians, other than spending more money on more politicians. Yet it is time for our generation of Tasmanians to grasp the nettle and to demand a fully functioning lower house, capable of sustaining and delivering a top order government for our future and the future of our children.

Reflecting on our parliamentary history and the political landscape over the past 35 years and beyond, we can appreciate how society and the demands of running a state have changed. Nothing stays the same, governments are essentially ephemeral creatures, each one different in its constitutional make up and capacity. The Tasmanian parliament is no different, it too has changed over time. It has fluctuated in size and power and has fluctuated in capacity, integrity and productivity. Yet, under our Westminster system of democracy, we have a set of criteria for a fully functioning parliament that are unable to be met without adequate resources – both human and economic. The number of MPs is a critical input to our democracy.

It was in 1984 that the then Premier Robin Gray sought and received advice from the Advisory Committee on the Proposed Reduction in the Number of Members Elected to Both Houses of the Tasmanian Parliament. The report became known as the Ogilvie Report. Having made election commitments to reduce the number of parliamentarians, and to reduce the number of ministers, the Government followed through in 1998 cutting the numbers to 25.

This was despite the Ogilvie Report's findings which recommended against the reduction in numbers because of the likely negative impact on the institutions functioning. Sadly, for Tasmanian democracy, the size of both the legislative council and house of assembly were duly reduced.

Much has been said about the size of our Parliament in the intervening years with a key argument for a small Parliament being based on statistical arguments relating to

the size of the Tasmanian population compared to other jurisdictions. However, the statistical argument is only part of the picture. Have we actually made the savings promised in 1984, or have we short changed the people of Tasmania by merely reducing the effectiveness of government?

The expectations of voters, the requirements of the Tasmanian Constitution and our political, electoral and legislative requirements, still need to be met.

In short, there are fewer people representing Tasmanians in the Parliament but the job scope has not changed, in fact it has increased in response to the 24/7 news cycle and the advent of social media. The backbench is limited, the committee system is under pressure, and power is concentrated in a small number of hands.

People do not want to see the essential characteristics of our key democratic institutions change. In this age of social media, where immediate access and the free flow of ideas is a given, never before has there been more scrutiny of MPs. There is a genuine desire to have more accessible Parliamentarians, greater democratic engagement and a deeper pool of talent on all of the benches. Yet the work load for MPs and their advisers is large and growing with MPs parliamentary and constituent duties expanding, and our changing world creating an ever more complex working environment.

Since the establishment of the Tasmanian parliament in 1856 our political landscape has of course changed. In 1870 for example we had 32 lower house MPs and electors numbered 11,171. That meant the ratio of politicians to electors was 1:349. Can you imagine that, each MP served only 349 constituents. It would have been possible to know them all by name.

In 1906 when women were first permitted to vote, Tasmania had 30 lower house MPs, electors of 88,294 and a voter ratio 1:2943. The number of constituents was growing, because the Tasmanian population was growing.

In 1984, the number of members of parliament was 35 and the number of voters was 281,453 giving a voter ratio of 1:8042. That is one MP for about 8,000 constituents – a fairly sizable number.

Today there are 25 MPs in the Lower House and Tasmania has an electoral roll numbering 359,779 – a voter ratio of 1:14,391. At no time in Tasmania's political history have Tasmanians had less access to their local MP.

Previous moves to increase the numbers of members in Parliament, reflected a desire to reduce deadlocks. For example, the 1957 committee argued that the increase to 35 was warranted because "...the population of the State has nearly doubled...and the function of Government have increased enormously." How very sensible.

On reflection, in 1984 had we merely maintained the number of MPs, the growth in the Tasmanian population between 1984 and 2016 would have resulted in a lowering of the ratio in any case.

To show how the numbers would have worked, if there were 35 members of the house of assembly today, instead of the 1:14,391 ratio, we would have slightly better access to politicians with a ratio of 1:10,279.

Experience also shows that the fewer the number of MPs, the greater the risk of deadlock or balance of power situations. Taking a look at the figures in some more depth, in our 25 member house, in a contest between two parties of about equal strength, together with a minor party, an electoral outcome with either a balance of power situation, or a minority government situation, is slightly more likely.

We all understand that the strength of a government lies in the quality of its cabinet, and a backbench of 3 (once a 15 member majority government has provided the Speaker) does not provide a lot of depth. Choice and talent are both diminished.

The Opposition is considered to be essential for the proper working of democratic government and the Parliamentary process in our Westminster system. The Opposition has a special role - to scrutinise legislation, examine expenditure, seek information, appraise and criticise government administration.

A reduced opposition, also reduces the functions and capacity of government. Parliamentary committees are affected, fewer MPs stretched thin must logically affect the quality or the quantity of work able to be done.

And what of the interaction between Parliament and the public?

Not only do we have a high ratio of constituents to politicians, making access harder, but the increased workload on those fewer MPs means they find it challenging to cover their electorates to meet and work with people.

If we look at the lack of access to MPs, the scope of work to be done, the challenges of modern public life, the requirements for good government – such as a strong backbench and a strong opposition – we must accept that there is a minimum number of MPs that a State needs to fully function. We can only conclude the numbers in the House of Assembly of the Parliament of Tasmania should be restored.

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Barrister & Solicitor