

State needs electoral reform to restore voter confidence

CM 16/6/15.

ALLOW me to make the least popular political statement this year: Queensland needs more politicians.

There, I said it. Queensland needs at least 10 more MPs to bring our total in the Legislative Assembly to 99.

Consider the following before bleating about how Australia is already over-governed (what does that mean, anyway?) or that more polities are just an increased burden on the taxpayer (10 more MPs will cost us about \$1.5 million extra each year in salaries – the cost of only 75m of Bruce Highway upgrade).



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How many of us whinge that we see MPs only at election time? Who's had to wait for an appointment to see their local member? Maybe that's because there are now too few MPs to service a rapidly growing population in what was

always a vast and decentralised state.

As I've written in this space before, we've had no increase in our Legislative Assembly since 1985 when the number grew modestly from 82. That was the year John Farnham recorded *You're the Voice*, Ronald Reagan had just begun his second presidential term and petrol in Queensland cost about 40¢ a litre.

And Queensland's population was a comfy 2.2 million, or one MP to every 27,000 people (including children and non-citizens). Today, we bulge at the seams with 4.7 million, or

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a whopping 53,000 people per MP. In some sense, the democratic value of our MPs has halved since 1985.

A parliament of 99 is no panacea, but it will bring the ratio down to fewer than 50,000 for each MP. And before protesting that even NSW has only 99 members in its Legislative Assembly, that state also boasts 42 upper house members, or 135 MPs in total.

A redistribution of seats must occur in Queensland at least every seven years. Given our last was in 2008, we have to have new electoral boundaries in place by the 2018 election. The redistribution process begins next February and, from that point, residents can submit their ideas to the Redistribution Commission.

But, this time around, Queensland needs more than a tweaking of boundaries. It

needs an overhaul of how those boundaries are redrawn, and by whom, so that it has the power to make recommendations on any number of electoral issues.

The first reform should be a broadening of the Redistribution Commission itself from its current three members. A wider representation beyond the Electoral Commissioner, a judge and a senior public servant would give the Commission fresh eyes.

Presently, the Commission must work within the 1992 Electoral Act, which sets down a limit of 89 seats. In other words, polities have set that number, and they're unwilling to increase it for fear of a voter backlash, despite the clear democratic deficit of having too few MPs.

But, in the same way salaries of politicians and judges have been defused by

an independent remuneration tribunal, so too can parliamentary numbers be depoliticised by being determined by an independent commission.

Third, the Commission should have the power to recommend the abolition of the special weighting for the handful of special category rural seats (such as Mount Isa, Gregory and Warrego) whose area exceeds 100,000sq km and, therefore, are currently allowed fewer voters than southeast seats.

Last, the Commission should be able to recommend changes to voting methods themselves. It should have the power to research the democratic value (or lack of it) of optional-preferential voting, and to suggest alternatives ranging from proportional representation or a return to full preferential.

But we still operate under a

Westminster system, and parliament should not be deprived of the power to reject recommendations, especially if public opinion is vehemently opposed. But, where possible, our parties must put good representation before self-interest, and offer bipartisan support for those measures screaming out for reform.

Queensland is at electoral crossroads. We live in age of voter volatility where one-term governments and hung parliaments are increasingly common. Voters are disengaged and disenchanted like never before and some even speak of a democratic crisis.

That's why any reform in Queensland that brings MPs and voters closer together has to be a good thing.

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