

Electoral Representation Review - East Gippsland Shire Council - Preliminary Submission Deb Foskey - Bonang - 10 March 2019

It is appropriate that we are being asked to review limited aspects of the electoral process for East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) as there are vast problems to provide fair representation for citizens living in the shire, as was proven at the last Local Government election in 2016. The previous review resulted in us having an unsubdivided electorate despite several submissions requesting wards. The poor representation provided by this system is illustrated by the process for and results of that election.

Forty candidates presented themselves for election (subsequently one was removed due to insuitability) and the only information available to electors was a large sheet with a photograph and 200 words provided by the candidate. Voting was postal for many residents so there was not even the possibility of sighting any candidates not already known.

Voters were asked to indicate their preference by marking every square 1-39. The opportunities for confusion were many and a considered vote, jumping all over the ballot paper, was likely to lead to a spoiled vote. Consequently, many of our councillors were elected by the Donkey Vote, either up from the bottom or down from the top. Name recognition was also a factor in election. Suitability for the job was difficult to determine on the basis of information provided.

We live with the consequences of that and many ratepayers would love the chance to reform the system. This review is limited and offers us little scope for meaningful change, leading to either a more representative council or a more accountable one. Nonetheless it provides an opportunity to voice preferences and concerns.

I am aware that Local Government Legislation waiting for the newly elected Victorian Government to consider may overturn anything decided by this review. It is unclear whether any recommendation from this review will be contradicted by the legislation - in its current form, this process may be maintained.

As some submitters have already commented, the job of determining a fair and equitable electoral system for EG is made extremely difficult by the concentration of voters in one small coastal district and, it should be noted, residents in more far-flung areas, like the mountains north of Orbost, or towns east of Orbost, are rarely consulted, nor, due to our small numbers, are our votes sought. This makes accountability difficult - indeed even residents in the more populous areas around Bairnsdale complain that transparency and accountability are lacking due to the lack of particular constituencies apart from interest groups (and these are not transparent).

I concur with the other submitters, in particular Dr Hal Colebatch, who argue for de-amalgamation or a softening of the 10% rule so that more account can be taken of geographical factors in determining wards. I am aware that the people who will make decisions, including the Minister who has final say, lack understanding of the vast distances between most of the shire and its 'centre', Bairnsdale, in fact located at the extreme western end of the Shire. Over time, there has been a consolidation of local government functions in Bairnsdale to the detriment of more easterly residents.

While I do believe that a Council, or indeed its staff, could attempt by administrative arrangements to overcome these inequities, the Victorian Electoral Commission and the Minister could start the process by allowing exceptions for far-flung Shires such as ours to rules that may work well in metropolitan areas but are entirely unsuitable for ours.

The current Our Place, Our Plan community consultations may produce representative groups for pilot areas that may provide a model of a future, fairer way for communities to be heard at local government level.

Note: While I attempted to play with the boundary builder map to begin the process of working out equitably-sized wards and numbers of councillors, I found the tool unhelpful. Further, like Dr Colebatch, I decided that VEC was resourced to do this job and therefore I respectfully ask VEC officers to present in their preliminary report some scenarios with potential wards for us to

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consider.

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