PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA (VICTORIA-TASMANIA) INC.

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2019-04-16

Response submission to Electoral Representation Review, Glenelg Shire Council

This submission is also accessible, **with active hyperlinks,** at http://www.prsa.org.au/2019_response_glenelg.pdf

SUMMARY:

Support for the Preferred Option:

Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc. supports the Preferred Option (Option A) in the Victorian Electoral Commission's Preliminary Report, which recommends seven councillors for Glenelg Shire, to be elected by PR-STV (proportional representation using the single transferable vote), from an undivided municipality.

The Preferred Option accords with the principles of a best-practice electoral system for Glenelg Shire. PRSAV-T Inc. submits that there are two models that fit the aim of best practice, within Victoria's *Local Government Act 1989:*

1. Undivided municipalities, with an odd number of councillors, or
2. Municipalities divided into wards, each with an equal number of councillors to be elected, where that number should be an odd number, and at least three.

Adoption of the Preferred Option would produce a high quality electoral system for Glenelg Shire, so that:

a. a high percentage of voters will continue to be represented by a person that they voted for, and
b. the Council as a whole will continue to be representative of the voters' wishes.

Neither of the two alternative options (Options B or C) meet those desirable standards, and would be likely to lead to a distorted result in Glenelg Shire.

The advantages of the preferred option (Option A):

With the present undivided municipal area as a single electoral district for the election of all 7 councillors, the quota of votes for the election of each councillor is 12.5% of the overall vote, plus one vote. As each quota of votes represents a different one-eighth section of the voters, seven-eighths of them have the advantage that the full value of their vote is used to actually elect a representative of theirs to a seat on the Council. If the VEC were to decide on Option B or Option C, which each lack the important quality of parity among the wards, and include one or more 'stalemate wards' with an even number of councillors, the disadvantages noted at those hyperlinks would soon become evident in the operation of the Council.

The advantages of an undivided district, without any wards, for a 7-member Council include:

- such an undivided district is the only way in which proportional representation can be applied for a 7-member Council in a symmetrical even-handed manner,
- an undivided district is the only system that ensures that the majority of councillors have been elected by the affirmative votes of an absolute majority of voters over the entire municipal area,
- ward boundaries do not require periodic re-adjustment to cater for changes in relative enrolment numbers,

- councillors, who always have to vote on all issues in all wards, are given a compelling motive to become equally informed about all the areas they are collectively voting on, rather than tending to confine their knowledge to their own ward,
- citizens have the maximum choice of councillors to approach to engender action on their concern, and
- citizens do not become confused about which ward they are in.

In multi-councillor wards, elected by proportional representation, the percentage of voters that cast effective votes is much greater than for single-councillor wards. What does this mean? **Successful** votes means those that count towards the election of a successful candidate, and **wasted** votes are those that do not count towards the election of a successful candidate.

If the Preferred Option is adopted, at least 87.5% of voters will cast **successful** votes, leaving only 12.5% casting **wasted** votes but, if Option B or Option C is adopted, unopposed returns are more likely in the smaller wards, particularly the lone single-councillor ward in Option C. Unopposed returns are a sign of the failure of a democratic system, not a sign of satisfaction.

Proportional representation electoral systems reduce **wasted** votes, increase **successful** votes, and increase community satisfaction with Council. The high level of **wasted** votes in single-councillor wards leads to people feeling that they are not well represented by councils, and may be one of the factors leading to high levels of dissatisfaction with some councils.

WHY OPTION C - WHICH HAS ONE SINGLE-COUNCILLOR WARD – IS THE WORST OPTION:

Victoria's *Local Government Act 1989* now sets up two different electoral systems in a given municipality if that municipality contains a mixture of single-councillor and multi-councillor wards. The resulting asymmetry and departure from electoral even-handedness and parity enables the configuration of a municipality to be distorted so that the fairer and greater diversity of representation afforded by the multi-councillor wards can be thwarted by the predictably more single-minded lack of diversity of the lone single-councillor ward. The sole councillor for that ward could well become a 'kingmaker' if the votes of the councillors in each of the remaining wards, which each have an even number of councillors, are split evenly, and are thus stalemated.

A single-councillor ward maximizes the number and percentage of ineffective votes per district:
Under single-councillor systems, in any individual ward, each councillor is elected with just over 50% of the vote. The remaining votes, which often amount to just under 50% of the vote, have no effect on the outcome. Where the results are close, it is possible for the votes of just under 50% of the voters to not be counted towards the election of a candidate. These votes are usually termed *wasted* votes.

Wastage of close to 50% of the total votes cast (that is the number of **wasted** votes can nearly equal the **successful** votes) is quite typical of single-councillor ward systems, whereas in an undivided shire, wastage cannot exceed 12.5% (that is, the number of **wasted** votes will not exceed one eighth of the **successful** votes).

This high percentage of unnecessarily **wasted** votes, usually over 40%, is typical of single-councillor ward systems, which exaggerate majorities, particularly quite small majorities, and thus lead to under-representation of quite large minority viewpoints and a distortion of the community's views. Such unreasonable under-representation perpetuates a quite justified dissatisfaction with local government in that large segment of the community that has been denied a legitimate share of Council representation.

Undivided municipality minimizes the number and percentage of councillors elected unopposed:
For it to be possible at a general election that a poll is required in every ward, the excess of the number of candidates over the full number of seats on the Council must be at least equal to the number of individual electoral districts. The more wards there are, the more likely it is one or more are uncontested.

It is therefore much more likely with multi-councillor electoral districts that:
- at least 50% more voters will be involved in choosing between candidates,
- council seats in such districts will be far less likely to be taken for granted by their occupants than in smaller wards, owing to the greater competition in larger multi-member wards, and
- local issues will be aired and assessed electorally with extensive public participation - rather than by default with unopposed nominations - **each** four years, in **each** part of the municipality.

Single-councillor wards with incumbents elected unopposed facilitate unopposed succession:
Once a councillor has been able to be elected unopposed, particularly if consecutive unopposed elections have been involved, a notorious weakness of the single-councillor ward system can be utilized by that councillor when he or she eventually chooses not to contest the next election.

Such retiring councillors do not have to give, and often do not give, any public notice or even suggestion, prior to the nomination deadline, of their private decision that they will not be maintaining their past practice of nominating for another term. The public is lulled into the misconception that the councillor will probably be nominating again. What happens is that the retiring councillor discreetly chooses not to nominate, and quietly encourages a protégé to nominate at a few minutes before the deadline. That scenario is far less likely in a multi-councillor ward as explained in the point just above.

Once that surreptitious unopposed transition is a **fait accompli***, the ward in question soon finds to its surprise that it has a new councillor that hardly anybody realized would be installed so effortlessly.*

Proportional representation in an undivided 7-councillor municipality does not reduce geographically based communities of interest, as 87.5% of votes **successfully** elect somebody, but smaller wards arbitrarily and unnecessarily destroy any non-geographical communities of interest. Choosing an undivided council lets voters aggregate into quotas on their highest priorities, which are not always geographic.

PR-STV works far better in electoral districts with an odd, not an even number of councillors:
We strongly urge the reviews **not** to recommend any electoral districts with an even number of councillors to be elected. Wards electing an even number of councillors are most unsatisfactory, as they flout the important democratic principle that a majority view should be represented by a majority of elected councillors.

Unfortunately one or more such wards have been included as part of Options B and C. In 4-councillor wards, a minority group with 40% of the vote will be able to achieve equal representation with a majority group achieving 60% of the vote, and in 2-councillor wards those percentages are even more unequal, being just over 33.3% and 66.6% respectively.

Only by having an odd number of councillors elected in each electoral district can the important democratic principle be maintained that majority support in that district should lead to majority representation.

Number of Councillors: The PRSAV-T Inc. agrees with the number of councillors recommended.

Public Hearing: PRSAV-T Inc. does not request to be heard at the Public Hearing.

Geoffrey Goode,
Secretary
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.