Re-imagining Governance for the ACT

– the case for an increase in MLAs in the Legislative Assembly.

The Re-imagining Governance for the ACT series overall has identified several options for improving the Legislative Assembly and governance overall in the ACT. CAPaD's interest is for better avenues for community participation in governance. Along with setting up local councils, having a standing citizens assembly or an upper house, increasing the number of MLAs in the ACT is a strongly held option.

At the third event in our **Reimagining Governance in the ACT series:** ***A larger Assembly - do more MLAs make for better government?*** both speakers agreed the arguments for more MLAs include:

- A stronger backbench enables greater pressure on the executive to govern well
- A broader cross bench and opposition provides stronger scrutiny on the government and the executive
- The talent pool for ministers is deeper enabling more ministers, and so less workload per minister
- The committee work is shared more broadly. This means fewer committees per member permitting committees to deliberate and be more effective
- There is increased possibility for deeper representation of minorities in the community by increased diversity in MLAs
- MLAs are more accessible to their electorate community
- More opportunity for MLAs to bring private members bills

A larger backbench and opposition may preclude the need for an upper house by holding the executive government to better account.

The ACT has the lowest ratio of parliamentarians to population in Australia. Partially this is because of the absence of local government. However, given the ACT Assembly also covers local government functions, this is significant.

Options to permit this increase include adding two more electorates to the existing five, or adding two more MLAs to the existing five in each electorate. There are pros and cons to each which were not discussed at this event.

Arguments against an increase in MLA numbers are:

- questions of cost in a financially tight budget situation, and
- community acceptability.

Some very rough costings presented by Knox suggested that ongoing costs would be only about six million dollars annually. That can be viewed as an investment in better government with better outcomes for Canberrans.

Community support would need to be built by further engagement in discussion about the advantages and benefits for better quality government (weighed against any disadvantages) of more MLAs.

Additionally, this discussion would need to include other options that may complement or negate the need for more MLAs. For instance, local councils or a standing citizens assembly might provide other avenues for sharing the workload of MLAs and improve community participation.

Additional information about what pattern of increase is 'better'

The question, in expanding the Assembly, which option, between five electorates of seven MLAs or seven electorates of five MLAs, (or another option such as six electorates of six MLAs) provides the optimum level of representativeness, stands. This did not come up at the event but is pertinent. A quick dip into the political science literature sought to answer that question.

The political literature is silent in regard to the question of whether five MLAs in seven electorates of seven MLAs in five electorates best produce community diversity. There is agreement that proportional representation is superior to first past the post elections, and multi-member electorates superior to single member electorates. The evidence suggests that multimember electorates of between three and eight members with proportional representation provide the optimum for diverse representation.[i]

The current ACT Electoral system with Hate Clarke, already enhances community representativeness, that is "multidimensional representation, with more voters able to identify and affiliate with a party that represents their interests".[ii] The question is, in expanding the Assembly, which option, between five electorates of seven MLAs or seven electorates of five MLAs, (or another option such as six electorates of six MLAs) provides the optimum level of representativeness cannot be definitely answered.

However, there may be political incentives to chose one over the other. The more candidates in each electorate means a smaller quota is needed for a candidate to be elected. This might benefit smaller parties or independents, which might make for a more diverse Assembly. This may also lead major established Parties to opt for more electorates rather than increasing the number of MLAs per each existing electorate.

[i] Carey, J.M. and Hix, S. (2011). The electoral sweet spot: low-magnitude proportional electoral systems. American Journal of Political Science, 55(2), 383–397.10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00495

[ii] American Academy of Arts and sciences, 2025, Our Common Purpose, Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, Expanding Representation: Reinventing Congress for the 21st Century, III. Implications of Reform, available from https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/congressional-reform-proportional-representation/section/6 [accessed 27/10/2026]