

Northern Territory Government Plan for Quota-preferential PR in Municipal Polls

In November 2011, the Northern Territory's Minister for Local Government, Ms Malarndirri McCarthy, announced changes to the Territory's *Local Government (Electoral) Regulations*. The changes will commence in 2012, and will require March's NT municipal polls with multi-councillor electoral districts to be counted using STV, the Single Transferable Vote proportional representation system. The only NT municipality without such districts is Litchfield.

In those districts, polls were previously counted by a *winner-take-all multiple majority-preferential system*, identical to the discredited 1919 system used for Senate polls that, in 1948, was replaced for those polls by the present STV (quota-preferential) PR count.

Ms McCarthy said that a majority of the NT's local governments supported the new system, which would not change the way people vote on polling day, but ensured a fairer translation of each candidate's share of the votes.

Following the NT's 2008 municipal polls, a paper by Dr Will Sanders, an Australian National University (ANU) academic, *'Fuelling large group dominance and repeating past mistakes. A critique of the Northern Territory local government electoral system'* questioned the suitability of the multiple majority-preferential system for NT council polls. It was a major factor in establishing a consultative departmental review of current voting arrangements amid widespread dissatisfaction with some outcomes.

A commissioned expert paper from the ANU's Professor Benjamin Reilly concluded in January 2011 that the current system must be changed immediately, and put forward STV proportional representation as the optimal replacement.

Although the continued compulsory marking of all preferences is unnecessarily onerous, the adoption of defective Senate transfer value procedures unfortunate, and the failure to implement *countback* a missed opportunity, supporters of effective voting can work with Territory authorities so that desirable improvements are made and voters come to appreciate the *full benefits of STV*.

NZ Votes to Keep National Party Government and MMP Electoral System

New Zealand's general election and *electoral system plebiscite* were held on 26 November 2011 as announced in February. As has often occurred in election years, a degree of party splintering or other rearrangement followed. Hone Harawira resigned from the Maori Party and Parliament, and stood successfully for his new Mana Party at the

subsequent by-election. Former National leader Dr Don Brash seized control of the floundering ACT Party, forcing its previous leader to stand down from the Ministry, and ensuring that none of the five incumbent MPs would be re-elected. A number of smaller parties decided not to run separate campaigns, and instead had prominent members standing for the new Conservative Party.

With polls showing National near a majority in its own right, the formal election campaign generally lacked fire. The PM, who "wouldn't be at all unhappy" about working with his current partners in government, asked Epsom's National supporters to consider voting tactically for an ACT candidate, to maximize ACT's electoral prospects.

After a 74.2% turnout, the lowest under voluntary voting in over a century, the *Electoral Commission's* official results showed National winning 59 seats out of 121 on 47.3% party-list support. The Greens had gained enough special votes to lift them to nearly 11.1% and take an extra seat, having 14 list MPs compared with 8 after the 2008 polls.

ACT's Mr Banks won Epsom, but the party's support fell from 3.7 to 1.1%, and it won no list MPs, so its leader, Dr Don Brash, resigned on election night. Labour's vote fell from 34.0 to 27.5%, and its seats fell from 43 in 2008 to 34. Its leader, Phil Goff, announced his imminent resignation the following week. New Zealand First - in 2008 below the 5% threshold - won 6.6% of the 2011 vote and 8 list MPs.

An extra seat arose because the Maori Party won three constituency seats, one more than their 1.3% party support would have entitled them to. Hone Harawira was re-elected but the Mana Party's 1.1% was not enough for an extra list MP. Had the Conservative Party's 2.6% of votes not been wasted, National could have considered governing in its own right. Such twists and turns again illustrated arbitrary aspects of the *MMP system* that arise regularly. National stayed in power with its previous supporters as allies.

In keeping with most polling figures, 57.8% of those voting formally (97.2%) wanted to keep the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system. Those pushing for the less proportional supplementary member system, in which the electorate and party-list components would operate independently, tried to raise the spectre of New Zealand First again determining who would be Prime Minister, but such efforts had little impact, as the deficiencies in the *first-past-the-post* system were still well remembered.

Over a third of voters marked no alternative option, for when a rejection of MMP would require it to be later pitted against the highest-polling of the four options. One commentator suggested that MMP supporters should mark the STV option to maintain a proportional system, but few voters pursued that strategy. Of the options marked, 46.7%

were for first-past-the-post (*some of that was undoubtedly tactical, to further lessen the risk to MMP*), 24.1% for supplementary member, 16.7% for STV and 12.5% for preferential voting in single-member electorates.

NZ's Electoral Commission will conduct a statutory inquiry into MMP arrangements (but not Maori representation or the number of MPs) and recommend any improvements. Submissions will be called for in February. A final report will go to the Justice Minister in October after public hearings and issuing of a proposals paper for public comment. Much disaffection has been expressed about defeated candidates coming into parliament through their parties' lists, the various eligibility criteria for participating in the party-list carve-up of the 120 available places, and centralized control of the ordering on party lists.

A.C.T. Electoral Dangers Averted

Many of the 23 comments the [Augmented ACT Electoral Commission](#) received opposed electoral fragmentation of Gungahlin township ([QN 2011B](#)). In July, it proposed major boundary changes, shifting the central seven-MLA electorate to northern ACT areas, but including three inner suburbs to fall within statutory elector-to-MLA tolerances.

This radical proposal led to a record 83 objections, many voiced further at a well-attended public hearing. [PRSA's ACT Branch](#) was strongly critical, arguing that the specific strong requirement of having to give due weight to current boundaries meant that the Commission did not start with a blank sheet, and only recent major population shifts could justify extensive changes to boundaries. Fears of fragmented political influence were best alleviated by giving an Assembly committee oversight of service provision in the ACT's fastest-growing areas. Such ongoing committee work would sensibly balance all future ACT interests and make an impact on the entire Assembly.

Inner-city residents, who would be adversely affected, pointed to ludicrous aspects of being combined with outlying suburbs when they were part of a discrete central area planning regime, and used only local transport corridors. Some complained that far more electors would be disrupted under this proposal than under the Redistribution Committee's earlier suggestion of essentially the minimum necessary changes to achieve acceptable elector-to-MLA ratios. Liberals and Greens each sought minimal change. Labor did that at the Redistribution Committee stage.

The Augmented Electoral Commission's [determination](#) on 29 September 2011 reverted to the Redistribution Committee's approach of moving Palmerston and Crace to the slowest-growing electoral district, Ginninderra, for October's poll. Major changes could however be expected at some point if the size of the Assembly remains unaltered.

Ironically, Labor, the strongest advocates of a much larger Assembly, had urged the benefits of a smaller one under an earlier leader. In 1994, it moved to entrench the number of MLAs after any future handover of power from the Federal Parliament. PRSA(ACT) was invited to make a submission to the Assembly inquiry into all aspects of self-government

arrangements underway, in view of a move for federal law changes to mark the [Centenary of Canberra](#) in 2013.

PRSA(ACT) was not asked to give oral evidence after [its submission](#) to an Assembly committee strongly opposed proposals for direct appointment of replacements if no member of the vacating candidate's party was available for a [countback](#), and to limit - to the number of vacancies to be filled - the number of candidates a party or group could stand (see [QN 2011B](#)). [Malcolm Mackerras's](#) excellent [submission](#) said that the principle of voter control over electing individual MLAs should prevail over stability of party numbers. Surprisingly, given their active 1990s Hare-Clark campaigning, the [ACT Greens](#) argued the opposite.

The Gallagher Government stated that it would not proceed with the [countback](#) changes, despite its Assembly majority. Without the two-thirds majority needed to directly alter [entrenched provisions](#), passing an amending law would trigger a referendum where a majority of electors (about 60% of voters) would need to approve for change to occur.

Far more positively, in October, all Committee members rejected the Government's and ACT Electoral Commission's proposal to severely limit the number of candidates that can be nominated as a team in any district.

South Australian Parliamentary Report urges Countback to fill Municipal Vacancies

In November 2011, the [Final Report](#) by a Select Committee of SA's Upper House on the 2010 municipal elections, held with voluntary voting by postal ballot, recommended that casual vacancies in councils be filled by [countback](#), as in Tasmania and Victoria. Government MLCs dissented, but said the issue of [countbacks](#) versus by-elections was being researched by the [Electoral Commission of South Australia](#).

The [submission](#) made by the [Electoral Reform Society of South Australia](#) proposed the dispatch of voting packs in distinctive coloured envelopes in spring every three years, optional preferential voting, allowance of dual candidacy, less onerous arrangements for absentee owners to be enrolled, and [countback](#) for filling casual vacancies.

National Office-bearers for 2012-13

The ACT Branch's Returning Officer for the elections of PRSA National Office-bearers, Mr Martin Dunn, has declared the candidates below elected unopposed for the term 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013:

National President:	Mr Bogey Musidlak
National Vice-President:	Mr John Pyke
National Secretary:	Mr Anthony van der Craats
National Treasurer:	Ms Julie McCarron-Benson

[Anthony van der Craats](#), a member of the [PRSA's Victoria-Tasmania Branch](#) since 1985, and now a Life Member, succeeds Dr Stephen Morey after four terms.