

Another Lopsided Queensland Outcome

Labor's dominance of Queensland's Parliament in recent years ended at the [polls on 24 March 2012](#). Its first preference vote fell to 26.6%, compared with 49.7% for the Liberal National Party, 11.5% for [Katter's Australian Party](#) - which lost [its court challenge](#) over its [abbreviation on ballot-papers](#) - and 7.5% for the Greens. Labor was reduced to just seven seats compared with seventy-eight for the LNP, and two each for Katter's Australian Party and long-standing independents. An independent's loss to the LNP [in Maryborough](#), by only 86 votes, seemed the only case of luck of the draw for ballot-paper places.

Informal voting under the optional preferential rules remained low at 2.1% statewide. Labor, LNP and the Greens endorsed a candidate in every electoral district.

The Katter's Australian Party stood candidates in 76 districts and Family First in 38. [In total](#), 430 candidates nominated. In the 89 electoral districts, voters had a choice in 5 districts of three candidates, in 29 districts of four, in 36 of five, in 15 districts of six, in 3 districts of seven, and in 1 district of eight.

Whereas Labor's ascendancy had long been due to domination in the Brisbane metropolitan area (the Liberals were reduced to a single seat there in 2001 and only had nine when briefly part of Coalition government after the court-ordered Mundingburra by-election of 1996), it won just four seats there this time.

After the decision by Queensland's former Premier, Anna Bligh, to quickly leave its Parliament, a by-election in South Brisbane was set down for 28 April, the same day as for periodic municipal elections.

The decision of the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission to narrowly recommend against proportional representation for State elections [in 1990](#) has now been shown to regularly result in lopsided parliaments that do not reflect levels of voter support either overall, or at a broad regional level.

The LNP gained nearly half the votes on this occasion, so it would have won a clear majority under quota-preferential arrangements in multi-member electorates, while sufficient MPs with other pedigrees would have been elected in all parts of the State for local political competition and vigorous scrutiny of policies and actions to occur throughout the current term.

ACT 20th Anniversary Radio Interviews

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the [resounding two-thirds vote for Hare-Clark](#) at a 1992 plebiscite, PRSA's [ACT Branch](#) issued a [media release](#) highlighting many of the subsequent benefits to voters: a good choice of candidates in each electorate, with no-one guaranteed a safe seat, as [Robson Rotation](#) is in operation; demonstrably fair results particularly in the seven-member Molonglo electorate; and the expeditious filling of casual vacancies via [countback](#).

Resultant interviews on the ABC's morning program and commercial talkback radio's afternoon show on 15 February 2012 allowed positive messages about voter empowerment and demonstrated ability to individually and collectively make key choices to be widely shared as interviewer's or listeners' questions were answered.

The Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Administration and Procedure has initiated a review of the [Australian Capital Territory \(Self-Government\) Act 1988](#). Currently, that federal legislation specifies 17 MLAs and at most five ministers, and permits changes to the former number only after passage of a suitable Assembly motion of request.

It also sets a maximum 10% tolerance from the overall Territory average in elector-to-seat ratios when a redistribution is undertaken, which the Territory's [Electoral Act 1992](#) takes further with maximum anticipated election-day discrepancies limited to 5%.

The federal legislation also specifies the circumstances in which ACT legislation may be entrenched through support at a referendum by a majority of electors (whether or not they vote, let alone formally – in practice, nearly 60% of the latter).

The key [Hare-Clark](#) principles, along with Labor's additions of compulsory attendance and special procedures for changing Assembly numbers should that power be transferred, were entrenched following passage by a 16-1 majority of the [Proportional Representation \(Hare-Clark\) Entrenchment Bill 1994](#) and support of nearly two-thirds of the electors voting formally on 18 February 1995, yielding [its enactment](#).

Only through a two-thirds Assembly majority or a majority of electors voting at referendum can electoral legislation containing provisions at variance with the entrenched principles come into effect.

Major NSW Local Government Changes

Following the March 2011 change of government in New South Wales, the new Local Government Minister, Don Page, has embarked on a wide range of reforms and reviews, including changes to electoral legislation and intensive work positioning local government to meet the challenges expected over the next twenty-five years.

Key strategic directions and action plans have been developed under the [Destination 2036](#) initiative. A three-member [Local Government Review Panel](#) will investigate and identify options for governance models, structural arrangements and boundary changes before 2014.

Through the [Local Government Amendment \(Elections\) Act 2011](#), choices over the running of elections were restored to councils rather than having these automatically under the control of the [NSW Electoral Commission](#). Unsurprisingly, just [15 councils](#) decided to take responsibility for the September 2012 poll rather than seek to enter into a service agreement with the Commission. The responsibilities involved and the limited scope for piggybacking onto Commission arrangements or facilities were set out clearly in new [guidelines](#) for council-administered elections issued in September 2011 by the Division of Local Government.

After future periodic elections, councils will have twelve months in which to decide whether they wish to use the services of the Electoral Commission for elections, polls and referendums until the end of the four-year term.

The legislation also opened up a five-month window ending on 30 November 2011 in which councils [could resolve to abolish](#) ward boundaries entirely (this would mean a change to proportional representation wherever single-councillor or two-councillor wards had exclusively applied, as in Guyra Shire and Cabonne), and - as seven councils did - [could resolve to reduce](#) their future numbers without holding a municipal [constitutional referendum](#).

Circumstances in which casual vacancies need not be filled were extended, including to possibly eighteen months before periodic elections, but unfortunately the much more representative approach of requiring automatic [countbacks](#) in such instances was not taken up, even as an option.

Separately - after issuing a [discussion paper](#) - the O'Farrell Government managed to have [the law changed](#) to prohibit dual council and State parliament membership after September's elections, after gaining Christian Democrat and the Shooters and Fishers Party [MLCs' support](#) on 3 April 2012. It stressed similar prohibitions that apply in all mainland States. The plight of [Cr Clover Moore MLA](#), the [Lord Mayor](#) and [Member for Sydney](#), gained the most attention, but twenty-nine MPs currently have dual roles.

Donations other than directly from individuals were prohibited under changes to the [Election Funding, Expenditure and Disclosures Act 1981](#), which came into effect more broadly on 9 March 2012, and will apply to candidates standing in September 2012. Mandatory authorization of internet advertising and information to be

included on candidate information sheets were among changes made through the [Local Government \(General\) Amendment \(Election Procedures\) Regulation 2012](#).

Work has also continued on establishing a new Model Code of Conduct with more flexible procedures for handling complaints, and the development foreshadowed of a new NSW Intergovernmental Agreement dealing with core functions of councils and joint responsibilities of local and State governments.

Changes Might Eventuate in Tasmania

In April 2011, with funding from the federal [Local Government Reform Fund](#), the [Southern Tasmanian Councils Authority](#) established an independent panel of three members, all living outside Tasmania, to develop options for local government reform aimed at achieving financial sustainability in and around Hobart.

After consulting the community and relevant councils, the panel, in its [Final Report of October 2011](#), recommended a single City of Greater Hobart, initially with wards, be formed from current urban areas, and rural arrangements not be altered until their special needs can be reviewed in more detail and changes be made, including mandated sharing of some resources and contracts with urban areas.

The panel recommended that general elections every four years replace the present staggered four-year terms of councillors where half face a [poll every two years](#), and that [mayoral candidates](#) not need prior council experience. It was silent about deputy mayor polls, but advocated compulsory voting to encourage more mainstream candidates and for more democratic accountability.

In coming to its primary conclusion about boundaries, the panel put emphasis on carving out a stronger voice for Hobart residents within State structures, and more effective strategic and land-use planning. The panel did not think that emphasis on greater co-operation and shared services under current boundaries offered much hope of significant improvement in efficiency.

While the Report pointed to high levels of public support and councillor co-operation, it remains to be seen whether supportive groups, such as [Tasmanians for Reform](#), can build a climate to effect change in the near future.

The Mercury in Hobart also reported the Premier, Lara Giddings, [saying in January 2012](#) that the House of Assembly should be enlarged to 35 members when economic conditions improved, but no legislation could be expected this year. The Greens agreed, saying Tasmania had suffered from the major parties' collusion to reduce numbers in 1998, but the Liberal Opposition Leader, Will Hodgman, claimed such priorities were about saving the Premier's skin, and showed how out of touch she was with public opinion when services were being cut.