



Central Australian
Aboriginal Congress
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION | ICN 7823

Submission the Inquiry into the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020*

10 July 2020

Background

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) is a large Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) based in Alice Springs, Northern Territory (NT). We deliver services to more than 16,000 Aboriginal people living in Alice Springs and remote communities across Central Australia.

We are one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal health, a national leader in primary health care, and a strong advocate for the health of our people. Since the 1970s, we have developed a comprehensive model of primary health care that includes:

- multidisciplinary clinical care;
- health promotion and disease prevention programs;
- action on the social, cultural, economic and political determinants of health and wellbeing.

Congress supports the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Ensuring Fair Representation of the Northern Territory) Bill 2020* (the Bill) and the provision of certainty that the NT will continue to be represented in the federal Parliament by at least two members of the House of Representatives.

The NT is highly unique. We have vast distances between urban centres, many small remote communities and a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal people many of whom do not have English as a first language. Moreover, Aboriginal people in the NT have some of the highest rates of poor health and disadvantage in the country, alongside being politically underrepresented. There are already a number of existing barriers to political representation including under-resourcing of the AEC and significant under-enrolment of eligible voters. Reducing representation to one member in federal Parliament will further disempower and disadvantage our people.

The NT as a vast and unique place compared to the rest of Australia.

The NT has particular characteristics that make it unique as a jurisdiction.

Firstly, at 1.4 million square kilometres the NT is six times the size of Victoria and almost double the size of New South Wales.

Secondly, we have the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in the country. Thirty percent of our population is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which is ten times greater than the overall proportion of Aboriginal people in Australia (3.3%) (ABS, 2018). Furthermore, more than three-quarters (78%) of Aboriginal people in the NT live in remote areas compared with 24 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (ABS, 2019). Aboriginal people speak multiple languages across the NT which means it takes more time and effort for politicians to be able to communicate effectively on the key issues that the electorate needs to be informed about and to hear from the electorate about their unmet needs.

There are already barriers to representation for Aboriginal people in the NT.

Aboriginal people have historically been excluded from democratic participation, and it is only since 1984, with the extension of compulsory enrolment and voting requirements, that they have been granted the right to fully participate in Australia's political system. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

The remoteness of the NT compounds the historical exclusion in political participation and a significant proportion of eligible Aboriginal citizens in the electorate of Lingiari have not been fully utilising their right to vote (Sanders, 2019).

Additionally, of the 25,000 people noted to be missing from the electoral roll in 2019, 16,000 are estimated to be Aboriginal (NTEC, 2019; AEC, 2019).

It has not helped that in 2017 the AEC significantly reduced its physical footprint in the NT by relocating all but three of its officers from Darwin to Queensland. This has no doubt contributed to the ability of the AEC to effectively support the electoral participation of Aboriginal Territorians across remote areas of the NT and contributes to the NT's low levels of voter registration, turn-out and participation.

Another barrier that has disproportionate impact on remote Aboriginal Territorians is the system by which electors are added to the electoral roll. The Federal Direct Enrolment and Update (FDEU) system is largely redundant across remote areas of the NT as it relies on the elector's address meeting certain requirements which are not compatible with the postal delivery system across remote areas of Australia – including the NT – where the majority of people collect their post from post offices rather than it being delivered. This is reflected in the unequal rates of growth in the electoral roll between eligible Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018).

The risk of underrepresentation of Aboriginal Territorians in Federal Parliament.

The NT Aboriginal population has one of the highest rates of chronic disease in the world, high rates of incarceration, poverty, homelessness and overcrowding as well as unemployment. This entrenched disadvantage is the result of ongoing colonisation, disempowerment and intergenerational trauma. In this context, it is only if people have a personal relationship with politicians that they feel comfortable and have the conversations that are so effective to making our democracy work. With only one representative in the House of Representatives it will not be possible for the type of access and relationship building that has been possible with Aboriginal communities to continue. This will greatly weaken the level of input that Aboriginal people have into the political process.

Powerlessness has been identified as a risk factor for disease in the Australian Aboriginal context.¹ Aboriginal peoples' lack of control of their lives is expressed at a national, systemic level through the lack of a national political representative institution; at a community level through their marginalisation from decision-making about programs that affect their own communities; and at an individual level through their experience of racism. At a time when Congress and many other NT Aboriginal organisations are calling for the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart which includes the establishment of a new "Voice" to Parliament, it would be ironic indeed if the current level of access to political representation was in fact diminished. This would make younger Aboriginal people feel more and more that they are outside the political processes that are so

essential for achieving an inclusive nation. This risks further alienation of young people and the health consequences this brings.

Since the now famous Whitehall studies of the 1970s, 'the control factor' has been recognised as an important contributor to patterns of disease with the evidence showing that the less control people have over their lives and environment, the more likely they are to suffer ill health.² One way to exercise greater control is to engage fully in the political processes and systems and this requires active engagement with politicians who have the time and capacity to get to know you and listen to your views.

It is therefore critical that the voices of Aboriginal people in the NT continue to be heard in Parliament through fair representation by at least two members in the House of Representatives who are able to get to know our people face to face, articulate these unique issues, and are able to fairly represent remote areas.

¹ Tsey, K., et al., Empowerment and Aboriginal Australian health: a synthesis of findings from Family Wellbeing formative research. *Health Soc Care Community*, 2010. 18(2): p. 169-79.

² Marmot M, Siegrist J, and Theorell T, Health and the psychosocial environment at work, in *Social determinants of health*, Marmot M and Wilkinson R, Editors. 2006, Oxford University Press: Oxford.