



Comment on objections 26

Brian Cox

2 pages

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The Chairman,
Augmented Electoral Commission,
Redistribution Secretariat for the ACT
Australian Electoral Commission

Dear Chairman and Commissioners,

Comments on Objections-Name of Division.

Two main themes dominate in the objections which were lodged against the redistribution proposal to name the new ACT Electoral Division after Charles Bean:

Theme 1. Charles Bean's strident, racially based attacks on Sir John Monash render it highly inappropriate to name the division in honour of Bean.

Theme 2. Is that more than enough Federal electorates have been named after "white Anglo Saxon males" so the opportunity should now be taken to use a name with aboriginal connotations and/or female. Some objectors also assert that the name of Bean should be avoided because of likely use of the name for lampooning whoever might become the member for Bean.

As to Theme 1: It is true that Charles Bean did outrageously oppose Monash's appointment as commander of the Australian Corps on racial grounds (these grounds were both anti-Semitic and because of Monash's German antecedents). Those who supported the Bean proposal since the publication of the Committee's report point out that:

- a). Bean was a man of his times in that the racist attitude he displayed was representative of opinions widely held in this country at the time, as distinct from the more enlightened attitudes of our 21st century population.
- b). Bean later changed his position on Monash and publicly acknowledged his error.

As to a. above, it may be said that Bean misused the considerable influence he had gained from his position as the officially appointed War Correspondent in seeking improperly to influence government and public opinion against appointing Monash to head the Australian Corps on the Western Front, and he was in no better position to judge Monash's suitability than the officers and men who served with him in the field. Moreover, whatever public opinion about Jews might have been in Australia in those days, it seems that those serving with Monash had enough confidence in him to persuade Prime Minister Hughes to select Monash for the position.

As to b. Bean's change of position came after Monash's huge successes were so obvious and acclaimed that even Bean could see that he had been wrong and had to admit it. Had Bean's opposition to Monash's appointment been successful or had it had such an adverse impact on Monash personally as to upset his generalship at crucial times of decision making the course of the war on the Western Front in 1918 may have been very adversely different. It is virtually inconceivable that had Monash been sidelined as Bean wanted, anyone else could have done better as commander of the Australian Corps.

As to Theme 2.: It is true that far more seats have been named after white Anglo males than non-Anglo females. But given the relatively short course of Australian history leading to and since Federation this is hardly surprising and cannot be attributed to a conscious bias against non-Anglo females. To redress this asserted underrepresentation of females and aborigines many objectors have grasped the Committee's observation that the seat should be named Cullen, after the aborigine Ngingali Cullen: stated grounds being that Cullen is a female and that a seat in the ACT should have a name with some aboriginal connotation. The objectors' point overlooks the fact that the ACT already does have a seat with an aboriginal name and that seat is Canberra itself. Canberra is an aboriginal word meaning meeting place and it is my understanding this meaning underlay the selection of the name Canberra. The other aspect of the objections which go for Cullen in preference to Bean will no doubt be evident to the Augmented Electoral Commission: it is that these objections have the hallmarks of an organised letter writing campaign. There is also a strong element of "political correctness" fuelling the campaign.

The Redistribution Committee for the ACT said that it was "strongly supportive of naming an electoral division" after each of Charles Bean, Nginagli Cullen and Dr Lewis Nott (p,6 of report) but was divided as to which one to choose. Their ultimate selection of Bean arose from the very unconvincing result of a vote amongst the four Committee members. In the publicity and debate that followed the announcement of the Committee's proposal, the name of Nott has largely been overlooked. It seems therefore that only those who actually read the Committee's report would have been aware that Nott had been a serious contender in the Committee's estimation. Yet a couple of people who have submitted formal objections to Bean did, of their own volition, state their preference for Nott. This is of interest because, unlike what seems to underlie the support for Cullen, there has been no organised letter campaign supporting Dr Nott.

In my own formal objection to the Bean proposal I chose not to base my case on the racist/anti Monash argument referred to above, but to assert on the basis of merit alone, Nott has the greater claim. From all the unfavourable comments against Bean, it does seem that a final choice of that name would be so widely unwelcome and divisive as to effectively rule it out of the Augmented Commission's consideration. If that is accepted by the Commission the choice now seems to be between Nott and Cullen. Ultimately the choice should be based on merit, not on political correctness.

The Committee acknowledged that the merit based factors for consideration are the "name of a prominent individual or family who have contributed to the development of public life in the ACT or the Nation" (p.6 of the Report). On this basis there is scarcely any contest between Nott and Cullen. Cullen was an aboriginal activist in a number of aboriginal causes which are of national significance, but there appears to be little if anything of note to be said for her about any contribution to public life in the ACT. Also on the 'aboriginal connection' side of the argument of those in favour of an aboriginal name, I repeat that the seat of Canberra in the ACT already has such a connotation. Nott, on the other hand, and without the backing of party support achieved Federal representation for ACT citizens, thus completing the National franchise. He recognised that ACT citizens had no effective representation of any kind as the ACT Advisory Council had, as the name implies, only an advisory role. Dr Nott then went on to become the first Federal member for the ACT. In the process he also made a huge contribution to enriching life in Canberra's early days. He worked so tirelessly over an extended period of years for the people of the Territory that it is fitting that a seat here should be named in his honour before the memory of him is forgotten.

Yours sincerely,

Brian Cox.