



The Federal Redistribution 2006
NEW SOUTH WALES



Public Objection Number: 618

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To <nsw.redistribution@aec.gov.au>
 cc
 bcc
 Subject Objection/NSW/Gwydir

Classification Unclassified

Attention Karen Houston
 The Redistribution Committee for NSW
 PO Box 20014
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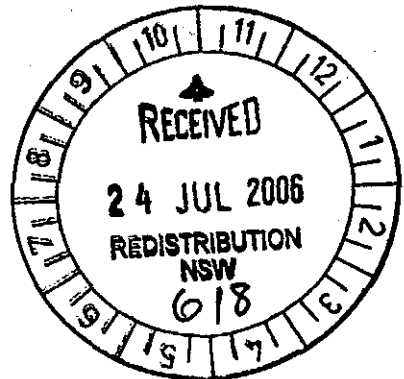
Dear Commissioners,
 I wish to submit a personal objection to the Federal redistribution in NSW
 and in particular the proposed abolition of Gwydir. The objection is
 attached as a Word document; and the signed original is being posted to
 you. Yours sincerely, Ralph Schulze

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GWYDIR REDISTRIB



OBJECTION TO AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION Regarding NSW REDISTRIBUTION

TITLE: REDISTRIBUTION FLAWED AND UNFAIR

FROM: Ralph Schulze, 219 Maitland St., NARRABRI 2390.

Introduction

This is a personal objection which I make as a disappointed elector in the Federal Electorate of Gwydir. It results from a sense of being discriminated against and disadvantaged in the Commission's proposed redistribution. There is frustration that the Commission did not appear to use the flexibility available to it, or follow the guidelines, to reduce the negative impact on people, like myself, in inland NSW. As a consequence I believe that the redistribution is flawed and unfair; and that the only way to redress the wrongs is for the proposed redistribution to be redrafted.

In the redraft I would suggest that the Commission start by amalgamating say the six innermost Sydney electorates into five, and then using the overflow and ripple effect to bring other electorates up to quota. Such a redraft should not unduly disadvantage electors in those inner city electorates, as boundary changes need only be a kilometre or so, and thus access of electors to their elected representatives, and vice versa, should remain virtually unchanged. Adjustments from the ripple effect would move along established corridors to be shared across the state, would be relatively minor, and could be achieved with minimum disruption to the community.

This outcome would be fairer and less discriminatory than one which seeks to create an unmanageable mega seat, combining most of Gwydir and most of Parkes electorates.

Redistribution is not a mindless numbers game; it is rather an opportunity to give reality to the concept of "one vote – one value". This principle not only relates to having similar numbers of voters in electorates; but also to achieving relatively equal value in the voters access to (and service from) their elected representatives. It is for these reasons that the proposed redistribution should be deemed as discriminatory and unfair; and why Gwydir should be retained.

Need to maintain electorates in inland NSW

The western inland of NSW is currently served by four large electorates, Gwydir, Parkes, Riverina and Farrer. People in these areas already feel disadvantaged because of isolation and distance. That disadvantage extends to health services; education; transport, roads and infrastructure; telecommunication; accessibility to Government services; and law and order issues. And the disadvantages embrace all people in the electorate, whether they live on farms, in isolated villages and towns, or in larger centres.

The four western inland electorates mentioned are already so large in area that the people scattered throughout them have difficulty in gaining access to their Federal Members. These Members do undertake tours of their electorate, but because of the distances involved and the scattered nature of the population and communities, such visits are infrequent. When urgent matters arise, telephone and electronic communication is used, but only where there is service coverage. Even so some issues need to be pursued in a face to face situation. Such meetings require long distance and sometimes arduous trips. In reality many people just give up, because transport is not available, or is too difficult, or too costly. They include those who are unable to drive, the aged, and others who are already disadvantaged. Yet these are the very people who have a greater need to have access to their Federal Member. In contrast similar people living in the Sydney/ Newcastle/ Woollongong area would have only a short trip, or would be able to use public transport.

Taking these disadvantages into account, it would seem illogical for the Commissioners to propose that these four already huge electorates, be reduced to three- through the elimination of Gwydir. Gwydir must be retained.

Personal examples of disadvantage.

In recent years my wife and I have both required specialist medical treatment – available only in Sydney. Arranging and coordinating medical appointments, accommodation and travel, has been far more costly and difficult, than would have been the case if we lived in, or near, Sydney. We have an intellectually disabled adult daughter who lives in a group home in Narrabri. Problems with her care arise which require access to various State and Federal departments, and to our parliamentary representatives. If we all lived in Sydney, access would not be an issue and these problems could be easily managed. We are just one of thousands of families, spread through electorates like Gwydir, who regularly must contend with these types of problems. Access to, and service from, our elected representatives, is important in helping to cope with and manage these problems.

Just one example of the 'different' needs, is the fact that 22% more men die of prostate cancer in country areas, than in the city.

Possibly partly explained by attitude differences, but more likely to do with difficulties in gaining access to appropriate diagnostic and treatment services.

Need to retain Gwydir.

The AEC's own description of Gwydir is; "*Gwydir covers an area of approximately 185 604 sq km from the Queensland border in the north to Kandos in the south and Bourke in the west. The main towns include Aberdeen, Baradine, Boggabri, Bourke, Brewarrina, Coolah, Coonabarabran, Coonamble, Gilgandra, Gulgong, Gunnedah, Kandos, Mendooran, Moree,*

Mudgee, Narrabri, Quirindi, Rylstone, Scone, Walgett, Wyallda, Wee Waa and Wellington.

Products/Industries of the Area: Wool, beef, pork, wheat, cotton, oil seed crops, lucerne, fruit, vegetables, dairy cattle, horse, sheep and cattle studs, timber, coal and opal mining and wine growing."

Sizeable towns not mentioned include; Murrurundi, Mungindi, Collarenebri, Lightning Ridge, Binnaway and Dunedoo. In addition there are scores of smaller towns such as Boggabilla, Burren Junction, Goodooga, Gulargambone, Tooraweenah, Pallamallawa, Gravesend, Tambar Springs, Pilliga, Gwabegar, Mullaley, Premer, Spring Ridge, North Star, Croppa Creek, Boomi, Garah, Angledool, Quambone, Bellata, Mumbil, Willow Tree, Wingen, and Cassilis. People from all these far flung communities, including representatives of their Local Government Areas and the various industries mentioned, all want access to (and from) their Federal Member.

The already huge electorate of Gwydir is around 7,000 times larger than the electorate of Wentworth in Sydney, and almost equal to the area of the state of Victoria. It is a far more diverse area than the AEC's short synopsis would suggest. There are huge areas of forest, including the Pilliga Scrub. There are major National Parks, including Mt Kaputar and the Warrumbungles. There is significant, but scattered crop irrigation. There are economic and ecological issues including opportunities for young people and emerging industries, and others concerning access to water, sustainable farming, native vegetation, biodiversity, dryland salinity and soil sodicity, and in particular, farm viability. These issues alone generate the need for many meetings with the local (albeit distant) M.P.

There are communities like Lightning Ridge, where enrolment numbers appear to be far less than the actual number of permanent residents.

Community of interest does exist through the northern part on the electorate, i.e., north of the Pilliga Scrub/Warrumbungle Range – the geographic 'North West Plains'. A separate, but compatible 'community of interest' covers the Aberdeen-Scone- Murrurundi area – which extends to adjacent Muswellbrook. The area along and west of the Barwon/Darling River also shares some community of interest, albeit based on shared isolation. Towns and communities along the Castlereagh River, like Gilgandra and Coonamble, share some common interests. The south east corner of the electorate surrounding Mudgee has strong cohesion as an area, but is 'disconnected' from the main northern part of the electorate- as is Wellington. While some component sections of Gwydir are cohesive, as a whole Gwydir certainly is not.

Even though the Gwydir electorate contains the state's two rural most highly productive shires (Moree Plains and Narrabri) the average per capita income is very low.

Gwydir also contains a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal

people. These are scattered particularly through the north and west of the electorate. Coming from different communities they have different needs, each of which deserves fair attention from the local/distant M.P.

On its current boundaries Gwydir is a difficult electorate for any Federal Parliamentarian to serve. It is probably at the limit of capability. Considering this, the sitting member John Anderson, has done an admirable job in this regard, particularly considering his earlier ministerial and leadership responsibilities.

Gwydir is a 'Federation' seat, which over the years has returned some excellent representatives, including senior ministers, to the Federal Parliament. It is one of a handful of remaining 'rural' seats, which are not dominated by a major population centre. Very often the Gwydir M.P. has to champion the plight of rural voters in other electorates, where their needs are overshadowed by urban demands. Thus Gwydir historically has been an effective contributor to good and balanced government.

To suggest that it be eliminated, and that most of its people and communities be amalgamated with most of neighbouring Parkes, is illogical and unfair. It is not only unfair to the people of Gwydir, but also to those in Parkes – a lose:lose outcome.

Proposed new Gwydir/Parkes Unserviceable

The proposed new electorate, covering nearly 380,000 square kms, and nearly half of NSW, would be more than twice the size of the current Gwydir (which is already at the limit of serviceability).

Various disparate and disassociated communities, many with no means of direct communication, have been thrown together into one immense and artificial conglomerate. The area drawn from the current seat of Parkes has no affinity, nor community of interest, with the main northern area of Gwydir. It appears that 'community of interest' has been either ignored or dismissed as a consideration by the Commissioners in drafting this initial proposal. There is no way that these communities and people can have adequate access to their Federal Member, nor any way the Member can service their needs; and the people would justifiably feel that they had been effectively disenfranchised.

For this to be the outcome of a democratic process is unthinkable. There are other large Federal Electorates in other parts of Australia, but the proposed Gwydir/Parkes differs from them in significant ways. Rather than area, it is the number of individual communities and the distances separating them, that underlies the unfairness and disparity.

To visualise the problem one needs only to consider a typical scenario.

Visualise that the Member is required at the Cobar mines, and later that afternoon at Mungindi; the next day the need is at Lake Cargelligo, followed by Lightning Ridge that afternoon, and Trangie that evening. Flying is of course not always an option, but the

distances are simply too great for car travel in restricted time - so how can it be done?. Even a short trip, to meet say with each Local Government body, would take several weeks. To meet with each individual community would take months. Seriously though, just study a detailed road map and start adding up the times and distances to accomplish such trips. Add in extra time to actually meet with constituents, and you will conclude that the whole expectation is ludicrous. Compare this with an inner Sydney seat, where the Member could do all this in an afternoon - on a bicycle. These may be light hearted examples, but they do highlight the absurdity of creating such an unworkable Electorate, and the inability of any one person to service it. Simply ludicrous, until you remember that the Commission's proposals are serious. Considering the separation distances between communities, how can one Member adequately serve 47% of NSW, when it requires 48 Members to serve the other 53% ?

Community concerns

Generally it appears that people living outside major population centres are more 'involved' and concerned about their community, than their urban counterparts. This is a well studied sociological phenomenon. Certainly the proposed redistribution has aroused this local community (Narrabri) and the reaction is undoubtedly repeated in other centres. It has aroused (and enraged) people of all political persuasions, and irrespective of other differences. Whether it be bumping into people up the street, or at say a Rotary meeting, or at a gathering, the topic is raised - usually with anxiety or sincere concern. Trying to summarise those concerns is not easy.

- . Many people feel that their vote has been 'devalued' and use the term "one vote -less value".
- . Others recognise that accessibility to their Member will become more difficult. Similarly that the elected Member will be less able to service their needs.
- . Others are incredulous that anyone would seek to put Narrabri into the same electorate as say Condobolin - with which they share no common interest. The apparent lack of consideration of 'community of interest' and ease of communication, by the Commissioners leaves them disappointed and confounded.
- . People are quick to point out the relative ease of access and adequate service enjoyed by voters in Sydney electorates. They also understand that inner Sydney, and rural areas such as this, are both slowly losing relative population; but cannot understand why the Commissioners picked Gwydir for elimination, rather than a city electorate, where the flow on impact would have been more equably and fairly shared.
- . Many are concerned at the erosion of Government and other services, and feel that they need quick access and assistance from their Federal Member to alleviate these problems. Hence they see

the proposed redistribution as causing them to be more remote and more disadvantaged. They feel that they are pawns, that their needs have not been considered, and their rights to fair representation ignored.

The understandable demoralisation leads to cynicism: "is redistribution a mindless numbers game- or is it about people like us?" ; "obviously those who drafted the proposal were not familiar with inland NSW " ; "it is just sad that they missed a real opportunity to lessen disadvantage"; and, " why does anti discrimination legislation not protect us –or does it ?".

From my observation there are many people who feel cheated, and are very committed to fighting what is seen as injustice in the redistribution proposals. They recognise that the Commission has the ability to redress the discrimination it exacerbated in its first draft. They will not give up easily and have widespread support.

Commissioners visit to Gwydir

According to the local press, invitations to the Commissioners to visit Gwydir, have originated from several sources, including Narrabri Shire Council. I would strongly urge the Commissioners to respond by visiting the electorate. To add value to such a visit, it would be good to hold on site discussions with several communities. Of course a comprehensive tour of the electorate would be impossible in the time available – for the geographic and distance/time reasons previously mentioned. Two variations of a workable itinerary covering several typically different communities could be – Day 1, start at Gunnedah, then on to Boggabri and overnight at Narrabri; on Day 2 the group could travel via Wee Waa and Burren Junction to Walgett (overnight). Then in the first option for Day 3 could drive to Bourke(overnight) via Brewarrina; and on Day4 via the Macquarie Marshes to Coonamble (overnight); then on Day 4 could either go via Baradine and Coonabarabran to Coolah (overnight); or via Gilgandra and Mendooran to Dunedoo (overnight); then on Day 5 it is on to Gulgong and Mudgee – possibly extending to Kandos; and then finally on Day 6 back to Gunnedah (or Sydney). OR in the second option, on Day 3 drive from Walgett to Lightning Ridge and then via Collarenebri to Mungindi (overnight). On Day 4 it is on to Boggabilla via Boomi and then on to North Star and Warialda (overnight) and then on Day 5 to Moree for meetings on the final day– then on Day 6 back to Gunnedah (or Sydney). Either of these sample quick itineraries probably could be covered in a week, weather and other conditions permitting – and depending on the time allowed for discussions versus that lost in driving. Or the two could be combined into say a 12-15 day trip. Unfortunately the trip could not be extended to visit centres in Parkes electorate which are proposed to be included in the new mega electorate. Such a trip would take several weeks, even in a truncated form. Actually a trip through the current Parkes would warrant a separate visit, as people in this area are just as

disadvantaged, and discriminated against, as those in the Gwydir parts of the proposed mega electorate. Seeing is believing, as is talking to the people who live there.

Should the visit be confined to one or two relatively central Gwydir towns- Narrabri, Walgett, Coonamble, Coonabarabran, Moree or wherever- and people from other communities forced to travel to the meetings, it would at least be something, but would be less effective.

Should the visit go ahead then I would be pleased to be able to appear before the Commissioners.

The Way Forward

The basic flaws in the draft redistribution proposal appear to have arisen because conventional wisdom and historical experience in undertaking such a task may have been largely ignored. The Commission needs to tap that experience in redrafting the proposal; in addition to utilising guidelines, tolerances, and demographic software.

Wisdom and experience indicate that the drafting of new boundaries needs to start at the centre (inner Sydney), and then move progressively outwards along established corridors. The objective needs to be to cause as least disruption, and disadvantage, as possible. Generally this means shifting boundaries, and people, as least distance as possible- and respecting all the other criteria at the same time. Here it needs to be stated that NSW loses one seat out of fifty- a 2% reduction, and this triggers a similar 2% increase in numbers per electorate- adjusted up or down to reflect statewide and localised population change. Major demographic changes make the exercise more difficult. The relative decline in population in inner parts of Sydney, and in western inland parts of the state, need to be factored in just as the opposite is for some coastal and outer metropolitan areas. Still, against this generalised background there are still some 80 or 90,000 people from the obligatory loss of an electorate that need to be absorbed into the remaining 49 electorates. By starting at the inner Sydney centre some of these numbers can be used to bring neighbouring electorates, which are also suffering relative numbers decline up to target. In the process boundaries only need to move short distances, and with little impact on 'community of interest and communication' criteria. In allowing the "ripple effect" to move inevitably outwards there are traditional corridors along which to channel the flow. These generally and logically follow the major arterial highways radiating from Sydney- Princes, Hume, Great Western (and branches like Mitchell), and Pacific (and branches like New England); as well as the main rail corridors.

This proven methodology effectively addresses communication and other common interest criteria, and avoids major dislocation. The desired outcome of moving the least people the least distance (and equably sharing minor adjustment across the state as a whole) can be achieved. Certainly it avoids concentrating the hardship and

disadvantage into the huge inland electorates –but these still share, equably, in the adjustment process. Naturally the boundaries of these large electorates will need to change, and in most cases they will need to expand to take in nearby population centres along the 'corridors'. In the case of Gwydir, which already includes Scone and Aberdeen, it would appear logical to add adjacent Muswellbrook and/or Merriwa.

Conclusions

1. To achieve the reduction of one electorate in NSW there are many fairer, and less disruptive, options available to the Commission than the abolition of Gwydir.
2. The abolition of Gwydir, or any of the huge existing electorates in western NSW, would concentrate further disadvantage into areas which are already disadvantaged.
3. In these huge electorates, where communities are widely separated, it is already difficult for those communities to have reasonable access to their Member, and vice versa. The draft redistribution proposal exacerbates those difficulties.
4. The concept of "one vote-one value" extends beyond simple numbers of voters. It includes the voters right to have equable value in access to and from their elected Member. Without this, redistribution results in an undemocratic and discriminatory "one vote-less value" outcome.
5. The proposed amalgamation of most of Gwydir with most of Parkes would create one huge unworkable mega electorate. It would include many diverse, disparate and widely separated communities which lack common interests and lines of communication. No Member could provide equable service to the people and various communities of such a huge artificial area.
6. The Commissioners have been invited to the region to see these problems for themselves. I urge them to come.
7. The only fair and realistic way forward is for the Commissioners to redraft their proposals. In undertaking this task the Commissioners should logically start at the population centre of the state and work progressively outwards.
8. The seat to be abolished should be located close to the centre, so that the flow on effect will necessitate the moving of boundaries only small distances. In this way disruption and disadvantage are kept as low as possible, and shared as equally as possible throughout the state.
9. In a fair redistribution the impact of the 2% reduction in the number of electorates should not be implemented in such a way as to concentrate disadvantage in one region. Rather it should provide an opportunity for the Commissioners to reduce that disadvantage. This can best be addressed through maintaining Gwydir, Parkes, Riverina and Farrer to cover the

western inland areas, where two way accessibility is most difficult, and disadvantage more extreme.

Ralph Schulze PO Box 389 NARRABRI NSW 2390