



Submission FOB203

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Clements, Nicholas - Redistribution TAS - Submission on the proposed Tasmanian redistribution (feedback)

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Submission on the proposed Tasmanian redistribution details

Category: Names
Details: I write, as an expert in the relevant history, in support of the proposal to rename the Division of Franklin as Tongerlongeter

Submission to the augmented Electoral Commission for Tasmania

Round 3: In support of the proposal to rename the Division of Franklin as Tongerlongeter

Dr Nicholas Clements

██████ Tasmania

20 July 2026

Introduction

I write in strong support of the augmented Electoral Commission's proposal to rename the reconfigured Division of Franklin to Tongerlongeter. I am a historian of colonial Tasmania whose doctoral and subsequent research examined the 'Black War' (1823–1831).

In this submission I wish to outline the reasons why I believe this change is both positive and appropriate while also responding to some of the objections that have been raised. I will not include references here, but I have included below a list of my relevant publications, which are replete with source material.

The positive case: the most impressive resistance fighter in our country's history

Tongerlongeter, leader of the Oyster Bay Nation, whose country closely overlaps the newly redrawn electorate, was arguably the most impressive resistance fighter in Australia's history.

In the early 1820s, his people's ancient way of life was upended by British invaders, who initially attacked looking for women and children to rape and enslave – Tongerlongeter lost his first wife this way – but by 1828 their violence came to be primarily aimed at checking Aboriginal violence. The Black War cost Tongerlongeter his country, his way of life, and almost everyone he knew. He even lost his arm to a musket wound. And yet, with each year, his fighting spirit grew.

Tongerlongeter and his allies from the Big River Nation prosecuted the most effective resistance campaign of Australia's colonial era. In some 710 attacks, they killed or wounded 358 colonists, destroyed thousands of head of stock, and used arson to devastating effect. At the height of the war, the colonial economy faltered as Tongerlongeter's tactics had settlers fleeing for the towns.

In 1830, the colonial government mounted a desperate 2,200-man, seven-week military offensive – the largest ever conducted on Australian soil – intended to crush Tongerlongeter's resistance. He outfoxed them on that occasion, but the following year, with his fighting force decimated, he agreed to an armistice. Promised he could soon return to his country, he agreed to go to Flinders Island, where the war's 200 or so survivors were exiled. At points his forces had been outnumbered 200 to one, and yet according to the *Colonial Times*, the resistance of Tongerlongeter and his allies displayed 'a cunning and superiority of tactic which would not disgrace even some of the greatest military characters'.

Nevertheless, Tongerlongeter might be best remembered for his leadership after the war. On Flinders Island he united remnant nations and fought tirelessly for their rights until his death in 1837. He was universally respected by his contemporaries – adored by his people but also admired by his adversaries. Officials, from Governor Arthur down, gushed about this man of 'outstanding character and capabilities'. One does not have to be Aboriginal to admire Tongerlongeter – it is time all Tasmanians learnt his name.

Sir John Franklin, by contrast, barely set foot on the country of the redrawn electorate, was recalled in 1843 amid controversy over corruption, and – as Professor Cassandra Pybus's research into the Franklins' collecting of Aboriginal remains has shown – hardly merits his posthumous reputation as a humanitarian, let alone having dozens of Tasmanian places named in his honour. Tongerlongeter, by contrast, was a

local war hero who defended that same country to the last, and he is honoured nowhere – even his gravesite is unmarked.

The proposal sits comfortably within the Commission's naming guidelines

The guidelines for naming federal electoral divisions provide that divisions should be named after deceased Australians who have 'rendered outstanding service to their country', and that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander names should be used where appropriate'. Tasmania is currently the only state with no Aboriginal divisional name, despite being the site of the most intense frontier war in Australian history. And no proposed name has ever satisfied the 'service to their country' criterion more literally: the country Tongerlongeter served, led and defended is, to a remarkable degree, the very ground the reconfigured division covers. If an Aboriginal name is ever 'appropriate', it is here.

The Federation-name objection

In an article in *The Australian* on 17 July 2026, Former Prime Minister the Hon. Tony Abbott objected to renaming Franklin, claiming it would be 'against the AEC's standard procedure' of preserving Federation-era names. Three points in response. First, the guidelines state expressly that redistribution committees and augmented electoral commissions 'are in no way bound' by them; they are a point of reference to be weighed against one another, and the Aboriginal-names guideline weighs on the other side of the scale.

Second, the objection misdescribes Tasmanian practice. Franklin was created in 1903, when the original Division of Tasmania was divided into five: Bass, Darwin, Denison, Franklin and Wilmot. Of those five, three have already been renamed – Darwin became Braddon in 1955, Wilmot became Lyons in 1984, and Denison became Clark in 2019. Denison, like Franklin, honoured a colonial governor of Van Diemen's Land, and its renaming after Andrew Inglis Clark attracted little controversy. Renaming Franklin would not be a rupture with Tasmanian precedent; it would be a continuation of it.

Third, the Commission has elsewhere renamed divisions where the record of the honoured person warranted it: Batman became Cooper and McMillan became Monash in 2019. Names are not, and have never been, beyond reconsideration.

Abbott's Batman comparison is a category error

In his article, Abbott claimed that if Batman was retired as an electorate name 'because of his unsavoury personal conduct', then it is a double standard to commemorate Tongerlongeter, 'whose many casualties (understandably enough under the circumstances) included women and children'. This conflates two quite different points: whether a man personally committed acts that his own society's laws and morals condemned as crimes; and whether a leader waged a war in which non-combatants died.

Batman failed on the first point. By his own report, after his party attacked an Aboriginal camp near Ben Lomond in September 1829, he shot two wounded captives who could not travel. Leaving aside his many other objectionable traits, Batman was a *murderer*, which is very different from someone who killed in the legitimate defence of his country.

Abbott believes Tongerlongeter ineligible on the second point – he led a war of resistance in which women and children were among the casualties. There are several major problems with this objection. While there is no explicit evidence that Tongerlongeter killed women or children, or that he ordered or failed to prevent their killing, it is reasonable to assume he was involved in attacks that resulted in their deaths. But the question is not *whether* Tongerlongeter was ever involved in actions that resulted in the deaths of women and children, but whether, to use Abbott's own measure, those actions conformed to 'the reasonable standards of their day'.

There can be no doubt that they did. To begin with, we cannot lose sight of the fact that *the British were the aggressors*. What's more, Tongerlongeter's warriors tried initially to limit their retribution and avoid escalation. But they could only do this for so long.

From the outset of colonisation, white men targeted Aboriginal women and children for abduction, rape and killing – Tongerlongeter's own first wife was taken this way. Yet with a single exception in 1824, his people refrained from harming white women and children for the first five years of the war – a restraint their enemies never reciprocated. When that restraint finally collapsed in late 1828, the government had proclaimed the expulsion of Aboriginal people from the settled districts and armed parties were attacking their camps; the war had become, for the Oyster Bay and Big River peoples, unambiguously existential. Even then, women and children were no longer spared rather than deliberately targeted. In the war's final three years, Oyster Bay–Big River warriors killed or wounded some twenty-five women and children, but men remained more likely to be attacked, even on a per capita basis. And in a frontier war, the homestead was the front line – the instrument as well as the site of dispossession – in a way that has no analogue in conventional warfare.

Abbott concedes his own case when he describes Tongerlongeter's casualties as occurring 'understandably enough under the circumstances'. Conduct that is understandable under the circumstances of a defensive war of survival is precisely the conduct his own 'standards of their day' principle is designed to protect. One cannot invoke that principle for the colonists on one page and revoke it for Tongerlongeter on the next. Batman was not retired for fighting a war; he was retired for murdering prisoners. Tongerlongeter fought a defensive war – the war that decided the fate of Tasmania – with skill, courage and, on the evidence, considerably more restraint towards enemy non-combatants than his enemies showed towards his.

Mr Abbott in fact accepts that Tongerlongeter and his warriors 'should be remembered and honoured', anticipating their recognition in the Australian War Memorial's new galleries. If Tongerlongeter's conduct does not disqualify him from honour at the nation's most solemn commemorative institution, it cannot coherently disqualify him from an electorate name. The disagreement is only about the manner of commemoration – and an electorate drawn over the very country he defended is the most fitting I can think of.

Conclusion

This proposal need not be political, and it should not be conscripted into a culture war by either side. It is not revisionism to acknowledge that Franklin was not the man Tasmanians once thought he was, just as it is not radical to honour a warrior who fought in Tasmania, for Tasmania, and in the war that decided the fate of Tasmania. If the Commission wishes to name this division after a Tasmanian we can all admire, it could not have proposed a more worthy name than Tongerlongeter.

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