

# CONSTITUTION AND ELECTORAL AMENDMENT BILL 2016

## SECOND READING SPEECH

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE MLC

I move –

*That the bill be now read a second time.*

The purpose of the Bill is to increase the number of electoral districts from 59 to 61 and subsequently amend the number of sitting members in the Legislative Assembly by the same number.

The constitution of the Legislative Assembly is a matter outlined in the *Constitution Acts Amendments Act 1899*.

As members are aware the population of Western Australia has grown significantly since the last increase of seats in the Legislative Assembly which took effect at the 2008 general election following the passage of the *Constitution and Electoral Amendment Bill 2005*, assented to on 23 May 2005.

In June 2015, the Australian Demographic Statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, estimated Western Australia's population to be 2,591,600. This is up from 2,010,100 in June 2005. This represents an increase of 581,500 people – which equates to a rise in population of 28.92% over that ten year period.

It took almost twenty years for WA's population to increase by 670,000 which in 2005 was seen as justification for increasing the number of electoral districts in the Legislative Assembly from 57 to 59. By 2021, it is highly likely that a similar increase will be achieved and exceeded in Western Australia – and a

consequential increase in the number of districts will be warranted. Such an increase in seats in the Parliament is required to ensure West Australians can be effectively represented in the Parliament.

The Average District Enrolment or ADE has dramatically increased in recent years. In 2001 there were a total of 1,193,508 voters. Had the ADE concept been in place at the time, on 18 January 2001, the ADE would have been calculated as 20,939 for the then 57 member Legislative Assembly. Prior to the passing of the *Constitution and Electoral Amendment Bill 2005*, total state enrolment at 18 March 2005 was 1,271,801. An ADE equivalent would have been 22,312. The 2005 Bill increased the number of members in the Legislative Assembly from 57 to 59 – recognising the increase of population and difficulties associated with extensive regional districts. Following the Bill's passing, which provided for the ADE concept, there were 1,259,665 enrolled voters as of 27 February 2007, resulting in an ADE of 21,350. This ADE was used as the basis for the establishment of the 59 new districts by the WA Electoral Distribution Commissioners for the 2008 general election. By the 6 September election date, the number of eligible voters increased to 1,330,399, with an ADE of 22,549.

The Electoral Distribution Commissioners based the 2015 electoral distribution on 1,470,451 enrolled voters, determined on 9 March 2015. This equates to an ADE of 24,923. Therefore the ADE has increased by 3,573 voters or 16.73% since the electoral distribution for the first 59 seat Legislative Assembly. Furthermore, the WA Electoral Commission in December 2015 released its report on enrolment statistics which showed the ADE to have grown to 25,170 voters. Based on past

experience by the time of the election in 2021, the number of voters, and consequent ADE, will have grown once again.

The inclusion of an additional two electoral districts to 61 will result in an ADE of 24,106 using figures of 9 March 2015. This is considerably higher than the ADE when the 59 seat Legislative Assembly was devised in 2005.

Given the significant increase in population across WA and in each electoral district, a Member of Parliament now has a much greater workload when compared to 2008 when the last increase of MPs came into effect. A number of the electoral districts in regional WA are now of an unmanageable size and no amount of technology or travel options can compensate for the size of these electorates; some of which have a multitude of towns and communities over vast distances. In order to ensure voters are adequately and effectively represented, more Legislative Assembly districts are needed.

It is worth noting that ADE in Western Australia is higher than the geographically smaller States of South Australia and Tasmania who have ADEs of 24,302 and 14,680, respectively. Further, members may also wish to note that a Member of Parliament in New South Wales has a higher ADE of 52,770 but on average, a substantially smaller land area to cover per Member, for example, 8,609 versus 42,879 square kilometres in Western Australia.

In November 2015, the Electoral Distribution Commissioners made their determination to significantly adjust the boundaries of electoral districts in Western Australia. In their “2015 Proposed Boundaries and Reasons by district and region report” of 24 July 2015, the Commissioners noted the

difficulties they faced in coming to their decision regarding the abolition, amalgamation and expansion of electoral districts in regional Western Australia and I quote:

*“The removal of a district from the vast landscape of country Western Australia has a significant impact on the democratic process, especially for people in an electorate that is effectively abolished and for those who find themselves in a geographically larger district as a consequence.”*

I believe that the Commissioners’ comments in their final report reflected some sympathy for the many objections put forward to the reduction in the number of electoral districts in the Mining and Pastoral Region, noting that they had no power to review or change the number of districts and regions provided for by the *Electoral Act 1907*.

There are three substantive clauses in the Bill:

- Clause 4, amends section 18 of the *Constitution Acts Amendment Act 1899* to increase the size of the Legislative Assembly from 59 to 61 elected members.
- Clause 6 makes a similar amendment to section 16C of the *Electoral Act 1907* increasing the number of electoral districts from 59 to 61; and
- Clause 8 provides for transitional provisions that require the electoral distribution process to accommodate the additional electoral districts following the 2017 general election.

What the recent distribution has shown is that the State of Western Australia has grown significantly over the past decade. This growth has extended in all directions although has been stronger in the metropolitan suburbs of Perth. This has placed

pressure on some metropolitan electorates that have seen exponential growth in voter numbers and regional electorates that have seen more modest growth projections with significantly expanding boundaries.

This bill, endorsed by the Parliamentary National Party, will better address the challenges that future electoral distributions will face whilst ensuring capacity to manage an increasing population over coming years.

With every voter and every square kilometre that is added to an electoral district adds greater challenges to a Members ability to appropriately represent their voters. Our democracy will be stronger as a result of the passage of this bill.

I commend the Bill to the House.