

Electoral structure review - Greater Shepparton City Council - Response Submission Chris Hazelman - Shepparton - 24 July 2023, 09:53 pm

I write from the experience of around thirty years of Local Government experience as an elected representative including nine years on the former Shire of Shepparton with two years as Shire President and over twenty years with the City of Greater Shepparton and five years as Mayor.

In 2019 I was awarded an Order of Australia for services to my community.

Under no circumstance could I support the electoral review proposal for changing Greater Shepparton from being a multi membered council elected at large to a system involving nine wards each electing one Councilor.

Historically this has been rejected as the community recognises the significant advantage and outcome delivered by the current long-standing system.

Prior to Greater Shepparton being formed in 1997 this community overwhelmingly rejected a ward system in favor of the then seven Councilors being elected at large which was considered the best system to support our geographic spread and cultural diversity.

In 2005 an electoral review mandated that proportional representation be the voting system for multi member wards as applies in the Senate and Victorian Upper House. This further increased the opportunity for culturally diverse and single-issue candidates to be elected to Council. A later change from seven to nine Councilors enhanced the potential for minority candidates.

The outcome of these incremental changes has created a Greater Shepparton Council that broadly reflects the community. Greater Shepparton has a demographic profile unique for a provincial Australian city. The introduction of intensive irrigated agriculture in the early part of the twentieth century saw the beginning of migration from non traditional sources which has continued to this day.

in the 1920's Greeks, Italians and Albanians came to work the orchards to be followed at regular intervals by Turks, Punjabis, Pacific Islanders and many other smaller community groups. In the 1990's Australia commenced an annual refugee intake which has resulted in people who came as refugees in the last twenty-five years now represent 10% of Greater Shepparton's population. These include Afghans, Iraqis, Congolese, Sudanese, Iranians, Syrians and others. A further 10% of Shepparton's population are indigenous Australians so how does the present electoral system serve these communities.?

Three of our last four Mayors have been Muslim, we have for the first time an indigenous Councilor, a Pakistani woman of colour and single-issue Councilors which broadly at least visually reflects our community.

These people were elected under proportional representation in a multi member electoral district electing all nine Councilors. A system that has been overwhelmingly endorsed on a regular basis by previous electoral review.

That system requires each successful candidate to achieve a quota of around 4000 votes from the entire electorate of around 40,000 voters. Proportional Representation makes that a realistic task as the candidate can achieve support from a relatively small number of voters across Shepparton at large. Contrast that with the proposed ward structures with around 4500 in each where a successful candidate will need 50% plus of the votes. The change means under the status quo its around 4000 votes drawn from the entire municipality to be elected compared to around 2200 votes from 4500 in each ward.

This clearly discriminates against the minority candidates whether they be indigenous, people of colour, a different faith, sexually diverse or any single-issue candidate.

When the Act changes were announced I approached several members of government including the relevant Minister at the time Adem Somyurek who bizarrely suggested the removal of multi member wards was designed to increase the level of diversity. It was cynically suggested at the time that the move was more intended to impact the influence of Greens and Independents in Metro Melbourne than address any diversity issue in regional Victoria.

Blind Freddy could confidently predict our next Council will be predominantly white and bear little resemblance to our current Council or indeed the community demographic profile.

Under no circumstance could it be argued that the suggested changes can produce any positive outcomes for the diverse Shepparton community as has been confirmed regularly by previous reviews.

What is being proposed resembles the very worst example of a gerrymandered American system designed to deliver specific outcomes and reduce community electoral participation.

The old adage "if it isn't broken why try to fix it" would seem to fit the situation.

One question I will be fascinated to see the panel explain is in the context of consistent outcomes of previous electoral reviews endorsing the current system "what has altered to require the changes suggested.?"