

## **Democracy and Small Parliaments: Some Diseconomies of Scale**

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When the size of the Tasmanian Parliament was reduced in July 1998 the primary overt motive was to make government more efficient by cutting back on the numbers of politicians relative to the population. Complaints had long been rife that Tasmania was ‘over-governed’ because it had more politicians per head than even some city councils in Australia. (Elsewhere, the downsizing of the state and public sectors had produced similar arguments for smaller parliaments on the grounds that fewer MPs would be needed.) However, changing the size of the Parliament without adjusting for other institutional constraints has raised real doubts about the viability of the resultant, slimmed down legislature.

The distinguishing feature of the Westminster form of responsible government, as used in Tasmania, is the virtually ironclad nexus between the elected executive and the parliament. Unlike other forms of responsible government, all ministers must be drawn from the membership of the Westminster parliament. There have been very minor and rare exceptions to this general rule but these are universally acknowledged as exceptions. As a consequence, the size of the parliament determines the available pool of talent from which the ministry can be drawn and, to some extent, the size of the ministry itself.

There has been a tendency to denigrate the role of parliaments in preserving democratic values such as popular control of the government and the inclusion of community perspectives in a deliberative debate on public policy. The principal reason for this is a belief that party discipline in the parliament has become so complete that it has cut across the older, parliamentary-based mechanisms for accountability such as ministerial responsibility. Thus, there is a contemporary

acceptance that parties serve as the gatekeepers for public debate and the choke points for political initiatives. This acceptance extends even to the almost absolute control political parties exert over the operation of parliament.

The critical issue regarding size for the democratic role of the modern Australian parliament derives from the capacity of parties to be effective vehicles for such political values as accountability, fairness, openness, respect and toleration. The extent to which they fail to meet these standards represents a substantial portion of the contemporary democratic deficit in modern parliamentary governments.

The nature and operation of political parties are not affected by the size of the parliament specifically but the size of parliament does influence the degree to which party discipline can over-ride other dynamics. The smaller the parliament, the fewer the number of backbench members there are to challenge the party's frontbench and moderate the executive's control of the public agenda. This was the underlying reason that section 44 of the constitution of Papua New Guinea specifies that the ministry could be no larger than one quarter the size of the parliament.

Allegedly a cost and efficiency measure, the reduction in the Tasmanian Parliament was driven as much by the two major parties' desire to restrict the influence of the Greens party. The House of Assembly was reduced from 35 seats to 25 (29 per cent) and the upper chamber, the Legislative Council, from 19 to 15 (21 per cent). The ministry was cut back from 10 to 7 (30 per cent) as a gesture toward retaining some backbench. This historically small parliament which hovered on the margins of viability as a Westminster parliament, suffered much more from the 1998 cuts than a larger parliament might have.

Executive government has revealed, predictably, the greatest immediate evidence of stress. Within a very few years the ministry was increased to nine to cope with the pressures on a State government trying to meet all its growing internal responsibilities as well the increased demands arising from participating in an ever more centralised federal system and the management of the impact of globalisation. Yet despite this, there has been growing public speculation that the talent within the parliament is insufficient to meet even the post-1998 reduced ministry.

The bureaucracy was re-structured to allow the less numerous ministers to be responsible for a smaller number of larger departments of state. The creation of super-departments has shifted decision-making downward from the cabinet into the senior executive levels of the bureaucracy since disparate interests that once would have been brought to cabinet by separate ministers are now settled within a department and presented to the minister as *fait accompli*.

Nevertheless, the expanded horizons of the more limited number of ministers has made them more vulnerable to political attack from their opposition counterparts and criticism from the public. To cope with this risk, the number of ministers has grown disproportionately to the reduction in ministers. In 2004, the Liberal opposition claimed the promised savings of 1998 had proved illusory and that the cost of ministerial and parliamentary support staff had increased by 25 per cent in one year alone. In addition, there was a similar expansion in “spin doctors” to promote the government and its ministers.

The effects of a smaller parliament on the alternate government were even more dramatic and, overall, the opposition *qua* opposition was the primary institutional victim of the change. After losses in the 2002 State election, the Liberal opposition was unable to staff a full shadow ministry much less maintain a backbench. Indeed, the opposition was half the normal size of opposition prior to 1998 thus depriving it of its chief resource – its membership. The deficiencies of this circumstance for accountability through the adversarial mechanisms of question time and debate are increasingly a subject of public comment.

The committee system in the House of Assembly is substantially impaired as there are too few government (and opposition) members to staff them acceptably. Moreover, this malignancy has extended to joint committees where full participation has become the exception rather than the rule due to absence of House of Assembly members. Even the Legislative Council committees have felt the pressure as they carry a more visible onus of being critics of the government in the wake of the weakness of the other committees.

The deliberative value of the smaller parliament has been compromised as well. The expected loss of representational diversity has occurred simply due to fewer MPs to voice constituents' concerns. However, unexpected consequences have also impacted on the representational role of the post-1998 parliament. Proportionally, a larger number of MPs are tied up in the ministry, making access for constituency issues more restrictive. The demands of governing absorb more of the time of the ministry, with a result that the parliament sits for fewer days thus allowing less time for the airing of grievances. It is equally true also that having fewer MPs means a reduction in the time absorbed in debate and other activities, thus diminishing the days needed for sitting.

These changes affect more than the government side of the parliament. The opposition is in as poor a circumstance if not worse than that of the government. It must shadow the government with fewer numbers and less resources while attempting to service constituency needs without a single backbench member.

The reduction in the size of the Tasmanian Parliament suggests that smaller parliaments need to compensate with greater flexibility if they are to meet their democratic responsibilities. The Westminster system imposes real constraints. Tight party discipline intensifies these constraints. The present Tasmanian Parliament has tested these restrictions perhaps beyond their limits. Size does indeed matter for parliaments and the current vogue for 'efficiency' at the expense of representation has severely compromised the democratic values of the people's institution.