

# It's time ... for more politicians

*The number of members of Parliament and senators has not kept up with Australia's population growth. Increasing the number of federal parliamentarians would give parliamentarians a smaller electorate to focus on and make it easier for voters to mobilise to influence their representatives.*

Discussion paper

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# Summary

The number of members of Parliament and senators has not kept up with Australia's population growth. Parliamentarians represent three times as many people as their counterparts did in 1901.

The last substantial increase in parliamentary numbers is now over thirty years old, meaning that federal representatives have never been spread as thinly as they are now.

This lack of representation likely affects political engagement. Less than one in every five Australians has spoken with their local member, and the majority do not even know his or her name. Few feel confident that they could speak about their political concerns with their representative.

Incremental increases in the number of senators and, commensurately, in the number of members of the House of Representatives, could bring Australian representation back in line with what it was after Hawke's 1984 reforms. This would give parliamentarians a smaller electorate to focus on and make it easier for voters to mobilise to influence their representatives.

However, the public do not want more politicians. In fact, as shown in opinion poll results in this paper, most Australians want fewer politicians. This is not surprising given the current political disengagement being reported by the public.

An increase in the number of parliamentarians would make it easier for them to engage with, and be engaged by, the community they are supposed to represent. This would in turn prove the value of parliamentarians, and improve public attitudes to politicians.

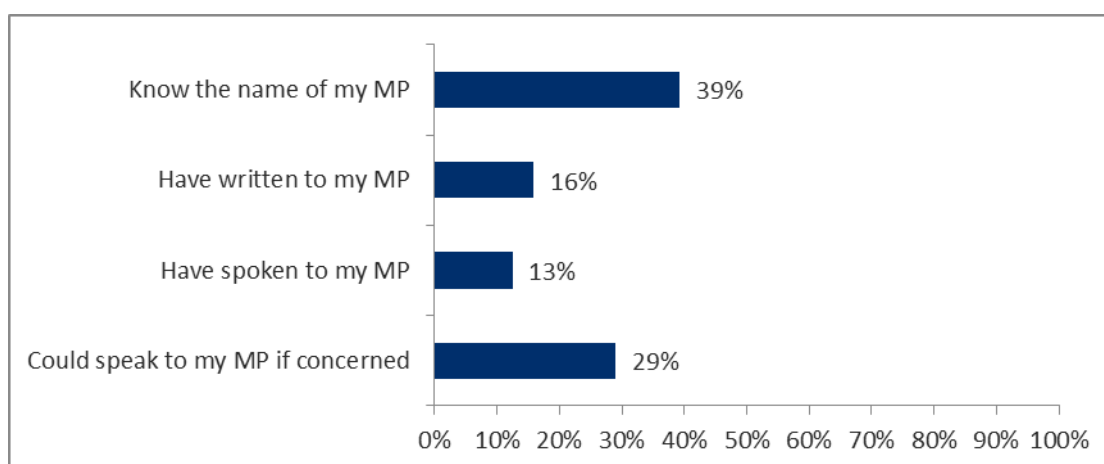
# Polling results

The Australia Institute conducted a national poll in April and May 2017 to assess levels of direct engagement between Australians and their parliamentarians, and opinions on whether the number of federal parliamentarians should be increased or decreased.<sup>1</sup>

## LOW LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Polling found that few constituents consider their parliamentarians accessible and approachable, or have interacted with their representative in the past. Results are summarised in the figure below.

**Figure 1: Relationship with local MP**



Sources: The Australia Institute (2017) *April–May 2017 polling*

Only 13% had previously spoken to their MP (in person or on the phone), slightly less than the 16% that had written to their local MP.

Less than a third (29%) said that they felt confident that if they had a concern about a current political issue, they would be able to speak with their local MP.

Only 39% of respondents said they knew the name of their federal MP. In other words, 61% of respondents did not know the name of their current federal MP. Note that knowledge was not tested here; it is possible that some who said they did know their MP's name are mistaken.

<sup>1</sup> Between 26 April and 5 May 2017, The Australia Institute conducted a national opinion poll of 1,408 people through Research Now, with nationally representative samples by gender, age and state or territory.

# AUSTRALIANS WANT FEWER PARLIAMENTARIANS

The Australia Institute’s poll also asked if people thought there should be more or fewer parliamentarians.

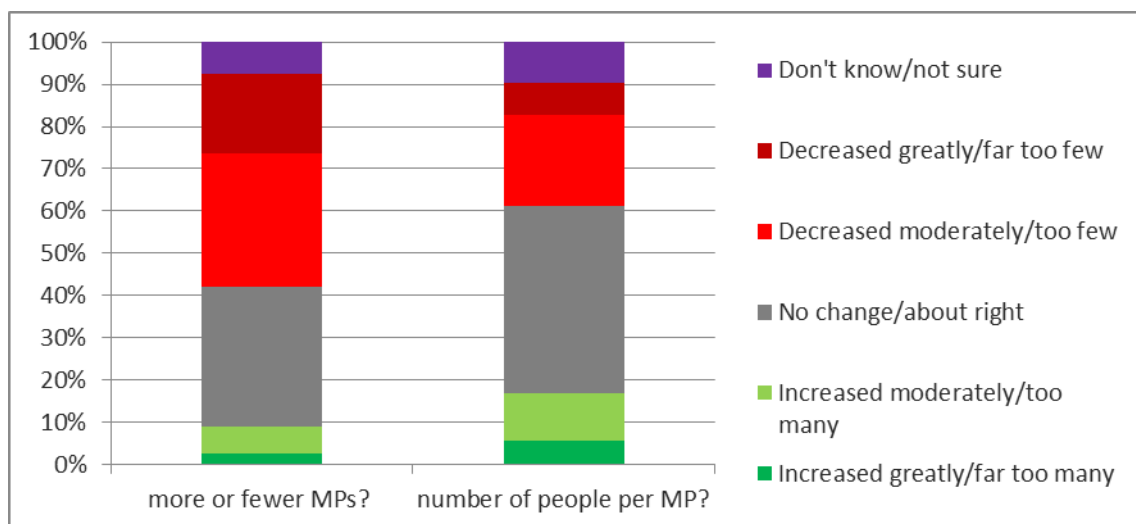
Half (50%) of Australians say the number of federal parliamentarians should be decreased. Only 9% said that the number should be increased. A third (33%) said there should be no change in numbers. The remainder were not sure.

The poll then asked a similar question, posed in reverse. Respondents were told that each member of the House of Representatives is responsible for an electorate of about 100,000 voters. They were then asked if this was too many or too few.

A plurality (29%) said that 100,000 voters per member was too few or far too few. This was a substantial drop from the 50% who thought there should be fewer parliamentarians. It was still higher than the fifth (17%) said it was too many or far too many. 44% said the ratio was about right, compared with 33% saying there should be no change to the number of parliamentarians.

The figure below compares the results from each question.

**Figure 2: Whether Australia should have more or fewer MPs and whether 100,000 voters per MP is too few or too many**



Sources: The Australia Institute (2017) *April–May 2017 polling*

## DISCUSSION

In short, Australians show little appetite for increasing the number of federal parliamentarians. To the contrary, there is a strong appetite for reducing the number

of parliamentarians. Putting the question in terms of the ratio of voters to MPs decreased the appetite for shrinking parliament, but did not result in large numbers of people wanting to reduce the ratio.

At the same time, Australians report low levels of engagement with their parliamentarians. Very few Australians report having spoken to or written to their MP, and most Australians do not even know their MP's name.

It is plausible that low levels of political engagement may lead people to oppose increased representation. Over-stretched MPs may be difficult for voters to access. This could contribute to voter scepticism about the value of federal parliamentarians, reducing support for increasing the number of MPs.

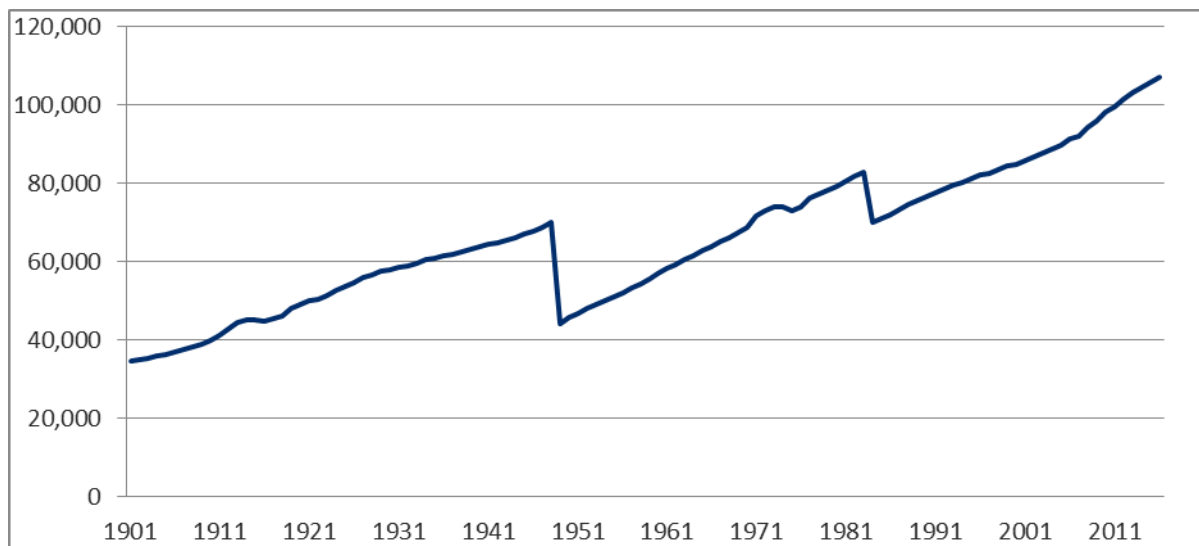
Paradoxically, one solution would be to increase the number of federal parliamentarians. This would increase capacity for MPs to interact with their community. It may also encourage support for further increases in MP numbers and emphasise their value to the community.

# Less representative democracy

In Australia's representative democracy, parliamentarians are accountable to their electorates, both through elections and by being answerable and accessible to their constituents between elections. The Australia Institute's polling, discussed above, shows that in practice most Australians do not engage with their elected representatives or find them accessible.

One explanation for this disengagement is that federal parliamentarians are spread more thinly than ever before. Since Federation in 1901, the increase in parliamentarians has not kept pace with population. In 1901 the Australian population was 3.8 million; in 2016 it was six times larger, 24.2 million. In 1901 the number of federal parliamentarians was 111 (75 MPs and 36 senators); in 2016 it was twice as large, at 226. As a result, the number of Australians per federal parliamentarian has significantly increased. Whereas there were 34,500 Australians for every federal parliamentarian when Edmund Barton became our first prime minister, there were 106,000 per parliamentarian by the time Malcolm Turnbull became our 29<sup>th</sup> prime minister. This is shown in the figure below.

**Figure 3: Australians per federal parliamentarian (senator or MP)**



Sources: The Australia Institute, from ABS sources and original research.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The several graphs in this briefing note use the same data sets. Population data from: ABS (2014) *Australian historical population statistics*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3105.0.65.0012014?OpenDocument> and ABS

There have been two large increases in representation, in 1949 and 1984. However neither of these changes returned the ratio of parliamentarians to population to original Federation levels. After the increase in representation in 1949, levels of representation returned to pre-1949 reform levels after two decades. After the smaller increase in 1984, levels returned to pre-1984 reform levels after just one decade.

While there could be many different measures of political representation, the number of constituents per parliamentarian is likely to be an important factor. Representing ever larger numbers of people makes it increasingly difficult for parliamentarians to be accessible and answerable to constituents, or to represent their views in parliament.

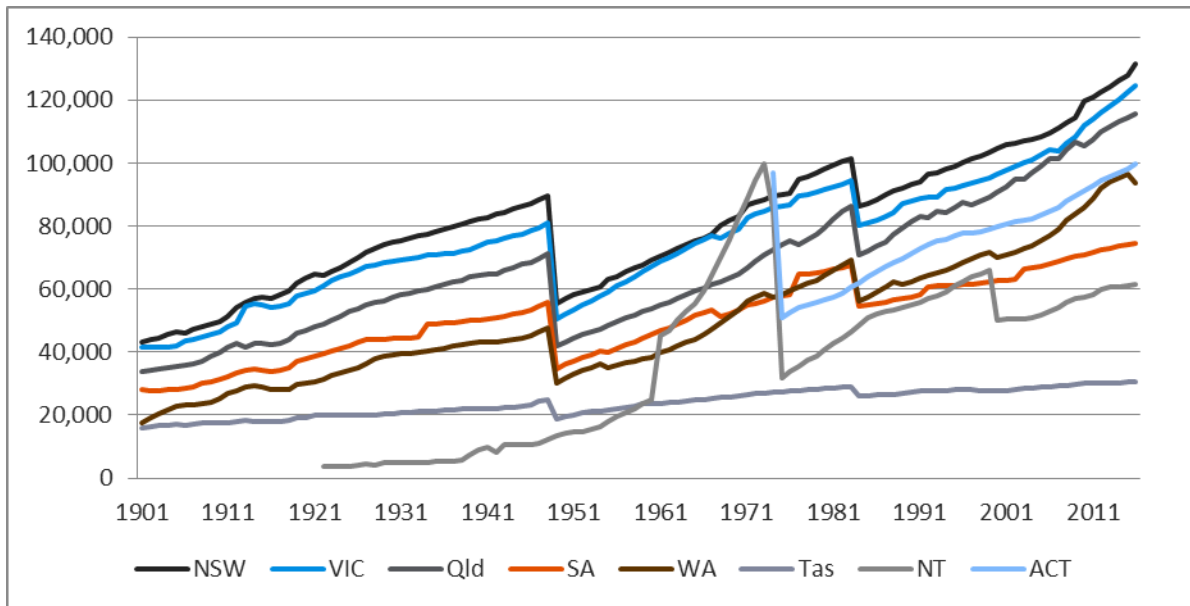
## By state and territory

Representation in federal parliament varies greatly by state and territory. This is largely because each state has the same number of senators, but very different populations (the mechanisms for determining representation are outlined in the appendix). However, no states are better represented now than they were at Federation, as shown in the figure below.

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(2017) *Australian demographic statistics*,  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3101.0Sep%202016?OpenDocument>  
House of Representative numbers by state and territory from: Christian (2004) *Australian federal redistributions: 1901–2003*, p 21–24, [http://www.aec.gov.au/about\\_aec/research/paper4/index.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/research/paper4/index.htm),  
with later elections (and SA and Tasmania allocations for 1901) added manually.  
Senate numbers calculated by reference to the election year following Senate reforms.

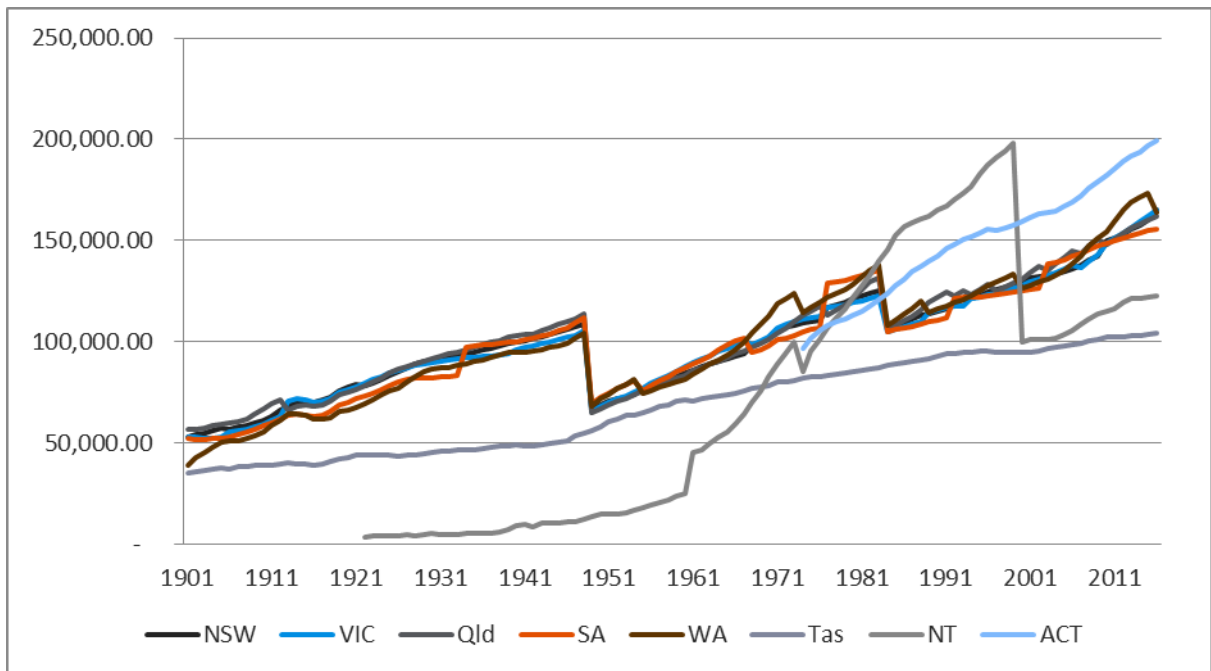
**Figure 4: Australians per federal parliamentarian by state**



Sources: The Australia Institute, from ABS sources and original research

Representation in the House of Representatives is very similar across most states, shown in the figure below, which also shows the significant increase in Australians per member of the House of Representatives since Federation.

**Figure 5: Australians per member of the House of Representatives by state**



Sources: The Australia Institute, from ABS sources and original research



The largest five states have stayed roughly proportional to one another since Federation. That is because House of Representatives electorates are allocated on the basis of population. Tasmanian representation benefits further from the minimum five seats for Original States.

The territories are outliers because their small size means their entitlements are vulnerable to rounding: in previous years the ACT has been entitled to around 2.4 members, which has been rounded down, and the Northern Territory to around 1.5 members, which has been rounded up. The Northern Territory would have lost one of its two members in 2003, but Parliament intervened and upon reconsideration the AEC found that it was entitled to two.<sup>3</sup>

## New population data shows trend continuing

New population figures for December 2016, released in conjunction with 2016 Census data in June 2017, show that federal parliamentarians are set to become even more over-stretched. Australia's population is now 24.4 million.<sup>4</sup> Even with the additional member of the House of Representatives to be added in the next federal election,<sup>5</sup> we will reach a record high of 107,500 Australians for each federal parliamentarian.

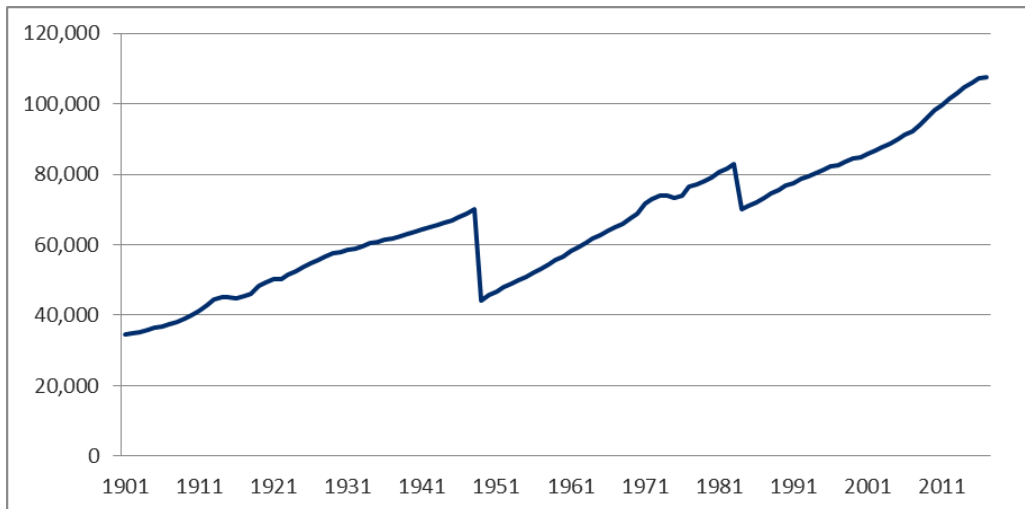
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<sup>3</sup> See *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Representation in the House of Representatives) Act 2004*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/library/pubs/bd/2003-04/04bd121.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> ABS (2017) *Australian demographic statistics*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/A2620F8FCA84C241CA2581470023DB07?opendocument>

<sup>5</sup> Giuliano (2017) *Gains and losses on the electoral roundabout*, [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2017/June/Changes\\_to\\_representation\\_entitlement\\_2017](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2017/June/Changes_to_representation_entitlement_2017); AEC (2017) *Formal commencement of redistributions in Victoria, South Australia and the ACT*, <http://www.aec.gov.au/media/media-releases/2017/09-04.htm>

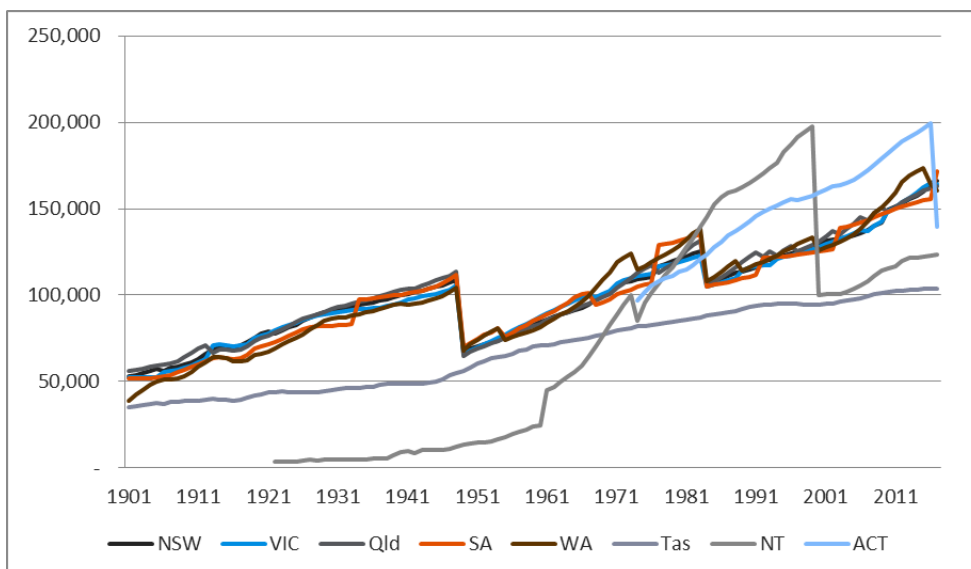
**Figure 6: Australians per federal parliamentarian (senator or MP) (2017 projection)**



The change in entitlements will see a new member added for each of the ACT and Victoria, at the expense of a member in South Australia, for a net increase of one.<sup>6</sup>

Where the entitlement change will make a noticeable difference is in the ACT's representation. The ACT will go from Australia's worst-represented state or territory to its third-best represented.

**Figure 7: Australians per member of the House of Representatives (2017 projection)**



Sources: The Australia Institute, from ABS sources, Parliamentary Library and original research

<sup>6</sup> Giuliano (2017) *Gains and losses on the electoral roundabout*, [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPos t/2017/June/Changes\\_to\\_representation\\_entitlement\\_2017](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPos t/2017/June/Changes_to_representation_entitlement_2017)

## State and territory parliaments

There is a similar story at the state and territory level. While populations have grown, state and territory parliaments have also been reluctant to increase the size of parliament. Table 1 summarises the last changes to the size of state and territory parliaments; in many cases they have been decreased, while in other cases the last increases were many decades ago.

**Table 1: Most recent changes in size of house**

| State      | Lower House | Year | Upper House | Year |
|------------|-------------|------|-------------|------|
| NSW        | Decrease    | 1999 | Decrease    | 1992 |
| Victoria   | Increase    | 1985 | Decrease    | 2006 |
| Queensland | Increase    | 2016 | N/A         |      |
| WA         | Increase    | 2005 | Increase    | 2008 |
| SA         | Increase    | 1970 | Increase    | 1975 |
| Tasmania   | Decrease    | 1998 | Decrease    | 1999 |
| ACT        | Increase    | 2016 | N/A         |      |
| NT         | Increase    | 1983 | N/A         |      |

Sources: Compiled by The Australia Institute, from various sources<sup>7</sup>

The last increases to the size of South Australia's houses occurred in the 1970s. The Northern Territory and Victorian lower houses were last increased in the 1980s. In other cases, parliamentary reforms have reduced the number of representatives, as is the case for both houses in NSW and Tasmania, and the Victorian upper house. A tripartisan agreement to increase Tasmania's lower house by 10 members was broken in 2011.

Only a few state parliaments have bucked the trend in recent years. The ACT increased its representation from 17 to 25 for the 2016 election, and Queensland's 2017 election saw representation increase from 89 to 93.

<sup>7</sup> Clune and Griffith (2006) *Decision and deliberation: The Parliament of New South Wales, 1956–2003*, p 627–628; Parliament of NSW (n.d.) *The history of the Legislative Assembly*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/la/roleandhistory/Pages/The-history-of-the-Legislative-Assembly.aspx>; Parliament of Victoria (n.d.) *Election summary data*, <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/archive/elect.html>; Australia and New Zealand Association of Clerks-at-the Table (n.d.) *Victoria's Legislative Council and the Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Act 2003*, <http://www.anzacatt.org.au/parliament/general/Anzacatt/Anzacatt.nsf/0/163717a2eea1c66eca256d5e00821f9d>, Green (2016) *Electoral law ructions in the Queensland Parliament*, <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2016/04/electoral-law-ructions-in-the-queensland-parliament.html>; Parliament of WA (n.d.) *The Constitution and roles of Parliament*, [http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/WebCMS.nsf/resources/file-about-parliament-full-set/\\$file/About%20Parliament%20Sheets%20-%20Full%20Set.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/WebCMS.nsf/resources/file-about-parliament-full-set/$file/About%20Parliament%20Sheets%20-%20Full%20Set.pdf), Jaensch (2007) *History of South Australian elections 1857–2006: House of Assembly*, volume 1, p 7, Tasmanian Parliamentary Library (n.d.) *Parliamentary reform – downsizing Parliament*, [http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/tpl/InfoSheets/reform\\_1998.htm](http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/tpl/InfoSheets/reform_1998.htm), ACT Government (2013) *Review into the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly*, [http://www.elections.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/837447/Size\\_of\\_the\\_Assembly\\_Final\\_report.pdf](http://www.elections.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/837447/Size_of_the_Assembly_Final_report.pdf)

# Reform

Dramatic changes to the nature of federal representation are possible only with a constitutional referendum (see the appendix). Without a referendum, reform options are limited to changing the number of senators for *all* states (with a flow-on effect for the number of members of the House of Representatives) or changing the number of senators allocated to each territory.

Even creating a new state (for example, the Northern Territory) would not necessarily have an effect as the constitutional rules are for Original States only.

It is not proposed to return Australia to the rate of representation at Federation, of 35,000 Australians per parliamentarian. This would require around 38 senators per state and six per territory, resulting in around 470 members of the House and 240 senators.<sup>8</sup> Even returning Australia to the rate after Chifley's 1949 reforms, 44,000 Australians per parliamentarian, would require around 370 members and 188 senators. There would not seem to be a national appetite for reform of this magnitude, nor would Parliament have the physical capacity for those extra parliamentarians.

It would be achievable to return Australia to the level of representation following Hawke's 1984 reforms, of about 70,000 Australians per parliamentarian. This would require 19 senators per state and four per territory, or around 234 members and 122 senators. This could be implemented incrementally by first adopting 16 senators per state and three per territory, a total of about 198 members and 102 senators, or about 81,000 Australians per politician.

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<sup>8</sup> For the formulas that determine House of Representatives allocations, see: AEC (2016) *State/territory entitlement to electoral divisions*, <http://www.aec.gov.au/Electorates/Redistributions/calculating-entitlements.htm>

# Conclusion

Our polling found little support for increasing the number of parliamentarians, although people were more likely to support an increase when the current size of electorates was included.

This reluctance is surprising given that, as a proportion of the population, the number of parliamentarians is at its lowest point since Federation. Each senator and member represents three times as many people as their counterparts did in 1901.

That parliamentarians are over-stretched is also clear from the low levels of engagement reported by their constituents. Less than half of Australians know their local MP's name, and fewer than one in five have ever spoken to him or her in person or on the phone.

This suggests the existence of a vicious cycle. Over-stretched parliamentarians struggle to engage with their electorates, who become sceptical about the value of politicians.

An increase in the number of parliamentarians could rein in under-representation and make it possible for more Australians to engage with – and be engaged by – their parliamentarians.

# Appendix: Seats in the Commonwealth Parliament

The number and distribution of seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate is determined by four constitutional requirements:<sup>9</sup>

- that there be an equal number of senators for each of the “Original States”, and at least six per state
- that there be, “as nearly as practicable”, twice as many members of the House of Representatives as there are senators (the “nexus”)
- that members of the House of Representatives be distributed among the states based on population (the “quota”)
- that there be a minimum of five House of Representatives seats for each “Original State”

In 1967, Australia considered a referendum that would break the “nexus” of two members of the HOR for each senator. This would have allowed for the HOR to increase in size without a proportional increase in the size of the Senate, but would have changed the dynamics of a joint sitting of the houses following a double dissolution. Despite support from the Labor, Liberal and Country parties, it received only 47.2% of the vote and carried only one state (NSW).<sup>10</sup>

From Federation, the Senate had six senators per state (36 total), which set the size of the House of Representatives at 74–76 seats.<sup>11</sup>

Two reforms permanently increased the size of the Parliament.

In 1949, the Chifley Government increased the number of senators per state from six to 10 (60 total), increasing the number of seats in the House of Representatives (to roughly 124).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Constitution of Australia, s 7, 24; AEC (n.d.) *Redistribution overview*, <http://www.aec.gov.au/Electorates/Redistributions/Overview.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Australian Parliament House (n.d.) *Part 2 – History of Australian Referendums*, p 92-93, [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_representatives\\_Committees?url=laca/constitutionalchange/part2.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_representatives_Committees?url=laca/constitutionalchange/part2.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Three factors mean that the House of Representatives is not exactly double the size of the Senate. The first is that any entitlement to half a member or more is rounded up to a full member. The second is that Original States get additional members to bring them up to five members if they would receive fewer under the quota. The third is that the ACT and Northern Territory also have members and senators.

In 1984, the Hawke Government increased the number of senators per state from 10 to 12 (72 total), increasing the number of seats in the House of Representatives (to 148–150).

The introduction and expansion of territory representation has also affected the overall numbers.

Between 1901 and 1911, Northern Territorians voted as South Australians. When the Territory was transferred to the Commonwealth, they lost their representation until 1922 legislation granted them a single non-voting member of the House of Representatives. The ACT began without voting rights, but were granted a non-voting member from 1949.

The ACT and NT's one territory member each received full voting rights in the 1960s and in the 1970s the territories received members based on the same quota as the states (with a minimum of one). This resulted in the ACT receiving a second member from 1974 and the NT a second member from 2000.<sup>13</sup>

Parliament legislated for the NT and the ACT to have two senators from 1975 election.

Between increases to the number of senators for each state and increases in territory representation, Australia's representation has more than doubled from 36 senators and 75 members of the House of Representatives in 1901 to 76 senators and 150 members of the House of Representatives today.

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<sup>12</sup> Between 121 and 127.

<sup>13</sup> The Northern Territory was considered to be entitled to only one seat in 2003, but the federal parliament intervened. See *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Representation in the House of Representatives) Act 2004*, <https://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/library/pubs/bd/2003-04/04bd121.pdf>