



Comment on objections 29

Associate Professor Selwyn Cornish AM

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18 MAY 2018

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Dear Electoral Commissioner,

I would like to comment on objections under Step 5 of the Australian Capital Territory federal distribution, and specifically to the issue of “names of proposed electoral divisions.”

The names of several prominent and deserving individuals have been put forward to the Electoral Commission, of which one will be attached to the new electorate.

I should like to propose the naming of the new electorate in the ACT after Sir Roland Wilson.

Wilson was a person who made a huge contribution to this country through his role in Australian Government, the ANU and publicly-owned businesses, including Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank; he was Chairman of both these corporations. He served as Secretary to the Australian Treasury between 1951 and 1966, the longest serving occupant of that position. Some of his more challenging times saw him deeply involved during and immediately after the Second World War. As well as taking a prominent role in the planning of the war economy, he initiated the process of post-war reconstruction in Australia, attending famous international conferences in London (1942) and San Francisco (1945); at the latter conference, the United Nations was created.

Because of the national and international contributions of this truly great Australian, and because he was a resident of Canberra for 65 years, I wish to apply to have Sir Roland Wilson’s name added to the short list from which an electorate name will be chosen.

I attach for your consideration a brief resume of Wilson’s career and his contributions to public life - nationally, internationally and locally. I am sure you will agree that his public service was outstanding and it is my hope that he will be publicly recognized by naming the third electorate in the ACT after him.

Yours sincerely,

Selwyn Cornish
Research School of Economics
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Roland Wilson, 1904-1996

Sir Roland Wilson, Secretary to the Treasury from 1951 to 1966, is regarded as the most distinguished Commonwealth public servant of his generation. He is the longest serving head of the Australian Treasury. But he also held a number of other very senior positions in the Commonwealth Public Service. In 1936, at the age of 32, he was appointed Commonwealth Statistician, having been appointed Economic Adviser to the Treasury in 1935 after declining the chair of economics at the University of Tasmania, his alma mater. In 1940 he was appointed inaugural Secretary of the Department of Labour and National Service. In 1939, on the eve of the Second World War, he became a member of the three-person committee – the Financial and Economic Committee – which planned Australia's war economy and initiated work on post-war reconstruction. In Labour and National Service, Wilson created a Post-War Division and recruited to it the group of men and women who later formed the nucleus of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction.

Wilson attended, as Australia's representative, the first international conference on the post-war economy, held in London in October 1942. Of his performance at this conference, the great British economist, John Maynard Keynes, wrote that Wilson 'took a prominent, indeed a leading part through all the discussions and played a major role in them with the greatest success. We had a great gathering of Whitehall officials, who came to feel the greatest respect both for his wisdom and for his perspicacity.' In 1945, as a member of the Australian delegation, Wilson went to the famous conference at San Francisco at which the United Nations was created. He was responsible for articles 55 and 56 of the UN Charter, those sections covering full employment. This was a major achievement, especially since Wilson was able to succeed against the wishes of the powerful American delegation, which wanted no reference to employment in the Charter. After the war, Wilson was appointed to the Economic and Employment Commission of the United Nations, serving as its chairman in 1948-49.

Upon his retirement from the Treasury in 1966, Wilson was appointed Chairman of two of Australia's major government business enterprises, the Commonwealth Banking Corporation and Qantas Airways. In 1975, following the collapse of the Tasman Bridge in Hobart, he was commissioned by Prime Minister Whitlam to oversee the planning of the bridge's reconstruction.

From 1932 until his death in 1996 – nearly 65 years - Wilson was a resident of Canberra. He took a close interest in the development of tertiary education in the ACT. He had been a Tasmanian Rhodes Scholar, graduating from the University of Tasmania with first class honours in economics. From the University of Oxford, he graduated with a doctorate in economics (D.Phil.), and then he graduated from the University of Chicago with another doctorate. His Ph.D. supervisor at the University of Chicago, the great Jacob Viner, declared that Wilson was 'one of the two or three best students I have ever encountered.' He was twice offered the inaugural chair in economics at the Australian National University, which he declined, preferring instead to serve the Commonwealth of Australia. He was a member of the Council of Canberra University College in the 1930s and 1940s, and was a member of the ANU Council from 1951 to 1966. Taken together, Wilson served longer than any other Canberra resident on the councils of tertiary institutions in the ACT. He was also one of the group who established the Commonwealth Club in Canberra. Sir Roland and Lady Wilson left a substantial financial endowment to the ANU, which has been used to finance a building on campus and a highly prestigious scholarship scheme for public servants undertaking Ph.D. programs.

Though a person of immense intellectual capacity and achievement, he was never desk-bound. He was a skilled carpenter and brick-layer, learning these trades as a boy from his father who was a builder in the northern Tasmanian town of Ulverstone. During the war he built himself an electric car to conserve supplies of petrol and drove it regularly to his office in West Block. In this respect he was more than 50 years ahead of his time, a pioneer in the construction and adoption of new and clean technology

In 1941, Wilson was awarded the CBE, and was subsequently knighted twice for his public service (he was created Knight Bachelor in 1955 and received the KBE in 1965). In 1969 the University of Tasmania conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (LL.D.); in 1988 he was made a Distinguished Fellow of the Economic Society of Australia.

Here, in short, is a former long-term resident of the national capital, who not only contributed greatly to the work of the Commonwealth Public Service and won respect and admiration for his achievements on the international stage, but who also contributed significantly to the development and funding of our educational institutions and the social life of Canberra. With his interest in the conservation of natural resources and the creation of new technology he showed us the way to the future.

Prime Ministers Hawke, Keating and Howard have all made references to Sir Roland Wilson's 'long and outstanding service as one of Australia's most eminent public servants', and of 'his role in the economic development of post-World War II Australia'. The naming of the third federal electorate in the ACT would be a suitable recognition of his many contributions to Australian public life and to humanity. In a city dedicated to public service, such a recognition would be entirely appropriate.