



# Objection 308

Victorian Women's Trust

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## VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST

The Redistribution Committee for Victoria  
Australian Electoral Commission  
GPO Box 768  
Melbourne VIC 3001

4 May 2018

Dear Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to comment on the proposed redistribution of Victoria into electoral divisions.

Since our inception in 1985, the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) has explored, and continues to address through a myriad of ways, improvements to the status of women. We yearn to see in our lifetimes, the achievement of full gender equality which includes full and equal representation of women in all of our public bodies, in the halls of power and reflected on our public record.

Over the years, the VWT has undertaken projects that consciously aim to improve the representation and acknowledgement of women's enormous contribution to every facet of Victorian social, cultural and political life. In 2001, the year of the centenary of Australia's Federation, the VWT toured an exhibition of 260 Victorian women and their contributions across Victoria. In 2013, the VWT started a directory of women *Here She Is* to showcase the enormous talent of women across Australia and to ensure that there is no longer any excuse to exclude women from boards, panels, conferences and the media. This year the VWT launched *Women in the Life of the City* in partnership with the City of Melbourne to redress the exclusion of women within public history and work towards putting the achievements of women on the public record.

In our submission we discuss how the processes of naming electorates has systematically overlooked the achievements of women, and outline how these proposed changes fail to rectify the disparity between the representation of men and women within electoral names.

Addressing the inequality in the naming of electorates is an important step to framing a future where the public record equally honours the achievements of women in our society. As community attitudes continue to shift towards seeking a more equal, and representative society, it is in the public's interest that these attitudes are embedded within public processes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the AEC's electoral division redistribution and naming process.

Regards,

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## **Recognition through Electorate Naming**

Federal electorates are often named after prominent Australians, in honour of their contributions to our communities, public life and culture. This electoral redistribution provides a profound opportunity to redress the public recognition of women, a necessary step towards attaining a more equal, representative Australia.

## **Our Vision**

As an organisation, we have strived for greater representation of women in public spaces, to ensure a more equal future.

During 2001, the VWT wanted to celebrate women's contribution to Victorian community life over the past century in a way that was special and put this proud history firmly on the public record. Our exhibition, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*, created as part of the Centenary of Federation celebrations, showcased the lives and stories of 260 women and became our tribute to all the women who have gone before us and those around us now. The artworks representing these women and their contributions surround us in our office, serving as a constant reminder of the enormity of contribution women have made to Victoria.

On International Women's Day in 2013, we launched our directory of women *Here She Is*. The directory came from our recognition that there are so many enormously qualified Australian women who are achieving great things, but women are still vastly underrepresented as keynote speakers and presenters at major conferences and events, in leadership positions, and in the media environment. We relaunched the directory in March 2018, increasing the breadth and diversity of speakers available to address this imbalance that continues today. *Here She Is* has been formally endorsed by the Victorian Government as a commitment to the State's Gender Equality Strategy *Safe and Strong*.

Recently, the VWT worked with the City of Melbourne on *Women in the Life of a City*, a project that aimed to increase the acknowledgement of women within public spaces, like street and laneways, and in public projects. At its core, this project outlined the essential role women have within our communities. Addressing the public record is a fundamental step towards attaining equality, however for such change to not be tokenistic, the inclusion and recognition of women must become normalised, and in equal measure to men.

## **Current Gender Imbalance in Electorate Naming**

Overall, we do not believe that the proposed naming changes sufficiently recognise the contributions made by women within Victoria. The public 'suggestions' and 'comments' identified fourteen women who had made impactful differences within the community, yet only two women, May Cox and Dame Annie McNamara, have been successfully selected for this honour.

Within Victoria, there is a strong disparity between the representation of men and women within the naming of federal electorates. Currently, nineteen of the thirty-seven Victorian electorates (51%) are named exclusively after men, compared to only four electorates (11%) named exclusively after women.

Under proposed changes to rename four Victorian electorates and establish a new one, the number of electorates honouring individual women will increase to six of thirty-eight (16%) and the number honouring men will increase to 20 of 38 electorates (53%). These changes have a limited impact on the disparity between the recognition of men and women within electorate names.

While another woman, Lady Gladys Nicholls, will be honoured alongside her husband Sir Douglas Nicholls, this “joint recognition” will not affect the rate of individual women who are honoured by this process, nor contribute to closing the gap between male and female representation. As a passionate leader and advocate, we believe that the extensive work of Lady Gladys Nicholls is deserving of individual recognition that reflects her own enthusiasm for women’s empowerment in the community.

These outcomes are not reflective of our changing social context, where as a nation we have become increasingly aware of the historic under-representation of women in our recorded history and are working towards addressing them. Now more than ever, it is necessary within our changing social context, that this historical exclusion of women within public life is rectified, and the achievements of women are acknowledged.

### **Naming Traditions and Reinforcing Gender Disparity**

Current naming traditions provide further hindrance to the recognition of women within electorate names. Names for new electorates are primarily drawn from past Australian Prime Ministers. Historically, women have faced many obstacles to political participation, some of which were not overcome until 2010 when our first, and to this date only, female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard took office, after 110 years of female enfranchisement.

Consequentially, this naming tradition has overlooked the contributions of many women by privileging male Prime Ministers. As seven of the thirty-seven electorates (18.92%) are named after male Prime Ministers, there are more electorates named after male Prime Ministers than there are electorates named after women. This rule contributes to the ongoing disparity of the representation of genders, by reinforcing opportunities for the recognition of men that simultaneously exclude women.

Further, we do not believe that assigning greater weight to political office reflects modern Australian democracy. These traditions presuppose that the most valuable contributions, or those most deserving of credit, are made within an elite political sphere, which undervalues the grassroots work done by countless other deserving citizens. As a society we have evolved to recognise that people can contribute to civic life, not just through politics but in ways as diverse as the people themselves. We believe that the electorate naming process should reflect the culture of diversity that defines modern Australia.

Naming this new Victorian electorate after a woman will not significantly increase the proportion of women acknowledged through electorate names, but it would be a meaningful step towards fostering a culture of gender equality within the process. By overturning structural exclusions and recognising worthy community contributions outside of politics, honouring a woman with an inaugural electorate name is an important element of achieving equal and fair representation.

### **Diversity on the Election Committee**

As Australia increasingly works towards parity between men and women in leadership roles, we believe that the inclusion of women on this committee is necessary to produce an outcome that reflects current Australian attitudes. In order to make meaningful and representative outcomes, we need to embed gender equality in every process we undertake to achieve them.

We strongly encourage the Australian Electoral Commission to attend to the actual composition of the Redistribution Committee for Victoria, Melbourne, by including women. Gender diversity at this level can only enhance the equality of decision-making and accountability to the Australian people.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Despite facing many structural and cultural barriers to their participation in the social and political life of Australia, women have made significant, yet undervalued, contributions to Victoria. As community attitudes shift towards seeking a more equal, and representative society, it is necessary that we embody these attitudes within public processes, to ensure that this public interest is being well represented.

If the proposed changes are carried in their current form, the Redistribution Committee for Victoria will have overlooked an opportunity to address the unequal representation of women on Australia's public record. This inequality is supported by a system that values the achievements of men, over those of women. We hope that the Redistribution Committee considers the value in addressing the inequality within the naming of electorates, and realises that it has an important role in attaining broader equality. We urge the AEC to now work towards addressing the composition of the Redistribution Committee for Victoria to better reflect community attitudes and expectations.