



**THE FEDERAL
REDISTRIBUTION
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Objection 120

Dr Raphaella Kathryn Crosby

9 pages

26/6/2024

Tom Rogers,
Chair of the Redistribution Committee and Electoral Commissioner
Australian Electoral Commission
Via online form

Dear Mr Rogers,

RE: Submission in Objection to the proposed redistribution – New South Wales

I am a media professional and business operator across the Hunter and New England regions of New South Wales, maintain residences in both Armidale and East Maitland, and am an experienced political operative and social scientist with a [PhD in voter behaviour](#).

One of my businesses, [New England Times](#), is a news media company that delivers hyper-local news for the 12 local government areas of the New England, and has its very branding deeply rooted in the concept of the New England and the deep personal association and pride of place evident in its residents. We have plans to launch a sister network, Hunter Times, which will also trade on the intense personal sense of identity the people of the Hunter feel with their region. I also broadcast in both these regions with the Super Radio Network.

My PhD thesis, much of my research on electoral behaviour, subsequent market and political research, and now business operations, focused significantly on the New England, as well as similar regions with strong regional identities like the Hunter.

Thus, I feel qualified in asserting, in the strongest possible terms, that the proposal to move Muswellbrook from the Hunter to the New England is downright ludicrous and deeply insulting to both the people of the Hunter and the New England. Even the suggestion has already caused damage to the credibility of the AEC.

Additionally, given the precarious future of the Muswellbrook region, such a redistribution potentially dangerous with catastrophic consequences.

This simply must not happen.

I lay out my reasoning below in a manner I trust will be of assistance. I am happy to provide further evidence and advice, where my schedule permits.

Finally, this is the second redistribution in a row where you have toyed with these well established, clearly identified, iconic regions with a rich history deeply intertwined with the history of our nation, like they don't matter. You have repeatedly disregarded their identities as nothing more than meaningless coloured lines on a map, easily moved without consequence. Please stop doing that.

Sincerely,



Dr Raphaella Kathryn Crosby

Submission in Objection to the proposed redistribution – New South Wales

Submission subject:

- **the boundaries of electoral divisions**
- **Several electoral divisions: primarily Hunter, New England, minor comment on Parkes, Paterson**

Summary:

The regional identities of the New England and Hunter regions are clearly defined regions with strong regional identity and branding, and extremely high levels of personal identification (that is, where locals incorporate sense of place in their personal identity). The strength of the identity of these regions is more than just habit or effective branding; they have defined geographic borders that make sense, common interests and industry, and common service centres.

The electorates that bear the name of the place should, as much as possible, align with the long-standing traditional boundaries of that place. The dividing border between the Hunter and New England should be in electorates as it is in life: just south of Willow Tree, north of Murrurundi, around Ardglen.

Additionally, it would appear that the AEC projections have failed to take account of the COVID realignment and ongoing significant regional migration. The growth rate in the Hunter – particularly Maitland and Cessnock – lacks any resemblance with reality, as does the high forecast drop in population in Armidale, a town that has multiple housing developments being fast tracked to try and keep up with the high demand.

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Regional identity and its importance to voter behaviour and democratic health

Please allow me to preface my comments with some background on regional identity, why it is desirable to have a strong sense of identity paired with electorates, and the role that identity plays in voter behaviour. In the interests of brevity and accessibility, I will dispense with some of the jargon and academic references, but I am happy to make them available on request.

Party identity is one of the most common heuristics in voting studies, briefly explained as ‘my party supports x, therefore I will support x’. Class identity is also a well-trodden board, as is identification with occupation, religion, age and status in life. These classification orientated identities (and the related tropes that fuel so much substandard election coverage) often seek to diminish the complexity of the voter to a single factor, rather than appreciating the voter as a complex being with multiple points of both individual definition and group association.

The advent of social media has fundamentally changed the way that voters interact with the public sphere, and cultural changes across the world are pushing all of us to a more individuated sense of identity and redefining belonging to a multi-layered series of groups. Sense of place is one of the most essential of groups in that multi-layered series, inextricably linked to social identity and connections, employment, housing, media influences, and, consequentially, voter behaviour.

My own research on the 2019 election identified that length of time living in a community, and sense of identity with that community, is a stronger predictor of voter behaviour and any demographic factor or traditional vote choice consideration. As submitted to JSCEM at the time:

“...the identity of an electorate, and whether the individual voter identifies as being a member of the electorate community, is a very important factor in voter behaviour. Those voters who do identify with their electorate are more engaged, informed, and care more about who their representative is.

The current practice of redistribution and renaming of electorates is not conducive to a healthy democracy, as it breaks voters’ connection with their electorate on a frequent basis, and does not consider sociological patterns (for example, commute patterns or shopping patterns) or clear community structures. On the one hand, blind electorate boundary selection designed to be as impartial as possible to avoid any implication of gerrymandering, and an equal number of voters, is a good goal; on the other, voters report feeling disenfranchised by being lumped with people they have nothing in common with because they are on the wrong side of the road.”

The Voter Choice Project also identified the New England as having one of the strongest levels of personal identification with electorate nationwide – with the exception of the Upper Hunter, who felt they had little or no affinity with New England. Voters in the heart of the Hunter – Muswellbrook, Singleton – also demonstrated similar qualities and behaviours. They demonstrated extraordinarily high levels of awareness of who their representatives and candidates are, engage with the electoral process much earlier than electorates with low identity, actively engage in the electoral debate, consume news and information about the election, scrutinise every candidate on the ballot even if the result is a foregone conclusion, and indicate they care greatly about local issues, with partisan alignment factoring only as a minor secondary consideration in their vote choice.

These are all good things. These should be preserved and where possible strengthened.

I acknowledge the AEC's position that renaming electorates should not be taken lightly, and the goal of electoral redistributions should be, as per paragraph 111 of the redistribution proposal, for electoral divisions to be readily recognisable.

However, time and time again, the AEC demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of the nature of regional communities, makes no attempt to account for natural traffic patterns or service delivery catchments, or any other social dynamic factor that influences how people live. Demonstrably, the redistribution committee places far too much weight on suggestions from a group of election nerds drawing lines on a map as a hobby rather than actively seeking the input of the people who will be affected by the change.

The New England has always been the New England

The 12 local government areas that comprise the New England are:

- Armidale Regional Council
- Glen Innes Severn Shire Council
- Gunnedah Shire Council
- Gwydir Shire Council
- Inverell Shire Council
- Liverpool Plains Shire Council
- Moree Plains Shire Council
- Narrabri Shire Council
- Tamworth Regional Council
- Tenterfield Shire Council
- Uralla Shire Council
- Walcha Council

Without wandering off into the intense local history of the region, the state movement, or why the New England is also called the New England North West or Northern Inland or sometimes people are referring only to the Northern Tablelands, this area has basically been grouped together in almost every respect, with near identical borders, since I was a kid growing up in Moree – so at least 40 years, and historical records would indicate long before that.

Historically, Ardglen has always been the transition point from Hunter to New England, with the heritage listed Ardglen Tunnel through the Liverpool Ranges between Murrurundi and Ardglen providing a rail connection that opened up the New England in the 1877 to more than the squatters. Histories of the region refer to claims and settlements of 'Scotsman from the Hunter' taking up land from the Liverpool Plains to Guyra and beyond. George James Macdonald was appointed as Commissioner of Crown Lands for the New England District in 1839, and named the place he set up his headquarters at a place he named Armidale, after his home town in Scotland.

People in this area will generally acknowledge activities or birth in these 12 LGAs as local to the region. A timely example of this is the freshly elected state member for Northern Tablelands, Brendan Moylan, who was born in Gunnedah, studied in Armidale, and lives in Moree; all three data points presented as evidence of his local qualifications.

Gunnedah is most definitely a central and important locality of the New England region. It is to Tamworth as Maitland is to Newcastle or Penrith is to Sydney – the once separate centre that is increasingly a major western suburb. The exclusion of Gunnedah while proposing in the inclusion of Muswellbrook is where the AEC loses any kind of credibility on this matter, and it is apparent you have made no attempt to find out how people here actually live. Again.

Arguably, the decision of the last redistribution that moved Upper Hunter to New England was also an error. My research in 2019 picked up that New England locals did not consider someone from Scone a New Englander, and would not consider a candidate from Scone if they were on the ballot. It is absolutely not fair to people in the Upper Hunter to draft them into an electorate with which they have little affinity and which will not acknowledge their equal right to represent the area, and which will forever be at risk of being forgotten by the elected member.

While there is some blurring at the extremities of the New England (for example, Tenterfield is sometimes in, sometimes not), these 12 LGAs rely on Tamworth and Armidale as their primary service centres, have common media sources and common industries. Ask locals to tell you the boundaries of the region and they nearly always quip ‘Willow Tree to the border’.

The New England has always been the New England since it was first gazetted in 1839, with Armidale at its heart. The specific borders may have changed in various iterations or purposes, but the New England does not extend south of the Ardglen Tunnel. That is the Hunter.

And until all 12 of those LGAs are fully within the electorate of New England, the AEC should not add any voter from outside it to the electorate.

Muswellbrook is the heart of the Hunter

Just as Armidale is the heart of the New England, Muswellbrook is the heart of the Hunter Valley.

The same 10 local government areas have been regularly attributed to belonging to the Hunter for many years, being:

- Cessnock
- Dungog
- Lake Macquarie
- Maitland
- Mid Coast
- Muswellbrook
- Newcastle
- Port Stephens
- Singleton
- Upper Hunter

Just as Tenterfield is sometimes in New England and sometimes not, MidCoast is sometimes in Hunter and sometimes not. But the Hunter Valley has been the Hunter Valley since the Hunter River was named in 1979. Convicts originally called it the coal river.

And the Hunter has always been defined by coal. The Singleton-Muswellbrook-Denman triangle powered not just the region, but the country, and have provided fuel to power the world. The

industry is the bedrock for local identity and sense of belonging as much as it is the bedrock of the local economy.

The transition facing the Hunter is immense. It is very scary for a lot of people. And the flippant way with which the AEC has divided the coal triangle, splitting the twins of Muswellbrook and Singleton into separate electorates, is it abhorrent. You have delivered this disrespectful and frankly stupid injury to our good and hardworking mining communities right at the point where they need each other, and both desperately need strong, consistent, representation at every level. This action is reckless, insulting, and potentially very damaging.

At its best, you are dooming the people of Muswellbrook to be forgotten and abandoned right at their hour of need. To quote the Mayor of Muswellbrook, Steve Reynolds, it renders this important and very vulnerable centre to be no more than 'a pimple on the arse of New England'.

At its worst, you are adding to the psychological distress of a community that already feels under siege, already feels as though their lives and livelihoods are being ripped from them without their consent. And now you have the audacity to tell them they are no longer part of the Hunter? Without any care or consideration for the mental health of already traumatised people?

What on earth were you thinking.

Thank goodness the boundaries of electoral divisions does not make for viral social media fodder, or your unthinking and tone-deaf proposal could very well have been the final straw that tipped one of our miners over the edge.

Muswellbrook doesn't belong in the New England in any sense or any context.

You owe the people of Muswellbrook a massive apology, and an undertaking to stop trying to rip away the one thing it has left and should be able to be sure about – its identity as the heart of the Hunter.

Not just a name

Lest you get any ideas that you could fix the problem of these two regions not wanting to lose their identity and traditional boundaries by simply renaming the electorates, even though these are both federation electorates whose names should be preserved, let me assure you that would make no difference.

It is not a solution to simply rename the electorate, because even without the name, the region is still a coherent block of interests that is best suited to be represented by the same member of parliament. It is also not ideal to break such a strong sense of identity with electorate, as voters who identify with an electorate display highly desirable democratic behaviours as noted above.

The Liverpool Ranges create a natural barrier that divides services areas, media markets, and local mentality. The further south you go, the more marginal the farmland, and the open fields give way fairly quickly to coal mines and industry. The endangered coal mines of the Hunter have little in common with the booming industries and traditional farming of the New England. They do not even share a common interest even with the coal mine at Gunnedah, where they mine metallurgical coal and have no plans to close.

However, the mines in the triangle and their troubled future do have significant impact and relationship with the industry and services of Maitland and Cessnock, on which the residents

and businesses of Muswellbrook and Singleton rely, and the vast majority of mine workers commute to and from.

Just as New Englanders are very proud of the dirt in their farming heritage veins, the people of the Hunter are very proud of the black gold in theirs. While good neighbours with a lot of respect for each other, these regions and these people do not share identity or interests, and do not sit well together, regardless of any name you might pluck out of the air.

Regional electorates should be easier to manage... and equal

The notion often posited by the AEC that you do consider geographical size but it is secondary to the numbers is, to be blunt, farcical.

While you may have had the constitution to hide behind on Tasmania's electorates having almost half the quota of a mainland seat, with the decision to abandon the redistribution of the Northern Territory into one seat it was clearly evident that the whole notion is just an artificial construction that can and should be bent when logic and common-sense demands.

The apparent preference for longer electorates, rather than centralised ones, which I can only presume is the result of some flawed understanding of the nature of partisanship and misguided attempt to avoid gerrymandering, makes them harder to manage, a is clear evidence that you don't really consider geographic size. Certainly, it is much easier for a busy MP to conduct business in Armidale, Tamworth and Gunnedah in one day than it would be to attempt Armidale, Tamworth, Muswellbrook, yet Gunnedah – fast becoming a satellite suburb of Tamworth much like Maitland is to Newcastle – is not in the New England electorate, but you want Muswellbrook to be?

To be honest, I have long suspected that those who like to play with electorate boundaries are more obsessed with adding statistical areas together like lego blocks rather than actually considering that the blocks are people with lives and needs, and the electorate at the end of all this play needs to be a workable service area, not just an acceptable answer to a mathematical equation. There is little other explanation for the often odd shapes, illogical combinations, and barking mad suggestions of, say, taking Muswellbrook out of the Hunter, or the Farrer dog leg fiasco.

If you insist on lumping regional and remote representatives with such huge tracks of land to cover, the very least you could do is centralise them so they are easier to manage. Just as voters move around to central locations and service centres, so to could MPs go from service centres to their catchments. The only thing required is some logic and common sense being applied in the redistribution of electorate boundaries.

The fixation on numbers with no other consideration really swaying the decision is a disservice to the Australian people, but it also results in the representation of regional people being significantly less effective than city voters. When an MP cannot physically meet with people or attend events because of the vast distances involved, then our electoral system is actively discriminating against the regions. You are actively discriminating against regional people and making their already harder lives unnecessarily harder.

That's not fair, that's not right, and it's most certainly not equal.

Suggested boundaries

I appreciate it's all well and good to say 'don't do that' and then fail to offer alternatives.

Unlike your merry bunch of electoral nerds making submissions for a hobby without any consideration of the actual people they seek to inflict their pretty maps upon, I do not have the time. Finding the time to do this much has been challenging, but is clearly required to make you aware of the significant wrong you are doing. You can make the maps. Here are my suggestions.

1. Define the core centres that belong to an electorate as the nucleus of that electorate, and then move boundaries around that. Recommend you select three geographic points to triangulate the zone.
 - a. The core centres of the New England are Armidale, Inverell (or Moree), Tamworth.
 - b. The core centres of the Hunter are the coal triangle - Muswellbrook, Singleton, Denman.
 - c. This approach can be followed for most electorates to ensure long term identity of the area with its electorate while still permitting variations. For example, Parkes should be something like Parkes, Dubbo, Cobar.
2. Then select the necessary regions around that nucleus to get to the desired target voter figures preferring natural transport and social movement patterns and affinity of industry and service centres over LGA boundaries or any other artificial construction.
3. Where there is a geographical place of the same name as an electorate in that area, even if that similarity of name is coincidental, every effort should be made to keep that place in the electorate if not as a core centre. For example, Parkes should be in Parkes, Paterson should be in Paterson.

Accepting the target figures you stipulate, by my quick look at the numbers using the figures you supply:

New England can be comfortably defined as the 12 traditionally accepted local government areas with significant room for further loss of population without further redistribution (if the pessimistic projections of the AEC bear out), with 133938 electors, projected 132604. While significantly larger than your current proposal, this would be far more acceptable to voters, result in far better representation, and I would wager be significantly easier to manage from an AEC perspective as well.

This would have a significant impact on **Parkes**, but Parkes is quite simply too big to be effectively managed. And if electorates in the Northern Territory can stay small because it's so remote, then an exception can be made for Parkes as well. While I appreciate it is a matter for JSCEM (and the case has already been made many times for many years) the rule should be for any significantly remote electorate, as long as it doesn't have less voters than a Tasmanian electorate then its fine.

There are more radical changes that would still be more palatable than adding Muswellbrook to the New England. For example, you could split New England at the Moonbis, which is not a novel idea by any means, and transfer Tamworth and the Liverpool Plains to Parkes (which should be renamed to avoid confusion with Parkes), while expanding New England east to take in places like Ebor and Dorrigo and west to take in Moree, Narrabri and hopefully not too many

blocks further west. This would enable Dubbo LGA to be united in Calare, and significantly reduce the geographic burden of the Parkes electorate by sharing the remote workload.

Hunter can comfortably include all of the core Hunter Valley LGAs – Upper Hunter, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Cessnock, and most of Maitland (excluding East Maitland) – with room for significant growth as we know is happening, at current 120302, projected 123580.

If you must, there are areas inland of the M1 and New England highway (such as Seahampton) that could be added.

However, Maitland is growing at a rate of 6 people a day, and the Huntlee development falls in this area, so I think it's safe to say your projections are woefully inadequate. I'd suggest you consult more up to date figures or an alternative data source before finalising these changes.

And, given the significant and challenging future the region faces, effective representation for the Hunter would be significantly aided by making the electorate as small as possible.

This proposal to forever define the Hunter as being centred on the heart of the Hunter Valley would obviously result in a significant impact on Paterson, Lyne, Newcastle and Shortland. I urge you to follow the same approach of defining the core of the electorate and working from there, and think about people and social patterns, rather than numbers or lines on a map.