



# Suggestion 51

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3 pages

# Sharing of names between LGAs and Electoral Divisions

Alan Thomas, November 2023

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## Introduction

The practice of giving Divisions names that are already used for LGAs is a source of real confusion for voters and should cease.

At present, in Victoria, seven Divisions share their names with Victorian Local Government Areas (LGAs). These are:

Ballarat    **Casey**    Corangamite    **Maribyrnong**    **Melbourne**<sup>1</sup>    **Monash**    **La Trobe**

As opportunities arise, each of the Divisions listed above should be renamed to honour a distinguished Australian whose name is distinct from the names of all LGAs in Victoria.

The AEC<sup>2</sup> should rename the divisions marked in **bold** at the first reasonable opportunity, for reasons that I set out under “Proposed actions” below.

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## Name-sharing is confusing

When naming an electoral Division, the AEC’s number one priority must be *clarity of naming*. This means selecting names that minimise confusion among voters.

A typical voter is likely to interact with the Division structure on an exceedingly infrequent basis. For most, this interaction is limited to once every few years when they go to vote in a Federal election, and on the odd occasion that they wish to contact their local federal MP. Indeed, some voters are likely unaware that there is a difference between LGAs and electoral Divisions<sup>3</sup>.

In light of this, there is a **real likelihood of voter confusion** when a Division name corresponds to another familiar geographical name elsewhere in the State.

The list of distinguished Australians after whom Divisions could be named is long. It would be of no hindrance to the AEC to remove from the list those few names that are already applied to LGAs in the State in question, even if the bearers of these name were most distinguished individuals with strong local connections. The AEC must place the needs of voters at the forefront. There are many other opportunities to memorialise distinguished Australians outside the realm of electoral geography.

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## Not just a hypothetical: Name sharing causes real problems

In the recent Referendum, I voted at a polling place in the western Melbourne suburb of Albion, in the Division of Fraser. The AEC staff member at the door welcomed voters to the polling place and asked them the question, “are you local?” If the answer was “no”, the staff member would ascertain where the voter lived and send them to either the main queue if they lived in the Division of Fraser, or the declaration vote area if they lived in another Division.

I saw a man enter the polling place. The staff member established that he was not a local, and when asked where he was from, he said “Maribyrnong”. The staff member evidently took this as a reference to the Division of Maribyrnong, so the man was directed to the declaration vote queue, where he filled out the form on a declaration envelope.

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<sup>1</sup> The name “Melbourne” is also shared by a State electoral district – a further opportunity for confusion!

<sup>2</sup> I use the name “AEC” loosely in this submission. In most circumstances I am actually referring to redistribution committees and augmented electoral commissions.

<sup>3</sup> The AEC’s practice of using LGA boundaries to form Divisions may contribute to mistaken beliefs that a person’s MP is the Federal representative of their LGA or a group of neighbouring LGAs.

When the voter handed over his form, the Division Finder was consulted, and it emerged that he in fact lived in the Division of Fraser. Part of the City of Maribyrnong LGA lies within this division, and it was apparent that he had been referring to the LGA when he said he lived in “Maribyrnong”. The man, with his now unnecessary declaration envelope in hand, moved back to the main queue to cast his vote.

The polling officials now faced a situation where the voter had potentially completed two ballot papers – they were unsure whether he had been provided with a ballot paper for the declaration vote. When this was noticed, there was quite a commotion. At least four staff were involved in sorting out the problem (not helped by the fact that the voter wanted to take his declaration envelope home with him for some reason).

This situation would have been avoided if the name Maribyrnong were not in use for a Division.

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### **Proposed actions**

So that the AEC can achieve *clarity of naming* and reduce voter confusion, I propose three actions.

#### ***Action 1: Rename affected Divisions at the first reasonable opportunity***

I do not propose that the AEC rename all seven affected Divisions at once. Instead, they should be renamed *at the first reasonable opportunity* (for example, at a redistribution where the boundaries of an affected Division are being significantly altered).

New names should be selected for the Divisions of Casey, Maribyrnong, Monash and La Trobe as soon as any reasonable opportunity is available. These Divisions are confusingly close to, yet have no overlap with, the corresponding LGAs. This is where the greatest potential for confusion arises.

Furthermore, there is a need to resolve the three-way naming conflict between the Division, District and City of Melbourne. These three entities have significant overlap but are far from identical. Their boundaries coincide in some places but not others – a clear source of confusion. As such, a new name should be proposed for the Division of Melbourne. In this case, the proposal should be made even if no major changes are proposed to the Division’s boundaries, as the nature of this Division is such that major boundary changes are unlikely to ever occur.

The need to rename the remaining two divisions is less pressing. The AEC will be aware of the history of unsuccessful proposals to rename the Division of Corangamite at the two previous redistributions. Moreover, the significant level of media coverage of, and political attention given to, the Division thanks to its status as a marginal seat has led to widespread awareness of the Division in the community, reducing the chance of voter confusion. As for the Division of Ballarat, it is centred on, and fully encompasses, the City of Ballarat, with relatively small populations outside that area.

#### ***Action 2: Provide formal guidance against using confusing names***

The existing “Geographical names” guideline, which is weak and contradictory, should be removed from the set of guidelines used by the AEC when selecting Division names<sup>4</sup> and replaced with a new guideline similar to the following:

- A name which is likely to create confusion for voters – for instance, a name that is applied to or strongly linked to a geographic area in the same state – should be avoided. For example, the name “McKinlay” would not be used for a Queensland Division due to the presence of the Shire of McKinlay in that state, and the name “Spencer” (after Sir Baldwin Spencer) would not be used for a South Australian Division due to potential confusion with the Spencer Gulf region.

The revised set of guidelines should be used in the current Victorian redistribution and all future Federal redistributions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aec.gov.au/electorates/redistributions/guidelines.htm>

*Action 3: Make the AEC's Division naming guidelines subject to review and public comment*

The guidelines used by the AEC when selecting names for Divisions do not have any basis in legislation, having been developed as the result of a recommendation from a 1995 parliamentary inquiry. They are, to my knowledge, not subject to public consultation or periodic review. This is a regrettable situation in a context where all of the AEC's naming decisions are informed by these guidelines and the AEC has submissions that propose a deviation from the guidelines can be easily dismissed by the AEC on the basis that they are not compliant with the guidelines.

This matter is arguably tangential to the current Victorian redistribution, but there is no other avenue for public comment on these guidelines. I would like to take this opportunity to urge the AEC to review these guidelines and consider whether they are fit for purpose almost 30 years on.