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Naming electorates: is holding a political office enough?

Hanish McDowall deserves some credit for even-handedness. In considering names for electorates, he appears to want to recognise both a member of the ALP and a member of the Liberal Party. In an era when even the naming of things can become a partisan exercise, that is not nothing.

But political balance is not the same as a convincing case for recognition. The more fundamental question is whether the people being proposed have made contributions that justify having a federal electorate named after them.

Being a leader of the Queensland Liberal Party does not, in itself, suggest that someone has rendered outstanding service to Australia. Nor does the fact that someone was involved in Queensland state politics in the 1970s necessarily count against them, although it is understandable that the reputation of Queensland politics during that period might colour one's initial reaction. That would be a rather unfair way to judge an individual, however. The question is what they actually achieved, not simply the political environment in which they operated.

This is where I would have welcomed a more persuasive explanation from Mr McDowall. The information provided does not, at least to me, establish a particularly compelling case for federal recognition.

There are, nevertheless, some interesting aspects of the career of Sir Llew Edwards which are worth considering in the context of state recognition. Edwards was a director of James Hardie Industries for a decade and was later appointed chairman of the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation established by the company to compensate victims of asbestos-related diseases. He criticised James Hardie for providing insufficient funds to meet its liabilities, arguing that the company had underestimated the likely cost of claims.

That is a significant episode, although it also raises questions about the responsibilities of corporate directors and the adequacy of the arrangements made to compensate people harmed by a company's products. It is not, on its own, an uncomplicated argument for an electorate bearing his name.

In 2010, Edwards was named one of six Queensland Greats by Premier Anna Bligh. The citation described him as “an outstanding Queenslander who has made exceptional contributions to many fields”. That is certainly a more substantial endorsement, although a state honour does not automatically settle the question of whether someone should be commemorated at the federal level.

There is a distinction here worth preserving. A person can make a considerable contribution to Queensland without necessarily being the most obvious candidate for

recognition through a federal electorate. The two are not mutually exclusive, of course, but the case for the latter should be made rather than assumed.

Naming guidelines support naming an electorate for contributions to Australia, not contributions to Queensland.

Governors-General are not automatically electorate-worthy

Being Governor-General is another qualification that might appear impressive on a résumé but should not, by itself, settle the question.

If serving as Governor-General were sufficient reason to have an electorate named after you, why are there so few electorates named after people who have held the office?

The electorates named after Governors-General are Casey, Isaacs and Hasluck, although Hasluck is jointly commemorated with his wife, Alexandra, in the name of the electorate. Australia has had 28 Governors-General since Federation. That is a substantial pool of candidates, yet only a small number have been commemorated in this way.

The figures do not prove that the others were undeserving. Electorate names are the product of history, geography and decisions made at particular times, rather than a carefully maintained honours list. Nevertheless, the relative scarcity of such names should remind us that holding the office has not generally been treated as an automatic entitlement to this form of recognition.

There is also a question of national connection. Eighteen of Australia's 28 Governors-General were born in the United Kingdom. One might reasonably give greater consideration to those with a more direct Australian connection, although birthplace alone is hardly a satisfactory test of contribution. All Governors-General appointed since 1965 have been Australian citizens, and Sir Isaac Isaacs, the first Australian-born Governor-General, has already been commemorated in an electorate name.

The point is not that Governors-General should be excluded. It is that the office itself should not be the argument. What did the individual contribute, and why does that contribution merit lasting recognition?

Having been Governor-General is an insufficient reason to name an electorate after Bill Hayden

So what about Bill Hayden?

Being Leader of the Opposition is a significant political role, but it does not necessarily amount to an outstanding contribution to the country. Hayden's departure from the leadership on the very day the 1983 federal election was called is an episode that can be interpreted in different ways, depending on one's political sympathies and one's view of the circumstances.

Some might see his replacement by Bob Hawke as an unfortunate end to a political career; others might regard it as an important moment in the ALP's path to electoral victory. Neither interpretation, on its own, provides a sufficient basis for naming an electorate after Hayden.

Nor am I convinced that the mere fact of having been a politician should be enough. Parliament has contained many people who have served competently and honourably without necessarily having made the sort of exceptional contribution that warrants a permanent place on the electoral map.

That is not a criticism of political service as such. It is a plea for a distinction between having occupied an important position and having achieved something sufficiently remarkable to justify commemorating it.

If we are to name electorates after politicians, there should be a clear explanation of what sets them apart from the many others who have held senior office.

Queensland Greats: a wider field of candidates

A quick look at the list of Queensland Greats suggests that there is no shortage of people whose achievements deserve consideration. There are now decades of recipients to examine, although many are still alive. This does shrink the pool for consideration.

Still, the list offers a useful reminder that outstanding contributions come in many forms. Politics is only one of them.

A few names struck me as particularly interesting candidates for future consideration:

- **Small — Sir Andrew Bruce Small.** His contribution to Australian manufacturing and bicycle production through Malvern Star is worth remembering, including the company's manufacture of its own parts during the Second World War. There is something appealing about recognising an industrial achievement that helped build Australian manufacturing capability, rather than another career in public office.
- **Cleary — Honor Dell Cleary.** A Guwa and Kuku Yalanji Aboriginal woman, Cleary is credited with introducing cultural, numeracy and literacy programs and services that had not previously been taught to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Improving educational opportunities while respecting Indigenous culture is surely a contribution that deserves serious consideration.
- **Mackay-Sim — Alan Mackay-Sim.** A biomedical scientist who specialised in adult stem cell research and the olfactory system, Mackay-Sim represents the kind of achievement that can have significance well beyond a particular state.

Scientific contributions may be less immediately familiar to the public than political careers, but that hardly makes them less worthy of recognition.

- **Sinclair — John Sinclair.** An environmentalist who received the Global 500 Roll of Honour award in 1990 and the Goldman Environmental Prize in 1993, Sinclair spent three decades fighting to protect K'gari (Fraser Island). His campaign helped stop logging of the island's rainforest and sand mining by multinational corporations. That is a tangible achievement: a determined individual helping preserve an important part of Australia's natural heritage.

These are not necessarily recommendations for immediate adoption. They are examples of the breadth of achievement that should be considered when deciding who deserves a place in the names of federal electorates.

There is also a practical issue. The Queensland Greats list includes many living recipients, so it cannot simply be treated as a ready-made catalogue of names for electorates. But it provides a useful starting point for identifying people whose contributions might otherwise be overlooked.

What should the standard be?

None of this requires us to pretend that politicians have not made worthwhile contributions, or that party affiliation should disqualify anyone. A fair process should be capable of recognising achievement across political lines.

But political balance should be a means of ensuring fairness, not the principal objective. Finding one person from the ALP and one from the Liberal Party might produce a superficially balanced outcome while leaving the more important question unanswered: why these people?

A federal electorate name is a form of public recognition. It is not a medal awarded simply for reaching a particular rung on the political ladder, nor should it be a consolation prize for a career that ended badly. The fact that someone led a party, held ministerial office or served as Governor-General may explain why their name is familiar. It does not, without more, explain why their name should be commemorated.

The test should be whether the person made an exceptional contribution, whether that contribution is worth remembering nationally, and whether the case for recognition can be explained convincingly to people who do not already share the person's political sympathies.

There are plenty of Australians who have made outstanding contributions in science, education, industry, environmental protection, the arts and community life. They may not have occupied the most prominent offices, and their achievements may require more explanation than a list of political titles. That is all the more reason to give them serious consideration.

If the best argument for naming an electorate after someone is that they once held an important office, perhaps the argument has not yet been made.