



post thumbnail

## It Reeks Of Blasphemy, But Might More MPs Give Us Better Service?

### **Publish Date:**

January 2021

---

Australian democracy faces a crisis of representation. People feel alienated from our politics and our institutions. Donkey votes are up, minor parties' votes are up, and the major parties are riven by internal dissent. In a way, even the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament can be seen as an attempted end-run around the dysfunction of our electoral process. In short, no-one seems to think that our Federal Parliament can do its job of representing the Australian people's diverse interests.

One intriguing, and perhaps counterintuitive, response to this problem was floated recently in the Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters report into the 2019 election. The report recommends further consideration of an expansion of the number of seats in the House of Representatives, and the repeal of the nexus clause of the Constitution, which links the membership of the House to that of the Senate.

That is, the solution for dissatisfaction with the political class is to hire more politicians.

It would be easy to dismiss this idea out of hand, with the line that no-one wants more politicians. Indeed, in 1967 a referendum on the nexus clause was rejected by 60 per cent of voters and by 5 of 6 states.

But the idea deserves a closer look. Consider that when politicians feign modesty and use this line, they are also saying they do not want their own power to be diluted or to face increased competition for attention. For those who already have seats in Parliament, it is in their own interest to keep their ranks small.

Meanwhile, the case for increasing the number of representatives is sound. As the committee notes, the House has not grown since 1984. Back then, each electorate had, on average, 67,000 voters. Today, that figure is 109,000. If you feel that your vote counts for less than before, you are right.

The small number of House members has two other important effects. First, as parliament has stayed the same size, the bureaucracy has grown rapidly, and now threatens to over-extend parliament's capacity for oversight. Secondly, the major parties are increasingly fractious, as evidenced by the past decade's frequent leadership challenges, but their internal diversity is rarely spotted in parliament, where party discipline, easier in smaller caucuses, suppresses dissenting views.

That said, expanding the House might cause concern among some smaller states. An expansion of the House would not mean an increase in the number of seats in every state, and so some states would see their share of House seats decline. In turn, this would make those states'

---



members less powerful in their respective party rooms.

That is true even before we consider repealing the nexus clause, which would make it possible to expand the House to a point where the Government's votes would generally overwhelm Senate opposition at a joint sitting of parliament, further diminishing the standing of the smaller states.

Perhaps, then, we ought to consider the expansion of the parliament as a whole. After all, the logic of expanding the House applies just the same to the Senate, which is, in part, why the nexus clause was included in the constitution in the first place – to maintain a balance of power between the houses. Unlike the United Kingdom, our upper house is not restricted to an advisory role, and unlike the United States, it was never intended as a small pseudo-aristocratic brake on the majoritarian impulses of the lower house.

But here another complication arises: as the Senate expands, it moves away from its historic role as the states' house. Increasingly, given their rapid growth, the Senate is the cities' house. On this point, the Committee's report notes the paucity of Senators' offices in the regions, and contemplates the creation of smaller Senate electorates.

A more radical idea, but one that the founders considered inevitable, is the creation of new states. This would make Senate representation more local and, by increasing the number of Senators, also permit an increase in the number of House seats.

One way or another, our Parliament needs to wrestle with the problem of representation. As odd as it may seem, the first step might be to admit that yes, we do need more politicians.

**Original Link:**

<https://spectator.com.au/2021/01/it-reeks-of-blasphemy-but-might-more-mp-give-us-better-service/>

**Originally published in:**

The Spectator Australia