

Submission: Electoral Districts Redistribution Proposals 2020

Reference: NSW200701/34

Liberal Party of Australia NSW proposal – Clarence and Lismore electoral districts

Summary

Richmond Valley Council (RVC) strongly opposes the Liberal Party proposal to divide our local government area between reconfigured electoral districts of Lismore and Clarence. Council believes that our LGA should be wholly contained within a single electorate, as this provides the best opportunity to maintain and develop existing community, economic and cultural links within the Richmond Valley. The current electoral boundaries for Clarence are an appropriate fit for our community and we do not wish to see them changed in any substantial way. RVC is responsible for planning holistically for the future of our valley, including the communities of Casino, Coraki, Broadwater, Woodburn and Evans Head. We feel the proposal to split this region between multiple electorates will make it extremely difficult for our communities to receive consistent representation and support. There is a risk that Casino will become the ‘poor relation’ of Lismore in terms of representation, and the needs of our smaller Mid-Richmond settlements will be subsumed by the demands of larger population centres to the north. The people of the Richmond Valley have committed to a common future for our communities and we want to see that preserved. Council has worked hard to build strong partnerships with the NSW Government, to deliver the outcomes our community deserves. We want this collaborative approach to continue within the bounds of a single electoral district.

Strategic alignment

Richmond Valley Council is responsible for planning for the future of our local government area (LGA) under the Integrated Planning and Reporting provisions of the *Local Government Act 1993*. Council has developed long term strategies for community growth, major transport and tourist links and economic development of the entire LGA and is systematically working to deliver these outcomes in partnership with other levels of government.

A key component of our success has been Council’s capacity to develop productive working relationships with a single State representative who has responsibility to represent our entire local government area. The Liberal Party proposal would see our LGA split between two electorates, with two different representatives. Council believes the current configuration of the Clarence electorate, provides an even balance between the Richmond Valley and Grafton population centres and ensures more equitable representation.

Council is concerned that this would not be the case if centres such as Casino shared an electorate with Lismore, or our smaller coastal communities were compelled to share representation with centres such as Ballina. The proposed reconfiguration of the Lismore electorate is disproportionate and does not support consistent representation. The population centres of Casino (10,000) and Tenterfield (4000) will have limited influence beside the greater demands of Lismore (27,000). Similarly, there is a risk that the small settlements of the Mid-Richmond (total population 5,500) will not be heard amongst the 26,000 voices of Ballina.

Maintaining our entire local government area in a single electorate has allowed our council to successfully advocate for economic development opportunities and the staged upgrade of major freight and tourist routes (such as the Woodburn-Casino Road and the Summerland Way between Grafton and Casino). If the electoral boundaries were reconfigured as proposed, securing strategic investment in these roads would become more difficult, as council would be required to work with multiple State representatives, with varying priorities. We believe the current electoral boundaries offer the best strategic alignment to help our region grow and prosper.

Economic, social and regional communities of interest

There are significant socio-economic and cultural ties between the communities of Casino and the Mid-Richmond encompassing Coraki, Woodburn, Broadwater and Evans Head.

This was demonstrated some 20 years ago, when members of these communities supported a voluntary amalgamation of their former local government areas to form Richmond Valley Council. In presenting their proposal to the NSW Governor, the communities highlighted the cultural and historic ties between the various settlements and expressed a willingness to work together and share a common future. The new Richmond Valley Council was proclaimed in 2000 and since that time the relationships between these communities have strengthened, with Casino serving as the administrative centre for the LGA.

To align Casino with Tenterfield (127 km away) rather than communities in the same local government area seems to make little sense. Similarly, there appears to be no logic in linking Casino with Lismore. Although Lismore is some 30 km from Casino, the two centres are significantly different. While they may share some basic services, they do not share a common future. Casino is a traditional rural centre, Lismore an emerging regional city. Casino does not wish to be regarded as a satellite of Lismore. Its community is different, and its needs and priorities are different.

Of particular importance to our community is the need to respect and sustain the cultural links between our Aboriginal communities. The traditional custodians of the land surrounding the Richmond River form the southern part of the wider Bundjalung Nation. There are significant Aboriginal populations in Coraki and Casino who share cultural links and have close ties with the coastal areas. One of the annual rituals of these communities was the movement from the mountain ranges to the coast during the winter months. Evans Head has special status as a traditional meeting place for local Aboriginal communities of the extended Bundjalung Nation. We believe it is important that these traditional ties with the Richmond River and coastal areas are maintained and that existing patterns of service delivery for these communities remain. The proposed reconfiguration of the Clarence and Lismore electoral districts shows little regard to traditional cultural connections.

There are also significant links between the inland and coastal communities for the wider Richmond Valley population. Historically the Richmond River played a critical role in the development of communities such as Coraki and Casino as the main passage for transporting timber and other agricultural produce. The river has helped to shape a common identity for our region and continues to draw our settlements together. In summer months, residents from the inland towns have traditionally gravitated to the coastal villages for recreation, social gatherings and holidays. Relationships between the communities remain strong and they share many services.

Agriculture is also a significant unifier and part of the Mid Richmond / Richmond Valley identity, with beef, dairy farming and sugar cane being the predominant industries. Beef producers in the Mid-Richmond rely on the Northern Rivers Livestock Exchange in Casino to sell their cattle, while cane producers in the Casino district rely on the sugar mill at Broadwater. There are traditional links between the farming practices of our valley – as distinct from the macadamia, coffee and more niche farm products grown on the Alstonville plain towards Ballina and Byron. Our farming communities rely on a consistent approach to the care and maintenance of key freight routes within our region to ensure their success. This is best achieved by ensuring this critical infrastructure is contained within a single electorate, with the opportunity to develop working partnerships for advocacy and funding.

Existing electoral boundaries

The existing Clarence and Lismore electorates are still within their population quota and the allowable variation. There is no immediate need to reconfigure these boundaries. Although Council acknowledges that the Ballina district is growing rapidly, we believe this can be accommodated through a minor variation of the existing boundary (transferring the Wardell region to Clarence) without the radical reconfiguration proposed by the Liberal Party. The existing electoral boundaries are working well for our community and Council sees no need to change them. There appears to be no logic in dividing an existing local government area between two disparate electorates. Richmond Valley Council does not support this proposal and strongly advocates for the existing configuration of the Clarence Electorate to remain.