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Comment on suggestions: Sharing of names between LGAs and Electoral Divisions

Alan Thomas, December 2023

Context

In my suggestion to the AEC¹ (S51) I argued that the practice of giving Divisions names that are already used for LGAs is a source of real confusion for voters and should cease.

Further, I proposed that five of the seven Divisions that already share names with Victorian LGAs should be renamed at the first reasonable opportunity.

I was pleased to see that this contention is supported by other suggestions, as outlined below.

General support

Several suggestions make remarks that echo my concerns regarding the real potential for confusion caused by these Division names.

Ben (S16), in section 5 of his suggestion, argues for the retirement of the Division names **Casey, La Trobe and Monash** as a “potential source of confusion” for electors, with a particular recommendation to rename La Trobe. This is essentially the same argument as I made in S51.

Cheston Mak (S20) proposes the renaming of (among others) **Corangamite, Maribyrnong and Monash**. Cheston comments on the geographical mismatch between the LGAs and the Divisions, and notes that the name Monash in particular “could be confusing”.

Darren McSweeney (S25), in suggesting the abolition of the Division of McEwen and transfer of its name to the Division of **Casey**, observes that “this will also remove a source of confusion, with the name Casey now debatably being more well known as the name of a local government area serving a nearby, but distinctly different part of the state”.²

It is heartening to see that others recognise that these Division names create practical difficulties. Needless to say, I am in full support of these contentions.

Specific renaming proposals

Among the suggestions that concentrated on electorate naming only, two concrete proposals for Division renaming emerged. It was pleasing to observe that both of these proposals concern Divisions which share their name with an LGA.

Suggestions S12, S13, S17, S29, S31 and S54 propose to rename the **Division of Casey to “Barak”** after the Wurundjeri elder William Barak. Most of these suggestions comment on the confusion that exists between the Division and the LGA. Tanya Kovac (S31) further observes that “Renaming the seat to Casey will not diminish recognition of Lord Richard Casey [...] He is already recognized with the local government area, City of Casey, named after him.”

In addition, suggestion S11 proposes to rename the **Division of La Trobe to “Flack”** after the Olympian Edwin Flack.

¹ I use the name “AEC” loosely in this submission. In most circumstances I am actually referring to redistribution committees and augmented electoral commissions.

² McSweeney (S25) and Warren Grzic (S38) also argue for the renaming of the Division of La Trobe, but for a different reason. McSweeney, in particular, contends that, given the relative insignificance of Charles La Trobe’s achievements, there is an opportunity to rename the Division in honour of a woman or an Indigenous name.

The names put forward in these suggestions are clearly those of distinguished Australians worthy of commemoration in this manner. I support these proposals.

Larger suggestions that comment on electorate naming

Among the larger suggestions that cover the whole State, there are numerous proposals to rename Divisions, several of which relate to Divisions that share names with LGAs.

Firstly, Benjamin Close (S7) proposes the renaming of several Divisions, including Ballarat to “Yollie”, Melbourne to “Batman” and Corangamite to “Connewarre”.

I support this suggestion insofar as it advocates for renaming of these Divisions. Unfortunately, the names proposed for Ballarat and Melbourne are weak. However, the proposal to rename the **Division of Corangamite to “Connewarre”** has greater merit. Even though “Connewarre” is a place name, a type of name which is generally to be avoided, it is an Indigenous name that is applied to a well-known lake – maximising its recognisability – but is not shared with a township³ or LGA – minimising the risk of confusion. Moreover, the Division is centred on the well-populated Bellarine Peninsula and cannot move any further east. This makes it difficult to imagine how the Division could ever be redrawn so it did not include Lake Connewarre. Having said all this, there is no pressing need to rename the Division of Corangamite, as explained in my suggestion (S51) and that of Darren McSweeney (S25), so my support for this proposal is lukewarm.

Secondly, two submissions discuss the naming of the Division of Melbourne. Charles Richardson (S60) observes that this Division shares a name with the State District of Melbourne and suggests that the name be retired, while Anonymous 1 (S27) suggests renaming the **Division of Melbourne to “Birrarung”**, the local Aboriginal name for the Yarra River, in order to “increase specificity and reduce confusion”.

I am broadly supportive of S27’s proposal. The situation is similar to that of “Connewarre”. “Birrarung” is a place name, but the geographic prominence of the Yarra River in the inner Melbourne area makes it all but certain that the Division would always touch, if not encompass, a segment of the river, even after many subsequent redistributions.

Finally, several suggestions (S25, S32, S49, S57) propose drastic alterations to the boundaries of the Division of **Casey**, and as a consequence they argue for the retirement of the name. Most of these suggestions merge the Divisions of Casey and McEwen and argue for the Prime Ministerial name “McEwen” to be retained. Although I have no opinion on the redrawing of boundaries in this context, the submitters of these suggestions have clearly reached the correct conclusion regarding naming.

Conclusion

There is clear support for the idea of renaming Divisions that share names with Victorian LGAs. This support arises both from submitters who explicitly argue for reducing confusion, and those who propose renaming for other reasons.

It is worth noting that there are few suggestions that make comments on Division names without proposing to rename at least one of the Divisions that shares a name with a Victorian LGA. This is a theme that stands out among the suggestions made. Moreover, there is an absence of explicit, argued support for the *retention* of the confusing names. The strongest statement to this effect – from Mark Mulcair (S32), who “tend[s] to lean against” the renaming of Divisions that are not subject to major boundary alterations – is hardly strong at all.

³ Names of cities and towns should be avoided in Victoria considering the VEC’s practice of using these names for State electoral Districts. There is a locality of Connewarre, but it is a thinly populated rural area and lacks anything resembling a township or focal point.

Addendum: Adjustment to original suggestion

In my original suggestion (S51), under “Action 2”, I made the following proposal:

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 names⁴ 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.

On reflection, the proposed guideline does not go far enough to discourage the use of place names. Here is a stronger proposal that captures the essence of the current guideline:

- Geographic names, such as “Kalgoorlie”, should be avoided in circumstances where a Division is likely to shift considerably from its current location over the course of many redistribution cycles.
- 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.

As I proposed in S51, the revised set of guidelines should be used in the current Victorian redistribution and all future Federal redistributions.

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