

# REVIEW OF ENTITLEMENTS FOR MEMBERS OF THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

SUBMISSION BY TOM DALE

This submission is made in response to the Issues Paper published by the ACT Remuneration Tribunal in December 2013.

## The basis for payment of ACT MLAs

The Issues Paper makes familiar assertions about the need for adequate remuneration of politicians – regularly and popularly summarized as “pay peanuts, get monkeys” – and cites a recent article in the respected UK journal *Prospect* in support.

However, pay levels are only one factor in ensuring that we get the best quality of political representation. Politicians themselves regularly cite a range of motives for entering into public service, and even if some of these are self-serving it does not follow that pay is a major pull factor in getting the “best” politicians, nor that there is a link between pay levels and the value of work done by MLAs.

## Canberra’s local politicians: anything special?

The Issues Paper tries to identify MLA work issues specific to the ACT but also relies heavily on comparisons with other jurisdictions. The result is a bit of a muddle.

The most relevant ACT-specific issues are, I suggest:

- A jurisdiction limited to one city, and not a particularly big one at that. The population of the ACT outside Canberra is very small, and not one well looked after by any MLA I have ever spoken with. So, no need to travel very far.
- A regional (Southern NSW) dimension, notably with regard to health and education. The Issues Paper notes that this creates additional responsibilities for ACT MLAs but offers no evidence in support. I suggest hardly anyone outside Canberra will have heard of any ACT MLA, let alone seek their assistance – regional issues are essentially a matter for the executive.
- Multi-member electorates, blurring exactly who any given Canberran’s “local representative” is and reducing the pressure (both quantitative and qualitative) from constituents found in single member electorates.
- A messy division of local and national capital functions and responsibilities, allowing ACT MLAs to wash their hands of issues such as parking in the Parliamentary Triangle.

## Work Value and Work Load

The Issues Paper states that the Tribunal is more concerned with work value than workload – a reasonable approach – but makes no effort to identify possible metrics for MLA work value, instead falling back on clichéd assumptions about a healthy politic and local community wellbeing. If the only metric for MLA pay is getting voted in or out at an election then the whole exercise is a pretty rough one and public money to pay politicians is not accounted for. The Tribunal could at least have a look at:

- Outputs (not just time spent) from Assembly Chamber and Committee work eg bills introduced, inquiries participated in.
- Outputs from constituent representation work, including qualitative assessment (what do the constituents think, is it just passing on a letter with an email on top) and quantitative (why are some MLAs more active than others in making representations and following them up).
- Accessibility of MLAs, both face to face and online.

It would be useful to consider whether the value of an MLAs work is being affected by new mechanisms for scrutiny of government (noted by the Issues Paper, under the unfortunate cliché of “a well oiled machine”); and more open communications facilitated by digital technology (not considered in the Issues Paper). If the effect of such trends is to focus citizens more directly on the actions of the executive, does this mean the value of non-executive MLAs is declining in relative terms?

The suggestion in the Issues Paper that ACT MLAs are more likely to be recognized in the community is dubious. The implication that this could be a factor in their level of remuneration is just silly. If they are recognized, so much the better for local democracy, but why on earth should they be paid more for it?

## Resettlement Allowance

It is hard to see why ceasing to be an MLA (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) should attract special financial or other assistance. The Issues Paper notes that the Tribunal sees some circumstances for MLAs as “particularly harsh” compared to the rest of the public sector. However, those other public sector arrangements are likely to change, and become less generous, as the notion of “career service” becomes more flexible and jobs are changed more frequently.

## Electorate Allowance

The Issues Paper notes a fair proportion of expenditure of electorate allowances by MLAs on newspaper subscriptions and mailing of publications. There is a thing called the Internet, they may have heard of it. Seriously, digital technology offers significant potential efficiencies in the way MLAs do their work.

About the author of this submission

I have lived in Canberra since 1974. From 1974 until 2008 I worked in the Australian Public Service, the last 12 years as a member of the Senior Executive Service. I currently work as a consultant, focusing on business improvement. I always vote at local elections and pay my rates on time.

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