

Greater Wellington Regional Council's Submission on the Justice and Electoral Select Committee Enquiry into the 2004 Local Authority Elections

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the Enquiry into the 2004 Local Authority Elections.

Greater Wellington Regional Council's submission endorses many of the points raised in Local Government New Zealand's (LGNZ) submission. Instead of repeating exactly what is written in LGNZ's submission we have simply listed all the recommendations the Council explicitly supports. We have also included comments on representation arrangements that are specific to regional councils.

We note that it would be easy to speculate on many of the issues raised in the Select Committee's Terms of Reference. We caution against such speculation and urge the Select Committee commission the research necessary to answer the questions posed so that it may make informed decisions and recommendations. In our view, the information necessary is not available at this time and is unlikely to be gained through the submission process. The 2004 elections presented a number of unique characteristics (e.g. Single Transferable Vote electoral system) that will not have been considered in research carried out into previous elections.

1. Assessment of the Local Electoral Act 2001 and regulations

1.1 Review and report on the process and outcome of the representation reviews undertaken in 2003/04 under the 2002 amendment to the Act

The Council is particularly concerned by:

- a) the narrow number of factors provided for in the Local Electoral Act 2001 for determining constituency representation, and
- b) the restricted application of the population criteria on constituency representation that was demonstrated by the Local Government Commission in 2004.

A formula based on population presents regional councils with significant issues regarding representation, fairness and effectiveness. An example is the Wairarapa constituency of Greater Wellington Regional Council, which constitutes three-quarters of the land area of the Wellington Region yet contains less than ten percent of the region's population. Under the population formula Wairarapa Constituency would only have one elected representative, while under the previous formula, which recognised land area and rateable value, it has two. In the Wairarapa much of the Council's work relates to land (i.e. animal control, plant pests and soil conservation) rather than people. Further, the Council is required by an Order in Council to have a Wairarapa Committee (of elected members from the Wairarapa Constituency and appointed members) to consider all matters affecting the Wairarapa. The effective working of this Committee would be seriously compromised if only one elected member was on the Committee.

Recommendation: That the provisions in the Local Electoral Act 2001 for setting constituency boundaries are amended for regional councils to take account of land area and rateable value, as well as population ratios, and that the Local Government Commission considers the impact of its decisions on fair and effective representation.

2. Participation and elector turnout

Select Committee's Terms of Reference	Greater Wellington's Response
Identify what factors influenced elector turnout (including the extent to which particular factors affect turnout, such as the use of Single Transferable Vote (STV), the impact of a vigorous mayoral contest or a controversial local issue)	We believe that representation issues are more likely to affect voter turnout. Therefore, when making decisions on representation issues the Government and the Local Government Commission consider the impact of their decisions on likely voter turnout
Identify the approach of local authorities and others in New Zealand and overseas in encouraging elector turnout, and the effectiveness of those approaches	The Electoral Commission should be charged with the responsibility to oversee national education with regard to all public sector electoral processes – local and national, and that funding should be provided to enable this to occur
Review the effectiveness of advertising in raising voter awareness of the elections	That national funding be provided to encourage voters to fill in and return their voting papers during the three week voting period
Review the impact of the media coverage of the elections	That a strategy be developed to raise the awareness amongst media of the role they can play in enhancing interest and participation in local elections and understanding about the role of local government. As a result we recommend that the public broadcasting charter is amended to promote local democracy

3. Electoral systems

Select Committee's Terms of Reference	Greater Wellington's Response
<p>Review the means available to local authorities and electors to review the electoral system which they utilised in 2004</p>	<p>Recommends that no change be made to the provisions governing the processes required to change electoral systems and further that in the situation where a poll of electors is taking place about whether or not to adopt an alternative electoral system that the Electoral Commission be charged, and resourced, to provide information on the relative advantages and disadvantages of each system</p>
<p>Assess the management and impact of different electoral systems (STV and First Past the Post) being operated through the same ballot paper, including the desirability of separate ballot papers. Compare the level of spoilt ballot papers, especially in those areas that only used STV and those that only used STV for district health board elections. Consider whether there should be only one electoral system at local level or whether voter education and ballot paper design could overcome the potential confusion of having two systems operating at once</p>	<p>It is essential to undertake significant research before any decisions are made in relation to this issue. This will ensure that any recommendations made by the Select Committee are objective, rather than subjective.</p>