



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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Wahine O Aotearoa

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**Submission to Justice and Electoral Select Committee
on the Inquiry into MMP**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 46 nationally organised societies. It has 35 branches spread throughout the country to which women from some 150 societies are affiliated.

NCW appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important review as encouragement of members to respond to the responsibilities of citizenship is central to its policies.

This submission has been prepared by the nucleus group of the Public Affairs Standing Committee with input from branches (representing both major and smaller population centres) affiliated societies and several individuals. It is structured around the seven points outlined in the terms of reference for the MMP Review Committee.

1. Changes to Sections 35 and 36 of the Electoral Act 1993

There was almost complete consensus that, given the number of members of parliament remains substantially the same, then changes to the provisions of the Act with respect to setting electorate boundaries are not needed at present. The few reservations expressed on this point mainly concerned fairness with respect to smaller population areas.

There was also a clear view that it is too early for any decisions that would impact on the operation of MMP to be made. Ongoing monitoring is seen as important. It is noted that, while the present provisions allow for adjustments in response to demographic changes evident in each five-year census, revision of the Act would need to be considered only if these variations become more dramatic.

2. Maori Representation

There is a clear feeling that decisions with respect to Maori seats are rightly the province of Maori, with most submissions not taking a firm stand on this matter. At present Maori, through registering on the Maori roll, are able to exert leverage with respect to the number of dedicated seats. It is noted that despite the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform advising abolition of Maori seats, the Maori at that time favoured their retention. In the few comments advocating abolition of Maori seats such a change is recommended for its potential unifying effect, and is seen as best occurring over time.

3. A further referendum on changes to the electoral system

Most of the responses to this question expressed a clear "No". Results of previous referenda (1992 and 1993) were unambiguous with respect to the need for electoral reform and that the change should take the form of MMP. It is premature to consider further change at this time. While the appropriateness of the present Review as a progress report is acknowledged, it is emphasised that a minimum of three full terms is needed before any assessment can be made of what has been achieved by the move to MMP.





A significant number of comments addressed the importance of proper preparation for, and conduct of, any future referenda - with particular concern for public education in relation to both the issues and the process. There needs to be budgeting to cover such a public education programme. There were specific references to experience with the recent Citizen Initiated Referenda, in particular unclear wording, and confusion in the minds of some voters regarding essential differences between reforming the legislature and effecting changes in the conduct of parliament and behaviour of individual members.

4. Appropriate number of members of Parliament

While the respondents' views ranged from 60 to 150, responses mostly favoured more than the previous 99, with the present number of 120 being cited most frequently. We note that 120 is substantially fewer than the Royal Commission recommendation. There is a body of research which shows that by international standards the size of the New Zealand parliament is modest. In a review of 23 countries with populations not exceeding 20 million it was found that 11 have a higher member to population ratio whereas for the other eleven it is lower.

The strong case against reducing the present 120 seats is based on the argument that fewer members would generally limit diversity, make it difficult to maintain proportionality and definitely reduce representation in parliament of women, Maori, and ethnic minorities. Conversely there is strong support for the increased representation, particularly for women, achieved in the elections conducted under MMP.

Furthermore we believe that any reduction in the number of members is contra-indicated by the volume of work which Parliament needs to achieve. With fewer members available, select committees would be put under increasing pressure due to inevitable reduction in their number and/or size. The function of government would be adversely affected, leaving little scope for proactive and innovative developments. The relatively small savings achieved by having fewer members would not compensate for these disadvantages. We are aware that some members of the public consider that fewer members would result in a better behaved parliament, but we do not see the relationship between size and conduct to be so simple or direct. There are other more appropriate avenues for dealing with problems of conduct.

5. Electoral system changes to enhance representation of women

There was strong emphasis on entry to parliament by merit, and hence little favour for quotas, with a significant number of submissions explicitly opposing such a scheme. The importance of women, and women's organisations, giving encouragement to able women at all phases of the election process was stated. It was also noted that women tend to enter parliament more readily via lists, often experiencing difficulty in gaining party nomination. Parties need to address the latter situation and at the same time ensure that there are well prepared women among the top list names.

Other comments included the observation that the parliamentary system having been established from a male perspective does not always work in ways that are congenial to women. Another suggestion concerned a 'school' for aspiring and new women members, and it was noted that if parliament could develop a more 'family friendly' work environment, this would help to correct the gender imbalance.

However, over and beyond all the above with respect to what women need to do, we hold that as a signatory to the Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the New Zealand government has a responsibility to take more active measures directed at closing the gender gap in political and public life. With respect to parliamentary representation the present 33% of women is still a long way from matching the gender distribution of the general population.



6. Representation of tangata whenua and ethnic minorities

We do not have any specific recommendations to make on this point, the general view being that much of what has been said under the other headings is also relevant to this issue. The effectiveness of MMP in improving representation for all is already being demonstrated. At no time in New Zealand's history has it been more important that all citizens accept and exercise their democratic right and responsibility to participate in the political process. Government therefore needs to be committed to ensuring an informed electorate.

7. Other suggestions for change

One comment was to the effect that voting in general elections should be made compulsory. Other comments mainly concerned issues such as the need for continuing and better public education with respect to the operation of MMP; requirement that a member leaving his/her party must automatically resign from parliament; list MP's being made responsible to a group of electors; and, the conduct of elections. The general tenor of comments in the latter area is that there is room for much improvement, specifically with respect to:

- availability of computerised and postal voting for those casting votes outside their electorate
- computerisation to simplify enrolment and casting of special votes, and earlier closure (10 days prior to election) for the latter
- if a general election and referendum are combined then counting of votes for former must take priority,
- clearly worded and presented referendum questions, and
- proof of identity to be required at polling booth.
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CONCLUSION

In summary the conclusions reached in preparing this NCWNZ submission are as follows:

At present changes to Sections 35 and 36 of the Electoral Act 1993 are not required.

With the proviso that the decision rightly rests with Maori, changes to the Maori seats - other than those that come about as a response to numbers of people on the Maori roll - are not recommended.

It is strongly recommended that, to allow MMP to be fairly evaluated, there be no further referenda relating to the electoral system for at least another three years.

There should be no reduction in the number of members of Parliament below the present 120.

While women need to continue their endeavours to achieve equal political representation the New Zealand government, consistent with their obligations as a CEDAW signatory, must become more active in identifying and addressing barriers to women's full participation in public life.

The change to MMP is effecting significant positive changes.

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National President

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Public Affairs Standing Committee