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# Information

for voters relating to the  
citizens initiated referendum on  
whether the number of  
Members of Parliament should  
be reduced from 120 to 99

At the 1999 general election, voters will be able to vote 'Yes' or 'No' in a non-binding referendum on the question '*Should the size of the House of Representatives be reduced from 120 members to 99 members?*'

The Electoral Commission has prepared this information for voters in accordance with its statutory responsibility under section 5(d) of the Electoral Act 1993 to promote public awareness of electoral matters.

The Electoral Commission does not express an opinion on whether there should or should not be a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament.

The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for the administrative arrangements for conducting this citizens initiated referendum. Information about those arrangements will be included in the *Voters Guide* which will be distributed to every household in New Zealand a few days before election day.



*F Clifton White Resource Center 12/99*  
International Foundation for Election Systems

Electoral Commission  
*Tē Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri*

October, 1999

# Questions and Answers

## **Q1. How many electorate MPs and list MPs will there be after the 1999 general election?**

There will be 67 electorate MPs elected at the 1999 general election –

- 16 MPs representing General electorates in the South Island,
- 45 MPs representing General electorates in the North Island, and
- 6 MPs representing Māori electorates.

Unless there is an ‘overhang’ (see Q5), there will be 53 list MPs after the 1999 election to reach the total of 120 MPs.

## **Q2. How are the numbers of electorate seats and list seats decided?**

The number of General electorates in the South Island is fixed at 16. The average population per General electorate in the South Island is used to calculate the number of General electorates in the North Island and the number of Māori electorates.

The boundaries of the General electorates in the South Island, the number and boundaries of the General electorates in the North Island, and the number and boundaries of the Māori electorates are reviewed by the independent Representation Commission after each 5-yearly census and Māori electoral option. The next review will take place after the census to be held in March 2001 and the subsequent Māori electoral option.

The number of list seats is the difference between the number of General and Māori electorate seats and the total number of seats in Parliament.

## **Q3. Will the result of this citizens initiated referendum affect the number of MPs elected at the 1999 general election?**

No. Parliament would have to amend the Electoral Act 1993 after the referendum if the total number of MPs is to be reduced.

## **Q4. If the number of MPs is reduced to 99, how could this be done?**

The referendum question does not say how the Electoral Act 1993 should be amended to reduce the total number of MPs from 120 to 99.

The reduction could be made –

- by changing the number of list MPs, or
- by changing the total number of General and Māori electorates, or
- by combining a change in the number of list MPs with a change in the total number of General and Māori electorates.

An amendment to the Electoral Act 1993 regarding the number of General electorates would require a vote of 75% of all MPs or approval by a majority of voters at a special binding referendum held for that purpose. A majority of MPs voting in Parliament could change the total number of MPs (and hence change the number of list MPs), and could change the basis on which the number of Māori electorate seats is calculated.

If the Electoral Act 1993 is amended to reduce the total number of MPs, it is likely that the reduction would come into effect at the first general election after the law was changed.

### **Q5. Could a reduction to 99 MPs affect elections under MMP?**

The basic principle of MMP would not change: in general, each political party would continue to have a share of all the seats in Parliament based on its share of all the Party Votes – provided the party qualifies by winning an electorate seat or by winning at least 5% of all the Party Votes.

However if there was a significant decrease in the proportion of list seats compared to the total number of seats, there would be more chance that a general election would result in an 'overhang'. That occurs when a party wins more electorate seats than the total number of seats it is entitled to based on its Party Votes. The number of list seats in Parliament is then increased by the number of overhang seats until the next general election.

Projections by Statistics New Zealand show that it is likely that the total number of General electorate seats and the number of Māori electorate seats will continue to increase after each 5-yearly census and Māori electoral option. If that trend continues, in general the number of list seats under MMP will continue to fall, whether there are 99 or 120 seats in total.

### **Q6. How much public money could be saved every year if we had 99 MPs rather than 120?**

The actual savings would depend on how the number of MPs was actually reduced – see Q4.

The Electoral Commission does not have independent information on this matter. The Parliamentary Service has calculated that, if the number of list MPs is reduced by 21, the savings would be at least \$7.1 million per year. This calculation is based on current salaries, allowances, travel costs, communications costs, staff costs and funding for parliamentary parties. It also assumes there are 21 ministers and 50 members in the government party or parties. However the calculation does not include savings in rent and other overhead costs, since these would depend on whether leased office space could be sublet.

The savings from other ways of reducing the number of MPs to 99 outlined in Q4 would depend on exactly how the reduction was made.

### **Q7. Could a reduction to 99 MPs affect representation?**

Once again, that would depend on how the change was made.

A reduction in the number of electorates would increase the average number of people per electorate and increase the geographic sizes of electorates.

On the other hand, an increase in the number of electorates would reduce the average number of people per electorate and reduce the geographic sizes of electorates.

A reduction in the number of list MPs could reduce the numbers of list MPs who are women, Māori, Pacific Islanders or from other ethnic or social groups.

### **Q8. Could a reduction to 99 MPs affect the work of Parliament?**

The Clerk of the House of Representatives has advised that a reduction in the total number of MPs could –

- affect the membership, operation and cost of select committees;
- allow MPs more opportunities to speak in the House;
- reduce the number of MPs in the governing party or parties from which ministers are chosen;
- reduce the influence of Parliament over the government if the number of ministers remains at current levels.

## Q9. How many people per MP does New Zealand have compared to other countries?

Some countries have more people per MP than New Zealand, whereas other countries have fewer people per MP than New Zealand.

In making those comparisons, however, it is necessary to recognise that some countries have provincial or state parliaments which carry out different functions from their national parliaments. In addition, some state or national parliaments have an elected or appointed upper house as well as a lower house.

This table shows the populations per MP in several western democratic countries.

	1998 population	Number of members of national parliament		Number of members of state parliaments		Population per MP		
		lower house	upper house	lower houses	upper houses	lower house of national parliament	lower houses of state parliaments	lower and upper houses of national and state parliaments
Australia	18,520,000	148	76	441	157	125,135	41,995	22,530
Canada	30,563,000	301	105	738	0	101,538	41,413	26,716
Denmark	5,154,000	179	-	-	-	29,441	-	29,441
Finland	5,200,000	200	-	-	-	25,770	-	25,770
France	58,683,000	577	321	-	-	101,704	-	65,349
Germany *	82,133,000	656	69	1,817	60	125,203	45,203	31,565
Greece	10,600,000	300	-	-	-	35,333	-	35,333
Ireland	3,681,000	166	60	-	-	22,175	-	16,288
Israel	5,984,000	120	-	-	-	49,867	-	49,867
Italy	57,369,000	630	326	-	-	91,062	-	60,009
Netherlands	15,678,000	150	75	-	-	104,520	-	69,680
New Zealand	3,796,000	120	-	-	-	31,633	-	31,663
Norway	4,419,000	165	-	-	-	26,782	-	26,782
Poland	38,718,000	460	100	-	-	84,170	-	69,139
Portugal	9,869,000	230	-	-	-	42,909	-	42,909
Spain	39,628,000	350	257	-	-	113,223	-	65,285
Sweden	8,875,000	349	-	-	-	25,430	-	25,430
United Kingdom §	58,649,000	659	1,165	297	0	88,997	32,714	27,652
United States of America	274,028,000	435	100	5,440	1,984	629,949	50,373	34,430

Sources: Population figures are from the United Nations website [www.undp.org/popin/](http://www.undp.org/popin/); numbers of members of national parliaments are from the Inter-Parliamentary Union website [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org); numbers of members of state parliaments are from various sources.

\* Excluding (a) 13 current overhang seats in the lower house of the federal Parliament, and (b) 189 current overhang and 'compensation seats' in the lower houses of state Parliaments (unlike New Zealand's version of MMP, some states in Germany use 'compensation seats' to ensure proportionality between parties when there are overhang seats).

§ The membership shown for the House of Lords is the total membership of that chamber although many of those entitled to take their seats do not do so. A bill to reduce the hereditary membership of the House of Lords is currently before the UK Parliament. The 'state parliament' figures for the United Kingdom are for the assemblies of Scotland (129 seats, 1996 population 5,128,600), Wales (60 seats, 1996 population 2,921,100) and Northern Ireland (108 seats, 1996 population 1,666,300), and the population per 'state MP' is based on their populations.

## Q10. Why did New Zealand increase from 99 MPs to 120 MPs in 1996?

The increase was part of the change to MMP which was approved by a majority of voters at the 1993 referendum. The 1986 Royal Commission on the Electoral System recommended that New Zealand should have 120 MPs irrespective of whether the voting system was changed. In paragraph 4.30 of its Report, the Royal Commission said: 'We support an increase in the number of MPs. Our principal reasons for making this recommendation are to make the system of parliamentary committees more effective, to enlarge the pool of ministerial talent and to allow for an increase in the number of Ministers. We also consider that an enlarged House could provide more independence in caucus and improve the quality of parliamentary debate.'

For further information on the electoral system, contact the Electoral Commission, P O Box 3050, Wellington; tel. (4) 474 0670; fax (4) 474 0674; email: [info@elections.govt.nz](mailto:info@elections.govt.nz) website: [www.elections.org.nz](http://www.elections.org.nz)

For further information on the administrative arrangements for the conduct of this referendum, contact the Chief Electoral Office, P O Box 3220, Wellington; tel. (4) 495 0030; fax (4) 495 0031; email: [chief.electoral.office@justice.govt.nz](mailto:chief.electoral.office@justice.govt.nz)