

BACKGROUND PAPER

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE TO  
OUR ELECTORAL SYSTEM

---

SENATOR ARTHUR GIETZELT

ALP SPOKESPERSON ON  
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES  
AND HOME AFFAIRS.

TEL: SYDNEY 525 7898  
CANBERRA 72 7302

JULY 1981

## C O N T E N T S

Preamble	1
The Current System	4
Votes Into Seats	10
Preferential Voting and Informality	22
Associated Reforms	26
Representative Democracy - How To Achieve It	30
Overseas Experience	35
Australian Experience With PR	44
Model Systems	47
Recommendations	59
Implementation	64
Appendix A	67
Appendix B	84
Bibliography	93

## ELECTORAL REFORM

### Preamble

The basis of any democratic voting system should be that whoever polls the majority of the votes should win an election.

The objective of any fair and equitable voting system should be that no party be denied a majority of seats in the Parliament if it polls a majority of votes.

ALP policy is explicit when it proposes "the principle of one-vote one-value in all Australian and State elections" and the achievement of "efficient and democratic government and a responsive national Parliament".

The present single-member constituency system destroys the principle of the Labor Party's policy of "one-vote, one-value" in so far as no matter how the electoral commissioners operate they cannot prevent distortions which invariably reduce the representation in Parliament of the ALP. The influence of regional-based parties plays an important part in this distortion.

In the years since World War II, the conservative Coalition has built up an image in the community as the "natural" government of Australia, portraying Labor Government as an aberration best avoided. The apparently firm basis of this image, the 23 years of coalition rule ending in 1972 and again since 1975, turns to sand once the hidden inequalities in the electoral system are revealed.

The ALP has been consistently disadvantaged by the single-member constituency system since it lost office in 1949. In three elections, 1954, 1961 and 1969, if the electoral system had been fair, the ALP would have gained office.

The difference this would have made to the post-war political history of Australia is, of course, enormous. And because of the changing demographic nature of Australia, to be accentuated by the resource-type development projected, the ALP cannot expect the system as it now stands to correct itself.

Almost all Western-style democracies in Europe have seen the inadequacies of relying solely on single-member constituencies and have electoral systems which more correctly reflect majority and minority attitudes.

When the 1980 election results became apparent, Bill Hayden commented: "Labor's achievement in the election is masked by the persistent disabilities it suffers as a result of the present electoral system. On the basis of a two-party preferred vote of scarcely more than 50%, the Coalition parties should have a majority no bigger than one or two seats."

Yet the conservatives hold a majority of 24 seats over the ALP, and the Australian Democrats who polled 6.6% have no seats; however, the National Country Party with 8.9% of the total vote has 20 seats.

Malcolm Mackerras has calculated that Labor needs at least 51.5% to win government, and Donald Horne in his latest book claims that this is probably more like 52%. Add to this the anti-Labor bias in the high informal Senate vote and the electoral problems which the ALP faces can be seen to be enormous.

It is clear that regional voting helps the NCP while an evenly dispersed vote has little or no effect. This means that votes vary in real value from one area to another. Thus, in Tasmania, 48.1% of all voters are denied the voice they want in the House of Representatives.

In fact, the system can hardly be called fair and just, unless you take Liberal Senator Reg Withers' taunting interpretation: "Fair to us, just awful to you".

This paper will take a look at our current system and show how inequitable it is, discuss the possibility of improvements to it, and then present two alternative models for far-reaching reform and how that could be achieved.

The basis of our representative system is the single-member constituency whereby all the people in a given geographic area are represented in Parliament by one person, whether they like it or not. But it is interesting to note that in the UK, Canada and Jamaica as well as in Australia the system of single-member electorates has come in for serious criticism. Why is this?

### The "Cube Rule"

Basically, the concerns in these countries are the same as ours - that a losing party is disadvantaged because its share of the seats is far less than its share of the vote. This phenomenon was first noticed in the UK as we know in Britain in 1907. In that year the Right Hon. James Parker Smith gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Systems of Elections and in that evidence outlined the "Cube Rule". By analysing various different systems electoral commentator Colin Hughes came to the following conclusions:

Single-member constituencies generally disadvantage the losing party - give it less than a share of the seats proportionate to its share of the total vote. In Australia, the ALP has usually been the losing party in federal elections and its representation in the lower house has suffered. The worse its performance in the total vote, the larger has been the shortfall of seats.

Hughes went on to explain that in single-member based elections the "cube rule" should operate. This means that if the ratio of votes between two parties for the two-party preferred ballot is A:B, the ratio of seats will be  $A^3:B^3$ .