

THE CURRENT SYSTEM

The Heart of it all: Single-Member Electorates

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 (as far as we know) in Britain in 1909. 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 votes. 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 (on the two-party preferred basis) is A:B, the ratio of seats will be $A^3:B^3$.

This is the best that any losing party can expect to achieve in a single-member system. The following is an example of what the "cube rule" means, and how it fails to operate in the Australian situation:

NATIONAL TWO-PARTY PREFERRED VOTES AND SEATS

House Election 1977

	Estimated two-party preferred vote	Proportionate seats	Cube Rule* seats	Actual seats
L/NCP	54.6%	68	79	86
ALP	45.4%	56	45	38

(ie. $(54.6)^3:(45.4)^3$ is the ratio applied to the total number of seats available - 124 - to give this result.)

In other words, we gained eighteen seats less than proportionately we should have, and seven seats less than the cube rule tells us we could have got under a single-member based system. This means that the single-member nature of our system cost us eleven seats, and gerrymandering and so-on, an additional seven seats.

However, the cube rule does not even work when Labor has gained a significant majority of votes. When we won government in 1972 and 1974, of course, we still gained smaller majorities than we should have, so the ALP is penalised by the system whether it wins or loses. As long as we remain locked into a system of single-member constituencies each time we lose an election we will invariably get less than our level of popular support would warrant.

Conservative governments are generally the groups that benefit from the existing system. Their gerrymanders in the States particularly strengthen this trend and highlight the distortion.

Will a Redistribution Help?

Probably not, and it would even make things worse for Labor. Colin Hughes analysed the impact of redistributions on the fairness of our system, and came to some interesting conclusions. One of these is the tendency of our electoral system to get fairer as it gets more unequal. The ALP has consistently been the advocate of more equal constituencies, and its protestations increase as population shifts during the life of a distribution make constituencies more and more unequal. Yet the party's chances of winning have usually improved as electoral inequality rose.

Radical shifts in population as we have seen in the post-war years, soon to be accentuated by the accelerated resource-type development, and the gentrification of Sydney and Melbourne may well have the effect of strengthening the regional influence of such parties as the Country and/or National Party to Labor's detriment.

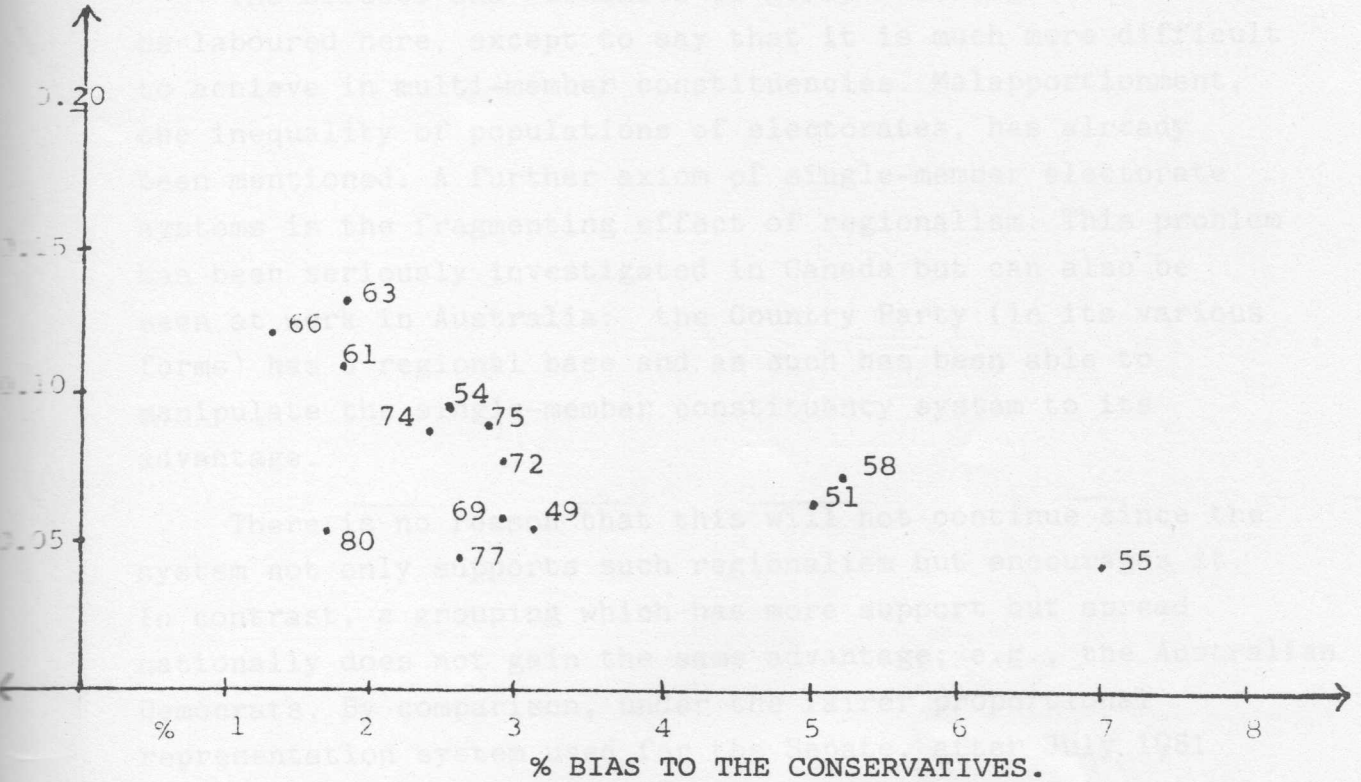
On three occasions, 1954, 1961 and 1969, the Australian Labor Party won more than 50 per cent of the "two-party preferred" vote yet failed to win a majority of seats because of bias in the system. At all three elections bias was relatively low in comparison with the twelve elections average of 3.2 although it was still sufficient to determine which party won office.

Figure 1 shows for all elections since 1949 two factors: inequality of enrolments in electorates measured on the vertical scale as the Gini co-efficient (the higher the co-efficient the higher the inequality); and bias in the system to the conservative parties:

INEQUALITY OF ENROLMENTS.

FIGURE ONE

(GINI COEFFICIENT)



The redistribution elections were 1949, 1955, 1969 and 1977. It can be seen that in these four elections the Gini co-efficient was at its lowest; nevertheless as it increased with the subsequent elections, the bias to the conservatives is usually decreased. It should also be noted that the bias is always to the conservatives (unlike the UK where it can be just as often biased to the left).

The conclusion is this. Even if the boundaries were completely fair, and if the enrolments were equal in all electorates, the system in this way alone would still be biased against us. We must look beyond the present system for adequate reform. Eliminating gerrymandering and mal-apportionment, even if that were possible, would not be sufficient to bring about a just electoral system.

Regionalism

The effects and mechanics of gerrymandering need not be laboured here, except to say that it is much more difficult to achieve in multi-member constituencies. Malapportionment, the inequality of populations of electorates, has already been mentioned. A further axiom of single-member electorate systems is the fragmenting effect of regionalism. This problem has been seriously investigated in Canada but can also be seen at work in Australia: the Country Party (in its various forms) has a regional base and as such has been able to manipulate the single-member constituency system to its advantage.

There is no reason that this will not continue since the system not only supports such regionalism but encourages it. In contrast, a grouping which has more support but spread nationally does not gain the same advantage; e.g., the Australian Democrats. By comparison, under the fairer proportional representation system used for the Senate, after July 1981 the Australian Democrats will have more representatives than the National/Country Party in the Senate.

The dangers of fragmentation are equally inherent. For example, a North Queensland separatist movement could combine with a West Australian independence party to make demands from a minority government. But most importantly the elimination of any malapportionment and gerrymandering would not solve the problem of non-representation of large percentages of voters due to the regionalist nature of the system. As an example, after the 1980 election, Labor's representation in New South Wales is confined to the Sydney/Wollongong/Newcastle region. The considerable Labor vote in the remaining areas of the State cannot be redistributed into electorates that would give a fair reflection of electoral support. Hence, the coalition holds all rural seats enabling them to consolidate their position as the "real" rural representative, despite the fact that in 1980 the ALP's vote in rural areas exceeded that of the NCP:

PRIMARY VOTE IN RURAL AREAS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

House of Representatives 1980

	<u>ALP</u>	<u>LIB</u>	<u>NCP</u>	<u>DEM</u>
Votes:	40.8%	13.7%	40.4%	4.9%
Change on 1977:	+3.4%	+2.6%	-4.4%	-0.8%
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Seats:	0	2	7	0
Change on 1977:	-1	-	+1	-
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Under a system of multi-member proportional representation, the ALP would always have at least one member representing Labor voters in every corner of the country (providing of course that it received at least 25% of the vote in 3-member constituencies). This would mean that Labor voters would always have a representative in the House to turn to, someone whom they could recognise as putting forward their views, and someone to focus local Party organisation on. It would guarantee that spokespersons for rural matters from rural areas would always be present in the Caucus and in the Party in general. And by combining the very large electorates with smaller rural electorates the average area to be covered by representatives of rural constituencies would be reduced greatly eliminating the problems faced by members of such large electorates as Kalgoorlie and Grey.