

Conference

Plans are being developed for a conference of the Society in Melbourne in the weekend of 23 - 25 April next year. In 1983, Anzac Day is on a Monday and the proposal is for the conference to start on the Saturday afternoon and end on the Sunday evening. This will leave the Monday for interstate participants to return home if they wish and for further informal discussion among those who can stay. The main purpose of the conference, apart from providing an opportunity for meeting fellow-members from other States, is to consider tactics and priorities so that we make the most efficient use of our resources in the future. Discussion on technical matters is not proposed in the conference itself but there will be opportunity for those so inclined to have informal discussions. Members of the Victorian Branch have offered to arrange for billeting of a reasonable number of interstate visitors. If you have suggestions for making the conference more enjoyable and profitable, please let your Branch Secretary know.

Redistribution Roulette

People keep telling us that we will have one vote, one value if we have equal, or nearly equal, enrolments in single-member electoral districts. To show that this is not true, we have devised a 'Gerrymander Wheel' which shows that a party with a majority of the votes in five districts with equal numbers of voters can win anything from one to five of the seats, the result depending on the placing of the boundaries. It also shows that, even if the parties win seats in numbers corresponding with the votes their candidates receive, nearly half the voters do not get the representation they want. The idea is to show media people, academics, students, and perhaps even politicians that we will get one vote, one value only through the use of the quota-preferential method. If you would like to know more about the Gerrymander Wheel, contact the Secretary or telephone 498 5559.

Answering the Critics

In Quota Notes No 27, we reported the preparation of a set of answers to the stock criticisms of proportional representation. These are now available and can be obtained by contacting the Secretary or telephoning 498 5559.

Community Proportional Representation

The Social Democrat and Liberal Parties in the United Kingdom set up a Joint Commission on the Constitution in November 1981. It recently released its first report entitled 'Electoral Reform: Fairer Voting in Natural Communities'. The Commission examined the working and results of the single-member-district system used for elections of the House of Commons and concluded that 'electoral reform is an essential precondition of creating the tolerant and fair society which Liberals and Social Democrats seek'. It recommended 'the adoption for Parliamentary elections of a system of Community Proportional Representation which uses preferential voting in constituencies which correspond to natural communities'. While noting that 'proportional representation is not a panacea for all of the country's ills', the Commission recorded that 'without an electoral system which reflects public opinion more accurately, we do not believe that any government will be able to achieve the economic advancement or social progress upon which the future of this country depends'.

International Collaboration

The first formal steps towards the establishment of an international body concerned with electoral reform were taken recently. An article in the latest issue of 'Representation', the journal of the Electoral Reform Society of Great Britain and Ireland, reports on discussions leading to an application by the Society for recognition by the United Nations as a non-governmental organisation with consultative status. Such applications are considered by a United Nations committee which will meet in 1983. It was judged better to make an application for recognition of the Society in time for consideration in 1983 than to delay so as to include Australia and possibly other countries. We understand that, if the ERS application is approved, it will be possible for other countries to become involved later. There is already substantial interest in the United States.

Across the Tasman

It is not surprising that there should be dissatisfaction with the system used to elect the New Zealand House of Representatives. The election of November 1981 gave the National Party, with 39.2% of the votes, 47 of the 92 seats, or 51.1%. The Social Credit Party, which won 2 seats (2.2%) with 20.8% of the votes, includes adoption of proportional representation in its policy. A well argued case for proportional representation with the single-transferable vote (quota-preferential method) has now been published by an academic, Mr Brian Wilson, in a paper entitled 'Proportional Representation: A Viable Alternative?' in the journal Public Sector, Volume 4, Numbers 2 and 3, 1982. Mr Wilson, whose paper was adapted from a thesis for a Master's Degree at the Victoria University, Wellington, concludes that 'from the viewpoint of the liberal democratic society as a whole, the voters would gain so much from STV that it would more than compensate for what the political parties might lose - and political parties being associations of persons living in society, in the long term, it would benefit the parties as well.'

South Australia

Elections for both Houses of the South Australian Parliament were held on 6 November. The 47 seats in the House of Assembly were filled from single-member districts. Eleven of the 22 seats in the Legislative Council were filled by a quota-preferential system used for the first time in South Australia, having replaced a party-list system used in 1975 and 1979. Early figures indicate that, although the numbers of seats in the House won by the major parties are in reasonable agreement with the votes, nearly 290,000 people voted first preference for candidates who were not elected. They amount to 42.8% of all formal voters. In the Legislative Council election, it seems likely that over 89% of voters will see the election of their first-preference candidates.

The Constitution

Your Branch Committee has recently considered some changes to the Constitution of the Society that it considers desirable. Some of these would merely clarify points that may be found slightly ambiguous in the present wording. Others would replace the present requirement for three-fifths majorities in ballots on policy questions and constitutional amendments by a simple-majority requirement. There are also proposals for wording changes to provide for the possibility, in one case already a reality, of officers of the Society being female. The Secretary will shortly be sending members details of the proposed amendments with a statement supporting their adoption, and a ballot paper.

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