

After the Federal Election

As might have been expected, the results of the House of Representatives election on 5 March were quite unsatisfactory. About 4 million voters will not be effectively represented. Their nominal representatives are mostly direct opponents of the candidates who got their votes but were not elected. The ALP, with just under half the first preferences, will have 60% of the seats, a reversal of the previous position, when the Liberal-National coalition was over-represented. Until we have proportional representation for the House of Representatives, waste of votes and voter dissatisfaction will continue.

In an article entitled 'Electoral justice? Not just yet, mate' in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15 March, Evan Whitton discussed what he described as 'that ramshackle and monstrously unjust thing, the Australian electoral system'. He went on to suggest that 'having won a handsome victory, we may be sure that the Labor Party, thanks very much, mate, is not about to install the fairest, or Tasmanian proportional, system'. In fact, the Special Minister of State, Mr Mick Young, proposes to introduce legislation to provide for a redistribution in a system of single-member districts basically little changed from the present one.

In the last Parliament, the Senate carried a resolution, moved by Senator Arthur Gietzelt and supported by all ALP and Democrat Senators present, inviting the concurrence of the House of Representatives in setting up a Joint Committee on the Electoral System. The House did not respond. It is most important that there should be a full inquiry into arrangements for elections of both Houses before legislation for changes is introduced. The Committee should hold public hearings and take evidence from experts and interested parties. This could prevent changes that would be of no real benefit to the voters being presented as 'electoral reform' and passed into law.

We are fortunate that we have proportional representation for the Senate. Again, the parties have won seats in good agreement with their voting support. If the system that applied before the change to proportional representation in 1949 had been used in the March election, the result could have been 44 Labor and 20 coalition Senators, hardly a democratic result. In the new Senate, the Australian Democrats, who are committed to proportional representation with a quota-preferential method, will hold the balance, and might be expected to insist on an inquiry.

New Order in Western Australia

The election for both Houses of the Western Australian Parliament on 19 February has given the Labor Party a majority in the Legislative Assembly but leaves it with less than half the seats in the Legislative Council although its candidates received about 54% of the first preferences. The ALP, before the election, committed itself to proportional representation for the Legislative Council with a method of election similar to that used for the Federal Senate and the Legislative Councils of New South Wales and South Australia. The ALP proposal is for reduction of the Council to 22 members, with 11 elected at each regular election from the whole State as one electoral district. So far, no plans for reform of the method of election of the Legislative Assembly have been announced, although about four voters out of ten have no representation in the new Assembly except through people whose political views are opposed to their own.

National Conference

The Society's first national conference (see Quota Notes No 28) will be held at Kingswood College, Box Hill, Victoria in the weekend of 23-25 April. The emphasis will be on planning for the most efficient use of our resources in exploiting the many opportunities available to us. A detailed program is expected to be available early in April. If you would like further information, telephone 498 5559.

Your Committee

Mr P.A. Paterson, who was a member of the Branch Committee in 1981-2 and was overseas during the latter part of 1982, has returned to Sydney and has been co-opted to the Committee.

Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the NSW Branch will be held at Cahill's Dutch Village Restaurant, 27 Park Street, Sydney, at 7.30 pm on Thursday 2 June. Further details will be given in the next Quota Notes.

Norfolk Island

The quota-preferential method used for the first two elections of the nine-member Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly in 1979 and 1982 allowed most voters to see the election of their first-preference candidates. Some residents apparently do not want effective minority representation and there have been moves to change to a non-preferential system. In May 1982, a committee set up by the Minister for Home Affairs recommended a cumulative-vote system, which would allow each voter to mark nine crosses on the ballot paper, with up to four for any one candidate. We pointed out to the Minister that this system could give grossly undemocratic results and could be manipulated readily by groups which could estimate their voting support reasonably accurately. With only about 900 voters, this would be easy. No reply had been received before the Federal election. We have provided the new Minister, Hon. Barry Cohen, MHR, with the same information.

Facts Versus Critics

Our Answers to Criticisms, to help people to deal with the stock criticisms of proportional representation, are now available in adequate supply. To get a copy, write to the Secretary or telephone 498 5559.

Power to Elect

Enid Lakeman, former Director of the Electoral Reform Society of Great Britain and Ireland and author of the classic 'How Democracies Vote', has produced a valuable new book which has just reached Australia. 'Power to Elect', published by William Heinemann Ltd., argues convincingly for proportional representation with preferential voting and quota counting as the only means of ensuring that parliaments govern in accordance with the will of the people. A few copies will be available from the Society but the book may also be ordered through bookshops. Other recent books from the United Kingdom that can be recommended are 'The People and the Party System', by Vernon Bogdanor (Cambridge University Press), which is now available in some bookshops at \$19.50, and 'Comparative Electoral Systems', by Robert Newland (Arthur McDougall Fund), available from the Society.

Votes for Electoral Reform

Mr Bryan Lobascher, President of the Electoral Reform Society of Western Australia, received more than 1200 votes in the North Metropolitan Province as an electoral reform candidate in the Legislative Council election.

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