

Electoral Justice? Not Just Yet, Mate

The outcome of the deliberations of the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform can be summed up by the heading, borrowed from an article by Evan Whitton in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15 March 1983. Mr Whitton referred to 'that ramshackle and monstrously unjust thing, the Australian electoral system'. Although the Committee made 132 recommendations for change, and most of these are in legislation now before the Parliament, the injustice will remain when the Bills are passed.

The 186-page Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill and the Representation Bill were introduced in the House of Representatives early in November. The Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill was rushed through the House and presented to the Senate later in the month. After a confused debate, it was passed on Friday 2 December with some amendments. There is little doubt that the Bill, as amended, will be passed by the House. The Representation Bill, which provides for the numbers of members of both Houses to be increased, was passed without delay by both Houses. The legislation also provides for public funding of parties to the extent of nearly \$10 million for an election of both Houses.

There are some desirable changes. They will improve arrangements for enrolment and for voting by people out of Australia, in remote parts of the country, or in hospital. An Australian Electoral Commission will be set up to control all aspects of elections, including the drawing of electorate boundaries. In Senate elections, the exact procedure will be used for the transfer of surpluses, but other provisions in the new counting rules are less satisfactory.

The worst feature of the electoral system will be practically unchanged. Elections for the House of Representatives will still be based on single-member electorates, so that nearly half the voters will be left without representation except by people with political views opposed to their own. As before, well over half the electorates are likely to be 'safe' for one party or another. It is quite dishonest to suggest, as some politicians have, that the changes will ensure one vote, one value. The Joint Select Committee did not recommend provision for genuine one vote, one value with a quota-preferential system, justifying its rejection of proportional representation by saying, in spite of strong evidence to the contrary, that 'it would not assist the stability of government'.

Although Senator Macklin presented a dissenting report arguing strongly for proportional representation for the House, the Australian Democrat Senators did not attempt to use their 'balance-of-reason' position to have the Bill amended to provide for PR. In this case, the Democrats certainly did not keep the government honest. The attitude of the media was also disappointing. In spite of strenuous efforts by your officebearers to stimulate media interest, there was little reporting and practically no comment on the recommendations of the Committee or the Parliamentary debate. The government has succeeded in the confidence trick of claiming to be introducing electoral reform when the essential reform is lacking. Clearly, it is not enough for the Society to attempt to interest the media. It is important for all those concerned about electoral justice to write to editors, phone in to talk-back sessions, and use every possible means to convince the media and the politicians that there is a real demand for genuine electoral reform.

The Voters Lose Again

In the election of the Queensland Legislative Assembly on 22 October, there were again serious discrepancies between what the voters wanted and what they got. The total National Party vote, although greater than in 1980, was still only 39%. The party won 41 of the 82 seats, or 50%. With two Liberals changing to the National Party after the election, Mr Bjelke Petersen was able to form a government with 43 members. Labor, with 44% of the votes, won only 32 seats and the Liberals, with only 15% of the votes, won 8 seats. Perhaps surprisingly, New South Wales has the largest discrepancy between votes for the government and seats won, the ALP having 14.8% more seats than votes, while the Queensland Nationals have a bonus of only 11%.

Giggling MPs

In the Weekend Australian of December 3-4, Carol Simmonds wrote of Opposition MPs in Western Australia who 'giggle over their Hansards at their successful defence of a gerrymander that, at its worst, equates 12 metropolitan electors with one country elector'. The Legislative Council has rejected the Bill to provide for proportional representation in future Council elections. The Bill also provided for a referendum on the proposal but evidently the Council does not want the people to decide.

Local Government

Changes in local-government election methods are impending in three States. In Victoria, it is likely that elections in future will be every three years, and there are some grounds for optimism that a quota-preferential system will be adopted. In South Australia, a proposal for replacing the existing X-vote system by a crude preferential system is being discussed. In Tasmania, local-government areas around Launceston are being amalgamated. Unfortunately, the plan is for three-member wards, with annual elections to fill one seat in each ward. In all three States, PR supporters are trying to convince those responsible that only quota-preferential methods are fair and efficient.

It's Time

Dr K.N. Grigg, Secretary of the Victorian Branch of the Society, has produced a paper entitled 'It's Time - To Change the Voting System'. From the results of House of Representatives elections from 1949 to 1983, he shows that a real anti-ALP bias in the system can be removed only by a change to a quota-preferential system. Contact Dr Grigg at 54 Wattle Valley Road, Canterbury, Victoria 3126. Phone 836 1009.

New Books

Limited supplies of two important books are now available from the Society. 'Power to Elect' is by Enid Lakeman, author of the well-known 'How Democracies Vote', and Director of the Electoral Reform Society of Great Britain and Ireland until her retirement in 1979. 'Comparative Electoral Systems', by Robert Newland, Senior Lecturer in Mathematics at City University, London, and a member of the Council of the Electoral Reform Society, discusses most of the electoral systems used in public elections around the world. 'Power to Elect' is available at \$15 plus postage and 'Comparative Electoral Systems' at \$7. If you would like either or both, write to the Secretary or phone 498 5559.

Proportional Representation Society of Australia

President J.F.H. Wright, 30 Kooloona Crescent, West Pymble, NSW 2073

Secretary Mrs N. Yeates, 75 Wilson Street, Brighton, Victoria 3186

Telephone 02 498 5559 03 592 7705