

Electoral Reform - In the Future?

With the proclamation of the Electoral Legislation Amendment Act on 21 February, electoral reform as understood by the politicians is now complete. One of the first tasks of the new Australian Electoral Commission will be to oversee the drawing of boundaries for the 148 electorates for the enlarged House of Representatives. One reason for the Government's determination to have the electoral Bills passed before Christmas is now clear. The new distribution can now be completed in time for an election when the Prime Minister thinks it desirable late in 1984 or early in 1985, at least a year before the completion of a three-year term. So much for four-year terms.

The changes described as electoral reform will benefit the party machines rather than the voters. New Senate voting procedures will make it easy to vote as the parties want. Optional marking of preferences, which would have given voters complete freedom of choice and made it easy to vote formally, was rejected. There will be more seats in the House of Representatives to be filled by those pre-selected by the parties. The system is basically unchanged. During the debate, Senator Macklin expressed regret that there was no provision for proportional representation for the House of Representatives. 'I hope', he said, 'that in the future it will be seen as a necessary reform and that eventually it will be taken'. Those of us who are alarmed at the prospect of indefinite continuation of party-machine control of politics must use every opportunity to make it clear to the politicians that there has to be a change. If we do not succeed, real electoral reform will stay, always, in the future.

Record Broken

The three House of Representatives by-elections held on 18 February made eleven in the shortest time in the history of the House. Fortunately for the taxpayers, the new Electoral Legislation Amendment Act passed in December was not proclaimed until 21 February so that the parties will not be getting public money for their campaign expenses for these elections. In future, there will be public funding for by-elections as well as general elections. With a quota-preferential system, casual vacancies could and should be filled by re-examining the votes of those who elected vacating members. This would be fair to voters, candidates and parties, and the very substantial costs of by-elections would be saved.

Four-Year Terms?

New South Wales voters will remember how essential it was, according to the politicians, to have four-year terms when they voted on the question in the 1981 referendum. Political expediency now requires an election after two and a half years. There isn't much for the voters in a Legislative Assembly election. As Claude Forell pointed out (other side), most of the people who will form the new Assembly will be chosen by the parties and not the voters. About a million people will vote for candidates who are not elected and the numbers of seats won by the parties are not likely to correspond with the votes they receive. The quota-preferential method will be used to elect fifteen Legislative Council members from the whole State. We can expect results in good agreement with the views of the voters, and it is important that people should know that they are free to choose within as well as between parties.

Democracy in Politics

Perhaps the idea of democracy in politics is real news, as suggested by the title of an article by Claude Forell in the Melbourne Age of 22 February. After agreeing with Mr George Crawford, Victorian President of the ALP, that 'the party is entitled to say who it wants and who it doesn't want in the party', he asked 'But ought not also the electorate be entitled to say whom it wants or does not want in Parliament? 'Voters have no say in choosing the candidates', he said. 'They are "pre-selected" by the parties'. He agreed that, while pre-selection could serve a useful purpose if each party endorsed the best available candidate in each electorate, 'this is no longer so, if indeed it ever was'. 'Strange as it may seem to mainlanders', Mr Forell went on, 'elections for the Tasmanian House of Assembly come closest to meeting the ideal of participatory democracy'. He was referring, of course, to the Hare-Clark system of proportional representation. 'What a pity', he concluded, 'we do not have this system in Victoria. If Tasmanians are sophisticated enough not only to understand it but to use it intelligently to elect the candidates they prefer rather than ones foisted on them by the parties, surely we could become so too.' There are also possibilities in the other States.

Local Government

Changes in provisions for local-government elections are under discussion in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Bogey Musidlak, Research Officer of the NSW Branch of the Society, is analysing NSW results but is also interested in what is happening in other States. He would appreciate press cuttings and other current information concerning local-government elections anywhere in Australia. Send them to him at 146 Wilson Street, Newtown, NSW 2042 or phone 519 2021.

Members on Radio

The case for PR has been aired recently on radio in at least two States. Late last year, Bogey Musidlak was featured in Australia Overnight on 2GB in Sydney and 3AW in Melbourne. May Pillinger told listeners to John Tingle's 2GB News Talk shortly before the Federal by-elections in February that casual vacancies are handled in a better way under Tasmania's Hare-Clark system. In Melbourne on 24 February, Dr Ken Grigg put the case for PR in Michael Schildberger's program on 3LO while Malcolm Mackerras attempted to justify the present House of Representatives system. Such programs can allow members to reach large audiences either as invited speakers or by phoning in.

Bottom Up

Much ingenuity has been applied to devising bad electoral methods. The 'bottom-up' method proposed for local-government elections in South Australia starts with preferential voting. Candidates with the smallest numbers of votes are excluded and the votes are transferred to those shown as next preferences until the number of candidates remaining is equal to the number of vacancies, when they are all declared elected. This method can lead to serious distortion. A group of voters may not get the representatives it should if most of its first preferences go to one popular candidate. The quota-preferential method, with its provision for election by quota and transfer of surplus votes to next preferences, ensures fair representation of all substantial groups. There is no case for using crude and unreliable methods such as 'bottom-up'.

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