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## The Government We Deserve?

In the new House of Representatives, the ALP is likely to have 81 of the 148 seats, which is 54.7%. First preferences for Labor were only about 47.5%. Not only were the numbers wrong. The people had very little choice about who will occupy the seats in the House. About two-thirds of the electorates were regarded as 'safe' for one party or another. In these, the candidates endorsed by the parties were assured of their seats long before the voters were consulted.

Even where there was uncertainty about which of the parties would win the seats, the voters had no choice except between parties. There was not one electorate where any party endorsed more than one candidate. About 4 million people gave their first preferences to candidates who were not elected and will have as their representatives people whose political views they oppose. Yet this election followed changes to the electoral laws that were called 'electoral reform'.

The new House of Representatives will consist of 148 people who must necessarily concern themselves more with the interests of the parties whose machines endorsed them than with those of the people whom they are supposed to represent. It will not be the House that we wanted.

## The Other Place

The Senate results are strikingly different from those for the House of Representatives. In the House, the Government will have a comfortable majority and the Opposition will be relatively powerless. In the Senate, no party will have a majority and there will be Senators, probably nine, who are neither Government nor Opposition.

The results are different because the Senate quota-preferential system gives more accurate representation. About nine voters out of ten will see their first-preference candidates elected as Senators. They include a very substantial number of people who prefer to be represented by people outside the major parties. The Government has a majority in the unrepresentative House of Representatives but the views of the voters are represented much more adequately in the Senate.

## How To Vote

Although it is probable that some people deliberately voted informally in the House of Representatives election, many whose votes were informal seem to have been confused by the new provision for endorsing an entire party ticket in the Senate election by making a single mark on the ballot paper. The obvious remedy for high levels of informal voting is fully optional preference marking. The parties rejected this and combined to introduce the party-box voting provision, the only other way to vote formally being to mark preferences for at least 90% of the candidates. The Irish have set us a good example. With fully optional preference marking in a quota-preferential system, informal voting in Eire has usually been less than 1%.



## What Next?

The high level of informal voting in the House of Representatives election is likely to lead to consideration of further changes in the electoral laws when the new Parliament meets. One suggestion being aired is that preference marking should be optional in voting for the House. This would certainly reduce informal voting, but would leave the basic defects of the system untouched. Effective representation would still be confined to one group of voters in each electorate and nearly half the voters would have votes of no value.

If the House of Representatives is ever to become what its name suggests, the system of electorates each returning only one member must be replaced by one based on a quota-preferential method of election in multi-member electorates. Preference marking should be optional, as it should be for the Senate. Besides ensuring justice for voters, this would have the incidental advantage that the same easily understandable voting requirements would apply for both Houses.

## Improving the Senate System

The changes introduced in the 1983 'electoral reform' package included some that were desirable. Among these was the replacement of the 'random sampling' step in the transfer of surplus votes of elected Senate candidates by the exact or Gregory procedure, named after J.B. Gregory, of Melbourne, who suggested it over a century ago.

Unfortunately, another change that was supposed to introduce a refinement has led to distortion of vote values. Until this change was made, the Senate rules, like those for all quota-preferential public elections in other parts of the world, specified that any surplus votes of an elected candidate should be transferred according to the preference indications on the last papers received by the candidate. The new Senate rules specify that all the papers of an elected candidate must be examined, and that all of them should be considered as being of equal status. This overlooks the fact that they may have widely differing values. The application of the new rule enhances the values of some papers while others are devalued. At the same time, it complicates the scrutiny and increases the time required. The Technical Committee of the Society is examining this provision with a view to recommending changes that would ensure equal vote values.

## What Makes News?

Those who attended the end-of-year meeting of the New South Wales Branch on 29 November received some valuable information as well as enjoying a pleasant occasion. The guest speaker was Sydney Morning Herald feature writer Yvonne Preston. With the title 'What makes news?', she described the background to the appearance of a news item or feature article in a major daily newspaper. Among other useful clues for those who have ideas of getting a message to the public through this medium was the comment that direct approaches to selected journalists are more likely to be profitable than wide distribution of media releases. Another welcome guest was Harry Ball-Wilson, a former member of the Council of the Electoral Reform Society, London. He gave a brief but stimulating talk on the work that the two Societies are doing, emphasising the importance of electoral reform as a prerequisite for other reforms.

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