



Number 37

March 1985

What Really Happened

The final figures for the 1 December House of Representatives and Senate elections became available recently. They provide convincing evidence that the electoral system did not give the House that the voters wanted. 4,101,769 people - 47.3% of all those who voted formally - marked first preferences for candidates who were not elected. For every ten people who voted for candidates who were elected, there were nine who did not. In 43 of the 148 electorates, the later preferences of some voters whose first-preference candidates were excluded went to candidates who were eventually elected. But this still left nearly 4 million whose votes were completely ineffective. The first preferences of 55.5% of all Liberal voters were for candidates who were not elected. The ALP, with only 47.5% of first preferences, won 82 of the 148 seats, which is 55.4%. Once again, the electoral system has given distorted results, this time favoring Labor. One vote, one value is still only a promise.

The Senate election gave seats to the parties in numbers corresponding well with their voting support, and a high proportion of voters saw their first-preference candidates elected. Although there was a reduction in informal voting, the task of the voter is still unnecessarily difficult. So too is the work of those counting Senate votes. Checking ballot papers for conformity with the complex requirements for formality must have cost the taxpayers many thousands of dollars. The new procedure for transferring the surpluses of elected candidates was also very time-consuming. Bearing in mind that this procedure boosts the electoral effect of some votes and devalues others, this was not time well spent.

There has been extensive comment on the sharp increase in informal voting in the House of Representatives election. One suggestion is that voters were confused by the provision for endorsing an entire party ticket by making a single mark on the ballot paper and tried to vote in the same way in the election for the House. The Western Australian electorate of Moore provided some evidence on the soundness of this idea. As there were only two candidates, one Liberal and one Labor, a 1 in either square on the ballot paper was all that was necessary for a formal vote. Yet 6.1% of the votes in Moore were informal compared with a national average of 6.7%.

There is no doubt that changes are needed in both systems. Preference marking should be optional for both Houses. The Senate system is basically sound but the unnecessary complications should be removed. For the House of Representatives, a change to a quota-preferential method is needed to ensure fairness to voters, candidates and parties.

Your Officebearers

The Society's national officebearers for 1986-1987 will be elected later this year and members should be thinking about possible candidates. Nominations for the positions of President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer are due to be invited between June and October.

Promises in Victoria

On 28 January, the Premier of Victoria, Mr John Cain, announced that his party, if returned to government in the election on 2 March, would legislate for proportional representation for the Legislative Council. The Opposition Leader, Mr Jeff Kennett, also stated on 30 January that he favours proportional representation for the Council. The ALP appears to have a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly but the final seat numbers in the Legislative Council are still in doubt. If the ALP does not have a majority in the Council, it will have difficulty with some proposed changes but the prospects for proportional representation for the Council seem good.

Alternative to Bottom-up

Last year, new South Australian legislation specified that the unreliable 'bottom-up' method should be used for local-government elections in most districts. It provides for preferential voting, followed by exclusion of candidates with the fewest votes until the number of candidates remaining is equal to the number of vacancies. Later, the Government accepted an amendment allowing proportional representation in districts that are not divided into wards. Recently, Alderman L.A. Ellis, a long-time member of the Electoral Reform Society of South Australia, persuaded the Local Government Association of South Australia to include a recommendation that proportional representation be an option in all districts in a call to the Government to review the legislation. This proposal was accepted and Councils will be able to choose between proportional representation and the bottom-up method for elections to be held in May.

New Zealand Inquiry

A Royal Commission on the Electoral System was set up recently in New Zealand. An Editorial in the National Business Review commented as follows. 'The right sort of proportional representation would improve accountability of the Executive, give greater choice to voters among candidates without necessitating the abandonment of favoured party choice, virtually automatically represent substantial ethnic minorities, promote greater sensitivity to broad public opinion and inject more flexibility into the parliamentary process. Side-products ought to be the restoration of respect to Parliament and the enhancement of political stability through a more flexible response to tension and change than the rigid two-party standoff allows.'

Choosing an Electoral System

'Electoral laws are no longer regarded as unalterable facts, and there has been a renewed scholarly attention to the study of electoral systems', according to the editors of 'Choosing an Electoral System - Issues and Alternatives', a new book from Praeger Publishers. The editors are Professor Arend Lijphart and Professor Bernard Grofman, of the University of California. Among the 22 authors are Dr George Hallett, joint author of the classic 'Hoag and Hallett', Miss Enid Lakeman, of the Electoral Reform Society, London, well known for her books and other publications on electoral systems, and Mr J.F.H. Wright, President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia. Australian agents for Praeger are Holt Saunders Pty. Ltd., 9 Waltham Street, Artarmon, NSW 2064.

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