



Let's Be Clear About One Vote, One Value

It is often suggested that one vote, one value is ensured in a single-member-electorate system if all electorates have approximately the same enrolment, since each member is said to represent the same number of voters. This idea is based on confusion about what 'represent' means. A local member can provide some kind of service to constituents, whatever their political views may be. But a member cannot vote in Parliament so as to represent supporters of both Government and Opposition, although party spokesmen assure us that the differences between parties on policy issues are important. Obviously, many voters are not effectively represented in relation to real political issues.

Sometimes we are told that one vote, one value means that the numbers of seats won by parties correspond with the overall support given to their endorsed candidates by the voters. Both interpretations miss the essential point that what is in question is the value of the vote to the voter. In a system that restricts representation to one group of voters in each electorate, many votes must be of zero value. And the only thing that a vote of zero value equals is another vote of zero value. The one vote, one value principle is realised if all votes are, as nearly as practicable, of equal effect in electing representatives. One vote, one value is certainly possible. It can be achieved in quota-preferential elections in multi-member electorates.

Bill of Rights

A Bill to provide for an Australian Bill of Rights was introduced in the House of Representatives on 9 October. It is based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Australia ratified in 1980. Article 6 of the Bill of Rights specifies that 'Every Australian citizen has the right and shall have the opportunity - (a) to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors ...'. The Bill may appear to protect the rights of voters, but a legal challenge to legislation that might be in conflict with its provisions would be a complicated undertaking. Another Bill provides for a new Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which, if it sees fit, can examine laws and report to the Minister if they are inconsistent with or contrary to any human right.

Pity the South Australian Voters

Voters in the South Australian Legislative Council election on 7 December had a choice between placing a 1 in a box above the list of names of the candidates of a party to support the entire 'ticket', or marking preferences for every one of the 37 individual candidates. In voting for the House of Assembly, it was also possible to endorse a party ticket, but those who chose not to do this had to indicate preferences for all candidates. In this election, voting wasn't meant to be easy except for faithful party supporters.

Constitutional Amendment

On 2 December, Australian Democrat Senator Michael Macklin tried unsuccessfully to have the Constitution Amendment (Democratic Elections) Bill that he introduced earlier this year referred to the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform. The Preamble to the Bill describes it as 'A Bill for an Act to alter the Constitution so as to ensure that the Members of the Parliament of the Commonwealth and of the Parliaments of the States and of self-governing Territories are chosen directly and democratically by the People'. The proposed amendment would guarantee the right to vote and would require all Federal, State and Territory electorates to be arranged so that the number of voters per member would be, as nearly as practicable, the same for each electorate. This would make it difficult to arrange gerrymanders as grotesque as those in Queensland and Western Australia. With quota-preferential methods and multi-member electorates in accordance with this requirement, members would really be elected democratically.

But electoral systems in accordance with the proposed amendment could still be undemocratic. In the House of Representatives election in 1984, enrolments in the single-member electorates were all within 10% of the average in each State. Yet the votes of more than 3.8 million people, 442 of every thousand who recorded formal votes, were of zero value. They did not help to elect any candidates and had no effect on the outcome of the election. The amendment could be a step towards democratic elections but there is also a need for a specific requirement in the Constitution that methods of election should ensure that, as nearly as practicable, all votes are of equal value.

Bad to Worse

The new arrangement of Queensland Legislative Assembly electorates has been described by Dr Ken Wiltshire, of the University of Queensland, as 'the worst zonal gerrymander in the history of the world'. It's a big claim but he may be right. Most of the politicians, journalists and academics who have been critical have suggested another redistribution as the remedy. A redistribution that reduced the variation in enrolments would probably reduce the distortion in party representation but could not give one vote, one value if single-member electorates are retained. While representation is confined to one group of voters in each single-member electorate, nearly half of the votes will be valueless and gerrymandering will certainly be possible.

Catherine Helen Spence

Adelaide newspapers have reported that the Queen, during her visit next year, will unveil a statue of Catherine Helen Spence, pioneer of proportional representation and other reforms, on 10 March. The statue in Light Square has been commissioned by the South Australia Jubilee 150 Women's Executive Committee. Arrangements are also being made for reprinting Catherine Spence's 1861 pamphlet 'A Plea for Pure Democracy', in which she argued for the introduction of proportional representation in South Australia. Donations towards the cost can be sent to Mr L.C. Higgs, Treasurer of the Electoral Reform Society of South Australia, at 3 Bohun Place, Moana, SA 5169. (Please make cheques payable to Electoral Reform Society of SA.) 'Unbridling the Tongues of Women', a biography of Catherine Spence by Susan Magarey, has just been published by Hale and Iremonger. A 22-page chapter records her work for electoral reform. The book is now available at \$14.95 paperback or \$24.95 hard cover.

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TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE PRSA

From the Retiring President

It has been a privilege to be the first President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia and my four years in the position have been full of interest. I hope that my successor, Geoff Goode, Vice-President David Higbed, Secretary Andrew Gunter and Treasurer Len Higgs find their lives in office just as interesting, and even more rewarding. Although a leading journalist, himself a supporter of proportional representation, once told me that stories about electoral methods tend to bring on the 'glazed-eye syndrome', the Society has made an impression and there is some cause for satisfaction with what has been achieved. But the need for activities such as ours is proved by the events of everyday politics. We are still a long way from representative democracy.

Australia now has more real proportional representation than any other country. We have the world's longest continuous application of the quota-preferential method in Tasmania's Hare-Clark system, and the world's largest in elections of the Federal Senate. The Legislative Councils of New South Wales and South Australia are elected by quota-preferential systems, as are many local-government bodies in New South Wales and South Australia, and the Hobart City Council.

It is good that we have as much PR as this, but the party machines still dominate Australia's politics and the real decisions are made by very few people. Recent evidence comes from the ACT, where there has been proportional representation in the House of Assembly since 1974. On 2 December, the Minister for Territories, Hon. Gordon Scholes, announced a plan for an ACT Council elected from 13 single-member electorates, although the Task Force on Self Government had advised the Minister that 'such a system inevitably excludes all but the major parties and is inconsistent with the objective of ensuring representation for groups or people with significant electoral support which may however be less than that commanded by the major parties'.

Party-machine domination should not surprise us. It is an inevitable consequence of the continued use of electoral systems based on single-member electorates. It is good that proportional representation applies in four of Australia's fourteen Parliamentary bodies but obviously, we should not leave it at that. Nor should we allow ourselves merely to bask in any feeling of superiority that might go with knowing that we understand things that other people don't.

Most electoral reform in Australia has resulted from the efforts of a few people. But there is nothing in history or logic to suggest that the chance of success in electoral reform is any greater if the numbers of those trying to achieve it are small. One of the basic requirements for success is that the subject should be on the public agenda. So those who want to see better government must ensure that the defects of our present electoral arrangements and the superiority of quota-preferential methods are generally recognised.

It would be nice to think that we could achieve our aims by convincing enough people, including the politicians, that we have the right ideas. But we need to recognise that those who are successful under the present arrangements have more resources than we have for persuading people to accept their ideas, including, in the last few years, millions of dollars provided by taxpayers through public

funding. So, while we should certainly do as much as we can to persuade people directly, we should be aware that most of the changes in electoral laws that have been of eventual benefit to voters have been made, not because they were logically or morally desirable, but because they gave some short-term advantage to the party in power. More often than not, when the right change has been made, it has been for the wrong reasons. But the changes that are needed can happen. If I did not believe that, I would have stopped trying long ago.

We should not assume that politicians are amoral. But they are forced, as a matter of survival, to do what the system demands of them. So we should always encourage honesty in politicians but we should also try to identify and use situations where the politicians' instincts for self-preservation might lead them to support the ideas that we advocate. The extent of our ability to do this depends on how many people are trying and on how hard they are trying.

For each of us, it comes down to a question of priorities. People who become members of the Society are aware that all is not well with our politics and that changes are needed. Many members are also members of other organisations with ideas about desirable or necessary changes. But continuation of many of the things that reformers deplore is inevitable while we have the kind of government that comes from Parliaments elected as we elect them now. Politicians elected from single-member electorates must be responsive to those who control their endorsement, rather than to the voters. Until it is possible for politicians to be responsive to the voters and survive, the probability of desirable changes is very small. Electoral reform must have a high priority for all of those who advocate reforms that can come only through legislation enacted by Parliaments.

In case any members doubt their ability to do something useful, let me make a few suggestions. Your committee members need all the clues they can get about actual and likely political developments relating to electoral methods. It is quite possible that you will hear of such things before they do from your reading, radio or television listening, or other sources. Please let your Branch Secretary or President know if you have information of this kind. If you belong to a society or club, try to persuade its members that the committee should be elected by the quota-preferential method. If you know of opportunities for speakers from the Society, again please pass the information on. If you would like to address meetings yourself, or just talk to other people about PR, but lack information, please ask for it. There is plenty available. Take, and if necessary make, opportunities for writing letters to papers and magazines and for getting the PR viewpoint into talk-back programs. Write to politicians, especially the Australian Democrat Senators whose published policy calls for proportional representation, and who, in the present Senate, hold what Senator Chipp described as the 'balance of reason'. Write to Mr Scholes and to newspapers, especially the Canberra Times (Box 218, ACT 2601), about the ACT proposals. And perhaps most important, persuade others to join the Society and take part in its activities. There is plenty of scope. There are about 3 827 000 people who had votes of zero value in the 1984 House of Representatives election and who are not yet members of the Society.