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Ensuring Democratic Elections

On 6 December 1985, the Senate resolved that the Constitution Alteration (Democratic Elections) Bill 1985, introduced by Australian Senator Michael Macklin in April 1985, be referred to the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform for inquiry and report. The Society has indicated, in a submission to the Committee, that it considers that the Constitutional provisions relating to Parliamentary elections are inadequate and that alterations are needed.

If the Constitution is altered in accordance with the Bill, it will include a clear statement of the right of citizens to vote, and provision for the jurisdiction of the High Court to be invoked by anyone whose rights relating to participation in elections may be in doubt. It will also limit variation between electoral divisions in the numbers of voters per member for elections of Commonwealth, State and Territory Parliaments. The proposed limitation of variation, if applied to quota-preferential systems in multi-member electorates, would ensure that, as nearly as practicable, each member would represent the same number of voters. This would be genuine one vote, one value. But limitation of variation in the enrolments in single-member-electorate systems, although it could reduce distortion in representation, would leave many voters in every electorate without effective representation. It would not give one vote, one value.

Although what is in the Bill is admirable, it does not go far enough. The proposed alteration of the Constitution would certainly not 'ensure' that the Members of Federal, State and Territory Parliaments are chosen democratically, as the title of the Bill states. The Society has therefore recommended that the Bill be made consistent with the title by providing for insertion at appropriate places in the Constitution of requirements that laws relating to elections shall ensure that, as nearly as practicable, all votes are of equal value.

Tasmanian Voters Knew What They Were About

Under the headline 'Heave-ho for the deadwood MPs', Bruce Montgomery, in the Australian of 10 February, wrote 'Tasmania's Hare-Clark system of voting, unique in Australia, produced the most informed and informative election result in the State's political history at the weekend - the voters clearly knew what they were about and their message is equally clear'. In the new House of Assembly, there will be 19 Liberal, 14 Labor and 2 independent members, as before. But the voters on 8 February replaced 17 of the 35 members of the House. Those replaced by others from their own parties included two Ministers and the Speaker and some senior members of the Opposition. Bruce Montgomery summed up the results neatly when he wrote 'it is the voters' freedom to choose between candidates on each party ticket which has produced the radical changes of the weekend'. Andrew Gunter, National Secretary of the Society, was in Hobart for the election. He was featured in an article in the Mercury on 12 February and was interviewed on ABC radio and commercial television. Another visitor was Dr Paul Harris, research officer for the New Zealand Royal Commission on the Electoral System, which is obviously giving serious consideration to proportional representation.

Significant Reprint

Following the unveiling of a statue of Catherine Helen Spence by the Queen in Adelaide on 10 March, a reprint of Catherine Spence's 1861 pamphlet 'A Plea for Pure Democracy' will be launched on 11 March by Miss Ellinor Walker, member of the Electoral Reform Society of South Australia for over 50 years. The pamphlet was published soon after Hare's proposal for proportional representation. Its discussion of the principles of representative government is as relevant today as it was in 1861.

Reform Likely in Western Australia

The ALP again has a majority in the Legislative Assembly after the election in Western Australia on 8 February but in the Legislative Council, there are 16 ALP members, 14 Liberal and 4 National Party. Mr Hendy Cowan, leader of the National Party, said in the forum on 'The Ideal Electoral System for Western Australia' in October 1985, that the policy of the National Party included changing to 'regional proportional representation' for the Legislative Council. He has reaffirmed his commitment to proportional representation recently, but still favours weighting of rural votes. Legislation for proportional representation for the Council now seems likely. Even with smaller quotas in rural electorates, this would be a very significant step towards democratic elections in Western Australia.

Doubt in Victoria

The Melbourne Age reported on 13 February that the Premier, the Hon. John Cain, had proposed a system for elections of the Legislative Council involving a requirement for a party to obtain at least 10% of the State-wide vote before it could win any seats. This would be inconsistent with the one vote, one value principle and in conflict with an election commitment by Mr Cain. It seems to have been forced on him by a resolution of the last ALP State Conference. One vote, one value would be ensured with a quota-preferential system of the kind supported by the Premier before the election last year.

The ACT Council

On 2 December 1985, the Hon. Gordon Scholes, Minister for Territories, announced a plan for a new ACT Council with limited legislative and executive powers. The thirteen members of the Council would be elected from single-member electorates, the Minister stating that 'the Government has approved of single member constituencies with optional preferential voting as the most democratic system available for the ACT'. A genuinely democratic system is certainly available. The recommendation of the 'Task Force on Implementation of ACT Self Government', appointed by the Government in November 1983, was 'a multi-member, proportional representation system . . . like the system which operates in the Australian Senate and the Tasmanian lower house'.

Gerrymanders and the Bill of Rights

Media reports on 19 February suggested that the Federal Government is unwilling to accept Democrat amendments to the Bill of Rights Bill to provide for it to override State laws, but will enact special legislation relating to State electoral gerrymanders later in the year, after an inquiry by the new Commission that is proposed in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Bill. The two Bills are likely to be debated in March. Since they will be opposed by the Liberal and National parties, they cannot be passed without Democrat support.

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