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The Real One Vote, One Value Bill

On 17 April, Australian Democrat Senator Michael Macklin introduced the Commonwealth Electoral (Representation of the People) Amendment Bill 1986. This is described in the title as 'A Bill for An Act to amend the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 to provide for the election of members of the House of Representatives by proportional representation and for related purposes'. In his Second Reading speech, Senator Macklin pointed out that 'the many excellent features of the Australian electoral system . . . make it easy to overlook some serious defects'. He noted that 'almost no-one expresses any concern that nearly half the voters in single member electorates fail to gain political representatives of their choice'. 'While the impartial distribution of electoral boundaries for single member electorates is fair to the parties', he said, 'there is no possibility of finding one that is fair to voters'.

After summing up the benefits that would result from the adoption of proportional representation, Senator Macklin concluded by saying 'From the national point of view, the most important benefit would be that Parliament would consist of people whom the voters would recognise as those they had chosen. On this basis, we might realistically expect a trend towards replacement of the present widespread distrust of the Parliamentary system by respect for elected politicians and confidence in the institution of Parliament'. Those who want real electoral reform can contribute by writing to newspapers, Democrat Senators and the Special Minister of State commending the Bill.

First-Hand Report

The Guest Speaker at the Annual Meeting of the New South Wales Branch on 22 May was Andrew Gunter, National Secretary. He spoke about what he saw and heard when he visited Hobart for the election of the House of Assembly of Tasmania on 8 February. The election demonstrated how effective the Hare-Clark quota-preferential system is in putting the views of the voters into effect. Andrew pointed out that the parties ensured that voters had a choice of both old and new candidates, and the voters used their freedom of choice to replace members who had performed poorly by others judged more likely to be effective.

Facts for New Voters

The New South Wales Branch is preparing a kit on electoral methods for use in secondary schools in years 11 and 12. The decision to produce the kit was made following a talk given at the 1985 Annual Meeting of the Branch by Mr Richard Lornie, Deputy Headmaster of Central Coast Grammar School, who is a member of the Syllabus Committee for Society and Culture, a subject introduced into the curriculum recently. Students will take part in small-scale elections by several methods and will then evaluate the methods. A draft of the kit was discussed recently with representative teachers and it will be the basis of a workshop in a Conference on Political Education in the Curriculum at the University of Sydney in September.

Democracy in the ACT?

On 2 June, the Minister for Territories, Hon. Gordon Scholes, announced that the Government would not proceed with its plans for self-government in the Australian Capital Territory. Opposition Senators had made it clear that they would support the Democrats in rejecting the Government's proposal for a Council of 13 members to be elected from single-member electorates, and in demanding the retention of proportional representation. In a Media Release on 8 April, Senator Austin Lewis, Shadow Minister for Territories, pointed out that, if an electoral system like the one proposed for the ACT had been used in the February Tasmanian election, 'there would have been 35 Liberals elected for a Parliament of 35'. 'What sort of a Parliament would that have been?' asked Senator Lewis. An absurd so-called compromise plan, for 10 members to be elected from single-member electorates and 9 at large, was also unacceptable to the Opposition and the Democrats. If the Government really wants democratic self-government in the ACT, it must provide for a quota-preferential system of proportional representation, preferably along the lines of Tasmania's Hare-Clark system.

Spence Reprint Available

The reprint of Catherine Helen Spence's 1861 pamphlet 'A Plea for Pure Democracy', launched in Adelaide in March following the unveiling by the Queen of a statue of Catherine Spence, is now available from the Society for \$2.50 plus 60c postage.

Electoral Changes in Western Australia

The Western Australian Government has promised to introduce a new Bill to change the electoral arrangements for both Houses when the Parliament resumes this month. The Bill provides for the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission to draw electoral boundaries. The single-member-electorate system is to be retained for the Legislative Assembly, with enrolments allowed to vary by up to 15% above or below the average. A redistribution is proposed after every second election. The Bill provides for proportional representation for the Legislative Council with a system of zones which, according to the Premier, will 'retain for country votes a weighting of 1.4 to 1'. The Government has a majority in the Legislative Assembly but the fate of the Bill depends on the National Party members in the Legislative Council. No doubt, the proposed weighting is designed to encourage them to give the support needed if the Bill is to be passed.

Embellishing the Language

Americans made a notable contribution to the language of politics when they gave us 'gerrymandering'. Now they have gone one better with 'equipopulous gerrymandering'. In March 1985, the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear an appeal by the Republican-controlled State of Indiana against a December 1984 ruling by a Federal appeals tribunal that a redrawing of State legislative districts discriminated against the Democrats and violated their Constitutional rights. In the 1982 election, the Democrats received 52% of the votes but won only 43% of the seats, although the populations of the districts were very close to equal. Some one described the phenomenon as 'equipopulous gerrymandering'. In the precedent-setting Supreme Court case, the Indiana Democrats are supported by the Republican National Committee, apparently because more States are gerrymandered by the Democrats than by the Republicans. A decision is expected very soon.

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