



Democracy Queensland Style

The Queensland Legislative Assembly election held on 1 November followed a redistribution with an increase in the number of seats from 82 to 89. National Party candidates were indicated as first preferences by 39.9% of the voters, candidates of the ALP by 41.6% and those of the Liberal Party by 16.1%. National Party candidates were elected in 49 electorates, which is 55.1%. Almost half the voters (49.9%) showed first preferences for candidates who were not elected. There has been much media comment on the result and some commentators have even tried to argue that it was fair. Those who find fault mostly suggest a 'fair redistribution' as the remedy. Unfortunately, any single-member-electorate redistribution would inevitably leave almost half the voters without representation by candidates of their choice. It seems quite possible that a distribution that would allow the National Party to win more than half the seats on the votes in this election could be arranged even with a limit of 10% on the variation in enrolments. Queensland voters should not expect to get fair and effective representation until their Legislative Assembly is elected with a quota-preferential method in multi-member electorates.

Local Government Preview

The Newcastle City Council elected in September 1983 was dismissed by the State Government in 1984. On 13 September 1986, a new Council of 12 was elected, with the City as a single electoral district. There are 5 ALP, 2 Liberal, 2 Citizens Group and 3 independent Aldermen. The numbers agree well with the voting support for the groups and the independents. Any casual vacancy in the new Council will be filled by the candidate next in the group of which the vacating Alderman was a member. This election may set the pattern for elections in other local-government areas in September 1987. It is good that by-elections have been eliminated but it would have been preferable to provide for casual vacancies to be filled by re-examination of the ballot papers counted for vacating Aldermen so that the voters losing their representatives would choose the replacements.

Change of Mind

In the Weekend Australian of 1-2 November, Matthew Ricketson reported a resolution at the Conference of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Labor Party in October that 'removed the "double quota" system from the party's policy for reforming the Upper House'. The system was introduced by a resolution carried at the 1985 Conference calling for proportional representation with a requirement for a party to obtain at least 10% of the State-wide vote before it could win any seats in the Legislative Council. According to the report, 'minor parties, from the National Party and the Australian Democrats to fringe parties such as the Socialist Workers Party, would not have been able to get their candidates into the Upper House of the Victorian Parliament'. The report says that 'it is believed members of the parliamentary party of the ALP are keen to bring a Bill before Parliament to reform the Upper House' and that 'if the proposed reforms favour the Nationals, the possibility is strengthened that the Bill will be passed'.

Individual and Democratic Rights

The Advisory Committee on Individual and Democratic Rights of the Constitutional Commission has been holding public hearings at centres around Australia. In Melbourne on 11 October, Mr Geoffrey Goode, National President of the Society, appeared before the Committee, and Mr Jack Wright, Past President, appeared in Sydney on 25 October. They pointed out that all single-member-electorate systems leave many voters without effective representation. It was emphasised that the Commission is required to report on revision of the Constitution so that it will 'adequately reflect Australia's status as . . . a Federal Parliamentary democracy'. For this, the Constitution must specify proportional representation, with a quota-preferential method in multi-member electorates.

Horse and Buggy

The recent election of eight members of the National Roads and Motorists' Association Council was given extensive media attention and questions were raised about the adequacy of the arrangements for the conduct of the election. In a letter in the Sydney Morning Herald of 30 September, Mr John Webber, President of the New South Wales Branch of the Society, showed that a candidate supported by more than 86% of the voters might not be elected. Describing the method of election as 'horse-and-buggy', Mr Webber pointed out that a quota-preferential method was necessary to give genuine representation of the members.

A Bleak Future?

The Electoral Reform Bill introduced in July by the Western Australian Government 'faces a bleak future', according to E.A. Barker in the West Australian of 21 October. The Premier had earlier announced Cabinet agreement to some changes proposed by the Opposition, one being provision for parties, rather than voters, to decide who should fill casual vacancies in the Legislative Council. The National Party is reported to be insisting on retention of substantial weighting of rural votes. We can only hope that Mr Barker was being too pessimistic.

New Zealand Developments

On 14 June, the Electoral Reform Coalition was formed at a meeting at Victoria University, Wellington. It rejects the first-past-the-post system but is considering party-list systems and a mixed system, as in West Germany, as well as a quota-preferential system. The Coalition is awaiting the report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System, expected on 19 December, before deciding what it will advocate.

Logic and Elections

On Sunday 26 October, Mr Jack Wright, Past President of the Society, spoke in the Radio National program Ockham's Razor on the subject 'Is there any logic about elections?'. He argued that 'If things worked as they should, we might expect people to believe that the members of our Parliaments are there because we thought them to be the ones likely to make decisions that we could approve and support'. 'As that doesn't seem to be the general view', he said, 'it's worth trying to find out what has gone wrong with our electoral arrangements'. After showing that quota-preferential systems have given much better results than those with single-member electorates, he concluded that 'there is no logic in continuing to use poor methods and to suffer the consequences of their use when better methods are certainly available'.

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