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Again the Joint Select Committee

In December, the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform released a Report on 'The Operation during the 1984 General Election of the 1983/84 Amendments to Commonwealth Electoral Legislation'. It includes 156 recommendations, none of which deals with the major defects of the present electoral methods. The Society presented evidence showing that 442 of every 1000 formal votes for the House of Representatives were ineffective, and that party representation did not correspond with voting support for the parties. The Committee has not recognised the failure of the method to put the one vote, one value principle into effect and has not recommended any change. The Society also pointed out that the 1983 changes to the provisions for counting votes in Senate elections could lead to serious distortion of vote values. The Committee has attempted to justify retention of these provisions by quoting an astonishing piece of verbiage from the Australian Electoral Commission. Written in a style almost worthy of Sir Humphrey Appleby, its exact meaning is hard to find but it certainly does not justify retaining a defective procedure. The Chairman of the Joint Select Committee, Senator Robert Ray, made his views on representative democracy clear in the Senate on 18 February. Responding to comments on the Report by Senator Vigor, Senator Ray said 'On the final point of proportional representation for the House of Representatives, that will happen over my dead body and the dead body of everyone on this side of the chamber'.

Not Cheaper by the Dozen

The by-elections in Bankstown and Heathcote brought to twelve the number of by-elections for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly since the March 1984 election. The real cost to the community is hard to estimate. Besides the administrative cost, the campaigns of the parties and some of the candidates are supported by public funds. Regular Parliamentary activity was suspended while party leaders, and even the local candidates, made appearances in shopping centres and tried to outdo each other in making airy promises. The end result in each electorate was the election of a candidate who was the first preference of fewer than half of the voters. A quota-preferential system, besides ensuring effective representation in general elections, would make it possible for casual vacancies to be filled without fuss, as in Tasmania's House of Assembly, by re-examination of the ballot papers that were counted for the vacating members.

Sydney Wards May Go

The Sydney Morning Herald of 11 February carried a report that the State Cabinet is considering abolishing all Sydney City Council wards before the local-government elections in September. The Council has been elected from nine three-member wards, which have widely varying numbers of voters. One of the recommendations in the Society's report on the 1983 local-government elections was that 'elections should be at large rather than in ridings or wards, as this is the arrangement most likely to give the representation that the voters want'.

New Zealand Royal Commission Report

In its Report, issued in December, the New Zealand Royal Commission on the Electoral System reviewed the history of electoral arrangements in New Zealand and recommended substantial changes. The most important recommendation is that the present first-past-the-post system should be replaced by a Mixed Member Proportional system (MMP) similar to the system used in West Germany. The House of Representatives would have 120 members, 60 elected from single-member constituencies with the first-past-the-post method, and the other 60 from party lists so that the total number of members of each party would be in proportion to its nation-wide voting support. This system would ensure that the real choices of people to be Members of Parliament would be made within the parties, with the voters determining the number of seats for each party. The recommendation is disappointing to those concerned about effective representation and is also surprising in view of the Commission's favourable comments on quota-preferential or single-transferable-vote (STV) systems. Mr John Taplin, President of the Electoral Reform Society of Western Australia, organised a symposium at the ANZAAS Congress at Massey University in January on 'The Theory of Representation'. While in New Zealand, he addressed several meetings arranged by the recently established Electoral Reform Coalition. He found that there is substantial support for STV, but that some who prefer STV think that MMP would be better than no reform. We note with concern that the latest Coalition Newsletter is devoted to promoting MMP.

The Voters Are Also Concerned

Under the headline 'Talks vital to electoral Bill' in the West Australian of 12 February, Peter Kennedy reported that senior MPs from the three main parties would hold talks in the next few weeks 'in an attempt to find common ground on the Government's electoral-reform proposals'. 'All parties', he wrote, 'agree that the electoral system needs overhauling. Consequently, if reform is to proceed, they will have to be satisfied that they will not be unduly disadvantaged and that no party gains too much by the changes'. We hope that some consideration is also being given to the interests of the voters, and how the proposals that are being discussed might affect them.

Gerrymandering Thicket

In a recent article in the Los Angeles Times entitled 'Court Should Plunge Deeper Into Gerrymandering Thicket', Professor Gordon E. Baker and Professor Bernard Grofman discussed the consequences of a decision of the United States Supreme Court on a challenge to the constitutionality of an electoral distribution. The case arose from the result of the 1982 election in the State of Indiana. The boundaries of the electoral districts, which had approximately equal populations, had been drawn by the Republican administration. The Democrat Party, with 52% of the votes, won only 47% of the seats and some critics labelled the arrangement as 'equipopulous gerrymandering'. The Court did not uphold the complaint but it did rule that political gerrymandering is 'justiciable' - subject to judicial scrutiny - 'when the electoral system is arranged in a manner that will consistently degrade' the rights of voters or groups. Some political commentators have argued that the courts should avoid this 'political thicket' but the two authors of the article argue that 'curing the ills of political gerrymandering cannot be left to the give-and-take of the political process', saying that 'that would be like asking the wolves to protect the sheep'.

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