



More 'Electoral Reform'

Early in May, the Federal Parliament passed the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill 1987. The Bill introduced some of the changes that were recommended by the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform in its report released in December 1986. It did nothing to remove the major defects from the parts of the Electoral Act dealing with electoral methods. Future elections of the House of Representatives will still leave nearly half the voters without effective representation and it is unlikely that party representation will correspond with voting support for the parties. The provision for transfer of surplus votes in Senate elections will still be likely to lead to significant distortion of vote values. One desirable change is provision for excluding several candidates together in Senate scrutines in appropriate cases. Unfortunately, the provision, which is intended to save time, is specified in such a way that understanding of what is involved is extremely difficult and this may lead to waste of time rather than saving. Australian Democrat Senator David Vigor, in moving amendments to provide for proportional representation for the House of Representatives, said 'If we really believe in one vote, one value, we must support a proportional representation system for the House of Representatives'. In spite of the supporting evidence that he presented, the amendments were defeated by 52 votes to 7, only the Democrat Senators and Senator Siddons voting for their adoption.

Casual Vacancies - The Tasmanian Solution

Long before Section 15 of the Australian Constitution was amended in 1977, a logical and fair method was in use for filling casual vacancies in the Tasmanian House of Assembly. The principle is that the voters who lose their representative when a member retires or dies choose the replacement member. The ballot papers 'counted for the vacating member' are re-examined to find which of the unelected candidates is the next choice of the people whose votes elected that member. Section 15 of the Constitution should be amended to embody this principle so as to make it consistent with Section 7, which specifies that the members of the Senate shall be 'directly chosen by the people'. If the same principle had been applied in New South Wales, thirteen wasteful and disruptive by-elections since the election of the Legislative Assembly in March 1984 would have been unnecessary.

Elections Kit for Senior Secondary Students

The 'Electing Representatives' kit prepared by the New South Wales Branch for use in senior secondary classes is now available. Generally, the level of understanding of electoral procedures in the community is very low, and this is also true of many students in years 11 and 12. Many of them will become voters while still at school and the others soon after leaving, so it is vital that they understand electoral processes. The kit is designed to guide students in studying the purposes of elections and finding how well various electoral methods achieve these purposes. It is available from the New South Wales Branch (Box 3058, Sydney, NSW 2001) for \$25 plus packing and postage.

Morwell Initiative

Following receipt of a request from the Morwell Shire Council for approval for future Councils to be elected at large by a quota-preferential method, the Victorian Government recently introduced a Bill to make this possible. It was rejected by the Opposition-controlled Legislative Council. A Bill intended to amend many features of local-government legislation in Victoria is to be debated shortly. It includes provision for Councils to choose between electoral methods, with proportional representation as an option.

Society Loses Senior Members

The Society has recently lost two valued members. Sir Alfred Kemsley, a member of the Victorian Branch for many years, died on 24 February. In a letter to the Society shortly before his death, he wrote that, because of his age, he was relinquishing the position of Chairman of the Trustees of the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance, but he went on 'As far as proportional representation is concerned, I will stick with it to the end'. Mr Rowland Stephens, a founding member of the Electoral Reform Society of Western Australia, died on 19 April at the age of 79. When the Society, which functions as the Western Australian Branch of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia, was formed in September 1981, he was elected as Vice-president and continued to hold that position for several years until poor health forced him to stand down. Besides his consistent work for real electoral reform, he was involved in other community activities, particularly in relation to housing for elderly people.

'Healthy for the Party'

The Australian of 9-10 May reported that the left wing of the ALP in South Australia will attempt to have proportional representation adopted for elections within the party at the State convention in June. A pamphlet being circulated by the left says 'Under proportional representation, the majority would still be represented but the minority would have a chance of putting its view. PR is healthy for the party. One of the great historical strengths of the ALP is its ability to allow for the expression of widely diverging points of view . . . voting systems which effectively exclude differing views have in the past spelt trouble for the ALP'. We might add, not only for the ALP.

Plan for Distortion

Recent media reports suggest that the New South Wales Government is considering a proposal to change the arrangements for elections of the Legislative Council. The proposed system is said to provide for the party with the largest total of first preferences to be given five extra seats in the Council. It sounds like a prescription for ensuring the election of unrepresentative Councils.

Cleese on PR

A television commercial on proportional representation featuring John Cleese was shown at the Annual Meeting of the Victorian Branch in March and at the New South Wales Branch Annual Meeting in May. John Cleese, who is a member of the Social Democratic Party in the United Kingdom, wrote and produced the commercial to promote the Liberal-Social Democrat Alliance policy on proportional representation for the House of Commons. His presentation of what is often considered to be a very complicated subject is not only entertaining but also very informative.

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