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The Federal Election

Writing in the Sydney Morning Herald on 22 June, Peter Bowers quoted the Australian Electoral Commissioner, Dr Colin Hughes, as saying that the election on 11 July would be the 'most equal' held. The Electoral Act requires each Redistribution Committee to 'endeavour to ensure that, 3 years and 6 months after the State or Territory has been redistributed, the number of electors in each proposed Electoral Division in the State or Territory will be equal'. Dr Hughes commended the Committees for their work in 1984, saying that he expected that 'very few divisions will be 3 per cent off State averages'. So we had enrolments as nearly uniform as we are ever likely to have them. If uniform enrolments ensure one vote, one value, that is what this election should have given.

It did not. ALP first preferences totalled 45.84% and those of the Liberal, Country Liberal and National Parties 46.07%. In the House, the ALP will have 86 seats, or 58.11%. More than 4.4 million voters marked as their first preferences candidates who were not elected and most of their votes had no effect on the outcome through their later preferences. This time, the distortion gave an advantage to the ALP. In 1977, just after a redistribution with a 10% limit on variation in enrolments, the Liberal Party, with 38.09% of first preferences, won 54.03% of the seats. In neither case was the result anything like one vote, one value.

For the real thing, we have to look to the Senate election. Within each State, there was excellent agreement between votes for the parties and seats won. The ALP, with 42.2% of the first preferences overall, won 42.1% of the seats, and the numbers of seats won by the other parties were in good agreement with their voting support. The 14.9% of voters whose first preferences were for candidates outside the major parties elected 10 of the 76 Senators.

Senator Robert Ray, formerly Chairman of the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform, is now Minister for Home Affairs, with responsibility for electoral matters. He made his attitude to electoral reform clear in the Senate on 18 February, when he said that proportional representation for the House of Representatives would only be introduced over his dead body. While he holds his Ministerial position and that view, the prospects for one vote, one value are not good.

Progress in Western Australia

In June, the Western Australian Parliament passed a Bill providing for proportional representation in the Legislative Council. The system being introduced is a compromise after three earlier attempts at reform by the Burke Government. The Council will have 34 members elected from six regions for four-year terms. In the metropolitan area, there will be one 7-member and two 5-member regions. In the rest of the State, there will also be one 7-member and two 5-member regions. The boundaries will be determined by an independent Electoral Commission. There will still be substantial weighting of rural votes. While this will not be an ideal system, it will be a vast improvement on what it replaces.

Democratic Rights Committee Reports

Eight of the twenty-two recommendations for changes to the Federal Constitution in the recently released Report of the Advisory Committee on Individual and Democratic Rights of the Constitutional Commission relate to voting and elections. The Committee 'has come to the view that legislators are elected by voters, not farms or cities or economic interests . . . In the Committee's opinion, if the principal right of electors is to choose their representatives and to maintain contact with them, it is essential that the conditions of choice should as far as possible ensure equality between voters, and equal freedom for would-be candidates to present themselves to the electors'.

The report discusses proportional representation in three short paragraphs and concludes 'Whatever the merits or otherwise of proportional representation, the Committee feels that to prescribe any particular system in the constitution would unduly interfere with the powers of the Commonwealth and the States to determine their own electoral system. It is an issue on which there is a continuing debate in the community'. The Committee has recommended that a new section 24A in the Constitution should read 'The number of electors in each electoral division who may vote for each member shall not vary by more than 10%'. Unfortunately, the July election of the House of Representatives, with enrolments close to uniform, showed clearly (see page 1) that the proposed amendment would not 'ensure equality between voters'.

Erratic First-past-the-post

In the first-past-the-post election in the United Kingdom on 11 June, the Conservatives, with almost exactly the same proportion of the votes as in 1983, won 22 fewer seats. They still won 57.7% of the seats with 42.3% of the votes. In many electorates, the candidates elected received fewer than half of the votes. In New Zealand on 15 August, the Labour Party, with 47.6% of the votes, an increase of 4.6% over its 1984 share, also won 57.7% of the seats, a reduction of 2.2%. It is not surprising that there is increasing interest in electoral reform in both countries.

Macquarie University Adoption

The first official elections at Macquarie University under changed rules were held in August. The relevant part of the Schedule to the By-laws now reads 'The result of an election shall be determined in accordance with the procedures set out in the publication entitled "Proportional Representation Manual" (3rd edition) published by the Proportional Representation Society of Australia'.

Cleese on SBS

The SBS election-night program included part of the television commercial on proportional representation made by John Cleese for the British Liberal-Social Democrat Alliance. His entertaining explanation of proportional representation was a welcome change from the confused accounts that we hear from some media commentators.

Local Government Elections in New South Wales

Following some recent changes, proportional representation will apply in all Municipalities in New South Wales except Ku-ring-gai in the elections on 26 September.

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