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Casual Vacancies Again

By-elections to fill casual vacancies in the House of Representatives are again being given a great deal of attention by politicians and the media. There are almost as many interpretations of the significance of the Adelaide by-election as there are commentators. Now we have Port Adelaide. In both cases, the result will be unsatisfactory to nearly half the voters, just as were the results in the July 1987 general election. In Adelaide in July 1987, Mr Chris Hurford was elected although only 31,572 people, 48.9% of those who voted formally, indicated him as their first preference. Of the 32,990 who voted first preference for other candidates, 871 had some effect on the result through their second or later preferences. That left 32,119, 49.7% of the voters, with votes of no value. Final figures for the by-election are not yet available but we can be certain that nearly half the votes were valueless.

Over 70 years ago, a much better method for filling casual vacancies was introduced in Tasmania as a refinement of the Hare-Clark system of proportional representation. The votes counted for a vacating member are re-examined to find which of the unelected candidates is the next preference of the voters left unrepresented. If the members of the House of Representatives were elected by a quota-preferential system similar to Tasmania's Hare-Clark system, not only would general elections give more effective representation but the disruption and cost of by-elections would be avoided. With a quota-preferential system already in use for Senate elections, casual vacancies could be filled in the same way, but an amendment of the Constitution would be needed to make this possible.

Two Views From Queensland

Some interesting comments on the notion that equality of enrolments in single-member electorates ensures one vote, one value were made in two items published in Queensland newspapers in January. In a letter in the Sunday Sun of 24 January, Stephen S. Tyler wrote 'There is a belief that if electorates that return one person to Parliament have equal numbers of electors then one vote, one value exists and gerrymanders have been abolished. Whether electorates are of equal size or not does not stop boundaries being drawn in ways that favor one political party or another. . . . The only way to achieve one vote, one value and have Parliament reflecting the way the population casts its votes is by having multi-member electorates with a quota-preferential method of counting the votes'.

In an article headed 'National one-vote one-value warning' in the Courier Mail of 27 January, Tony Koch reported that Mr Ian Henderson, Member for Mt Gravatt and Queensland Parliamentary National Party Secretary, told National Party members in a letter of 20 January that, although Australians would vote YES in a one vote, one value referendum, 'the Nationals could still maintain a majority in Queensland if they were allowed to draw the electoral boundaries'.

Editorial Got It Right

An Editorial in the Newcastle Herald of 28 December 1987 entitled 'Votes that lack true equality' noted that the Constitutional Commission's Advisory Committee on Individual and Democratic Rights had supported the idea of one vote, one value, but failed to recommend changes that would ensure that it would be put into effect. 'It seems less than just' it read, 'when an elector can vote throughout the whole of his or her adult life, in State and Federal polls, and never have a hope of political representation in his or her electorate'. The Editorial discussed the case for proportional representation and commented that 'under a totally fair system with multi-seat electorates, Tasmania has had more stable government than any other State. Where there is instability is in the tenure of the politicians rather than in the tenure of a Government. At the most recent Tasmanian election almost half the sitting MPs were swept out; the electors had decided they were not performing as well as they should be. Proportional representation offers a reasonable stability of government, a goad for MPs to be performers, and true one-vote one-value fairness in democracy'.

Votes of No Value

Figures released recently by the Australian Electoral Commission have made it possible to calculate how many people recorded formal votes that had no effect on the result of the House of Representatives election in July 1987. Of the 9,235,086 who voted formally, 4,408,977 indicated as their first preferences candidates who were not elected. Of these, 247,935 helped through their second or later preferences to decide which candidates were elected in the 54 electorates where no candidate had a majority of first preferences. That left 4,161,042 people, 45.06% of those who voted formally, whose votes had no effect on the outcome through their first or any other preferences. They had votes of no value.

Local Government Review in South Australia

Following the local-government elections in South Australia last year, the Government again set up an Election Review Working Party, with the special task of examining ways of improving voter turnout in local-government elections. The Electoral Reform Society of South Australia recently made a submission to the Working Party. The Society pointed out that voters in districts where proportional representation applies are required to mark preferences for at least as many candidates as there are vacancies. Where the defective 'bottom-up' method is used, preference marking is optional. The Society expressed the belief that the use of a fair and equitable electoral system will do much to encourage people to vote. It noted that the previous Local Government Election Review Working Party had concluded that proportional representation is the fairest and most equitable system, and recommended that optional preferential voting should also be allowed with proportional representation.

ANZAAS Symposium

A symposium on Democracy and Electoral Systems is to be held on Tuesday 17 May as part of the Congress to be held at the University of Sydney to mark the centenary of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. The symposium has been arranged by Mr John Taplin, President of the Electoral Reform Society of Western Australia. Those taking part will include Senator Michael Macklin and several academic political scientists. Mr Taplin will present a paper himself and another will be presented by Mr J.F.H. Wright, Past National President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia.

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