

Legislative Assembly Redistribution

Under the existing legislation, a redistribution of electoral boundaries for the NSW Legislative Assembly must begin by 11 May. Once again, we are being subjected to the usual charges and counter-charges by the various parties with vested interests in the outcome. Once again, the voters are neglected in the process, being denied the full freedom of expression that the quota-preferential method of proportional representation would give them.

It seems that there is some recognition of the case for proportional representation. In a feature article in the Sydney Morning Herald of 26 February, Malcolm Mackerras wrote 'Possibly there is a case for proportional representation. However, we now have this for the Legislative Council. It seems to me that the Assembly should be elected differently from the Council.' What Mr Mackerras sees as a need for difference doesn't seem to be a good reason for continuing with the use of a discredited method. There are ways of electing the Legislative Assembly differently from the Council but with proportional representation.

The Society is recommending to the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition that there should be a public inquiry into the method of election of the Assembly and that consideration should be given to the division of the State into eight 7-member districts, eight 5-member districts, and one 3-member district in the west of the State. With an arrangement of this kind, the voter would find greater rapport with the he or she helped to elect. The parties would win seats according to the support given to them by the voters and the exact placing of boundaries, which is what the present verbal brawl between the political leaders is mostly about, would become of minor importance.

A letter on this subject over the signature of the President, Jack Wright, was published in the Sydney Morning Herald on 5 February. The Herald and other papers are likely to publish more letters and possibly to produce editorial comment if there is evidence of real public interest. You can help to convince the editors that this is a newsworthy topic by writing to them. Not every letter is likely to be published but every one improves the chance of getting some published.

Interstate News

A Bill designed to upgrade the method of election of the South Australian Legislative Council in line with its New South Wales counterpart was introduced as a private member's Bill by the Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council, Mr R DeGaris, late in 1978. It was passed by the Council and is now awaiting attention by the House of Assembly. The Labor Government is opposing the Bill, inconsistently in view of the NSW Legislative Council reform having been implemented by the Wran Labor Government. Our friends in the Electoral Reform Society of South Australia are working to obtain support for the Bill. They would be very happy to have any support we in New South Wales can give them. So far, we have had one letter published in the Adelaide Advertiser, followed by a favorable editorial.

Candid Comment

In the drama and excitement surrounding the resignation of the South Australian Premier, Mr Don Dunstan, one might be forgiven for not noting a pertinent reference by Mr Dunstan to electoral reform as one of his outstanding achievements. In claiming that South Australia now has the 'fairest electoral system', he limited

Overseas News

In the clamour following the recent New Zealand election, proportional representation has become a catch phrase. Not only the newspapers but also some of the politicians have discovered it.

As was to be expected, the results of the first-past-the-post election, with single-member districts, gave a distorted account of the views of the people. The Labor Party received more votes than the National Party yet the Nationalists led by Premier Muldoon are in government. The Social Credit Party was supported by almost half as many voters as each of the major parties but only one Social Creditor, Mr Bruce Beetham, won a seat in the Parliament of 91 members.

Mr Geoff Powell, of the Victorian Branch of the PR Society, while in New Zealand recently, met Mr Beetham and learnt that he intends to introduce a Bill to provide for proportional representation in future elections. Geoff's visit was also given some attention by the media and several articles on the need for PR in New Zealand have appeared. We have sent some information to Mr Beetham to help him in the presentation of his Bill. Perhaps you have friends or relatives in New Zealand who could also use information from Australia to help bring about the much-needed change in their electoral law.

Petition

Several Senators have already presented petitions for the removal of the present requirement that preferences must be shown for all candidates in Senate elections. The petition is circulating not only in New South Wales but also in Victoria, South Australia, and Queensland. It has also been supported by the Human Rights Committee of the NSW Branch of the United Nations Association of Australia. A note on the petition is to appear in the next issue of the Committee's Human Rights Newsletter.

UNAA

The Proportional Representation Society was recently admitted as a Corporate Member of the United Nations Association of Australia. Members of the Society took part in the celebration of Human Rights Day organized by the United Nations Association. This took place at the village Church, Paddington. There was interest in our literature and signatures were recorded on the petition.

Policy Decision

The Australian Democrats have voted recently on the Party's policy on Electoral Reform. The results included the adoption of the quota-preferential method with optional preferential voting for all public elections.

Additional Member System

In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on 16 February, Mr J Mason, Leader of the State Opposition, suggested consideration of the Additional Member System for the Legislative Assembly. This system was proposed in Britain by the Hansard Society Commission on Electoral Reform in 1966. It would provide for three-quarters of the seats in the House of Commons to be filled by first-past-the-post from single-member districts and the other quarter by additional members to give the parties as far as possible the correct total numbers of seats. This seems to be a prescription for adding the defects of party-list and single-member systems. The introduction of additional members would do nothing for voters who are left nominally represented by people whom they have rejected when voting. Only the quota-preferential method can give British voters fair representation.