## PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATIONSOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA



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Senate "fix" does little to empower voters: Menzies' 1948 proposal was simpler and better

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia's analysis of proposed changes reveals some Senate numberings will be formal if indicated through party boxes, but informal if attempted alongside individual candidates' names. This novelty in Australian electoral practice highlights the failure to take up a key 2014 recommendation of the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Matters that it be much easier to lodge a formal vote below the line.

"In 1948, the Menzies Opposition moved an amendment that a vote be accepted as formal if it indicated at least as many preferences as there were vacancies to be filled," said Bogey Musidlak, President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia.

"Dr Evatt's rejection of that proposal meant that high informality continued because electors still had to indicate preferences for all candidates. Instead of simply fixing that problem in 1983, Labor and the Australian Democrats brought in party boxes and their associated group voting tickets, while keeping it onerous for electors to mark their own individual preferences.

"Few Australians know that you are required to mark at least 90% of the individual squares below the line, with no more than three departures from sequential numbering. Under the proposed changes, five departures will be permitted but the 90% remains unchanged!

"This ridiculous imposition has driven most voters towards marking just a party box, opening the way for fluke quotas to be cobbled together through tightly-interlocking numberings on group voting tickets as more first preferences have gone outside established parties.

"Preference whisperers have now been taken out of the picture, but voters' wishes haven't been placed at its heart. A single party box preference is accepted as formal, but equivalent numbering below the line would be rejected because insufficient squares have been marked.

"Such inconsistency of treatment is unprecedented. Those claiming to have 'fixed' the Senate system must explain why this perversity is justified, and how all the new deeming provisions associated with party boxes make for a simplification of voting and counting.

"Tossing out group voting tickets but keeping party boxes will force the Australian Electoral Commission to concentrate on advertising the change instead of just emphasising that the marking of preferences is an instruction about the order in which candidates can be assisted by what remains unused of a particular vote. As in 1984, informal House of Representatives voting will increase from already high levels in 2013 because many voters won't grasp that official advertising about numbering at least one to six applies only to the Senate.

"Dropping party boxes altogether and instead following a key Joint Select Committee belowthe-line recommendation could have given us what Mr Menzies proposed back in 1948 when proportional representation was introduced for the Senate, and allowed official advertising to focus on how electors can make the most of their vote," concluded Mr Musidlak.

## For further information:

Bogey Musidlak President (02) 6295 8137 bogeym2002@yahoo.com.au John Pyke Vice President (07) 3269 9689 or 0410 960 920 johnpyke.oz@gmail.com