

QUOTA NOTES

Newsletter of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia - NSW Branch

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Electoral System under Review

Late in the evening of 26 November 1981, the last sitting day of the year, the Senate carried a resolution 'seeking the concurrence of the House of Representatives' in setting up a Joint Committee on the Electoral System. The resolution, moved by Senator Gietzelt, provided for the establishment of a Committee of both Houses to 'inquire into and report upon all aspects of the conduct of elections for the Parliament of the Commonwealth and matters related thereto'. It also required the publication of advertisements inviting submissions relating to the matters to be dealt with by the Committee. Advertisements were published on 12 December with a deadline of 10 March for submissions.

A 14-page submission from the Society sets out our views on the defects of the present method for electing the House of Representatives, the need for a system based on multi-member districts and the quota-preferential method, and the benefits for both voters and parties that would come from the adoption of a quota-preferential system. It also examines other systems that have been suggested, especially so-called top-up systems, and shows how they, like the present single-member-district system, fail to give one vote, one value and to meet the requirements of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Australia in 1980. Some improvements in arrangements for elections of the Senate are also recommended.

As the House of Representatives had not dealt with the proposal, there was, and at the time of writing still is, no certainty that a Joint Committee will be formed. If it is not, it seems likely that the Senate itself will form a Committee and we have asked that, if so, it should consider our submission. A limited number of copies of the submission are available to members at \$1.25 a copy.

Vice-President

The ballot to fill the position of Vice-President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia resulted in the election of [Mr Geoffrey Goode](#), of Victoria.

Message to the Leader

Sometimes we get publicity that we don't expect. On 2 and 3 February, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had a two-part article by Chief Reporter Evan Whitton on differences within the Queensland Liberal and National Party coalition. Mr Whitton referred to the effects of the present electoral system on the winning of seats by the parties, with the Liberal Party's share of the seats well below its share of the votes. He went on to recommend to Dr Edwards, Leader of the Liberal Party, that he should 'ring, soonest, Mr J.F.H. Wright at (02) 498 5559'. He suggested that, as National President of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia, Mr Wright could tell Dr Edwards how, under a quota-preferential system, the Liberal Party would get seats corresponding to its voting support. So far, no call has been received from Dr Edwards. But the Society would be happy to help him, or anyone else, to prepare a plan for applying the quota-preferential method to Queensland. It's time that voters in Queensland had a fair system and if they had, so would the parties.

Changing the System

Four of the people who presented papers at the 'Change the Rules' Conference at the University of New South Wales in February 1980 have recently written a monograph (APSA Monograph 25) with the title 'Changing the System', which is intended 'to arouse discussion about four important items of political and constitutional reform'. One of the topics discussed by the writers, Associate Professor Donald Horne, Dr Elaine Thompson, Dr Dean Jaensch, and Associate Professor Ken Turner, is 'Fairer elections'. The principle of one vote, one value is considered but only in terms of the values of votes to parties, the right of voters to choose between candidates within parties not being recognised. The 'Tasmanian system' is recommended for further discussion but so also is a 'top-up' system with 'a majority of seats allocated as at present through a system of single-member constituencies using preferential voting' and 'a large minority of seats ••. filled from "supplementary representation" based on party lists and the total vote'. Dr Thompson, in a television interview when the monograph was released, recommended this latter system. Obviously, it retains the basic defect of all single-member-district systems, that only one group of voters in each district can see the election of the candidate for whom they vote, so that the one vote, one value principle is inevitably infringed. The topping-up process could give the parties seats in approximate agreement with their voting support but the supplementary seats would be filled by people chosen by the parties, not by the people.

Ireland

In the election in Ireland on 18 February, Fianna Fail won 81 seats, Fine Gael 63, Labour 15, and others 7. No doubt, we will be told that this is an example of the failure of proportional representation to give a Government a working majority. With no party or coalition supported by a majority of the voters, it is not obvious which party, if any, should have a majority of the seats. Those who voted to make Mr Haughey Prime Minister were a majority of the members and, although we do not yet have final figures, are likely to represent a majority of the voters. The outcome seems fair and the Haughey Government can now proceed with legislation that can win the support of a majority of the members.

Mo Awards

For the third year, the Society recently undertook the counting of votes for the [annual awards](#) of the Variety Artistes' Mo Awards Association. The awards were presented on Tuesday evening 16 March. The NSW Branch President, Mr E.W. Haber, was Returning Officer and he was assisted by Mr S.S. Gilchrist. In each of the 22 categories, five nominees were chosen on the basis of preferential voting by the members, the winner in each category then being chosen from these nominees in a further preferential vote. The *Daily Telegraph* also makes an award to a performer chosen by Telegraph readers. Although there is no proportional representation involved, the Society provides an expert service on a professional basis.

Lowe and Drummoyne

One bonus that goes with a well-designed quota-preferential system is removal of the need for by-elections. The retirement of Sir William McMahon from the Federal seat of Lowe has led to two by-elections, one Federal and one State, with all the attendant cost in money and time. With a quota-preferential system, we could follow the example of Tasmania and fill casual vacancies by re-examining the ballot papers forming the quotas of vacating members. While this would deprive party operators and media people of some fun, it would give voters, among other advantages, a choice between candidates rather than the choice within parties being made by a few people long before the voters are consulted.

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