

QUOTA NOTES

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Federal Elections - Where Now?

The Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform has recently taken evidence in public hearings. Mr J .F.H. Wright, National President of the Society, appeared before the Committee in Sydney on 8 August 1985. The Committee indicated in its advertisements that it wished to review the operation of the innovations introduced following its 1983 report. The Society's submission showed that, in the 1984 House of Representatives election, 442 of every 1000 formal votes were completely ineffective. The 3.8 million people who recorded these votes are represented by people opposed to those they wanted as their representatives. The system did not give one vote, one value.

Nor was the one vote, one value principle realised in party representation. Labor, with 47.5% of first preferences, has 55.4% of the seats. In Victoria, with 48.9% of first preferences, Labor won 25 of the 39 seats, which is 64.1 %. But in Tasmania, Labor has no seats at all although 43.3% of the first preferences were for Labor candidates. The Society has again recommended the introduction of a quota-preferential system as the only way to ensure genuine one vote, one value.

The changes in Senate election provisions, although they had some good features, were quite inadequate. The submission pointed out that the real remedy for high levels of informal voting would be fully optional marking of preferences. The reduction of the minimum number of preferences for a formal vote from 100% to 90% of the candidates did little to help voters. With the new 1-in-the-box voting procedure, voting as the parties wanted was much easier than voting intelligently. There was also confusion because the methods of voting for the two Houses were different.

The new provisions for transfer of surplus votes in Senate counts can cause distortion, sometimes gross, of vote values. The Committee was given an example showing that the values of some votes could increase by more than 40% during a scrutiny. The Chairman of the Committee agreed that this is a problem for which a remedy must be found and the Society has indicated the changes that are necessary.

The Committee is expected to report before the end of the year. We can only hope that its members will show that they can respond to facts and logic even when surrounded by party-machine politics.

National Office-Bearers

Because of pressure of other commitments, Mr Peter Paterson has resigned as National Secretary. Mr John Alexander has been appointed to the position for the remainder of the term. There was only one nomination for each of three of the national office-bearer positions for the term starting on 1 January 1986. The President will be Mr Geoffrey Goode and the Secretary Mr Andrew Gunter, both of Victoria. The Vice-President will be Mr David Higbed, of South Australia. The two candidates for the position of Treasurer are Dr Peter Fleming, of Victoria, and Mr Len Higgs, of South Australia.

More Than Sixty Years' Service to PR

Dr George Hallett, acknowledged around the world as one of the leading workers for democratic elections, died in New York on 2 July 1985 at the age of 90 years. Characteristically, he was working in his office when he suffered a cardiac arrest. George Hallett was co-author of the classic 'Proportional Representation', by Hoag and Hallett, originally published by Macmillan in 1926. He was active in the work of the Proportional Representation League from 1919 and was its Executive Secretary when it merged with the National Municipal League in 1932. At the time of his death, Dr Hallett was working with State Senator Roy Goodman, who described him as 'the most selfless and dedicated advocate of good government I have ever known'.

Interest in New Zealand

In June, the Society made a submission to the New Zealand Royal Commission on the Electoral System. In a letter to the Society, the Chairman of the Commission, Hon. Mr Justice J.H. Wallace, wrote 'I would like to place on record that members of the Commission appreciate the time and trouble that your Society has taken. We will certainly be looking with care at quota-preferential systems and we are most interested to have your views'.

Nunawading Re-run

In the Victorian State election in March, the ALP candidate in the Legislative Council Province of Nunawading was declared elected after the returning officer's casting vote resolved a tie. A petition to the State Supreme Court by the Liberal Party challenging the result was upheld and the seat went to the Liberal candidate in a new election held on 17 August. The Labor Government now has only 22 of the 44 seats in the Legislative Council, too few for the electoral reforms it has promised. Proportional representation for the Legislative Council and for local government councils is now possible only if some Opposition members can be persuaded to give their support.

Backwards in South Australia

Amendments to the Electoral Act in South Australia in May took electoral reform back a step. The counting procedure adopted for the Senate in 1983 has been introduced for the South Australian Legislative Council. As noted on the front page, this procedure can cause distortion of vote values. As eleven vacancies are filled in each Legislative Council election, the effect could be even more serious than with Senate elections. Regrettably, voters will now have to show preferences for all candidates rather than the eleven required so far. Provision for endorsing entire party tickets by a single mark has also been introduced so that it will be much easier for voters to do what the parties want than to exercise their own judgment in choosing between candidates.

YWCA Elections

The Australian YWCA, at a conference at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, this month, used the Society's quota-preferential method for several elections, including the election of three representatives to the World Council. Mr Geoff Powell, President of the Victorian Branch of the Society, assisted with the elections.

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