

SUBMISSION 64

Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600
June 2, 2006

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission. I will keep this short.

Introduction

Australia combines a complicated voting system with possibly the most strictly enforced party cohesion in the democratic world and one of the lowest levels of political interest. America may be one of the few countries whose citizens take less interest in day to day politics and policy than we do, but they have great pride in their institutions; many know their first President, a small handful of constitutional amendments, and so on. We, on the other hand, know little about our political and civil institutions or their history.

A popular explanation for our lack of interest is the ease with which our nation came into being, there being no traumatic events such as revolution to elicit emotion today. There must be a lot of truth to this. As well, our politicians, at least in the parties that seriously contend for government, have many fine attributes, but they are a grey, blokey and pasty lot (present company excepted) – again by world standards. This, again, hardly encourages interest from young people, migrants or Aboriginal Australians.

Our voting systems, particularly for most upper houses, are complicated. Many in the media obviously don't understand our House of Representatives preferential voting, and

you could almost fit in a phone box the number of Australians who truly understand the Senate version.

We can't change our history, and are stuck with our national characteristics, but we can still make the most of what we have, and use our history to our advantage.

Below are some suggestions, in two categories.

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I 'Pigs might fly' suggestions

These are the suggestions that I anticipate have next to no chance of being adopted. The first one: change the electoral system. Proportional representation in the lower house would, depending on the version used, see the entry of unorthodox, often interesting people and ideas. It would also be more likely to throw up representatives of the types of people this inquiry is addressing. The odd independent thinker, transvestite (as NZ had/has?) or outright nutter would make politics at least a little more interesting – and representative of the national community.

Secondly, we could make the Senate voting system less cumbersome. I know I've missed that boat (re a previous committee) and the current a Senate voting schemozzle has been covered elsewhere, but any electoral system must have a trade-off between theoretical purity and understandability. If people can't understand how their choices on election day translate into numbers in parliament, this lessens their general connection with institutions.

I would prefer to take our electoral system to the other extreme, where Senate voters just had one vote (a tick or cross), and parties and independents received seats in proportion to those, than that which we currently endure. But something between the two extremes – say abolish above the line, and have voters fill in as many squares as there are positions to be filled - would be the best solution.

While you're at it, introduce Optional Preferential Voting for the House of Representatives. We in effect tell people they must attend the polling booth, but don't have to vote. However, if they do vote they must express preferences for candidates they don't know. It is overly coercive and alienating¹. You might also consider a 'none of the above' box.

II More realistic options

Australia was once an innovator in electoral matters. We introduced the government-printed ballot slip to the world², trail-blazed on postal voting, abolition of public nominations³ and of course manhood and then universal suffrage. Our system of registering voters was also ahead of the rest of the world.

I mention this for two reasons. First, these are interesting facts that few know about. If people were aware of them, and other parts of the rich story, much of which we can be proud, they might value more the electoral process today. I am currently writing a PhD on the topic and hope to eventually produce a book with CD. I currently keep a website www.enrollingthepeople.com (or www.enrol.com.au) on my research. The site is, I believe, relatively jargon free and accessible to young people. There is a good story there that deserves telling.

¹ As an aside, the Coalition obviously believes any move away from full preferences would hurt them more than Labor, but they are dead wrong: in the current climate of high Green support, OPV would be deadly for Federal Labor.

² Before the 'Australian ballot', elections were either 'open' or 'secret' but with electors supplying their own ballot slips, or taking them off candidates and placing them in the ballot box in full view of anyone who wanted to watch.

³ Actually, the abolition of nomination on the hustings was seen at the time as directly responsible for a drop in public interest in elections. It took the human element out.

Secondly, I wish to encourage you, as legislators, to emulate your forefathers and be willing to experiment. Something that immediately comes to mind for consideration is a 'tell us what you're thinking (in two lines or less)' section at the bottom of the ballot paper. The AEC could collate and release on their website. It would further produce a connection with the system, keep teams of academics busy for endless hours, and the results might actually be useful. It might become a form of non-binding citizens initiated referendums, in which community issues find expression. Most importantly for the purposes of this inquiry, it may encourage connection between the citizen and the political/civic/electoral system.

Another suggestion is far from original but remains valid. School curriculums should teach more about our political institutions. I must admit I'd never heard of Simpson – let alone his donkey - until a few months ago. I'm sure he has a lot to teach us, but I would add people like H.S. Chapman (inventor of the ballot) and W.R. Boothby (<http://www.enrollingthepeople.com/boothby/boothby.htm>) who substantially improved it. And Catherine Helen Spence, who wrote in her autobiography of visiting the United States in the 1890s:

"You come from Australia, the home of the secret ballot?" was the greeting I often received, and that really was my passport to the hearts of reformers all over America.

Let's make politics interesting!

Thanks again for the opportunity to contribute.

Regards,
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