

Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto

Would Voluntary Voting favour the Right, and reduce community feelings of ownership in government?

Submission by Michael Doyle

Introduction

This submission addresses the arguments that Voluntary Voting would result in:-

- an undue advantage to Right wing, or Coalition-side, political Parties, and
- prevents the entire electorate from feeling that they have ownership in government and its decisions

It is frequently stated or implied that those who argue in favour of Voluntary Voting, do so because they envisage a political gain. The June 1997 Report of the then Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommended a change to Voluntary Voting. However, a minority report by Senator Conroy, Mr L Ferguson MP, and Mr R. McClelland MP states ‘The unambiguous rationale for this change is partisan self-interest.’¹ The statement continues ‘the socio-economic characteristics of non-voters on overseas experience indicate their discouragement will have important electoral implications here.’

Issues

The ‘partisan’ argument is not only offensive, implying as it does a selfish disregard for democratic values, but absurd. Members of the Liberal Party presumably want to be in Government, so they would normally be expected to argue, not necessarily in a partisan way, for any strategy that would provide an electoral advantage. And yet, Voluntary Voting has frequently failed to win acceptance as an official Liberal policy. Many members of the Coalition parties, such as Mr Petro Georgiou MP, argue passionately and strongly in support of Compulsory Voting.

¹ Senator Conroy, Mr L Ferguson MP, and Mr R. McClelland MP, Minority Report, Page 125, “The 1996 Federal Election”, June 1997, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

The proposition that the poorer people in the community are less likely to vote in a Voluntary System has never been proved. The 1997 Minority Report made reference to a 2.4 % change in voter numbers in Carinthia (an Austrian Province). This is hardly damning evidence. Sadly, though not surprisingly, there was no evidence as to the 'socio-economic characteristics' of the voters. The argument also depends upon the assumption that affluent voters always support one side of politics, whilst the less affluent consistently support the opposite side. This may have been a valid assumption 20 years ago, but it appears much less so now. It is true that rock-solid Labor electorates with low employment and low average income tend to always return Labor candidates. But does this mean that the unemployed or those on a low income living in marginal electorates will also tend to return Labor candidates? Howard's 'battlers' and the Tasmanian Forestry workers in 2004 seem to show they do not.

It is salutary to note that Voluntary Voting has not prevented Labor Governments being returned to power in NZ and the UK, again and again. In the UK the Right-wing Conservatives seem to be most successful when the turnout is high, whilst Labour wins and retains power with low turnouts:-

In 1945 in the UK, Labour swept to power with a turnout of 72.8%. The turnout in 1950 was much higher (83.9%) when the Conservatives won but it fell, along with their majority, until 1964 (77.1%) when Labour won. Apart from February 1974 (78.8%), when the Conservatives won, the turnout continued to fall with Labour winning and retaining power. Until that is, in 1979 when the turnout shot up to 76% ... and Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister². In 1997 the turnout of 71.4% was a new post-war low ... and Tony Blair's Labour won power. In 2005 he was returned with a 61.3% turnout³.

Our electoral system obviously differs from that of the UK, where a voter puts a cross against just one preferred candidate. But the clear conclusion is that, based upon the UK, a low turnout favours the Left-wing Party whilst a high turnout favours the Right-wing. Why, therefore, does the Australian Labor Party insist on supporting turnouts of around 95% ? One of their official reasons seems to be that it 'allows the entire electorate to feel that they have ownership in government and its decisions. People feel they are part of the loop and matter.'⁴ This sounds very grand and noble ... until we ask ourselves, "How do those making that statement *know* the way that people feel as they watch political TV adverts, queue to vote, stare at How-To-Vote cards, and stand in the polling booth?"

It may be that we regularly get 95% turnouts ... but that must include a large proportion of people who have given no real thought to the issues and policies of the candidates. How many? We simply do not know. Then there are the voters who choose to follow the 'Donkey' and simply vote 1,2,3,4, 5 ... down the ballot paper. Again, we have no idea how many Donkey voters there are. In every election there will be candidates who win by a handful of votes. In

² www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2004/rp04-061.pdf, Page 26

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/constituencies/default.stm

⁴ Senator Conroy, Mr L Ferguson MP, and Mr R. McClelland MP, Minority Report, Page 125, "The 1996 Federal Election", June 1997, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

these instances the winner will be dependent on those Donkey votes. It might well be that the Party that wins Government, does so thanks to an animal with big ears and 4 legs. We would never know.

Under a Voluntary System, we might get a turnout similar to NZ's of 76% in 2002⁵. That is lower than 95% of course. But we could be certain that all of those who voted, did so because they wanted to vote and had given consideration to their choices. Frankly, I'd take that 100% every time.

Conclusions

There is no evidence to show that Voluntary Voting favours Right-wing political parties. On the contrary, relatively low turnouts (as will sometimes occur under a voluntary system, but never under a compulsory one) seem to favour Left-wing political Parties.

95% is not always greater than 76%, because "Quality is always better than Quantity".

⁵ http://www.nzes.org/docs/papers/NZPSA_2003.pdf. Table 5