

I am concerned about a suggestion that compulsory voting should be abolished. There is no weight at all to the argument that it is a civil rights or individual liberty issue: in a democracy, the freedom of each depends upon the freedom of all and it is both logical and legitimate that this principle can be incorporated as an individual obligation. A consciousness of this principle is the foundation of the entirely successful history of compulsory voting in Australia and the support it has consistently received from the great majority of Australians of all political beliefs. I suspect also that even the majority of the small minority that oppose it do so more because it is a minor inconvenience than a violation of principle. No one is raging in the streets about it.

The notion also, that Australia is 'out of step' with other anglo-saxon democracies on this matter is a nonsense: each of these countries has its own individual take on democracy -though history seems to suggest, that in fact, Australia first introduced many of the features of modern electoral democracy that is now common to them all.

The immense benefit of the compulsory voting system is that it effectively gives true political autonomy both to the electoral system and the individual voter. The turnout is not subject to the power of organised lobby groups whose primary concern is power not democracy. In effect there is a separation of powers between electoral system and political process.

Some argue that it tends to 'force' politics to the centre favouring the large parties and marginalising minority groups. On the latter point I would suggest that on the contrary, compulsory voting has probably played an often unrecognised role in helping to create our successful multi-cultural society, because it makes sure minority migrant groups are enrolled and participate in the political process. (In any case our system of proportional voting because it is based on compulsory voting seems to have provided ample opportunity for all sorts of minority viewpoints to have an effective say.) And on the former point, considering the recent history of the USA and the UK, perhaps a system which encourages the predominance of the political centre is no bad thing.

I would also like to point out, that given the narrowness of the result in the 1951 Referendum, which was conducted in an intimidating atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria and proposed to introduce an Australian equivalent to US McCarthyism, compulsory voting probably helped save our civil liberties from being permanently crippled under the Constitution.

Finally one can suggest that if Winston Churchill, probably for many, the archetypal anglo-saxon democrat and civil libertarian and personal epitome of the defence of those values could support compulsory voting 'as it is in Australia' as he did in a speech in 1948 it is no bad thing and we should most certainly retain it.

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