

Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Above the Line Voting) Bill 2013 – Statement discharging the Committee’s requirement to provide and advisory report

The Committee has considered the content of this statement and unanimously endorses it. On 12 December 2013, the Senate adopted the report of the Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration on the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Above the Line Voting) Bill 2013*, which recommended that this bill be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for inquiry. As a result, the bill stood referred to the Electoral Matters Committee.

The bill proposes to reform the system for electing candidates to the Senate in light of perceived attempts to “game” the system through preference deals at the 2013 federal election. This proposal is timely, as the current system has resulted in the election of candidates who attracted a very small proportion of the primary vote – less than one per cent in some cases. The intention of the bill is to simplify the voting process to better allow voters to determine their own preferences.

The bill proposes an optional above the line voting system for electing candidates to the Senate. Electors would have the option either of numbering at least one group voting square above the line or at least as many candidates as there are to be elected at that particular election. Voters would then have the option to go on to number as many other squares as they wish. This would allow voters to express their preferences to the extent they wish.

The Committee is currently conducting a wide-ranging inquiry into the 2013 federal election, and all matters relating thereto. The main focus of the Committee for the early stages of this inquiry is in fact the current voting system used to elect Senators. The Committee is considering a range of different proposals, including several responses to the provisions outlined in this bill. There seems little point in covering the same territory twice, or in pre-empting the conclusions of this more comprehensive inquiry.

Given the wide-ranging nature of the inquiry into the federal election, and the Committee does not want to consider individual reforms by way of private bills. This Committee takes very seriously its responsibilities when it comes to the future of Australia’s electoral system, and is intent on considering this proposal in the context of the range of reform options that will be presented during the course of this inquiry.

Additionally, should this bill be passed by the Senate, the House will have a chance to consider its provisions in detail at that point. Therefore, the Committee has decided not to inquire into this bill in a separate inquiry, and will instead incorporate consideration of its provisions into the inquiry into the 2013 federal election. This will allow time and scope for the deepest consideration possible, as well as consideration of a range of other potential

reforms to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* which will no doubt come up in the course of the Committee's consideration.

It is the Committee's intention to report on the issue of Senate voting early, ahead of the full report. We are taking submissions on this specific issue now, with the aim of reporting, if possible, before the Parliamentary break for the budget.