

LARGEST REMAINDER

(Not quite Quota Notes)

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Special election issue!

Senate Election 2013 – a potential train wreck

by Stephen Lesslie

In our last newsletter (June 2013) in the article entitled “Above-the-Line Voting - a worked example” we predicted that the 2013 Senate election would have 50 groups and 120 candidates. We were almost right; in NSW there are 44 groups, plus 4 ungrouped – a total of 110 candidates.

We also stated that this election will be a disaster and that proportional representation will be blamed. We still believe this because:

1. The oversized ballot paper with its tiny font will overwhelm many voters who will simply refuse to participate. Remember that most polling booths are in poorly lit community halls.
2. Voters who try to vote below the line will just become frustrated and many will vote informally.
3. It will not deliver a truly democratic result as there is a high probability that someone will be elected who has minimal electoral support. The result will be determined by the manipulations of group voting tickets by party bosses, subverting the will of the people.
4. Proportional representation, which is the fairest and most democratic electoral

system, will be unfairly perceived to be a failure.

What should be a demonstration of democracy at work and an expression of a citizen’s involvement in their democracy will be viewed as a chore. This will alienate the Australian people.

The government and the major parties will be blamed - but the real culprit is above-the-line voting and the parody of proportional representation that is being used.

We predict that a six-year Senate seat in NSW will be won by one of the “joke” parties.

At the 2010 Senate election, the result in NSW was:

Party	%	Quota	Seats
<i>Lib/Nat</i>	38.9	2.73	3
<i>Labor</i>	36.5	2.56	2
<i>Greens</i>	10.7	0.75	1

To be guaranteed election, a party must obtain a quota (14.3%). To win three seats, the quota is 42.9%. Provided the Greens can keep their vote above Labor’s third candidate – and this seems likely – the combined Labor/Green

vote can withstand a swing against it of 4.3% and still win a combined three seats. This is because Labor is sensibly (possibly having learned a lesson when Senator Steve Fielding was elected) not playing games and has given their preferences directly to the Greens. With above-the-line votes, there will be no leakage.

Should Labor/Green fail to reach the magic 42.9%, the Greens will still be directed preferences by a small number of left-leaning groups.

The Liberal/National coalition will have to increase its 2010 vote by 4.0% to reach the 42.9% that guarantees them the election of three Senators.

Under normal Senate voting, and in the present political climate, this would seem likely, but with the excessive number of candidates and groups they may fall short. Should this occur, they will struggle to pick up the extra votes needed, as most of the micro and 30+ joke parties contesting the election have entered into a round robin of preference harvesting and have placed the Liberals near the end of their tickets.

We believe that the third Liberal candidate, Senator Arthur Sinodinos, is the major party candidate most likely to be defeated. This would parallel the result of the 2010 Victorian Senate election where the DLP beat Senator Julian McGauran for the sixth and last seat.

One of the micro or joke parties will be the beneficiary but it is nearly impossible to tell which group will benefit. Minute changes in voting strength will determine which groups are eliminated early and which groups will leapfrog their competitors. The Liberals will receive very few preferences from these groups.

Those groups that have not entered into this preference harvesting game as enthusiastically as most tend to give the Greens an early preference. Because the Greens will not have a quota in their own right, they will soak up

these preferences before they reach the Liberals.

Should Senator Sinodinos lose his seat, he can blame those parties and groups that the Liberal/National coalition would have considered as natural allies. The Christian Democratic Party, Family First and the Shooters have all placed most of his major threats ahead of him.

It is amusing for an observer to note the destructive and self-defeating tactics of the Christian Democratic Party and Family First. Both of these parties have placed a number of groups ahead of the other as well as ahead of the Liberals. This prevents either from benefiting from the other's preferences, effectively eliminating both from the contest.

Do you think the supporters of the Christian Democratic Party would approve of the decision to support One Nation (12), No Carbon Tax Climate Sceptics (17) and the DLP (19) ahead of Family First (21) and the Liberals (37)? Would the supporters of Family First themselves have chosen to support No Carbon Tax Climate Sceptics (23) and One Nation (29) ahead of the Christian Democratic Party (44) and the Liberals (71)? And how many of these voters, once having made their protest vote, would have preferred to support Labor or even the Greens?

Would these supporters believe they have been cheated and misled? Such is the outcome when voters are denied control of their own preferences.

What Can We Do?

Although it is too late for this election, this problem will not go away. And if you think this is bad, a double dissolution election with a quota of only 7.7% would be even worse!

To give voters a real choice that they are comfortable with and are able to make for themselves, we need to:

1. **Abolish above-the-line voting and the associated group voting tickets**

Voters will find the party of their choice and vote for it. Those that choose to make a protest vote will choose their own second and subsequent preferences. Joke parties would not be able to direct preferences or participate in the preference harvesting game, and would lose most of the incentive to run in the first place. The ballot paper will be smaller and, without the distracting big black line, much simpler.

2. **Allow fully optional preferential voting**

Informal voting would be greatly reduced and confined mostly to those who choose not to participate in the election by either deliberately spoiling their ballot paper or merely leaving it blank. Any increase in exhausted votes would be compensated for by the reduction in informal voting. ACT Legislative Assembly elections amply demonstrate that, even with fully optional preferential voting, the great majority of voters will vote for all the candidates in a group.

3. **Introduce the Robson rotation**

The Robson rotation randomises the order of candidates in a group. Every candidate would share equally the top and bottom positions. This spreads the votes of the more popular parties, helping to ensure that micro party candidates are not elected at the expense of more popular candidates or parties. It also helps to ensure that those voters who only vote for the top candidate in a group, perhaps thinking it is still above-the-line voting, would still have a high probability that their vote will never exhaust. (For a quick explanation of the Robson rotation, see our June 2013 newsletter, available online at <http://electoralreformaustralia.org>)

4. **Increase the electoral deposits**

The Senate electoral deposit of only \$2,000 per candidate is woefully inadequate. Since each party must have at least 500 members,

this equates to a maximum of \$8 per member for the two candidates. If the party membership is genuine, then \$8 per member is a pittance; if the party membership is not genuine, then the candidates should pay for the sham.

Conclusion

Election to the Senate should not be decided by back room deals made by party apparatchiks. It is not a game or a lottery to be won by the party with the cleverest name and a hundred joke candidates are not an indication of a thriving and healthy democracy.

We need to start trusting the Australian people and give them back control of their Senate vote.

Future Meetings

The next meeting will be held on Monday 23 September 2013 at 7:30 pm.

Anyone is welcome to attend. For details, please contact Susan Gregory at president@electoralreformaustralia.org or on 9181 5185 for the relevant information.

Comments and/or contributions are welcome:

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*Electoral Reform Australia is the NSW Branch of the
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