

# LARGEST REMAINDER

(Not quite Quota Notes)

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## President's Report 2015-16

*Stephen Lesslie, President, Electoral Reform Australia*

As I write this report, I note that the Prime Minister has been granted a double dissolution by the Governor General. The 150 seats of the House of Representatives will be all single member electorates and, as in the past, most voters will not have any influence on the outcome of the election. Mr Turnbull's seat of Wentworth and Mr Shorten's seat of Maribyrnong will both return their sitting member, as will about a hundred other seats in the Australian Parliament. Voters in these 'safe' seats may vote with passion or indifference but the result will be the same.

The campaigns of both Liberal/National and Labor will be concentrated on the marginal seats. If you live in a marginal seat then congratulations: you are one of the lucky voters who will help determine the fate of our nation. If you don't live in a marginal seat, your vote is effectively worthless.

The old joke about the results of next month's North Korean election being stolen is not that funny when we consider that the results of at least half of the results of our next election could also be stolen and no one would notice.

Of course it doesn't have to be this way. Should the election be conducted using the single transferable vote (STV) with electorates returning around ten members each, your vote would be equal with and, as

effective as, the vote of every other Australian citizen.

Think about it. Campaigns would have to be based on 'what is good for Australia' and not on 'what is good for the marginal seats of Australia'. There would be no safe seats – the citizens of Wentworth and Maribyrnong would have the real choice of choosing another candidate instead of their current member. Every electorate would be represented by both Government and Opposition MPs and no region could be ignored by any future Government.

So Mr Turnbull has his double dissolution. If he wins, he can claim a mandate, and if he loses, then so be it. But without changes to the Senate voting system he would not have been able to call a double dissolution. Because all Senators are up for election, the double dissolution drops the quota for election from 14.3% to 7.7%. With the previous voting system this would have resulted in two or even three Senators being elected from every State simply because they chose an emotive party name, participated in a preference harvesting round robin and had a favourable draw on the ballot paper. These candidates would not have been elected on merit.

Let's examine these Senate changes. Are they reforms or merely changes designed to help engineer a political fix?

I believe the changes are reforms. Their greatest, and probably only, achievement is that they return control of a voter's preferences to the voter. The abolition of group voting tickets means that party operatives no longer have the right to direct the preferences of every voter who chooses to vote above the line. The introduction of party logos will also help reduce confusion as to the identity of the parties.

Electoral Reform Australia and the Proportional Representation Society of

Australia have been campaigning for reform of the Senate voting system for many years but it is so disappointing that the Government, having taken the step towards reform, managed it so poorly. The limited nature of these reforms clearly indicates that politicians do not trust the voters and that the reforms, while an improvement, are also just a political fix. It is easier to show what was not achieved.

### **1. Above the line voting has been retained.**

There will still be an oversized ballot paper with two sets of voting instructions and a large distracting black line through the centre of the paper. Once group voting tickets were abolished there was absolutely no need to retain above the line voting.

### **2. Fully optional preferential voting below the line not implemented.**

This is particularly odd as the Government has effectively allowed for fully optional preferential voting above the line. A single [1] for a two member micro party will exhaust once the lead candidate has been excluded because the makeweight second candidate will have long since been excluded. Since most voters will still vote above the line, why punish those who wish to make a personal choice?

### **3. The Australian Capital Territory preference allocation procedures were ignored.**

The ACT Legislative Assembly allows single preferences given to candidates who gained over a quota to be retained at full value by the candidate and for the other preferences to be then allocated to further candidates. Fewer preferences are allocated but each is given a slightly higher transfer value. The Government's failure to implement this simple reform will result in more votes exhausting.

The Government's retention of above the line voting and their failure to implement fully optional preferential voting will result in an increase in informal voting and a massive increase in the number of votes that exhaust. Our fear is that, as a consequence, the next Government will take the easy option of

increasing the formality requirements for voting, thereby further eroding the rights of citizens to be able to express their democratic right to choose candidates to the extent that they deem necessary.

This cynical and undemocratic step to reduce the rights of our citizens has just been made by the Labor Government in Queensland which has just reintroduced compulsory preferencing for its elections. This single action will disenfranchise over 100,000 of its citizens.<sup>1</sup>

## **Honorary Life Member**

Congratulations to John Baglin on becoming an honorary life member of Electoral Reform Australia. John has worked tirelessly for many years promoting and campaigning for the single transferable vote to be adopted for our parliamentary institutions. His support for the cause and our committee has been invaluable.

## **An Examination of Informal and Donkey Voting**

### **Informal Voting**

At the 2013 Federal election for the House of Representatives, 811,143 voters voted informally. Of these, 169,354 left the ballot paper completely blank and a further 117,564 indicated their displeasure by marking the ballot paper with slogans and scribbles.<sup>2</sup>

These voters had clearly decided, for whatever reason, not to cast a formal vote. They are perfectly entitled to do so because without compulsory voting they would not have bothered to turn up at all. Indeed, a deliberately informal vote is greatly preferred to that other blot on our electoral system – the donkey vote (see below).

However, this means that over half a million (594,225) voters who tried to cast a formal vote were unsuccessful.

<sup>1</sup> Even ignoring the ethical and moral values, this action is politically foolish and likely to backfire on the Queensland Labor Party as the Liberal National Party (LNP) is highly likely to split into separate Liberal and National Parties.

<sup>2</sup> [www.aec.gov.au/About\\_AEC/research/paper13.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/paper13.htm)

This is unacceptable in a country that prides itself on its democracy.

The major cause of this high level of informal voting is compulsory preferencing, compounded by the existence of different voting requirements between the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The solution is very simple – abolish above the line voting for the Senate and allow fully optional preferential voting for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Labor Party operatives who complain that they will not get the preferences of Green voters should consider that the electorates with the highest informal voting percentages are all Labor electorates and that a decrease in the informal vote will be a benefit.

Compulsory preferencing is just as likely to lead to Labor seats being lost to Green candidates on Liberal Party preferences. All parties put themselves at the mercy of other political parties in areas where Independent candidates are a threat, because their traditional political opponents will run dead in the election and recommend preferences to the Independent. Watch for the lack of campaigning by the Labor Party in New England and Indi and the lack of campaigning by the Liberals in Denison.

The introduction of a genuine STV proportional representation voting system for the House of Representatives would solve all these single member electorate problems by forcing every party to campaign energetically across the entire country.

### **Donkey Voting**

Donkey voting is when voters simply and meaninglessly vote for all the candidates by numbering straight down the ballot paper.

With 150 electorates, some candidates will be elected by these donkey voters and, equally, some candidates will lose. Who wants to be the person who tells a friend or colleague that, although they were the most popular candidate, they lost because their opponent had a more favourable draw on the ballot paper?

We estimate that about 100,000 voters will do this at the next election. If the election is close, these donkey voters may well decide who forms Government.

For the House of Representatives, and all single member electorates, the issue is simple. Political parties preselect a single candidate and then campaign to have that candidate elected.

Electoral Reform Australia recommends a simple rotation that will allow all candidates to share the top position equally, using the following process:

1. Randomly draw the names of the candidates to give an initial order. This is the first ballot paper.
2. Take the name of the candidate last on this list and place that candidate's name first and move every other candidate down one place. This is the second ballot paper.
3. Repeat this process until every candidate has been placed in the first position. With thirteen candidates there will be thirteen ballot paper variations.
4. Finally, reverse the initial order of the candidates and repeat the above process. With thirteen candidates there will be only



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twenty six ballot paper variations (and certainly not millions).

Such a procedure can work for any number of candidates, and the rotation of candidates ensures that those voters who do donkey vote down the ballot paper will not favour any one candidate. The reversal of the order will ensure that any preferences from such voters will also not favour any one candidate.

The addition of party logos along with the party name will make it even easier for voters to find the party or parties of their choice.

## Grief Syndrome

*Stephen Lesslie*

*[With a Federal election on 2 July 2016 we felt it appropriate to re-run an article that first appeared in the Largest Remainder in April 2011.]*

Grief syndrome or bereavement syndrome is a little known hazard for politicians and political candidates.

A political candidate lives in an unreal world. With the pre-selection sometimes over twelve months before the election, a campaign can be long and arduous but it is also an exciting time for a candidate with campaign meetings, pamphlets and press releases to be drafted, letters to be written, doorknocking and public appearances, and the phone never stops.

A candidate is surrounded by friends and supporters who are equally enthusiastic – good news is lapped up and bad news ignored. Most candidates will suffer from ‘candidate’s disease’ where, no matter how remote the likelihood of actually winning, the candidate comes to believe that they will.

When the candidate loses the election, suddenly it is all over! The phone stops ringing. There is nothing that has to be done and no one to see; the campaign committee disbands and alliances are broken.

If a candidate, or their partner or campaign manager, is going to suffer from grief syndrome this is when it will occur. Not everyone will be affected, but if it occurs symptoms can vary from a mild sense of loss to a chronic and debilitating depression.

It is tragic to see talent wasted and a personality disintegrate, but it can happen if the grief syndrome remains untreated.

Just look at the post parliamentary career of a recent Leader of the Opposition. [*This article was written in 2011 but may also explain the more recent actions of some former Prime Ministers. –Ed.*] After a lifetime of commitment to his cause suddenly it is all thrown away, culminating in bizarre attacks on former allies and alienation of friends and supporters.

Democracies need candidates, but we must look after the ones that don’t win. If you have a friend who has just lost in this election, look out for them. Explain to them what has happened and why. If you can, encourage them to seek counselling.

Most progressive work places will automatically organise counselling after a work place accident; an election loss should be considered in the same way.

## Future Meetings

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 2 August 2016 at 7.30 pm.

Anyone is welcome to attend. For details, please contact Stephen Lesslie at [president@electoralreformaustralia.org](mailto:president@electoralreformaustralia.org) or on (02) 6351 2598 for the relevant information.

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Comments and/or contributions are welcome:

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### **Electoral Reform Australia Office-bearers for 2016-2017**

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Susan Gregory – Vice President  
Mark Rodowicz – Vice President  
Patrick Lesslie – Secretary/Treasurer

Committee: John Baglin,  
Patricia Kennedy, Marian Lesslie,  
Peter Palethorpe, Casey Peters.

*Electoral Reform Australia is the NSW Branch of the  
Proportional Representation Society of Australia*