

TWO PARTIES ACCUSED OF HYPOCRISY BY M.P

"The Redistribution Bill which passed through State Parliament last week was an exercise in hypocrisy by both the Liberal and Labor Parties", Mr Bruce Evans M.L.A. claimed to-day.

The Bill, which was introduced by the Liberal Party, sets up a permanent Electoral Commission made up of a County Court Judge, the Surveyor-General and the Chief Electoral Officer.

They are required to draw electorate boundaries having regard to community of interest, means of communications and other factors.

"The only point on which the Liberal and Labor Parties differed was the maximum variation in numbers of enrolled voters allowed, "Mr Evans said. "The Liberals wanted 10% and Labor believes that it should be 5 %."

"The National Party moved that the three Commissioners should appoint a fourth who should be resident outside a radius of 100 kms of Melbourne," Mr Evans said.

A Government spokesman argued that, as there was no requirement that it need be a Victorian or even Australian, that it could be the Premier of Queensland or Idi Amin.

"The hypocrisy became even more apparent when I moved to eliminate any reference to a maximum permissible variation in numbers of enrolled voters. Both Labor and Liberal Members spoke against this proposal. Although they both spoke in glowing terms of the intelligence, integrity and sense of justice of the three Commissioners, they do not trust them to appoint a suitable fourth member who has knowledge of country Victoria," he said.

"Even worse," Mr Evans said, "the three Commissioners are not allowed to exercise their intelligence, integrity and sense of justice even if they believe a case is made out for a greater variation than 10%." The point which country people should understand is that this Bill is against their interests.

"It is unrealistic to claim that country people are unduly favoured in Australia and allegations of a gerrymander reflect a belief that political philosophy is the only thing that matters in a Member of Parliament.

A gerrymander can occur in electorates of exactly the same numbers. It has nothing to do with recognising the disabilities of people in remote areas by reducing the numbers electing a Member of Parliament.

Democracy is not simply "majority rule, Mr Evans said, ---It is a system in which minorities have rights and these rights are being eroded"

Mr Evans said that he produced a pamphlet, "One vote - one value?" several months ago and several Government Members had copies.

"One would have thought that if my criticism of the Labor Party's case was unsound, they would have taken advantage of' this debate to prove it", he said.

"The Labor Party still talk of a gerrymander in Victoria even though they won 60.5%, of the seats with 50.02%, of the primary vote. They obviously want to win more seats with fewer votes," Mr Evans said.

Reproduction of the pamphlet referred to above.

ONE VOTE –ONE VALUE?

"Hansard* 27.4.82

Mr. Gavin (Coburg)

I shall demonstrate that Victoria does have an electoral gerrymander that is biased against the Australian Labor Party. At the last state election held on 5 May 1979, the Australian Labor Party polled 45.2 per cent of the vote, which was a lot more than the votes for the Liberal Party. However, the Australian Labor Party received only 39.5 per cent of the seats. Hence, there was a 6 per cent bias against the Australian Labor Party. The Liberal Party polled 41.2 per cent of the vote-4 per cent less than the Australian Labor Party-yet it won 50.6 per cent of the seats -a bias of 11 per cent in its favour.

"Hansard* 25.11.'81

ELECTORAL DISTRIBUTION

Mr B. J. EVANS (Gippsland) East). *The figures supplied by the State Electoral Office show that the Australian Labor Party secured 50.02 per cent of the valid primary votes cast at the recent State election. Through that 50.02 per cent of the votes the Australian Labor Party secured 60.05 per cent of the seats in this House and 54.5 per cent of the seats contested in the other House. How then can the Premier justify his frequent claims that the weighting of rural electorates constitutes a gerrymander in this Parliament?*

Mr CAIN (Premier)-*I am somewhat fascinated that this matter should concern the honourable member for Gippsland East so soon, especially when the next election is three years away. The Government is determined to ensure that the Parliament passes legislation to determine that the value of votes cast in Victoria are as near as practicable to being equal.*

It is true that in a single-member constituency, election results will never - or it is unlikely that they will ever - ensure that the number of seats won by each party corresponds to the proportion of votes each party receives. The Parliament should provide a system of voting that ensures that each person's vote is, as near as practicable, equal to his neighbour's vote. A vote cast in the country should be of no different value to a vote cast in the city.

The only way in which to achieve the perfect mathematical response that the honourable member for Gippsland East seems to contemplate is through a system of proportional representation. If the party to which the honourable member belongs is in favour of that let him say so. The view of the Government is that the Westminster system is best served by single-member constituencies and it will ensure that so long as Victoria has that system, the capacity of voters to influence the government and to record their vote will be equal as far as that is possible.

Scientific politics ???

A basic test for a scientific theory is that the same results must be achieved when the experiment is repeated. If this cannot be done, the theory is discarded.

Motivated by his theory that an electoral gerrymander biased against the Australian Labor Party existed in Victoria, the Labor Member for Coburg, Mr. Gavin, carried out a study of the 1979 election results. His findings are recorded in Hansard November 21st. 1981.

He found that at the election of May 5th. 1979, the Australian Labor Party polled 45.2% of the vote but received only 39.5% of the seats in the Legislative Assembly - in his view, "a bias of 6% against the Labor Party".

If Gavin does a similar exercise on the 1982 election results he will find that the A.L.P. won 60.5% of the Assembly seats with 50.02% of the vote. At the same time, in the Legislative Council, long claimed to be one of the worst examples of a gerrymander the A.L.P. won 54.5% of the seats contested. On Gavin's reasoning, a gerrymander biased against the Labor Party is now 10.48% in favour of the Labor Party on the same boundaries.

These facts prove that there is not a gerrymander in the State of Victoria; they prove that certain politicians and political observers are misleading the community when they describe the use of a lower quota in rural electorates as a gerrymander.

A gerrymander is the manipulation of electorate boundaries for the sole purpose of achieving the election of a particular party. It is not the use of a differential to help offset other disadvantages in obtaining a truly democratic society.

False premises.

Obviously, Gavin's theory did not work out on 1982 election figures because it was based on false premises in the first place. He is, of course, not alone in his basic misconception.

In their monograph (1) "Changing the System" the authors state that "many voters have no personal representation because they voted for a losing candidate". This extraordinary pronouncement could only be valid if every Member knows who voted for him. It assumes that a Member is not influenced by constituents who express their opinions either directly or through the media and in turn, has no influence on Party decisions.

Both these concepts are based on the case for proportional representation. The authors go on to state that 'Any form of geographical partitioning for single member constituencies will result in wasted votes and hence is a form of malapportionment'.

If geographical partitioning for single member constituencies is undemocratic, it would be possible, to comply with the theories of the political scientists, to divide the total enrolment for the State into the appropriate number of lists according to the number of seats. Each name would be added to a list in sequence disregarding the voter's place of residence.

This would fit the political scientists' theories because each seat would have exactly the same number of voters, each would cover the whole of the State without regard to geographical area. Each seat would be almost certainly equally divided in political opinion - and with 50.02% of the vote a Party could win every seat.

In fact, even under the present system it is theoretically possible for a Party to win every seat with 50.02 % of the total vote. It is only because of differences arising from geographical considerations that this does not happen.

Proportional representation.

Proportional representation is a system of multimember electorates such as used in Tasmania where five electorates each elect seven Members. If applied in Victoria, it could result, for example, in Gippsland becoming one electorate electing five members instead of five separate electorates as at present. Obviously they would concentrate their attention on the larger centres of population and the more remote areas would have even less influence than they do now.

The Tasmanian system is praised by political scientists as being close to the ideal. In recent times, it has led to the defeat of the Tasmanian Government on the Motion of a Member, elected with 2,700 primary votes, on an issue which not only had the general support of both political parties but also a majority of Tasmanians at a referendum. It has taken a general election to resolve the problem created by a small single-issue pressure group which gained disproportionate power under this system.

Under proportional representation, the Labor Party in Victoria would hold only 47 instead of 49 out of the 81 seats it now holds.

The authors also make the statement that, "At State level the ALP has a double handicap in the system of rural over-representation, (conscious electoral abuse) and of single-member constituencies '(the bias of the electoral system itself)'".

(1) Australasian Political Studies Association Monograph No. 25.
Produced in cooperation with the Change the Rules Conference Committee.
Sponsored by the Law Foundation of New South Wales

The Labor Party claims the best mandate for 70 years in obtaining 50.02% of the primary vote. It is apparent then that a minor Party or Parties should have held the balance of power over that period as no other Party had more than 50% of the vote.

An Oversight?

Is it an oversight that political observers have missed that fact or is it because they would have to concede that it is the National Party - the Party alleged to be the principle beneficiary of "rural overrepresentation" - which has the most legitimate cause for complaint?

The principle purpose of introducing "one vote - one value" is to reduce the numbers of the National Party, but even at reduced strength it could well hold the balance of power.

It is clear then that the present system of applying a lower quota to rural seats does not constitute a gerrymander. The A.L.P. has proven that a Party winning 50.02% of the votes can win a very comfortable working majority and therefore provides much more stable government than if elected under a proportional representation system

It should also be noted that under this system of alleged over-representation the Labor Party could lose the six seats it holds outside the metropolitan area and still have the numbers to govern. Effectively, people living in country areas are without representation in Government on the reasoning of the authors of "Changing the System"

Geographical Boundaries.

The theories under question also ignore the effect of geography on voting patterns. Place of residence undoubtedly has a major influence on political opinions. People in hot climates generally are opposed to daylight saving while those in cooler climates generally favour it. Those living in dry climates tend to lean towards water conservation and so on.

In the State of Victoria there has been created what might be termed a "population gerrymander". By the process of spending vast sums of money, creating jobs and stimulating development in the capital city, the small geographic area around Port Phillip Bay has been placed in a position where it can completely dominate the rest of the State. Having long outstripped the capacity of its own region to supply the resources necessary to sustain its growth, it plunders the resources of other regions without payment or compensation.

It is surely just as much a gerrymander to achieve a desired political result by encouraging people of the "correct" political opinion to live in a particular area and so dominate the State as it is to draw an electorate boundary to include a large urban area to dominate an otherwise rural electorate.

The irony is that it was a Liberal Government which created the geographic gerrymander" but it is the A.L.P. which is heaping the benefit.

The case for a lower quota.

The case for a lower quota for rural electorates is not based on allegations of social or economic disadvantage. It is based on the simple fact that country people have a much lower level of access to their Member of Parliament, who in turn, has a reduced ability to carry out the normal duties of a Member of Parliament because of greatly increased travelling.

A metropolitan Member continues to live in the same environment, meeting and mixing daily with the people he or she represents. Access to library and other research facilities is available virtually at any time. The Member representing a country electorate may spend 10 or more hours weekly travelling, out of communication and in circumstances where he cannot do any research or reading.

The country Member, of necessity, commutes frequently to the city and consequently has personal experience of city life.

It has been argued that with modern communication, rural communities have such ready access to their local Member that the problems of the country Member can be overcome by providing additional staff. Modern communications are aggravating the problem in some respects. Many people have to make a trunk call to ring their local Member and this form of access is much more expensive to them. Mail deliveries for many people in remote areas are less frequent and slower than formerly.

All country people are subjected to the political "line" of the metropolitan daily newspapers, radio and television but city people virtually never hear the views of country people. It is city people who decide what is newsworthy, not country people.

In the city, a group, or even an individual, with a grievance can be certain to get it aired if he or she does something outlandish and attracts attention. Country people, with possibly a greater cause, have to rely on their local Member to get attention drawn to their problems. They do not have the same capacity to influence Governments which respond to pressure from the media.

The disadvantaged in the community such as those requiring specialised health treatment or education, pensioners, unemployed and ethnic groups are even further disadvantaged if they live in the country

Overseas Experience.

It is dangerous to draw ideas from other countries without relating them to the way the electoral systems work. For example, reference is made to court rulings in the U.S.A. upholding the principle of "one vote - one value".

It must be related to the following facts about the American system:

The Government (governor) is elected separately from the Parliament (the Legislature). A voter may vote for a candidate of one political party for governor (Premier) and a different party for his representative. (Member of Parliament)

The governor is elected by all the voters in the State and does not depend on the numbers of his own Party in the legislature.

It follows then that every voter in the State has an equal vote for governor because it is a statewide election between candidates for the position and the successful candidate is responsible directly to them, not the legislature.

The vital difference is that voting is not compulsory. In fact, the turnout of voters varies dramatically. In New York State, it can range from about 80% in rural electorates to as low as 15% in New York City.

There is, therefore, a natural bias to rural areas, as a much higher percentage exercise their right to vote, bearing in mind that the election is statewide for a single candidate for office.

In our system, because the Government is formed by the Party which wins the majority of seats it can become totally dominated by those parts of the State which return candidates of that Party.

The American system has some advantages but the fact that the Government has little control over the legislature provides scope for the type of activity which has bedevilled the system.

Public Funding

The consequences of adding public funding to compulsory voting are quite horrifying. Public funding is practised in some overseas countries but again, voting is not compulsory.

Candidates for office, not only have to persuade voters that their policies are the best, they also have to persuade them that it is worth the trouble of going to a polling booth to vote. The lazy, disinterested and apathetic do not vote and therefore do not influence the result of elections.

It is likely that public funding of political parties would be allocated on a basis allied to the percentage of voters cast in elections.

It is surely stretching the definition of democracy to argue that those who neither know nor care what goes on in government should be compelled to vote and thus provide additional public funds to the political party for which they vote.

If the A.L.P. believes in public funding, it should at least acknowledge that it should only be at the price of abandoning compulsory voting.

A Little Emotion.

Politics are rarely hard cold facts. More often than not emotions, arising from our background, training and traditions influence our thinking.

Few people would not acknowledge that it was the pioneers who faced great hardship in establishing farmlands in a harsh and strange environment who paved the way for this nation. They established a way of life based on the need for improvisation and flexibility to meet the extreme vagaries of the climate.

In some cases, up to 150 years of family tradition has been established by experience; a relatively short time to get to know the land.

Now, two out of three Victorians live in a totally changed environment. With three years supply of water in storage, Melbourne is drought proofed; with all its natural native forest removed, the metropolitan area is safe from bush fires; floods are virtually unknown.

One vote - one value is not about the survival or demise of a political party. It is about the right of country people to have some influence on government. Decisions by governments have a profound and lasting effect on the environment in which we live.

Being able to ring up or write to a local Member is useless unless he understands what you are talking about. How do you describe a bush fire to someone who has never seen one? How can those who have unlimited supplies of good quality water know what it is like to get through a drought on tank water? How can one, accustomed to a regular pay packet know what it is like to see good land go out of production through salting; a good crop cut back by disease, whole communities devastated by fire or flood?

On the floor of the vestibule of Parliament House is the paragraph from Proverbs, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall but in the multitude of councillors there is safety".

If country people do not stand up for their rights, their opinions will not be expressed in our Parliament unless they are shared by a substantial proportion of city people.

The Forthcoming Redistribution.

There is no doubt that there is a need for a redistribution within the State of Victoria. Some metropolitan seats have grown considerably in population while others have declined.

The redistribution is needed to even out the work load of Members rather than in the interests of democracy. Indeed, it would be far more practical to provide additional staff for a member with an electorate having a large enrolment than to a Member with a large area to cover.'

The Premier, Mr. Cain, has indicated that he will insist on a maximum variation of 5%. Some variation is essential because it is physically impossible to get total equality.

One vote - one value is therefore a theory which is impossible to achieve in practise - that Mr. Cain concedes any variation is a concession to that fact.

Therefore the amount of variation is a matter of opinion - not principle. The Premier cannot assume the air of a democrat of high principle because he concedes a 5% variation and condemn as villains and gerrymanderers those who believe that there are good reasons why it should be 10% or even 20%.

A variation of these dimensions is vital to the future of the State. Despite what Mr. Cain may think, land is an essential ingredient in Statehood. It is not possible to govern people without regard to the land upon which they live.

If the population of the State was reasonably spread, every political party would receive input and be open to influence from all parts of the State. However, because of the gross imbalance in the growth of this State, it is now obvious that the country is expendable from a political point of view.

The Labor Party has better prospects of picking up the remaining city seats than it does of winning any country ones. The redistribution envisaged by the Labor Party is not implementing an important democratic principle - it is not based on a fair deal for everyone - it has no other purpose than to give the Melbourne metropolitan area such dominance that the country will cease to matter politically.

The National Party should therefore oppose any Bill which does not provide for at least a 10% margin for electorates having an area in excess of 5,000 sq. kms.

Regardless of party politics all country people must unite to prevent further reduction of influence on governments.