

*ELECTIONS FULL, FREE AND FAIR.*

Edited by Marian Sawer. Federation Press, Sydney, 2001.

Reviewed by Joan Rydon\*

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Australians can be justly proud of the early and rapid steps towards democratic elections taken in this country, but this collection of essays tends to suggest Australia has found perfect solutions to methods of representation and voting systems and is now competent to instruct the rest of the world in these matters.

The opening chapter portrays Australians as ‘Pacemakers for the World’, and shows how Australian parliaments led in legislating for basic elements of democratic elections such as adult suffrage, secret ballots and ‘One man, one vote’. But such innovations were largely in the nineteenth century. The most distinctive features of current elections in Australia are compulsory voting and preferential voting which remain almost uniquely Australian. The world has certainly not followed these peculiarities.

Colin Hughes (pp. 144–5) lists characteristics which ensure ‘integrity of the ballot process’. Among them he includes ‘simplicity’, but few would describe Australian voting methods as simple. I would describe their defects as compulsory, complex and costly. The secret ballot was one of the greatest Australian achievements, but it is often not realised that it rules out any method of enforcing the later innovation of compulsory voting. Lisa Hill (in chapter 3) sees compulsory voting as ‘a great leveller’ but admits it is a misnomer since only registration and having one’s name marked off the electoral roll at a polling place is compulsory. Yet all suggestions to make clear that voters are under no compulsion to mark ballot papers have been rejected. It may be regarded as a dishonest policy since most citizens believe they must vote and the government authorities and political parties encourage that belief. Some migrants claim they are not naturalised because they do not wish to be compelled to vote and do not understand Voting by number. The belief in compulsory voting has enabled the adoption of complex voting methods. In 1919, when the requirement for voting in the House of Representatives changed from indicating the chosen candidate with a cross to numbering all candidates in order of preference, there was a great deal of opposition and criticism. Many did not understand the system; many voted informally or did not vote. In 1922 turnout fell greatly and Parliament was persuaded to vote for compulsion in 1925.

Diane Sainsbury (chapter 4) finds a puzzle in the long gaps between the achievement of women’s suffrage and the election of women parliamentarians. She naively comments that the early strength of the Labor Party increases the puzzle since parties of the left have generally promoted women’s office-holding. She fails to note that some of the first women elected (including Edith Cowen and Dame Enid Lyons) were successful in seats where conservative parties practised multiple

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endorsement and gave their supporters a choice between male and female candidates.

In considering the effects of preferential voting, Ben Reilly fails to mention this multiple endorsement though it was important in the conservative parties (which saw preferential voting as a means of abolishing pre-selection) until after the formation of the modern Liberal Party. He also does not discuss the increases in informal voting or the steps taken to ease the burden on voting by easing the rules re informality and, in some elections, allowing the alternative of ticket or 'above the line' voting whereby the voter allows his party to distribute preferences for him. Though Reilly distinguishes between systems of optional and compulsory preferences, he makes no attempt to justify the requirement of compulsory preferences and there is no attempt at such justification throughout the book.

Judith Holmeshaw gives an able discussion of the STV or Hare-Clark system of proportional representation and its use in Tasmania, but the system has been so modified in Senate voting by the grouping of party candidates and the possibility of ticket voting that it now operates more like a list system of Proportional Representation and there may be doubts that it and some of the systems used in state upper houses can be still properly described as STV. Her argument that the successful use of STV lies in the relative immunity from strict party control that people perceive in the system cannot be sustained when well over 90 percent of voters in Senate elections choose to allow the parties to distribute their preferences.

It is only in the final chapter of the book that there is any attempt to relate the conduct of elections to the general operation of Australian elections and here serious problems are admitted. It is clear that the system has been operated by highly disciplined political parties operating at both levels of politics. The parties have not been interested in free and fair elections but have endeavoured to use the rules to their own advantage. Thus most changes in electoral rules have been fought over by the parties and any changes have usually been designed to benefit the party in office. Moreover the parties have shown little democracy in their internal organisation and have often been guilty of 'rotts' particularly in their preselection practices.

This is a disappointing book. There is little connection between the contributions, several of which contain careless and naive generalisations.

There is room for a detailed study of Australian innovations and experimentation in electoral matters, but this can probably only be achieved in the context of a detailed history of Australian politics which links elections and their administration with the political parties and other institutions. It is certainly not sufficient to show that Australian electoral administration is non-partisan and that 'a Florida cannot happen here'. ▲