

Submission: 'Strengthening Australia's Democracy.' (Sept. 2009) page 1 of 2

From D Skewes

~ 15th Oct. 2009.

My concern is for the strengthening of the democratic process in relation to election procedure, in particular issues around voting rights and obligations.

My thoughts are based on my observations and experiences, over a period of forty-five years, +.

As preamble, there are two issues, each worthy, but sometimes in competition.

- 1) The egalitarian impulse: - the want to involve people across a wide age spectrum, so to be as inclusive as possible.
- 2) The effectiveness of the voting system, to best reflect the wishes, opinions, values, etc. of Australian citizens.
 - a. Qualitative reflection is desirable.
 - b. ^{ie} Depth of maturity & experience in voters is desirable.

The egalitarian impulse may be at the expense effectiveness, if this latter is to be measured by an aggregate of informed and considered opinion.

I relate these issues & my following concerns to chapters 4, 5, in part I, and chapter 14, in part II, of "Australia's Electoral Architecture." Two main concerns follow.

Concern One: Minimize age of voters.

In recent times, for mainly egalitarian motives, the minimum age was moved from 21 to 18. Currently, some people are arguing for a drop in the minimum age, to 16.

From my observations, and as a general rule, I would argue that a mature and informed vote will be more likely to be cast if the person is of age 25 years, or more. My experience as a teacher in High Schools & at a tertiary level, is that the majority of young people, despite goodwill or otherwise, lack a comprehensive, contextual overview of the intricacies of political issues. Furthermore, while they may have some factual knowledge of issues, there is yet to arise an emotional maturity

~ continued.

to deal with the attempts to manipulate the feelings of voters by political spin or by media. Schools can be a good training ground for democratic process but the fruits of practice only mature at about age 25.

(For egalitarian purposes the vote could be given to 10 year old children. There would be a greater participation in the electoral process; ~ but would this strengthen democracy?)

Concern Two: Compulsory Voting

1) On a few occasions, after thoroughly considering the Parties, their policies and their candidates, ~ including also the minor parties; I have had no interest in supporting any of them. There may have been aspects of principles and policies in each of the Parties with which I had found some resonance, ~ but overall, a vote for any Party or candidate would have resulted in my voting for a stance contrary to my central beliefs & values.

Furthermore, it is often the case when a candidate appears to be generally aligned with my beliefs and values, this candidate is gagged by the Party mechanism.

It is my view that if the democratic process is to faithfully represent and convey my opinion, beliefs, values, etc. then this may be best achieved by my non-vote. In other words, a forced vote is a misrepresentation.

2) The only option in such cases is to deliberately vote, 'informal'. However, this "option" is in fact a misnomer. It is no option at all in the fullest sense of democracy, because it demands a response out of coercion. Apart from the ethical issues around coercion, coercion inevitably distorts the picture. (Coercion via compulsory voting always distorts; either there is an informal-vote, or a 'vote' cast void of consideration.) As someone who takes the democratic process seriously and as someone who considers himself to be a responsible voter, I would like the choice, to vote or not to vote.

Without compulsory voting, Parties & candidates might better refine and articulate their policies, to appeal to more voters, & in a more sophisticated way.

Some final remarks.

To strengthen Australian democracy it requires a deepening, by bestowing more quality to our vote. A shallow, broad based participation is to deflate the value of our vote.

At the very least, proportional-representation should be introduced. This gives a greater value to the individual vote.

I thank you for your consideration. Sincerely, D Skewes.