

Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election

“People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices. It is impossible indeed to prevent such meetings, by any law which either could be executed, or would be consistent with liberty and justice. But though the law cannot hinder people of the same trade from sometimes assembling together, it ought to do nothing to facilitate such assemblies; much less to render them necessary.” – Adam Smith

Universal suffrage: The right of all adult citizens to vote at public elections, especially for the members of a legislative body or parliament.

Universal suffrage to me should be universal suffrage. If a person is a citizen of Australia and over the age of 18 years, they should be able to vote unencumbered in all our elections, Federal State and local. We should never seek to dilute this principle. We should never seek ways to prevent people from exercising our basic and fundamental right to vote.

Unfortunately I perceive there is a growing difficulty for people to register to vote and to have any change of address registered so that they can vote. I believe it is because “political professionals” of a conservative nature, and not necessarily just Members of Parliament, have been campaigning against universal suffrage and doing their utmost to discourage people from voting.

The soft option for many political commentators is to disparage parliamentarians, disparage Parliament and its processes and to basically disparage Parliamentary democracy. Those who encourage the discouragement of voting are discouraging democracy itself and the motives of these people need to be scrutinised intensely. Compulsory voting and universal suffrage are twin principles that protect Australia’s democracy from political extremism of all varieties.

“It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.” – Winston Churchill

On the floor of the vestibule of the Victorian Parliament there is a quote from the Bible: **“Where no counsel is the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”** This quote not only reminds us of the importance of Parliament to our democracy, it also reminds us that the more people who participate in our democracy, the safer we are and the safer our democracy is.

“No taxation without representation” began as a slogan in the period 1763–1776 that summarized a primary grievance of the American colonists in the thirteen American colonies. The slogan was used by the American revolutionaries and meant they weren’t willing to pay taxes imposed by the British House of Commons - as they were not represented there.

If persons are discouraged, inhibited, prevented or unable to vote because of the restrictions we put on peoples eligibility to vote, then there can be no representation of these people. If we are on the one hand, going to provide public funding to candidates to contest elections, we cannot at the same time be restricting citizens and taxpayers access to vote.

Thirty years ago when I started working, many people stayed in one job all their lives. Before the 1960’s, many families stayed in the same location for generations. The flight to the suburbs encouraged people to move and become hopefully upwardly mobile. While the opening up of our economy to market forces in the 1980’s has made work and our job security more fluid.

It is clear that people in our society have become more mobile and if our form of representative democracy is going to continue to represent the people in the Parliament, we should be ensuring that it is easier for people to stay registered on our electoral rolls rather than harder.

I believe we should engage with the computer age and enrol on line and be able to update on line. The nonsense of putting people through hoops by making a person go to Post offices and show they have certain levels of identity just so they can stay enrolled, but at a new address, is simply a way of disenfranchising people. It discriminates against the itinerant as well as the homeless.

If a person is obliged to meet their taxation obligation, and if the community is going to foot the bill of the electoral process by funding campaigns, then it is vital that people are represented in the Parliament and this can only be achieved by them being every opportunity to vote at elections.

Stephen Paul