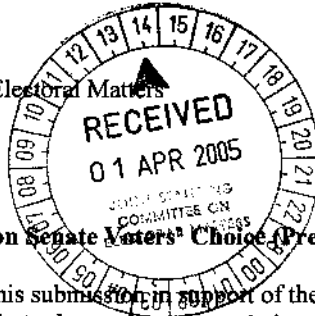


SUBMISSION NO. 124

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Submission No. <u>124</u>
Date Received <u>1-4-05</u>
Secretary <u>[Signature]</u>

Re: submission on Senate Voters' Choice (Preference Allocation) Bill 2004

The Braidwood Greens make this submission in support of the above Bill, recognising that it is essential that voters themselves are able to determine where their preferences are going in the event that they want to avoid having to fill out a large number of squares through the process of below-the-line voting.

Under the current system and with the public's knowledge about the electoral process in general so poor, voters are often unaware of the process of preference distribution for above-the-line votes and many are appalled to learn, after an election and when it is too late, that their vote has flowed onto and perhaps elected a party or candidate whom they would not have supported otherwise.

Above-the-line voting in its current form does not promote accountability and open processes. The pressuring for preferences and the deals that result have no place in a healthy, honest democracy. Furthermore, the current system delivers results which do not reflect the support that a particular candidate or party received on the ballot paper. How is it that a party with only 2% of the primary vote can be elected when a party with 8% misses out (the example of Family First and The Greens)? Proportional Representation should be just that, but at the moment it is a meaningless concept when this situation can continue to occur, simply because above-the-line voting allows preferences to be directed away from the more popular group in a covert and undemocratic manner.

There are many other issues which ought to be taken into consideration as part of the 2004 Federal Election review.

One is the misuse of the media by parties, politicians and journalists with their own agenda to push, which allows misinformation about and misrepresentation of a particular party's policies to be perpetuated. I refer of course to the infamous Herald Sun article about The Greens' Drugs Policy which demonstrably changed the intentions of a large number of voters across the country and quotes from which are still being used by the Liberal Party in propaganda intended to discredit The Greens (eg during the 2005 WA State Election campaign), despite the Australian Press Council upholding the Greens' complaint and ruling against the Herald Sun.

For a political party to be allowed under legislation to use quotes from an inaccurate article in almost anonymous* glossy brochures distributed in marginal seats should be an illegal act. But this was what occurred as part of the 2004 campaign and we as Greens, with little time and even less money to counter these claims, were powerless to correct the misinformation. It is entirely possible, judging from the feedback we have had from across the country, that if that article had not (i) appeared and then (ii) been repeated in election propaganda and (iii) possibly affected how some groups then determined their preference flows, the Senate might be quite different on July 1.

(*unless you actually knew that the obscure authoriser in this case happened to be a Liberal Party official)

Another issue is that of handing out **How-To-Votes** on election day. Apart from the immoral waste of paper that this practice encourages, it also benefits the larger parties who have the greatest financial resources. While we believe that a party or candidate presence need not be discouraged at polling

stations, in order for people to obtain more information about policy issues if they need to, it would be a simple matter for the **preference recommendations of all the candidates and parties to be displayed in a uniform fashion in each of the polling cubicles.**

In the long-term, we believe that the Government needs to fund the AEC to do **widespread and ongoing voter education**, making a concerted effort to ensure that everyone from school age up is aware of the **voting and preference systems**. This could be done through a series of mock elections, learning aids, brochures, TV ads, interactive meetings - there are many possibilities - but what ever the methods chosen it needs to happen soon.

If we are serious about being a true democracy, these are just some of the issues we need to address, and we thank you for the opportunity to do so in this submission.

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