

From: David & Margie Mills  
Sent: Friday, 21 February 2014 3:19 PM  
To: Committee, EM (REPS)  
Subject: Sub061 David Mills



TO: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Dear Honorable Members

I wish to comment on the matter of preference votes in the recent Senate election. I offer my encouragement for your Committee to tackle the challenges ahead of us as a nation.

I believe it is a matter of absolute principle that a voter be able to know how their vote will count. Indeed it is the purpose and strength of the preferential system of voting, that each (valid) vote will ultimately count. But if it counts in an unknown and unpredictable way, there is an issue. The events of our 2013 Senate election show that the current system is failing to support this principle. To uphold the principle, we need a system in which the flow through of preferences can be seen and readily understood by the voter.

This will be complex if there is a large number of candidates, hence some compromise to our current formula may be needed, to preserve the intention of this principle.

In my work as an educator, an assessment regime (exam or otherwise) should be both valid and reliable. The current system is arguably 'reliable' but not 'valid'.

I recently heard an ABC Radio interview with one of the 'preference-whisperers' in W.A. I do not dispute his main point, that small (or micro-) parties should be encouraged in order to provide a wide range of views in our society. However, the elected representative should be elected by a system which ensures that the people, the electors, have had the best opportunity to choose candidates on the basis of their merits, platform, etc., i.e. that those 'wide range of views' be fairly tested by the electorate before being elected to parliament.

One option is to allow the voter to make an above-the-line selection of preferences. This appears to be transparent and workable, eliminating the current (hidden) flow of preferences, and giving the voter a manageable amount of homework to do in order to make the most of their vote.

An extension of this, put shortly after the election by one commentator, is to limit the number of preferences to be selected by the voter. And/or, limit the preference flows to candidates who have been ranked say in the top 20% of candidates in the 1st preferences. These options would mean that some voter's ballots did not influence the final outcome. But there would be a sufficiently strong opportunity for the candidates with good voting support to remain in the race.

With Tennis Opens and the Winter Olympics in our recent memories, we recognise the necessity of practical ways of ranking athletes when they can't all compete directly against each other. E.g. ways in which safeguards are provided so that No.1 to No.4 seeds will not face each other before the semi-finals, or the best two of each heat plus the best (two) times of the remaining competitors will go through to the next stage. I can't think of an exact analogy, sufficient to say that sport is too important to Australians for us to allow teams to negotiate deals so that their good players, coaches and cash are transferred from a team which has been knocked out, to one of the teams remaining in the finals series.

We would not accept a system in sport which allows a competitor who is clearly and consistently performing at say No.6 in the assembled field, to win through ahead of 5 who have performed better.

Mathematician Ian Stewart has written in New Scientist, 28 April 2010, "Electoral dysfunction: Why

democracy is always unfair" and an earlier item in Scientific American July 1995, showing that different voting systems will produce different outcomes whilst electors individually exercise the same choice/preference. Understandably your Committee will not move away from Australia's choice of system. Without improvement however, the electorate will most likely change its voting behaviours to cope with what is seen as an arrangement which allows candidates with minimal electoral support to be elected to the Senate.

Until a better method is introduced, I will continue to vote below the line. It's a matter of principle!

Sincerely

David Mills