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‘ALP's electoral reform claims have to be taken with a grain of salt’

Gary Nairn

RECENT commentary on the proposed amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (the Electoral Act) have, for the most part, been politically motivated and ill informed.

In particular, debate has focused on the alleged potential disenfranchisement of electors resulting from the proposed amendments to the Electoral Act that reduce the close of rolls period after an election has been called and redefine the rights of prisoners to vote.

The proposed amendments to the Electoral Act provide that, in general, the roll will close at 8pm the day the writ is issued for people not already on the roll, and at 8pm on the third working day after the issue of the writ for people updating their address details.

The priority in bringing forward these amendments is aimed at improving the integrity of the electoral roll and the electoral process as a whole, a point that seems to have been lost on many commentators.

Implemented in parallel with other provisions, such as those seeking to strengthen the Proof of Identity (POI) requirements for new enrolments, the changes to the closure of the roll will significantly reduce opportunities for fraud and errors on the roll.

The Australian Electoral Commission processed 423,993 enrolment transactions during the seven days after the writ was issued at the 2004 election. This places untenable administrative pressure on the AEC.

The new arrangements will ensure that the AEC has sufficient time to verify details provided by applicants and significantly reduce the number of fraudulent applications made to the roll.

Not surprisingly the Labor Party has put its usual politically motivated, emotive mark on this debate. Labor Senator Steve Hutchins said that the proposed changes to the Electoral Act were "the greatest attack on people's rights in the last 100 years"; he even went so far as to claim that the changes were "barbaric" and "undemocratic".

So how do the proposed changes compare with Senator Hutchins colleagues in the Labor states? The rolls close on the day writs are issued in NSW. In the ACT, rolls closed fully 29 days before polling day. In the NT it is a mere two days after the writs are issued. In Victoria it is only three days after the writ is issued.

I suppose Senator Hutchins believes the systems in these Labor States are "barbaric" and "undemocratic" also? I put it that he does not believe this to be the case and his comments amount to nothing more than political grandstanding.

An editorial in The Canberra Times ("Concentrate on important issues", February 20) claimed that these changes are aimed at political advantage and that the Coalition believes that its amendments will disadvantage young people, who it (the Coalition) believes do not vote conservative. This assertion simply does not stack up.

According to the latest Australian Electoral Study, 41 per cent of young people voted Liberal at the last election, compared to just 32 per cent Labor.

It makes no sense that the Government would want to disenfranchise a section of the community that in the last election overwhelmingly voted for the Coalition.

The Electoral Act also has safeguards against disenfranchisement, including requiring electors to update enrolment details as they change address and providing for provisional enrolment of 17-year-olds.

At the time of the last federal election, 65,139 17-year-olds were provisionally enrolled and by polling day, 13,803 had turned 18 and were eligible to vote.

Even if you put aside the hysteria of the Labor Party, and put aside the fact that the overwhelming number of young Australians are already enrolled by the time they turn 18, thanks to the school outreach efforts of the AEC, one simple fact remains: that it is illegal not to be correctly enrolled. It is not optional. It is required by law.

The amendments to the Electoral Act also seek to redefine the right to vote for prisoners serving full-time prison terms.

The position of the Government, reflected in the proposed amendments to the Electoral Act, is that people who commit offences against society, sufficient to warrant a full-time prison term, should not, while they are serving that prison term, be entitled to vote and elect the leaders of the society whose laws they have disregarded.

These restrictions on the right to vote do not apply to those being detained on remand, those serving sentences such as periodic detention, those serving a non-custodial sentence or people released on parole.

Emotive claims about disenfranchising people incarcerated for non-payment of a parking fine are a nonsense. It is questionable that any Australian jurisdiction has such an offence punishable with a full-time custodial sentence and such comments add nothing to this debate.

The Electoral and Referendum (Electoral Integrity & Other Matters) Bill 2005 is scheduled to be debated in the House of Representatives during the next parliamentary

sitting week. The Bill responds to a number of priority recommendations of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matter's report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election.

Together the amendments will improve the integrity of the electoral roll and provide a fair and robust electoral system for all.

Need we be reminded of Labor's intentions in 1984, when Kim Beasley was Special Minister of State, when the electoral process was altered with the aim of ensuring, and I quote from former minister Graham Richardson: "That Labor could embrace power as a right and make the task of anyone taking it from us as difficult as we could".

According to one of Labor's most significant powerbrokers, there was one reason and one reason only why Labor changed Australia's electoral system, and it wasn't to improve or strengthen our democracy.

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