



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 22 February 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Morrison, Scott, MP

Source House
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Responder
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Mr MORRISON (Cook—Treasurer) (12:11): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased, as the Minister representing the Special Minister of State in the House of Representatives, to present the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill 2016, to amend the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*.

The bill proposes to:

simplify and improve the Senate voting system;

improve the ability of voters to express their voting intent;

require unique registered officers and deputy registered officers of political parties; and

reduce voter confusion, by allowing political party logos to be printed on ballot papers.

A strong electoral system is open and transparent, and allows for the expression of voter intent.

The parliament has been well served by the work of its Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, which regularly examines aspects of our electoral system, and issues that arise from the conduct of national elections.

The bill responds to key elements of the interim and final reports of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into the 2013 Federal Election, which were tabled on 9 May 2014 and 15 April 2015 respectively.

To support the changes proposed in the bill, the AEC will be provided with additional resources, including some minor new funding, to ensure their systems can address these reforms, and voters are made aware of, and understand, the changes.

Part 1— Senate voting

Voters' dissatisfaction with the complexities of the current Senate voting system is well-described in the JSCEM's report on the 2013 federal election. The committee concluded that the current Senate voting system lacks transparency, is overly complex, and needs simplification.

At the 2013 election, over 96 per cent of formal votes for Senate candidates were made above the line. The current Senate ballot paper encourages above-the-line voting, with voters relying on a complex, and often opaque, system of individual and group voting tickets to allocate their preferences according to a pattern determined by parties or grouped candidates. Individual candidates and political parties can register up to three voting tickets that determine preference allocation. While voting tickets are required to be displayed at polling places and on the AEC website, the JSCEM concluded that most voters are unlikely to understand where their preferences flow. This has led to some Senate candidates being elected on very small first preference votes.

The bill will introduce optional preferential voting above the line, with voters to number at least six squares in sequence (except where there are fewer than six squares above the line). Advice will be printed on the Senate ballot paper to guide voters on this.

The bill proposes the abolition of individual and group voting tickets. This will return the control of preferences back to voters themselves to empower voters. The abolition of group voting tickets will not impact on the ability of candidates to group their names for the inclusion of a square above the line on the Senate ballot paper.

To reduce the risk of increased informal votes, as the proposed changes amend voting rules that have now been in place for 30 years, the bill includes changes to vote savings provisions. These allow for a vote to remain formal even where voters have numbered fewer than six squares above the line. The objective is to capture voter intent by enabling voters to allocate their own preferences on the Senate ballot paper. This will improve the franchise and support the democratic process. It will empower voters.

The bill also proposes an improvement to the vote savings provisions for voters who choose to vote below the line. It proposes increasing the number of allowable mistakes that can be made by voters when they are sequentially numbering their preferences, from the current three to five mistakes—improved savings measures—where 90 per cent of the number of boxes below the line have been filled in correctly, before a vote becomes informal. There are no other changes to the current provisions for below-the-line voting.

Taken together, the introduction of optional preferential voting above the line, the abolition of the voting ticket system and the enhanced savings provisions for voters that preserve their vote above and below the line, will improve voter control over preference flows, support transparency, and simplify the Senate voting system.

Part 2 – Registered officers and deputy registered officers

Consistent with the JSCEM's recommendations, the bill proposes changes to remove ambiguity around the accountabilities, affiliations, and alliances of political parties by removing the capacity for an individual to be a registered officer or deputy registered officer of multiple political parties. This does not prevent a person from being the registered officer of a federal political party and the registered officer of a State branch or division of that party.

Part 3 – Party logos

In its final report on the conduct of the 2013 election, the JSCEM considered the confusion that arises when political parties with similar names appear on ballot papers. The JSCEM suggested that the printing of party logos could help to overcome this confusion.

The bill proposes to allow for political party logos to appear, in black, on the ballot papers for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The AEC will determine the most effective method for registering, authenticating, reproducing, and printing party logos on ballot papers. The bill also proposes a new provision in the Electoral Act to protect the AEC against any action in relation to the reproduction of party logos.

Technical amendments

In the past, voters mainly placed a '1' above the line on Senate ballot papers. This enabled an initial first preference count to be undertaken at polling booths. As the proposed Senate amendments will lead to multiple voter preferences being numbered above the line, preference counts at polling booths will no longer be possible. The bill, therefore, proposes technical amendments to the scrutiny and count processes to enable the AEC to improve and centralise the count of Senate ballot papers.

Conclusion

The government is committed to an open and transparent voting system that has integrity, is simple and clear, and provides voters with the ability to express their will to the greatest extent possible and to have their voting intent upheld. The JSCEM is to be commended for its work in identifying the changes that need to be made in our current voting arrangements to achieve this objective in relation to Senate elections in particular.

The bill addresses the JSCEM's concerns and further improves Australia's democratic processes by placing more power in the hands of voters.

I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned.