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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

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Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 February 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Broadbent, Russell, MP

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Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (21:08): I have always been a long-term advocate for compulsory voting because I think it is important to the whole of the nation that each person has an opportunity to cast a vote with regard to who will govern this country. Whether you are young, are of a median age or are an older person in Australia, you will contribute directly to the governance of this country. It is a very important role that each person plays: they have the opportunity to participate in the democratic processes.

Having said that, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, one of the issues that have raged over what they call the silly season in Australia has been compulsory voting, and you would have heard the debates that raged on the radios across Australia in that time. One of the biggest ironies about the debate we are witnessing, particularly in Queensland, where you come from, over compulsory voting is that the Sunshine State itself was the first in the British Empire to introduce compulsory voting, in 1915. You know that; I can see by your smile.

The second-biggest irony is that the two biggest protagonists against the Queensland government's discussion paper, Prime Minister Gillard and Treasurer Wayne Swan, displayed none of their current hyperbole four years ago in September 2009 when the Rudd government released its own discussion paper, asking, 'Should compulsory voting in Australia continue?'

The genesis of compulsory voting in 1915 Queensland was the then Liberal Premier Digby Denham's concern that Labor Party shop stewards were marching out their troops to vote in blocks under voluntary voting. To counter this, Denham's government introduced compulsory voting in the hope it would provide more of an electoral equilibrium.

For a modern day take on the former Liberal government's motivation, you just need to envisage thousands of activists from the extreme green movement and GetUp! swamping the voting aspirations of Middle Australia and mainstream Australia under a voluntary voting regime. Listening to the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, you would be forgiven for thinking there was a plan by the coalition to introduce voluntary voting by stealth for its own benefit. I would say to you, Deputy Speaker Scott: would a government of this day promote voluntary voting or the opposite as an opportunity for their own benefit? I cannot think political parties in this day and age would do any such thing. As for the coalition conspiracy, several key frontbenchers, including Malcolm Turnbull and Barnaby Joyce, as well as other coalition members, have publicly announced their support for compulsory voting as recently as last month.

The current debate offers little in new armoury of arguments thrown up against compulsory voting. The old chestnut about compulsory voting being terribly undemocratic, even an infringement on human rights, is usually at the top of the list. It has got to be put for the counterview, though, that if compulsory voting is undemocratic, so is stopping at traffic lights, being called up for jury duty and paying taxes. It is a price we all pay for living in a civilised, representative democracy. As for the human rights part, even article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'rights and freedoms' are subject to 'duties to the community'. In other words, we have a right to live in a free democracy and the responsibility to help uphold it.

There is genuine and well-founded risk that voluntary voting would see a dramatic drop in voting turnout at elections. This is steeped in historical reality. The Conservative Bruce-Page government was so significantly worried that voluntary voting turnout had dropped from 71 per cent of the 1919 election to less than 60 per cent at the 1922 election that it supported a private member's bill from within its own government to introduce compulsory voting. At the subsequent election in 1925 the result was self-evident, with voter turnout increasing to over 91 per cent. Since then voter turnout has never fallen below 90 per cent in an Australian federal election.

When the soap opera over the Queensland discussion paper reached one of its higher octave notes in December last year there was even a case made that voluntary voting would decrease the rate of informal voting. This is not a proven case. For example, just over one-third of the informal votes cast of the 2001 federal election had

only the number '1' marked and around half that number did not complete the full sequence of numbers required—1, 2, 3 et cetera—and less than that amount had ticks and crosses.

It cannot be argued entirely one way or the other whether these votes were a case of not understanding the required voting procedure or a deliberately cast informal vote. In other words, you cannot quite tell the difference between someone who has decided to put a '1' in to say, 'This is where I would vote for the member for Maranoa, but I want to make a statement about the fact that I am upset about this voting procedure and therefore will not fill in the rest of the figures.' You do not know whether they are deciding to cast an informal vote or, as in my case in 1998, sadly, when I lost that election campaign, many of my scrutineers actually showed me that many people put '1' in the Russell Broadbent Liberal box. But they failed to put the rest of the numbers in.

The member for Dunkley is here, and he would know that one of my scrutineers was the former Speaker in Victoria, John Delzoppo. John said, 'Russell, there are enough votes in two booths in Morwell that had you in the '1' box to win the election campaign'—which I lost by 400 votes. But that is irrelevant. All these things are meant to be. What I am saying is that there were enough votes of people who put 1 next to 'Broadbent' and 1 next to 'Liberal' in the Senate vote for me to have won that election campaign. You do not know whether they were casting an informal vote or they were just saying, 'This is how I want to vote, but I don't want to be troubled with the rest of it.' That is a difficult example, but I just put that to you as one of the vagaries of our system. However, I believe the people of Australia at every election campaign have come up with the result that they chose.

One-third of the informal votes cast at the 2001 federal election had only the number 1 marked, and around half did not complete the full sequence of numbers required, as I mentioned before. It cannot be argued entirely one way or the other whether these votes were a case of not understanding the required voting procedure or were deliberately cast informal votes. Members of this place would be well familiar with the scenarios I am referring to because they would have seen many of them many a time in their own electorates.

Ongoing information and education about how Australian democracy works is more effective than the disincentive to participate in it that voluntary voting induces. In his very thoughtful and thorough paper for the Australian Electoral Commission on compulsory voting in Australia, Tim Evans demonstrates that compulsory voting has enjoyed a remarkably consistent level of support among the Australian public. Evans notes that in the first Australian election study after the 1996 election 74 per cent of Australians supported compulsory voting in federal elections. The same study after the 2004 election returned the same 74 per cent level of support, as did an Ipsos Mackay case study in 2005, and in 2005 a Morgan poll showed a level of 71 per cent support for compulsory voting.

Another point of contention is whether a particular political party—with the Liberal Party most commonly pointed to—would benefit from voluntary voting. While there is still conjecture on this, I will again refer to Evans, who wrote in 2006:

There appears to be a consensus that there would have been the same result at each of the last four elections if they had been held under a voluntary regime.

I need to repeat that:

There appears to be a consensus that there would have been the same result at each of the last four elections if they had been held under a voluntary regime.

Pollster Antony Green, in contributing to the current debate, wrote late last year that, had voluntary voting been in place at the 2010 federal election, there might have been a different outcome. My view is that, had there been a different voting system in place, Australians might well have voted with a different intention from the votes they cast in 2010. One thing is for sure, though: over 90 per cent of adult Australian citizens, of all means and walks of life, will be compelled to contribute their say on who should govern for all of us, and that is what counts the most.

I am not going to take up the rest of my time in advancing my propositions in support of compulsory voting. I remember a note from the former Prime Minister John Howard that suggested he did not agree with me on this issue. It was a very forthright private note where he noted that he was not going to appoint me to a position I had asked for and he let me know that he did not like my opinions on compulsory voting. I personally think compulsory voting is extremely important because, as each generation comes through, they are drawn to the ballot box. They do not have to vote. They can pick up a piece of paper like that. I say to the member for Gippsland,

who is sitting beside me, that their name is crossed off the register, they are handed two pieces of paper and they can put a cross across them and throw them in the bin. You do not have to vote.

Voting is not compulsory, but we are asking you to contribute to the democratic system that we have here in this nation, which is really important. If we do not say to the youngest in our communities, 'This is really important,' how will they ever know? If they are not drawn in by law or by the threat of a fine to contribute to the national debate, and therefore, quite seriously, if they know that they have to vote, they get a chance to consider how they might vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to say this to you, because you and I came into this House at the same time and I have the highest regard for you. I remember a time three days before an election campaign which was crucial to me in a marginal seat in Victoria. They were very difficult and rough times, which made it very difficult to win. I had to deliver some keys to one of my staff members to open one of our business stores early in the morning, and her son was there. He was going to be handing out for me the following Saturday, and I said to him, 'Dean, are you right for Saturday?' and he said, 'Who are we playing?' His mindset was on the local football. We as politicians, especially in this House in Canberra, need to remember that there is a world outside of this place that is not particularly interested in us. The only way that we can draw them in is through this compulsory voting system. Personally, I think it is crucially important that we hand on to our generations that out of Queensland in 1915 our forefathers said: 'Look, this is really important. It is not about who wins or loses. It is about everybody in this nation contributing to who runs this nation.' Both you and I have suffered the slings and arrows of political ups and downs and turbulence. We have been in and out, and the Deputy Speaker has seen more comings and goings than most members of this House. He has decided to continue in this place, which I applaud him for, because we need the experience and the benefit that he has given this place over a long time, and will continue to give. Compulsory voting has been a great benefit to this country and will continue to be a benefit to this country long after I have left this House.