



Photo: Australian Electoral Commission

Does Australia need electoral reform?

"Should electoral reform be one of Parliament's priorities in the new century?" asks Canberra academic John Uhr in an essay to mark the Centenary of Federation.

"Parliament already knows that voters are increasingly disenchanted with many aspects of the system of government," says Dr Uhr. "Can we come up with a better electoral system that might help restore public trust to politics and elections?"

In his essay, which traces the development of Australia's electoral system since Federation, Dr Uhr notes that today's arrangements are the result of political decisions made by earlier generations of parliamentary leaders.

"One of the few constants in this story is the frequency of change, as successive Parliaments have tinkered with electoral law and policy to accommodate changing priorities. Not surprisingly, the Australian solution is a fascinating compromise of democratic ideals and partisan deals.

"The electoral system was written by established political parties in Parliament and so favours political parties," comments Dr Uhr. Some people, he says, have questioned whether this has come about at the "cost of weakening the place of conscience and independent judgment in the Parliament".

While suggesting that the current system reflects a workable compromise, Dr Uhr warns, "these arrangements can easily become dated, falling behind changing community priorities".

Looking back to the time of Federation, Dr Uhr notes that the framers of Australia's Constitution left many of the operational details of the electoral system to the good judgment of the first Parliament. "They trusted 'the class of 1901' to get to work and devise an electoral system that would carry out the intentions of the Constitution and provide Australia with ground rules for parliamentary representation."

Over time, successive waves of electoral reform have delivered an electoral system featuring elements that are now regarded internationally as distinctively Australian. These include compulsory enrolment and voting, preferential voting, proportional representation (for the Senate), an independent and professional Electoral Commission, and public funding and registration of political parties.

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Dr Uhr suggests that while Parliament has been an important forum for considering electoral reform options, it has been the instrument rather than the architect of electoral development. "The dominant pattern is that Parliament has acted as a deliberative forum where electoral options were finalised rather than originated. Individuals and particularly the political parties have fed ideas and arrangements into the Parliament, usually through the medium of the serving government of the day."

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There has been considerable parliamentary interest in using referendums to entrench features of the electoral system in the Constitution. But Dr Uhr suggests that this may be a thing of the past. While there have been 11 referendums relating to the electoral system, only three have been successful. The first was in 1906 when the starting date but not the term of Senators was changed by six months, and the second and third were in 1977 relating to the filling of Senate casual vacancies and the rights of Territory voters to vote at referendums.

There is great potential for Parliament to show more initiative in developing Australia's electoral system, argues Dr Uhr. The emergence of a joint parliamentary committee on electoral

matters is "an encouraging sign of Parliament's willingness to take greater responsibility for the electoral system".

"The current standing committee on electoral matters has the opportunity to draw together the many strands of parliamentary involvement in Commonwealth electoral arrangements and to devise new institutional forms for the expression of a fresh parliamentary contribution to the national electoral system. In many ways, this opportunity should remind us of the original opportunity seized nearly 100 years ago by the first Commonwealth Parliament to develop rules for representation true to the spirit of Federation."



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Dr John Uhr is a Senior Fellow of the Political Science Program at the Australian National University, Canberra. His essay 'Rules for Representation: Parliament and the Design of the Australian Electoral System' is part of the *Vision in Hindsight* project of the Department of the Parliamentary Library for the Centenary of Federation.

Vision in Hindsight: Parliament and the Constitution is a collection of essays each of which tells the story of how Parliament has fashioned and reworked the intentions of those who crafted the Constitution. The essays are published as research papers available on the Parliamentary Library's web site (www.aph.gov.au/library). A selection of the essays will be included in a volume of work to be published in November 2001.

With the agreement of the Parliamentary Library and essay contributors, *About the House* is publishing summaries and extracts from some of the *Vision in Hindsight* essays. A full copy of Dr Uhr's essay is available from the Parliamentary Library's web site at: www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1999-2000/2000rp29.htm

For more information on the *Vision in Hindsight* project call Judy Hutchinson on (02) 6277 2512 or email: dpl.publications@aph.gov.au

For more information on the work of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (mentioned in Dr Uhr's essay), including its current investigations, visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em, call: (02) 6277 2374 or email: JSCEM@aph.gov.au