

# Senate voting reforms proposed

## 2013 election results prompt calls for change

**'G**aming' the Senate ballot paper at federal elections may soon be impossible if a raft of electoral changes proposed by a parliamentary inquiry are implemented by the federal government.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has released an interim report on Senate voting practices as part of its inquiry into the 2013 election.

The original Senate result in 2013 saw several candidates from smaller parties elected, including the Australian Motorist Enthusiast Party's Ricky Muir who received just .51 per cent of the primary vote.

The interim report has made six recommendations for change to the Senate voting system in a bid to stop preference deals which facilitate the election of candidates on such a small primary vote.

Committee chair Tony Smith (Casey, Vic) said the recommendations were agreed to unanimously across all parties, including the Australian Greens.

"These changes are designed to restore choice to the voter, restore some clarity, and bring an end to the distortion of electoral will that has been occurring as a result of 'gaming' the Senate voting system," he said.

As outlined in the interim report, the Motoring Enthusiast Party received only a total of 17,122 votes in Victoria, or just 0.0354 of a quota.

"However, through manipulation of preference deals, the party was elected to the final seat with a transfer of 143,118 votes from the Sex Party, whose transferred votes themselves had been transferred from over 20 other parties, arguably coming from voters that had no idea that their vote would elect a candidate from such an unrelated party with such low electoral support," Mr Smith said.

Deputy chair Alan Griffin (Bruce, Vic) said the proposed changes were a positive step forward.



**BALLOT BLOCKS:** Recommendations to stop 'gaming' in Senate elections

"We think they're the sorts of steps that governments should be considering seriously to actually ensure the sorts of events that occurred in the Senate election in September 2013 don't happen again," he said.

The committee has recommended that the group voting ticket, which allows for parties to determine the preference flows, be abolished.

It has also called for optional above the line and below the line preferential voting.

At present a voter can vote with a '1' above the line, with preferences to be distributed as per the group voting ticket which dictates the full preference flow to be applied.

If they opt to vote below the line they need to number all the boxes. At the 2013 federal election some Senate ballot papers were the maximum allowable printable width, with 110 candidates listed.

"We think this farce should end and that's why we're recommending we move to a system of optional preferential voting," Mr Smith said.

According to Australian Electoral Commission figures, in 2013 96.5 per cent of formal votes nationally were made above the line, leaving only

3.5 per cent or 470,000 voters voting below the line.

The committee has also targeted party registration rules, recommending that the number of members needed to register a party be tripled from 500 to 1,500.

And it wants the Australian Electoral Commission to verify that the membership is genuine.

"If these recommendations are accepted ... voters will know that parties have had to pass a reasonable test, that they're real and genuine and voters won't be able to have their electoral will distorted," Mr Smith said.

"They'll know where their preferences are going and the extent to which they'll go."

If the recommendations are implemented, the committee also wants adequate resources allocated to the Australian Electoral Commission so it can conduct a comprehensive education campaign on the changes.

Special Minister of State Michael Ronaldson welcomed the report and said the government will consider it.

"The committee's interim report has highlighted and confirmed widespread community concern in relation to the current Senate voting system," he said.


"There was also widespread acknowledgement that many voters were unaware of where their preferences would eventually flow."

The inquiry has held several hearings in Canberra, NSW, Queensland and Tasmania and is still investigating other aspects of the 2013 federal election such as the circumstances which led to a new Senate election being held for Western Australia this year. ■

### LINKS

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