MALCOLM FRASER:

May 23rd, 1965

AMENDMENT - COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL ACT

Changes have been introduced into the Electoral Act and these will have some effect on representation in the Federal Parliament. Many of the changes are ones of detail; the Act is clarified and there are some safeguards built into the Act to maintain the Commonwealth tradition of honest electoral redistribution. Some people will say that the Bill is designed to give undue representation to country areas. I would strongly deny this. So that I may explain it, I would like to relate Section 19 of the Act as it now stands:

"In making any proposed distribution of a State into divisions the Distribution Commissioners shall give due consideration to –

(a) Community or diversity of interest
(b) Means of Communication
(c) Physical features
(d) Existing boundaries of Divisions and Subdivisions
(e) State Electoral boundaries;

and subject thereto the quota of electors shall be the basis for the distribution and the Distribution Commissioners may adopt a margin of allowance, to be used whenever necessary, but in no case shall the quota be departed from to a greater extent than one-fifth more or one-fifth less."

The provisions that the Commissioners must take into consideration are stated in the new Act more clearly than in the old one. Apart from this there is no great difference. The new Act says that the Commissioners shall give consideration to the community of economic, social and regional interests, means of communication and travel with special reference to disabilities arising out of remoteness and distance, trend of population changes, the density or sparsity of population and the areas of proposed Divisions. Furthermore, the Commissioners will be required to have regard to physical features and to the existing Divisional and Sub-divisional electoral boundaries.

The trend of population changes, the density or sparsity of population of the areas of proposed Divisions are new elements stated for the first time. It will clearly be seen that while the Commissioners are asked to take into consideration some of the difficulties of remote areas they must also, at the same time, give consideration to the trend of population changes, and this new provision will work in the opposite direction. It will, in fact, favour the extra metropolitan areas, e.g., the electorates of Bruce and Lalor have grown to over 100,000 since the last distribution because of the rapid growth and industrialization in these areas. In future redistribution the Commissioners will be asked to try to forecast a little more accurately the nature of these changes so that electorates would not rise to this tremendous size; in other words, in an area like Dandenong, an electorate might well begin its life after a distribution with a considerably smaller number than it would have had under the old provisions. This cannot be argued as unduly favouring country areas.
A new provision is being introduced in which any person or organization will be able to put suggestions in writing to the Distribution Commissioners before the Commissioners have made any plans. After these suggestions have been put forward they must be made available for perusal at the electoral office for the State, and other people will be able to lodge written comments on these particular suggestions. In other words, any contact between an outside person or body and the Commissioners must be in writing and it must be available for general perusal and anyone else can put in counter suggestions.

After these initial suggestions and counter proposals have been completed the Commissioners will formulate their proposals for the redistribution. Then, as in the past, the initial proposal will be exhibited at Post Offices. Here again, any written comments lodged with the Commissioners will be made available for perusal at the office of the Commonwealth Electoral Officer for each State and a period will be allowed for further suggestions and objections. The important part in all this is that all suggestions and comments lodged with the Commissioners must be made in writing and they will be available for perusal to anyone who has a particular interest and wishes to see them.

I know of no charges of improper conduct in a Commonwealth distribution. The fact that all suggestions and objections to the Commissioner must be made in writing and must be available for general perusal will be a strong safeguard for the future so that this tradition will be maintained.

After the Commissioners have examined all suggestions and comments on their initial proposals they will draw up their report which will be given to the Minister concerned. This report will be accompanied by a map showing the new boundaries together with copies of all suggestions, comments and objections lodged with the Commissioners. All these documents will be tabled in the Parliament and thus will be available for Parliamentary debate. What the Government is doing represents a fair and just amendment of the electoral Act. This is much more fully explained in the Minister's second reading speech. If anyone has any particular interest in it I would be glad to provide them with a copy.
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Title:
Amendment - Commonwealth Electoral Act

Date:
23 May 1965

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/40168

File Description:
Amendment - Commonwealth Electoral Act

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