

# End compulsory voting

**Bert Kelly**

(Originally published in *The Bulletin*, 12 February 1985)

The Labor Party blamed the voting system for its comparatively poor performance at the recent federal election. Evidently, members felt that traditional Labor supporters were unable to follow the House of Representatives how-to-vote card because the voting system for the Senate had been changed. But surely it would not take much brains to follow the simple directions on a Reps how-to-vote card. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that anyone who could not do so was stupid, ignorant or indifferent.

Why do we have a compulsory system that forces people with these qualities to the polling booth when, by making voting voluntary, we could pleasantly and painlessly let them stay away? They would like that and so would I. The democratic system is hard enough to operate with an intelligent and interested electorate.

Eccles says that compulsory voting was introduced years ago because, before cars were common, it was feared that rich people or rich political parties affluent enough to have cars might persuade poor people to vote for them by taking them to the polling booths in their cars. Well, if that was a proper reason then, it certainly is not now when almost everyone has a car or a relative who has and so could get to the polling place if they wanted to. And, if they did not want to go, they and we would be better off if they stopped at home.

In any case, there is no guarantee that people bribed to vote in this way would do what was expected of them in the secrecy of the polling cabinet.

We had a very keen candidate for a political pre-selection in this district who took along five supporters to the selection meeting 65 kilometres away. Unfortunately, he only got one vote. One of his passengers told me that the drive home was the longest and most miserable he has known. If the candidate had got two votes, it would not have been quite so bad.

I remember Fred asking me while I was still in parliament why we had compulsory voting. I gave him one of my smart political answers but it did not impress Fred. "The only reason why you politicians think that compulsory voting is good is because you got elected under this system so you think it must be good," he snarled. "In actual fact, it proves that it is bad." I do not think that Fred likes MPs much.

Only four other significant democracies have compulsory voting by law but I am told that these countries do not enforce the law. As we appear to be the only democracy that forces people to vote and as our economic performance is so poor compared to the voluntary voting democracies who have far less natural resources than we have, we are in no position to claim any economic merit for our system. Its defenders may claim that, though our economic performance is lamentable, our high moral standards are its justification. Well, you cling to that straw if you can; it may comfort you for a few years yet.

No political candidate who has knocked on doors will ever forget the reception from people who come blinking out into the sunlight, stare stupidly at you and, after you have told them who you are and why you are there, say: “Do we have to vote?” When you say “Yes,” they usually explain that both parties are crooks anyway and that they will vote informal if they are forced to vote. And all the fuss about a party’s or a candidate’s position on the ballot paper would cease because, if people were interested enough to vote, they would vote intelligently and not like donkeys.

One real reason why we cling to our system is that which Fred put forward, that MPs who are elected under it have an uneasy feeling — even though they can see its faults — that they might lose their seats if it were changed. But by far the greatest barrier to change is the inertia of the political party organisations who would be faced with the responsibility and trauma of conducting their political campaigns differently.

For instance, they would have to enthruse their party members to go out into the highways and the byways to persuade their friends to vote. They would not like having to do this but it is done in all other countries and the democratic process is all the better for it.

Our system encourages an awful boredom about elections. My old seat was so safe that when I asked my predecessor what kind of seat it was, he replied: “Bert, even you couldn’t lose it.”

I always knew I was going to win and the only uncertainty was by how much. If I had had to campaign under the shadow of uncertainty that my supporters might not turn out, then I and my party would have had to campaign differently. This would have been a strain for us but at least it would have made my election campaigns interesting for me, if for no one else.