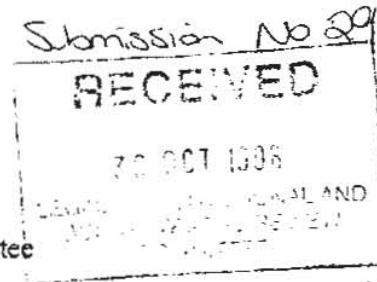


30 October 1998

The Research Director  
Legal Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane 4000



Spec 18-1

Re the Inquiry into Issues of Electoral Reform Raised in the Mansfield Decision

I would like to make a submission to the inquiry urging the abolition of how-to-vote cards at polling booths.

How-to-vote cards may be viewed in two ways:

Firstly, as a right to freedom of speech and political expression in a parliamentary democracy and

Secondly, as an electoral obligation to assist voters in a compulsory voting system based on preferential voting.

The experience in Mansfield and in many other electorates over the past few years indicates that the current system is failing to meet both these needs which could be met in ways much fairer to voters and candidates alike.

1. Our society already recognises the right to regulate freedom of speech to appropriate sites and forms. An example of this is the restrictions on broadcasting political advertisements in the last days of election campaigns. Political parties and interest groups should be allowed to continue to print and offer how-to-vote cards but they should not be allowed to be distributed within a 1 kilometre radius of a polling booth. Political parties and individual candidates could have stalls in towns and shopping centres on election day but nowhere in the vicinity of a polling place. Voters who genuinely want a how-to-vote card would have to actively seek the candidate's or party's advice.
2. As more candidates stand, how-to-vote cards are failing in their second function, that of assisting voters to fill out their ballot formally. Voters are being inundated with too many pieces of paper. Parties are now competing to make their card the most dominant by printing them in larger and larger sizes. Interested parties other than candidates are also exercising their right to persuade voters to vote in particular ways and are also handing out how-to-vote cards. Additionally political parties and interest groups are seeking to influence voters by using the slogans, issues and colours of rival parties and candidates and in the process misleading them. Clearly under the current system where there is no limit on the number of candidates or on the groups who may wish to influence voters we could have an infinite number of how-to-vote cards being distributed at polling booths. It is already not uncommon to have 10 how-to-vote cards being urged upon voters as they enter polling places. The current system confuses rather than assists many voters and should be prohibited.

3. I would like to propose that officially administered posters be produced by the Queensland Electoral Commission listing the preference positions of each candidate and displayed in every polling booth. A similar system has already been adopted by the Australian Electoral Commission to inform voters of the preference distributions by the political parties for above the line voting in the Senate.
4. Officially administered how-to-vote posters would defend freedom of political expression for all candidates and would more effectively assist voters in carrying out their voting obligations.
5. They would also significantly reduce the problem of litter in polling places and the associated problems of lost ballot papers.

I would urge the inquiry to recommend a trial run of such a system to test its effectiveness. It could be trialled at the next by-election or at the next general election by selecting four electorates to assess its impact - one marginal rural seat, one marginal urban seat, one safe rural seat and one safe urban seat. Such a trial could then determine the effects of the abolition of how-to-vote cards on all concerned parties - the candidates, electoral officers and polling booth workers and of course the voters.

*E. L. A. Connors*

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