

74/398

EMBARGO: 7.30 P.M.



PRIME MINISTER

10 March 1974

NATIONAL BROADCAST

Good evening.

I want to talk to you tonight about some basic issues of democracy, about your fundamental rights as citizens in a free society. At the Senate elections later this year the Government will be putting several referendums to the electors. By voting YES in those referendums you will be doing two things: you will be giving a new deal to local government, to the local councils that provide many of our essential services; and you will be establishing the basic democratic rights of Australians. All Australians, for the first time, and for all time.

Local Govt.

There is no principle more basic to democracy than that all people should be equal in their rights and freedoms. We hear a great deal about gerrymanders in Australia, about politicians rigging the electoral system to suit their own interests. And it's unfortunately true that there have been many examples of this practice in our history. For decades in every State there have been wrangling and debate on this question. And it's not just the Labor Party that complains; the electoral laws in Queensland where the Government is dominated by the Country Party are directed just as much against the Liberals as they are against Labor. In every State, one party or another is usually complaining about bias in the electoral system.

Electoral boundaries

The reason for all this wrangling - the reason why politicians can gerrymander electorates for their own purposes - is that there is nothing in the Constitution to stop them. There is nothing in the Constitution to guarantee that all Parliaments must be elected directly and democratically by the people. There is nothing to guarantee equal voting rights for all Australians. So the Government has decided, by means of these referendums, to allow the people to establish these rights once and for all.

Equal Voting Rights

In the House of Representatives and in every mainland State Parliament, it is possible for a political party to gain a majority of seats even if, after the distribution of preferences, it has gained much less than a majority of votes. In every House there are cases where some electorates contain more than twice as many people as other electorates. That's not democracy; it's not justice.

There is one House of Parliament - the Legislative Council of New South Wales - that is not elected by the people at all; it's elected by the politicians, some of them about to retire. And country people suffer as well as city people. In Western Australia there are more people in the Pilbara electorate than there are in any other electorate except one. In the same way, votes in Mount Isa are worth less than votes in Brisbane. So it goes on. To use a good Australian phrase, the system is crook. It's time we did something about it.

My Government tried to remedy this situation last year, when we introduced amendments to the electoral laws that would have made the size of electorates in the national Parliament pretty much the same; much closer to the ideal of equality. The Senate twice rejected our legislation. So we have now resolved to let the people decide this question. If our referendums are carried it will mean that every Australian Parliament - State or Federal - will be elected directly by the people, and that in each House of Parliament any electorate will have, as nearly as practicable, the same number of people as any other electorate.

We put this emphasis on people because registered voters are not the only individuals who matter in a democracy; they are not the only ones whose interests are represented in Parliament. Children have no vote, but children matter; unnaturalised migrants have no vote, but their interests matter; many Aborigines choose not to enrol, but their rights and welfare are important. We believe that in a truly democratic system all people matter and all people must be treated as equal. That's the view taken by that great instrument of democracy the United States Supreme Court. For the past ten years, the court has ruled that any inequality in the population of electorates in the Congress or in the State legislatures is unconstitutional. In Australia any elector will have the right to approach the High Court for a decision on any of these electoral matters. And let me remind you of this: this particular proposal will come into operation in July 1976. That is, it will be the next House of Representatives and the next State Parliament which will in each case have to comply with this new safeguard.

Democracy

Next, we want to ensure that elections for the House of Representatives and the Senate are held at the same time - not just when it suits the Government to hold them together, but always. In the eleven years from 1961 to 1972 we had eight national elections. That's too many - it's inconvenient for the people, it's bad for the working of Parliament, and it's too costly. The simple proposition is that elections for the national Parliament should normally be held every three years and always for both Houses together. This won't affect the rights or authority of either House; nor will it shorten the term of any Senator who took office three years ago or will take office this year. This safeguard will come into operation at the House of Representatives elections after next.

Furthermore, we are asking you to approve a proposal that will make it easier to amend the Constitution in ways that the majority of the electors approve. Instead of requiring a majority of voters in four States to approve a change in the Constitution, it will be sufficient to have a majority in three States - provided there is a majority of all the Australian electors including Territory electors. I remind you that that change was recommended as far back as 1958 by the Constitutional Review Committee established by Sir Robert Menzies. The same committee endorsed the proposal for simultaneous elections of both Houses of Parliament. They are sensible proposals. Let's do something about them.

*Simultaneous
Elections*

Finally, we are asking you to give a new deal to local government. For generations now, local councils have lacked the financial resources to provide better roads, better sewerage, decent community health services, child care centres and facilities for sport and recreation. These services are best provided by local authorities, but the Constitution makes no mention of local government. By agreeing to our referendum, you will enable the national Government to borrow money for local authorities if they wish and top up their revenues if they wish. In this way the national Government will be able to have direct financial dealings with local government bodies in helping them to do the job for which they were elected.

*Local
GOVT.*

I know this adds up to a long list of proposals, but we would not be putting them to you unless we were convinced of their urgency and importance. Our opponents have not only resisted our reforms; they have done their best to prevent you, the people, from deciding these questions for yourselves. I ask you to keep in mind the basic principle enshrined in our proposals; their candid and honourable purpose. They go beyond party politics to elementary rules of right and justice. We seek an end to all gerrymanders, by any party, by all politicians, for all time. I believe deeply, from life-long conviction, that these reforms will make Australia a more just and democratic nation - a model of democracy in the eyes of our neighbours and the world.

Goodnight.