



## PRIME MINISTER

MONDAY FEBRUARY 7 1983

### REFERENDUM FOR FOUR YEAR PARLIAMENTS AND FOR SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS

As soon as possible after the Parliament resumes, the Government will be proposing that a constitutional referendum be held for extending the term of Parliament from three to four years and for simultaneous elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The referendum will allow the people of Australia to express their view about an extended term for members of parliament and the consequent fewer elections.

There have been several significant indications in the last few years that both of these proposals are favoured by the majority of Australians.

#### Simultaneous Elections

The 1977 simultaneous elections referendum achieved a 62 percent majority of all votes throughout the whole of Australia, and only failed because it was just defeated in Queensland, and even more narrowly defeated in Western Australia. A majority in either of those States would have been enough to carry the referendum.

The 1977 vote showed that a substantial majority of Australians want the Constitution to be changed so as to ensure that Senate elections are always held with House of Representatives elections.

### Four Year Parliaments

The referendum in New South Wales in 1981 for four year Parliaments in that State was carried by an overwhelming majority of 69 percent of votes cast. Tasmania has had provisions for four year Parliaments since 1976. A four year term was adopted for the Northern Territory when it obtained self-government in 1978.

Whenever the question of Parliamentary terms has arisen in recent times in Australia, the decision has therefore been to adopt a four year term. A majority of Parliamentary democracies around the world have four or even five year terms. Three year terms are the exception, not the rule.

Standing Committee D of the Australian Constitutional Convention has been studying the matter since 1978. In the Report of the Committee that was recently released by the Attorney-General, it has recommended that the term of the House of Representatives should be extended to four years. The proposal has also been supported by the Reid Review of Commonwealth Administration.

### Amalgamating both Proposals

The time has come to join both these proposals together and put them to the people of Australia. Speaking on behalf of the Government, the Attorney-General commended this step in Parliament on 23 March 1982. Standing Committee D thought so also. Its Report recommends that the most practicable method of dealing with Senate terms under a four year Parliament would be to change the terms of Senators, now six years, to two terms of the House of Representatives. This would ensure that elections for both Houses would be held simultaneously.

### Senators' Terms

The Government's approach is that the changes to be proposed there should be no shortening of normal Senate terms (six years), and the joint proposal satisfies that criterion.

The Government therefore proposes that Senators' terms should be changed from six years to two terms of the House of Representatives. On past experience this is likely to be closer to seven years than to eight years.

This would keep the extension of Senators' terms within reasonable bounds.

By comparison, under the New South Wales referendum for four year Parliaments, the terms of members of the State Upper House went to twelve years. An extension of that dimension would clearly be unacceptable for the Upper House of the National Parliament.

### A Question for the People

Under our Constitution, the changes I have referred to can only be implemented by a national referendum approved by a majority of Australian voters and by voters in a majority of States. The Government believes that the time has now come to put these changes to the vote of the people as soon as practicable, so that they can have an opportunity to express their wishes on the matter.

The two major advantages are first, that a longer duration of Parliaments would enable government to be planned and conducted more efficiently. This consideration, so far as it affects the administration of government, was referred to by the Reid Review of Commonwealth Administration in supporting four year Parliaments.

Secondly, it would provide the conditions for reducing the number of elections. Standing Committee D concluded that an extension of the term of the House of Representatives, particularly if coupled with simultaneous Senate elections, should result in fewer elections under normal conditions.

These advantages would be substantial and significant, even though early elections would still be possible. It needs to be understood that it will never be possible to eliminate completely the possibility of early elections under the Westminster system of Parliamentary government or while double dissolutions can be granted under section 57 of the Constitution.

#### Timing of Referendum

The Government's intention is that the referendum should be held at the earliest appropriate time after the forthcoming general election. It would be necessary under the Constitution to introduce a Bill to that effect in the new Parliament. The four year term for the House of Representatives would only come in to operation with the first election after the passage of the referendum.

However, the simultaneous elections proposal would come into effect immediately the referendum was passed. This was important if the necessity of an early election after the forthcoming election was to be avoided. This necessity was caused by existing provisions of the Constitution which would be eliminated by the present proposal.

The possibility of putting other constitutional changes at the referendum would be considered by the Government in the light of the outcome of the meeting of the Constitutional Convention scheduled for next April.

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