

THE BEGINNINGS OF COMPULSORY VOTING IN QUEENSLAND

Dr Chris Salisbury¹

Compulsory voting at national or sub-national elections was introduced around the turn of the twentieth century in places like Belgium, Switzerland, Spain and Argentina. Queensland in 1915 was the first Australian state to introduce the electoral practice, and in fact was the first jurisdiction in the British Empire to do so. But outside Australia, which introduced the measure federally in 1924, nowhere else in the so-called English-speaking world followed our example, at least not until more recently. Britain hasn't seriously considered introducing compulsory voting, although some MPs there are wondering aloud about it after their May 2015 general election. Even the United States, which in the past eagerly adopted some of our electoral practices (like the secret ballot, or 'Australian Ballot', as the Americans once called it), has never really contemplated compulsory voting either – despite President Obama's recent reflection in front of an Ohio audience that it'd be 'fun to try'.

In Australia, the notion of compelling citizens to vote on election days was promoted prior to and after federation most notably by Alfred Deakin, the nation's second Prime Minister. But a vocal movement opposed to the idea, whose number included H R Nicholls and other leading figures of the Victorian 'establishment', proved enough for compulsory voting to remain a more or less 'sleeping' issue until it surfaced in this state. To a political historian, the question then is not so much 'why introduce compulsory voting?', but instead, 'why Queensland, and why in 1915?'

I'd approach those questions from firstly specific and then more general perspectives. To begin, Digby Denham was Premier at the time that Queensland's parliament debated the introduction of compulsory voting, legislated in 1914 by his Liberal government and put into practice the following year. Denham had used 'law and order' concerns as a pretext for his government's re-election in 1912, after controversially ordering a police and 'special forces' crackdown on striking tramway and other workers in Brisbane in January of that year. The Liberals subsequently lost several Brisbane seats at the 1912 poll, but found their support boosted in the regional and rural vote. By 1915 Denham's administration was confronted with an active, organised union movement still hostile to the government. Ostensibly, the Premier instigated compulsory voting at the 1915 election to thwart the unions from mobilising Labor voters. The initiative was less about negating electoral fraud (compulsory enrolment, introduced federally in 1912, was meant to see to that), or addressing any particular security or wartime concerns; it was, rather, an attempt to maximise the middle-class, non-unionised vote. However, as a political manoeuvre, it backfired spectacularly. Until January of this year, the 1915 poll was the only state election in Queensland where the Premier was defeated in his own electorate, with Denham's Liberals losing office to T.J. Ryan's Labor Party. The huge election defeat saw the government lose half its seats and the conservative forces in Queensland remain on the opposition benches until 1929. It should be noted, though, that this episode didn't later deter the Bruce-Page conservative coalition government in Canberra from introducing compulsory voting in time for the 1925 federal election – at which the incumbent conservative government was returned.

Speaking more generally, and putting Denham's actions as Premier into broader context, Queensland since separation over 150 years ago has earned itself various reputations, one of

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which in the latter part of the twentieth century could be characterised as a hesitant, or even intransigent, approach to reform. This applies to both sides of politics; Queensland, after all, still retains the harshest criminal statutes outlawing abortion of all Australia's jurisdictions, which neither conservative nor Labor governments have seen fit to alter. But this shouldn't overlook or take away from the fact that, since federation, Queensland has many times led the way in pioneering (using that term advisedly) ground-breaking reforms and far-sighted initiatives. We might recall that, as well as ridding itself of its Upper House in 1922, Queensland's government in that same year abolished the death penalty, several decades ahead of the rest of the country. Like teenagers at Schoolies' week, or footballers on an end-of-season trip abroad, political leaders in Queensland have at times seemed less constrained by the prospect of disapproval or sanction from 'higher authorities', especially when those authorities – be they colonial masters in Sydney or a federal government in Canberra – were so very far away. The state's location has in the past perhaps afforded its political class the licence to behave a little more daringly, or to push the boundaries of reform that bit further, than might be the case in the distant southern capitals. It can be said of Queenslanders that we labour not so much under the 'tyranny of distance', but in some respects we instead capitalise on the 'liberty' of distance. It was Digby Denham, let's not forget, who in 1912 contemplated inviting troops from a passing German naval ship to assist in breaking the Brisbane general strike, after the federal government in faraway Canberra rejected his request to send armed forces into the state capital as 'impractical'.

So, when considering the introduction of compulsory voting here a century ago, rather than 'why Queensland?', we should probably ask instead, 'where else but Queensland?'.