

1913.
NEW ZEALAND.

PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM OF ELECTION IN TASMANIA

(REPORT OF MR. MANSFIELD, CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER, ON THE).

Return to an Order of the House of Representatives dated the 12th November, 1913.

Ordered, "That there be laid before this House the report of Mr. Mansfield, Chief Electoral Officer, on the proportional system of election in Tasmania, together with the newspaper extracts attached thereto, as supplied to the Legislative Council."—(MR. RUSSELL.)

TASMANIAN SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.

The Hon. Minister in Charge of Electoral Department.

I HAVE the honour to report that in accordance with your instructions I visited Tasmania, arriving in Hobart on the evening of the elections, 23rd January. I was present that night at the count of the votes for Denison, and later witnessed the Franklin count.

The Premier (Hon. A. E. Solomon), the Chief Electoral Officer (Mr. H. E. Packer), the Assistant Returning Officer (Mr. E. L. Piesse, LL.B., expert and mathematician), and other responsible officers kindly extended to me every courtesy, and provided all possible facilities for my obtaining the fullest information in regard to the proportional system.

The process of the count under the Tasmanian system is complicated and tedious, but I followed it without much difficulty and obtained a good insight into the method, and brought back sufficient data to enable me to demonstrate the system here.

Tasmania is divided into five electorates, each returning six members, and at the elections in April last the Government (Liberal) secured the return of 16 members and Labour 14. A deadlock in Parliament ensued, followed by a dissolution, when the country was appealed to again. The result of last month's general election, however, is, so far as the strength of the respective parties is concerned, precisely the same as at the previous election, the distribution being—Liberals, 16 members; Labour, 14.

In their official report on the general election of April, 1912, the Chief Electoral Officer, Assistant Returning Officer, and Clerk in charge of the Electoral Department pointed out that the smallness of the Liberal majority in the House "is mainly to be attributed to the fact that the districts each return an even and not an odd number of members," and that with seven-member constituencies the Liberals would probably have had 20 members to Labour's 15.

As the representation in proportion to the actual strength of the parties should only have been Liberal 19·1 members, Labour 15·9, this result would come about by the larger party receiving the benefit of the fractions. By adopting seven-member constituencies, therefore, the larger party would probably have obtained a majority of 5 members, although only entitled, according to the actual strength of the parties, to a majority of 3·2 members.

No alteration was made, however, in the number of members to be returned for each constituency, with the result (as already mentioned) that the parties were again returned with exactly the same respective strength as at the previous election.

Judging from comments in the Press, and from the remarks of informed persons with whom I had conversation, there is a good deal of dissatisfaction with the system of elections as at present constituted, and it was indicated that an effort would probably be made to have the law amended. I am under the impression that some, while not wishing to see the fundamental principle of the proportional method interfered with, would welcome some modification of the present method by which the results of the poll are arrived at, while others would support a change back to single-member constituencies with preferential voting so as to secure the return of a candidate by an absolute majority.

I was greatly struck to find that many electors did not appear to understand the principles of their proportional representation system, although in operation there for the past three general elections. Even amongst those who possessed a general idea of the working of the system there was but a most hazy conception of the method by which the results of the election were arrived at; and this is not surprising—the process is bewildering to most people. That it works out with almost mathematical accuracy so far as the strength of the parties in the electorate is concerned is quite apparent, but the transfer of the remoter preferences is apt to produce most unexpected changes at the last moment.

It may sometimes happen that preferences three or four times removed will finally decide the election of a candidate—a complex phase of the system that is not fully realized by the average voter when marking his ballot-paper. The delay in arriving at the final results of the poll, which may extend over a period of a week, is a cause of much dissatisfaction.