

# A RIGHT—OR A CIVIC DUTY?

## Should You Lose Your Vote If You Do Not Use It?

ONE of the features of the Local Body Elections was the number of people who did not vote. Voting is of course not compulsory in New Zealand, though enrolment is, and this year the Local Body rolls were bigger than they have ever been before.

It has therefore been suggested by some of our readers that voting as well as enrolment should be compulsory. We express no opinion ourselves, but have consulted some of the authorities, and we reprint the first part of an article on the subject taken from the "Encyclopaedia Britannica":

**A** DISTURBING phenomenon in all electoral systems is the small percentage of actual voters (says the article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). In England the parliamentary vote is normally about 70% of its full strength; in France it is not much over 60%, in Germany it is often over 75%, and in the United States, where the word 'non-voting' was invented, presidential elections have had as great a proportion as 80% voting; but in other elections, State and local, there is a great falling off. The best extant study of non-voting is that by Professor H. Gosnell, of Chicago University, who found by actual research the following causes in the degree expressed in the Table (herewith).

"We cannot say how far the percentages given in the Table fit conditions outside Chicago for that particular election, but the causes of non-voting as analysed and defined in this study are useful clues. Non-voting has caused considerable anxiety to the supporters of democracy and it is natural that reformers should have hit upon the idea of compulsory voting. Switzerland, Spain, Argentina, Bulgaria, Austria, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, Holland, and Belgium have penalties for non-voters—all of them, with the exception of Holland and Czechoslovakia, dating from before the war. [The reference to New Zealand is wrong: there are penalties here for failing to enrol, not for failure

to vote.] The Australian Commonwealth adopted a system in 1924. Belgium, which has enforced its law most stringently, began to compel voters as early as 1893 with the penalty of a fine of from one to three francs or a reprimand for the first omission to vote; for a second omission within six years a fine of from three to 25 francs; for a third omission within 10 years a similar penalty and the exhibition of the offender's name on a placard outside the town hall for a month. The fourth omission in 15 years brings about a more serious punishment: similar fines and the removal of the elector's name from the register for 10 years, during which time he may receive from the State no promotion, distinction, or nomination to public office in local or central government. Though the franchise has been greatly widened since 1893, the abstentions have never been higher than 7.5% (in 1896) and in 1900 were 6% and in 1912 only 4%. Altogether from 1899-1912 it needed 24,819 convictions of various degrees (about 10,000 being reprimands) to secure this result. The main question is: is it worth while spending the energy and money required to make voters exercise the vote? Is the vote, as some consider it, a right, or, as others, a civic duty?"

### "A Horse to Water"

COMPULSORY enrolment was introduced in New Zealand in 1924, but compulsory voting, although it became



law that year in Australia, was not here made an issue. A search of *Hansard* brought us only this brief reference in a debate on the Legislature Amendment Bill in which compulsory enrolment was introduced.

Sir William Hall-Jones: I would like to see compulsory voting.

Sir Francis Bell: There is no compulsory voting provided for. You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. Compulsory voting would be absurd, because a man has a perfect right to say, "I do not like either of the candidates and I will not vote for either of them." There would be no freedom of life left if we did not have that to fall back on.

### Australia Remained Calm

NOR would it appear that there was much excitement in Australia over the adoption of compulsory voting. By consulting the General Assembly Library's copies of the *Hansard* reports from the Australian Parliament, we found some mention of the fact after it had occurred, but we found no evidence of violent opposition. From some subsequent questions in the House it would not be rash to conclude that the measure went through almost without discussion. Towards the end of 1924 members were asking what steps would be taken to inform all the voters that they now had to vote, and one country member complained that most of his constituents were unaware of it.

### "Compulsion Not Necessary"

FINALLY we sought two current (and necessarily local) opinions.

A student of politics whose name we are not at liberty to use, but who was once in Parliament and now occupies an exalted position in another sphere, expressed himself strongly against compulsion.

"The elector," he says, "has the right to disagree with both sides. If he can't support one or the other, he is entitled to abstain from voting. He also has the right—the moral right, I mean, though not at present the legal right—to abstain from enrolling as a voter. He has that right as an individual, and as a strong individualist I am against the curtailment of personal rights without clear and strong reasons.

"In any case it is not necessary to resort to compulsion to make democracy work. What we need is a rational system of voting. The present system—if it can

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REASONS FOR NOT VOTING at the Chicago Mayoralty Election of April, 1923.

Reasons for Not Voting	No.	Per Cent Distribution
All reasons .. .. .	5,310	100.0
<i>Physical Difficulties</i>		
Illness .. .. .	647	12.1
Absence .. .. .	589	11.1
Detained by helpless member of family	115	2.2
<i>Legal and Administrative Obstacles</i>		
Insufficient legal residence .. .. .	274	5.2
Fear of loss of business or wages .. .. .	289	5.5
Congestion at polls .. .. .	44	0.8
Poor location of polling booth .. .. .	45	0.8
Fear of disclosure of age .. .. .	14	0.3
<i>Disbelief in Voting</i>		
Disbelief in women's voting .. .. .	414	7.8
Objections of husband .. .. .	54	1.0
Disgust with politics .. .. .	230	4.3
Disgust with own party .. .. .	105	2.0
Belief that one vote counts for nothing .. .. .	79	1.5
Belief that ballot box is corrupted .. .. .	40	0.7
Disbelief in all political action .. .. .	22	0.4
<i>Inertia</i>		
General indifference .. .. .	1,347	25.4
Indifference to particular election .. .. .	129	2.5
Neglect: intended to vote but failed .. .. .	448	8.4
Ignorance or timidity regarding elections .. .. .	378	7.1
Failure of party workers .. .. .	47	0.9