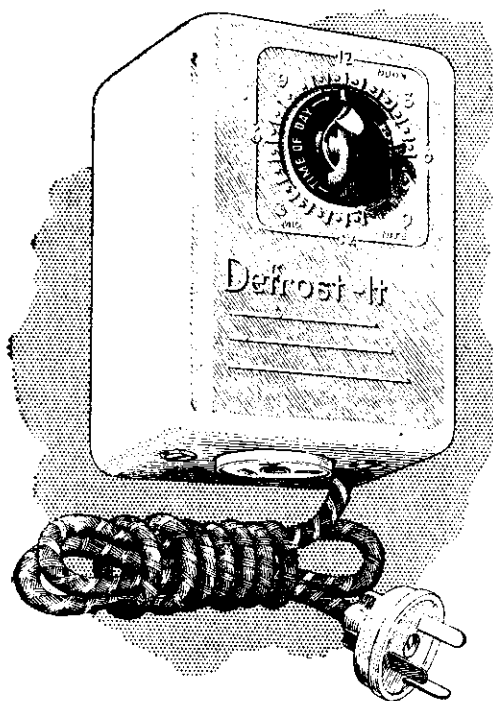


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Before the Election

A QUIET election campaign will end this week, and on Saturday the people will go to the polls. It is evident from their public statements that political leaders are wondering if quietness means apathy. There are, admittedly, no sharply controversial questions before the electors. The policies of the two main parties are familiar; and the ideas of the third party, although untested by parliamentary experience, have been discussed in New Zealand for many years. Yet an election brings its own peculiar excitement. The meetings of candidates may have been thinly attended, but this need not mean lack of interest. It is no light duty to elect a Government which for the next three years will control the nation's affairs. The people of New Zealand would have suffered a sudden and inexplicable loss of democratic fibre if they gave it less than full attention.

It is often said that broadcasting has changed the nature of political campaigns. Meetings have certainly become smaller as radio has reached an almost universal coverage, but it is doubtful if electors stay at home because they can hear a few speeches without having to make journeys and sit in chilly halls. They are more likely to be influenced by what they have learnt of the parties in three years of Parliamentary action. Few people may listen to all the broadcasts from the House of Representatives, but large numbers tune in for the big debates. They know where parties stand on the broad issues of the day. Radio has kept them close to the processes of government; and only inattentive listeners could have failed to form some definite opinions. In an educated electorate—and the standard of education has risen steadily in New Zealand—political judgment is formed gradually. The so-called floating vote may still be large

enough to deserve attention from politicians, but it is probably much smaller than it used to be.

The question must still be asked, however, if democracy is in danger of being weakened by too much reliance on the microphone. Electors can make up their minds about policies without leaving their homes, but they cannot reach any safe judgment of candidates until they have seen and heard them on the hustings. It is commonly said that the votes for a candidate are really given to the party he represents. This may be generally true, but it is equally true that an impressive and able candidate can win votes from a weak opponent. Political parties are only as strong as their members will allow them to be; and public interest remains the best guarantee that capable men will be chosen. The selection of candidates is a democratic process, but there will be a risk of declining standards if the conviction grows that the people are ready to give automatic approval. An election campaign allows new men to be tested on the platform: it is part of a political education which should never be allowed to become easy or perfunctory.

The final test of democracy, however, is the use that is made of the vote. An election in quiet and prosperous times may bring no large disturbance of national life; but people who throughout the years have conducted their affairs in a democratic way cannot fail to understand the central importance of the ballot box. Its value may seem to be greater when the nation is divided on great issues. The truth is that its value is constant and changeless. A vote given every three years is not, while the party system remains, a formal gesture: it is the culmination of all the processes by which a free people has managed its own affairs. Judgment is completed at the polling booth, and the size of the poll is in itself a report on the health of a democracy.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 12, 1954.