

Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0 – Volume 11

~ The New South Wales State Election : From the perspective of a Japanese citizen ~

3 April

(Translation published 13 April)

On Saturday 25 March, the New South Wales (NSW) State Election was held.

As you all know, the election resulted in a change of government with the Australian Labor Party rising to power for the first time in 12 years. This was the first time I have seen an election in Australia. As of today (3 April), more than one week has passed and the final number of seats has yet to be determined. However, I would like to share some of my impressions from my first election here and the particularly memorable differences to the Japanese system that stood out from the point of view of a Japanese newcomer six months into my assignment here.

With that, I will now introduce some of these interesting differences.

- The voting is held on Saturdays (Sundays in Japan)
- The time for voting is from 8am to 6pm, which finishes a little earlier than Japan. (For the Japanese national and local elections they are held from 7am to 8pm.)
- It is possible to campaign on election day, with supporters handing out flyers in front of the polling station. (In Japan, campaigning ends the day before election day, with all canvassing finishing at 8pm)
- Vote counting on election day stops at 10:30pm on Saturday, with no vote counting on Sunday, before recommencing on Monday. (The vote counting process in Japan starts from 8pm on voting day and continues through Sunday.)
- In addition to early voting, postal voting is widely observed. For example, if you live somewhere located more than eight kilometres from a polling station, it is possible to submit a postal vote. Postal votes that arrive by 6pm on 6 April in the two-week period after the election are counted as valid votes. As a side note, the number of postal votes in this election has already passed 500,000 and are still being tallied. (In Japan, postal voting for people with severe disabilities is allowed, however the application must be made four days prior to the voting day, and postal votes arriving after voting day are treated as invalid.)
- Failing to vote without a proper reason results in a \$55 fine.
- Selling sausages at the polling station is quite common. They appear to be called “democracy sausages”, and why they sell sausages and not hamburgers or steaks is unknown. There are also polling stations that sell things like muffins and cakes.
- On the ballot paper, you number the candidates in the order you wish to elect them from 1,2,3,4,5 etc.



On the day of the election, I visited a polling station at a nearby public school. Something in particular on the day that you wouldn't see in Japan was the fact that supporters were actively campaigning by handing out flyers during the election day. The flyers even thoroughly explained how to number your ballot in detail. I will be mentioning this later, but this probably stems from the complexity of the Australian electoral system.

Furthermore, I thought it interesting that at the polling station people selling food including sausages made it seem just like a festival. When I used to work in Russia, the government handed out things like milk and sweets for free to desperately raise their voter turnout (Still, the most recent lower house election in 2021 saw a 50% voter turnout.). In Australia, where failing to vote results in a fine, I do not think selling food is really necessary to increase the voter turnout. Rather, there is an atmosphere surrounding the election, which had a feeling that the whole family could participate and 'enjoy' this culmination of democracy, and I quite liked it.

I was also surprised that no vote counting took place on Sunday. On the night of the election, all of the media simultaneously reported, “the Labor Party is to secure the majority” with an announcement proclaiming victory for Leader of the Labor Party Chris Minns, and Premier Dominic Perrottet announcing his defeat and indicating his resignation as party leader. On the other hand, as the votes were counted, the cloud of uncertainty began to lift in the latter half of the following week, indicating that securing a majority was not a certainty. The counting of the postal votes also continued. At this point, the Labor Party is one or two seats short of its 47-seat majority and it is being said they will form a majority in the House of Representatives with the support of three independent MPs.

Regardless of the vote counting process, on Tuesday 28 March, Chris Minns received approval from Governor Margaret Beazley to assume office, and to form an interim cabinet by appointing a Deputy Premier, Treasurer, and Ministers of Health, Transport, Education, and Attorney-General as the core of NSW's administrative operations. The list containing the names of all the cabinet ministers will be released very soon. According to the pre-published election schedule, the declaration of results for the Legislative Assembly will take place on Friday 14 April, with the results for the Legislative Council on Thursday 20 April, and the first sitting of both houses taking place sometime in early May. I feel that if Minns was not confident that he would secure a majority, he would have been more hesitant in forming his interim cabinet, however, as he did so, he must have had that confidence.

The difficulty of the Australian electoral system is not something that can be easily explained in words. As mentioned above, the pamphlets distributed by the supporters gave voters specific instructions on how to vote and how to number their voting ballot. I think the difficulty of the electoral system plays a part in this.



I will try to explain this as I understand it. The Legislative Assembly will be used here as an example.

In this example, let's say that there are five candidates called A, B, C, D, and E. The voters then number the candidates in order of preference in the empty column on the left from 1 to 5.

Firstly, all first preference votes are counted. Let's suppose that the votes were in the order A, B, C, D, E. If A possesses the majority of votes, then A will be elected. If this is not the case, E who is the candidate with the lowest number of first preference votes is excluded. Then, votes where E was the first preference are re-assigned to the candidate who was the voter's second preference as "the deemed first preference." If there is still no majority, then D is also excluded from the vote. Then the votes where D was the first preference are assigned to the remaining candidates from A to C in line with their second preference. Also, the votes where E and D were the first and second preferences have their vote moved to the third preference candidate from A to C. This process is repeated, and the individual who achieves the majority of votes, including the deemed first place, is elected as a member of parliament.

It is possible to evaluate this system as a system with fewer wasted votes as it allows people to 'prioritize those they want to get elected' and to 'eliminate candidates' opportunity to get elected by assigning lower numbers to those they don't want to.' This should work well in the previous example where there were only 5 candidates, but in the event there are more than 10 candidates, I think the act of assigning preferences could become laborious on the voter. Even so, I can see that the fact that this complicated system has continued to this day for over 100 years since its introduction in 1918 is something that the Australian people see as having positive impacts that far exceed its inherent intricacy.

Please note that the aforementioned was in relation to the lower house (Legislative Assembly). The upper house (Legislative Council) has voting for political parties (proportional representation) and voting for individuals, but looking at each parties' leaflets, which states "it is ok to only vote for the party, and the vote for the individual need not be stated," it is clear that voters are urged to do so. The general voter perception also seems to be that "the Legislative Council has a system of proportional representation." The system in the Legislative Council is also quite complicated, but I am not confident enough to explain it in my own words, so I will leave it at that for now.

At any rate, the first election I observed in Australia was a fresh experience for me.

(Please note: The above statements were based on the author's personal understanding. If there are any errors, please do not hesitate to point them out to me.)

(END)