

DEMOCRACY TAKES ANOTHER BEATING

Labor's Socialist Left is not averse to electoral engineering in contempt of democratic principles. Its malign influence was behind a resolution of the Party's State Conference last October which, if implemented, would eliminate minority parties — including the National Party — from the Legislative Council and disenfranchise more than 200,000 Victorians.

Before the last election, the Premier, Mr. Cain, promised to introduce proportional representation in elections for the Legislative Council if Labor won control of both Houses of Parliament. On this understanding, the Australian Democrats urged their supporters to give their preferences to Labor candidates. As it happened, the Cain Government did not win a majority in the Upper House. Ironically, this was partly due to the failure of the Democrats to deliver

sufficient preferences in the crucial contest for Nunawading Province. But then the A.L.P. Conference imposed the condition that, if proportional representation were introduced, a Party would have to win at least 10 per cent of the vote in the State as a whole for its candidates to be elected.

The Democrats have protested that this proposed threshold amounts to a breach of promise, and would permanently exclude from the Upper House the very minority groups for whom the reform was intended. The impact would be much more dramatic. Not only would it keep out of the Legislative Council such minority Parties as the Democrats and the Nuclear Disarmament Party, whose support is dispersed throughout the State, as well as any independent candidates, unless they can clear the State-wide 10 per cent barrier. It would also eliminate from the Upper House the National Party which, although it gained less than seven per cent of the total primary vote for the Legislative Council in the last election, outpolled the Labor and Liberal parties combined in one Province, led the poll with nearly 38 per cent of the primary vote in another and outpolled the Labor candidate in a third. The proposition that a candidate who can win a parliamentary seat, even with an absolute majority, in a particular area of the State should be disqualified, and those who voted for him disenfranchised, because his Party has not won 10 per cent of the vote throughout the State is an outrageous denial of democratic principles.

The Socialist Left's suspicion of proportional representation is, perhaps, understandable. Where, as in Tasmania, sophisticated voters can distinguish between factional representatives of the same Party and vote only for those they favour, the S.L.'s parliamentary numbers could well be limited by the electorate. What is neither understandable nor excusable is that Mr. Cain should accept this audacious proposal, which is not only undemocratic but politically foolish. The Liberals would be the main beneficiaries of the elimination of the Nationals and Labor could kiss goodbye any future preferences from the Democrats. Indeed, the Democrats may have already concluded that Labor is not to be trusted.—“Age”, 18/2/86.