

# THE SECRET BALLOT - A WORLD FIRST



## Victoria – one of the world’s first modern democracies

Imagine attempting to vote in an election where the vote is restricted to men of property and where your name is written on the ballot paper so that anyone can see how you voted.

Few people realise that Victoria can lay claim to having one of the world’s first truly democratic electoral systems – it was in Victoria that the secret ballot – the basic tool of democracy – was invented and first used.

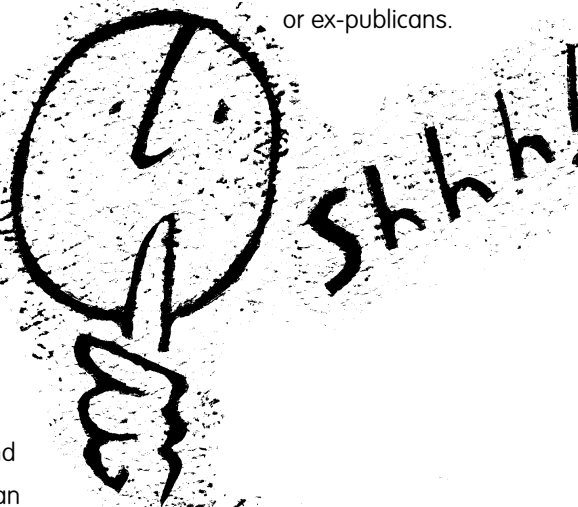
## Abusing the system

Elections in the first half of the nineteenth century were conducted using a practice adopted from Britain known as ‘open voting’. This was a system where candidates employed ‘polling agents’ who presented a card to each elector with their roll number and a space for the candidate’s name to be printed by the elector. To cast a vote, electors wrote their own name and address on the ballot paper and placed it on a table face up in piles sorted by candidate.

This led to widespread abuse of the system, where an atmosphere of violence and intimidation were often characteristics of an

election. Since polling took place over several weeks it was common practice for scrutineers to keep candidates up to date on their progress, and for losing candidates to stop people voting for candidates that were ahead. Open voting also made it easy for pressure to be applied to traders, employees and tenants. There were reported cases of tenants being evicted because of how they voted.

Hotels were often used as venues to receive nominations and as voting centres. Voting in the hotels took place accompanied by lots of drinking and riotous behaviour, and it is not surprising that throughout the 1850s and 60s the majority of members elected to the Melbourne City Council were either publicans or ex-publicans.



## The secret ballot

Henry Chapman, a London-born barrister who had successfully defended the Eureka rebels, proposed the idea of the secret ballot, which was eventually enacted into law by the Victorian Parliament on 19 March 1856.

Although the Colonial Secretary opposed the secret ballot, labelling it 'not only unconstitutional, but un-British', local opinion was in favour. It was widely held that the secret ballot would bring fairness and order to the electoral process. One commentator optimistically predicted that the secret ballot would 'relieve candidates from the base artifice of kissing squalid children, flattering

slatternly housewives, and cajoling partial fathers'.

The secret ballot was widely copied and became known throughout the democratic world as the 'Victorian Ballot'. It was quickly adopted in South Australia (1858), Tasmania (1858), New South Wales (1859), Queensland (1859), New Zealand (1870), Britain (1872), Canada (1874) and in parts of the United States from 1888.

For an informative history of the introduction of the secret ballot in Victoria, refer to 'Making Voting Secret' by John Hirst. This publication has been sent to all Victorian government secondary schools. It is also available on the VEC website at [www.vec.vic.gov.au](http://www.vec.vic.gov.au).



1. Can you think of times at home, school or work where you have been involved in an open vote?
2. How is it different to a secret ballot?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each system?
4. When we vote for our parliamentary representative a secret ballot is used, but once in parliament all votes are open. Explain two reasons why this is so.
5. There are still some people that do not have the right to a secret ballot in Australia, a blind person being one example (a trusted friend or election official must fill out the ballot paper for them). How might this problem be overcome? Can you think of any other examples of people who don't have access to a secret ballot?