

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry:

All aspects of the conduct of the 2016 Federal Election and matters related thereto

Name: Andrew Reid

Date: 1st October 2016

Re: Expatriate Voting

My wife and I are Australian citizens, who moved overseas to Cairo, Egypt, in January 2013. Before moving, we registered to become overseas electors and elected to receive an automatic postal vote (General Postal Vote).

After the announcement of the 2016 federal election date, the Australian Embassy in Cairo posted a statement on their Facebook page, stating that the Australian Electoral Commission had decided not to use the Embassy as a foreign polling station for the 2016 Federal Election. Therefore, postal voting was the only voting option available to us. This might have saved a few dollars for the AEC and a bit of the embassy staff's time, but it meant Australian citizens here had to rely on Australia Post and Egypt Post to deliver their ballots in a timely manner.

Our ballot papers did not arrive by post until 20th July, well after the cut-off date for receiving postal votes, making it pointless to complete them.

Given that over one million Australians currently live as expatriates, it seems farcical that Australian citizens living outside major foreign capitals have to rely on the efficiency of foreign postal systems in order to cast their vote. This practice suggests that the democratic voice of Australian expatriates is not valued highly enough to provide a feasible method of voting, unless they live within travelling distance of the embassies in London or Washington. Australian expatriates continue to have an interest in Australian affairs and are impacted by Australian government policy in areas such as taxation, trade, tourism and investment. They ought to be provided with a feasible method of casting their vote if they wish to do so.

I would recommend to the committee the model in use by the Victorian Electoral Commission, where overseas electors receive ballot papers by mail, but then scan the completed ballot papers and return them via email to the VEC. This means that only one delivery by post is required, increasing the likelihood that electors can cast their votes before the cut-off date. If a broader electronic voting system were to be introduced for remote or vision-impaired voters, its applicability should also be considered for expatriate voters.

In light of these events, I would suggest that the JSCEM recommend the following change to the Electoral Act.

- Allow ballot papers for registered overseas electors to be scanned and sent electronically to the AEC.

If the committee does not accept this recommendation, then it ought to recommend that the AEC be sufficiently resourced so that all Australian Embassies are equipped to function as overseas polling places.