

Opening statement | Electoral Commissioner

Senate Estimates

23 May 2023

Chair and members,

I wish to briefly highlight some key points for the Committee's awareness; noting the Senate's interest in some of the AEC's key deliverables.

Domestic, and even global, events impacting on election delivery, and evolving citizen perceptions of the electoral process have combined to create the most challenging, complex, unpredictable and yet exciting epochs in the AEC's history. Additionally, against a backdrop of increasing threats to electoral integrity, escalating electoral costs, supply chain disruptions, recruitment challenges, and ageing systems, the AEC continues to prepare for a Referendum and the next general election – whenever that may be – and at least one by-election.

We've recently received funding to deliver the next phase of the AEC's critical modernisation program. Australia's elections are frequently internationally noted for their transparency and integrity. While robust democratic machinery is indispensable to the well-being of our nation, the continued success of our electoral system does require ongoing investment. The modernisation of critical election systems will mean better planning, execution and monitoring of an operation involving tens of millions of transactions between citizens and the AEC, hugely complex supply chains and large-scale material use, elaborate and time critical global transport arrangements, one of the biggest temporary workforces in the nation.

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The AEC's preparations for the referendum continue apace, and we will be ready when the Writ is issued. To that end:

- We've started a comprehensive education campaign to inform those who may have a referendum disclosure obligation. There's a range of information already on our website, and ads in social media and print media. We've also identified, and are already informing, entities that may already have accrued a reporting obligation, and we are working with other peak bodies and organisations such as the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission to provide additional information.
- This referendum will have the most complete electoral roll in Australia's history with an extraordinary enrolment rate already sitting at 97.2%; and we continue to focus on underrepresented cohorts; with some significant successes. For example, the youth enrolment rate currently sits at a high point at 87%. The estimated Indigenous enrolment is also at a record high – currently at 84.5% nationally. The introduction of Medicare cards as evidence of identity has been a further huge step in making it easier for citizens to enrol.
- We are enhancing remote voting services to achieve greater equity of access for all Australians for this referendum and into the future. Australia already has one of the most flexible and accessible voting systems in the world, and we're looking to enhance that further. This means navigating challenging and unpredictable situations, including natural disasters, pandemics and the genuine difficulties of Australia's vast terrain.
- The information eco-system was entirely different at the time of the last referendum, with no social media. We're already seeing an increase in disinformation on social media – and a regrettable increase in threatening commentary. We are adapting our approach to manage this for the referendum, including protecting our own staff from online harm.

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- To ensure all Australians understand the process and how to participate in the referendum, the AEC is preparing a large-scale public information campaign focussed on the referendum process, and we will also educate voters about mis and disinformation through our Stop and Consider campaign (to encourage people to consider the source of the information they come across). Of course, we'll also be sending out the Yes / No Pamphlet to every household and translating versions into large number of other languages.

Electoral administration is increasingly complex, we are seeing a more unpredictable information environment every day, requiring us to navigate far more challenges than ever before. We remain incredibly proud of our work to deliver high integrity elections in which Australians can trust, whilst also keeping an eye to the future in modernising our work.

Thank you, I'm happy to take questions.