

6 October 2022

To whom it may concern

Inquiry into the 2022 federal election

I write to you on behalf of the Central Desert Regional Council, elected members and residents in response to the Inquiry into the 2022 federal election.

Central Desert Regional Council (CDRC) is located in the central southern section of the Northern Territory, lying north of Alice Springs. Central Desert Regional Council is named to describe its location and geography in the central part of Australia and encompassing the Tanami Desert. The land area is 282,093km² and CDRC manages 1,769 kilometres of roads.

The total estimated resident population in the Central Desert Region is 4,124. The original inhabitants of the Central Desert Regional Council area were the Anmatjere, Arrernte and Warlpiri Aboriginal people. The census population of the Council area increased during the early 1990s, rising from about 4,000 in 1991 to nearly 5,000 in 1996. The population then gradually declined, falling to about 4,222 in 2016 and even slightly further to 4,124 in 2021.

The communities in the Central Desert are Lajamanu, Anmatjere (Ti Tree), Wilora, Nturiya, Pmara Jutunta, Willowra, Laramba, Nyirripi, Yuelamu, Atitjere, Engawala and Yuendumu. There are also several homelands and outstations.

In respect to my submission this will be in particular reference to points (d) and (e) of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

(d) encouraging increased electoral participation and lifting enfranchisement of First Nations People;

Commentary

In the months, leading to the federal elections CDRC collaborated with the Australian Electoral Commission's Indigenous Electoral Participation Program whose objective was to get as many indigenous remote residents who were not registered on the voter's roll and increase their participation numbers in the elections.

The key feedback CDRC has received from its residents regarding the 2022 federal elections and their participation was:

- Lack of confidence in the democratic process, politics across all levels of government



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- A visible gap seen as 'us' and 'them' due to majority of residents admitting that they did not know the candidates they were voting for and none of them visited remote communities frequently enough to be known by residents resulting in disengagement in the process
- View that the further up the levels of government there is a growing lack of awareness of the challenges faced by remote residents particularly in the Central Australia region – resulting in the 'what's in it for me' evaluation where majority of government expenditure is spent developing metropolitan centres while remote communities get left behind with some communities not even having mobile coverage or outstations without water
- Inadequate notice was given to residents regarding the registration on the roll
- Majority of remote community residents in our region are transient and electoral officer community visits were conducted at times where majority of residents were not in the community due to lack of awareness of community events calendar
- Lack of awareness of the voting dates attributable to the timing of the declaration and the actual voting dates
- Voting methodology and process gave residents little or no time to cast their votes with most polling officers being in a community for an average of 2-4 hours
- Polling officers were unknown to residents and there was lack of confidence to approach and ask questions
- Tyranny of distance between communities and outstations made it a challenge for residents to travel within the stipulated voting window – voting windows were unrealistic
- Lack of identification documents is a real challenge for remote community residents and the new process or flexibility to register an individual on the roll was not well communicated to residents
- Lack of recognition of aboriginal culture with respect to visible absence of local cultural induction, awareness of competing local cultural activities such as sorry business, local language barriers and acceptable community visitor practices/norms
- Voter fatigue due to the number of activities that had occurred in the last 18 months from NT legislative assembly elections, NT local government elections, census and then the federal elections
- Impact of COVID 19 with residents returning to the new normal, social distancing, navigating the isolation requirements that were applicable at the time, fear of contracting the pandemic
- Competing priorities such as economic factors, royalties, sporting events and family commitments

Ideas and suggestions

In the 2021 Northern Territory (NT) Government local Government election held in August, local government entered into an agreement with the NT Electoral Commission. This agreement included regional council's acting on behalf of the returning officer as the polling agent with our service delivery centres operating as voting centres.

For our central desert region, this meant we had 9 voting centres with over 20 polling officers covering the 282,093km². Our polling officers also travelled to surrounding outstations and homelands to enable a wider reach for the majority of our residents registered on the roll.

This initiative resulted in an increase in resident participation across the NT in the 2021 local government elections. The contributing factors to this in addition to the above are:

- There was advertising of the upcoming elections and discussion through our local authority meetings at least 6 months before the elections
- Polling officers were known to the local residents as they were council workers and there was increased confidence in asking questions, clarifying the process and even getting on the roll
- Residents led local initiatives to get as many individuals known to them as eligible to vote on the roll and marked off against each household
- Voting was open for two weeks which allowed residents who were travelling between community ample time to return to their registered location to vote
- The duration of the voting period also permitted cultural flexibility in respect to cultural business that occurred during the voting period
- Majority of outstation residents are elderly persons who do not have reliable transportation to travel between communities and with our polling officers travelling to these locations voter participation was increased by merely giving them access to lodge their votes.

(e) the potential for the creation of a single national electoral roll capable of being used for all federal, state and territory elections in Australia;...

Commentary

Resident feedback on the potential creation of a single national roll was received as a positive step however consideration of the challenges in remote communities such as:

- Not all residences in our communities have a street address and a consistent approach will need to be applied across all jurisdictions
- Consistent process for inclusion of the record of a new voter on the roll when a person becomes eligible to vote
- Regular updating of the roll will be critical which includes correction, misspelling of names or changes for remote residents
- Passive or automatic enrollment for remote community residents may not contain accurate information for these individuals such as correct spelling for names and associated residential information – residents may not fully understand their role in this process as well



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What would be critical is to undertake adequate consultation with community residents in all jurisdictions to adequately explain the workings of the single national roll and what barriers it intends to overcome.

Should you require further information, or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



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