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Federal elections: critical steps to sustain the electoral system

Australian Electoral Commission

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Overview

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is responsible for conducting federal elections and referendums and maintaining the Commonwealth electoral roll. The AEC also provides a range of electoral information and education programs and activities.

Since the AEC was established in 1984, the scale of federal elections has expanded dramatically. Elector behaviour continues to evolve, along with community and stakeholder expectations, which include an expectation that the voting process will be more contemporary with the use of digital technology, and a reduced tolerance for errors at any point in the electoral cycle. As a result, the AEC is working in a challenging and complex logistical and operational environment: in turn, this creates added challenges to the planning, preparation and conduct of each federal election.

Despite this increasing complexity, the AEC has innovated within its current significant legislative and resource constraints. For example, prior to the 2016 federal election, the AEC successfully implemented the most comprehensive legislative and administrative reforms to the federal electoral system in the past 30 years, digitising the scanning and counting of Senate ballot papers.

Following an evaluation of the successes and challenges of the 2016 federal election, the AEC has concluded that further meaningful innovation and modernisation are unlikely without legislative reform and significant investment in the AEC's base operating systems and models.

Three key areas must be addressed in order to ensure the integrity and long-term sustainability of Australia's electoral system:

1. legislative reform
2. investment in systems, people and processes
3. stakeholder and community engagement.

The AEC is seeking support to drive meaningful change in the delivery of electoral processes and systems in order to address the key areas listed above. This will improve voter experience, seek to meet community expectations and ensure the long-term sustainability of the federal electoral system.

In April 2017, the AEC provided a detailed submission (66.15) to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) that identified a series of challenges to the electoral process and the first steps needed to ensure the continued successful conduct of federal elections.

The submission highlighted that failure to address these matters would increase the risk that the current electoral system will not meet community and stakeholder expectations. A copy of this submission can be found at the following link:

www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/2016Election/Submissions



The changing nature of elections

Federal elections continue to grow in scale. This growth has not been matched with significant investment in technology, or streamlining of rigidly prescribed legislative processes. As a result, the amount of human intervention and manual processes continues to grow.

Regardless of the controls implemented to mitigate the risks inherent in the widespread use of manual processes, the 'human factor' combined with aged information technology systems and highly prescriptive legislation increases the risk of error.



The AEC

At the 2016 federal election, the AEC workforce comprised approximately 75,000 temporary staff recruited in the weeks prior to the election. These temporary workers were required to provide services for 15.6 million enrolled Australians, almost a million more voters than were on the roll at the 2013 federal election. Following years of concerted effort, 95 per cent of eligible Australians were enrolled to vote at the 2016 federal election, and fewer than a million people were missing – a significant improvement on previous elections. As stated by Peter Brent in an article 'Time for voluntary voting' published 28 July 2016 "the roll today is more comprehensive than it has been in living memory".

Table 1. Selection of election statistics

Figures for 1983/4 reflect outcomes at the 1984 federal election following legislative changes in 1983

	1983/84	1993	2013	2016
Electors on roll	9,372,064	11,384,638	14,712,799	15,676,799
Senate nominations	202	266	629	631
Electors per polling place	1,439	1,444	1,913	2,297
Election staff per 1,000 electors (temporary workforce)	6.5	5.9	4.9	4.8

Current state of play

All election management bodies (EMBs) must contend with the challenges and intricacies of election delivery. The AEC's current challenge is to maintain service standards and agency reputation whilst delivering increasingly complex and intensely manual federal elections. Delivery of federal elections

takes place in a highly scrutinised, zero error environment and while relying on aged information technology systems with a minimally trained election workforce of some tens of thousands.

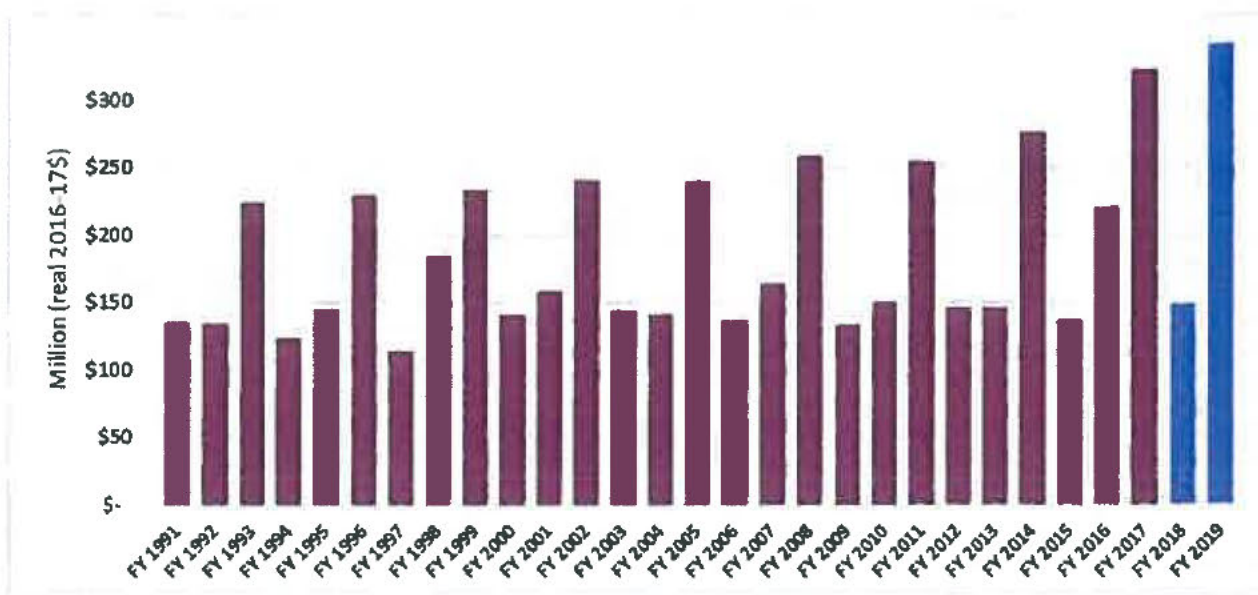
Additionally, the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Electoral Act) is highly prescriptive and provides little or no scope to implement technological and procedural changes that would promote sustainability of the electoral system into the future.

Further modernisation of the electoral process will require additional, and significant, financial investment. The current funding model for the AEC provides minimally adequate resources on the assumption that the AEC is simply repeating the process it has undertaken before, but provides little investment in new systems or processes at a time when the AEC has the ability to implement such change – in between election events.

Funding

As previously mentioned, the AEC has received minimally sufficient funding to conduct each federal election (to all intents and purposes, based on the processes and funding model of the previous election). However, the funding received for AEC ongoing operations – in effect the money between elections – is insufficient to provide for the long-term sustainability of the systems the AEC uses to conduct the federal election and does not allow for long-term, meaningful innovation.

Figure 1. Total AEC expenses, adjusted for inflation



Ongoing funding was previously reviewed in 2012 by a joint Department of Finance and PwC team, which identified a \$16 million shortfall, which government agreed to fund. Subsequent whole-of-government savings measures now place the AEC in a worse position than in 2012.

The AEC's three largest costs are people (accounting for 60 per cent of total costs), property (15 per cent) and information technology (15 per cent). Of the remaining 10 per cent, Australia Post costs are significant. There is little opportunity to change this:

- Property costs are influenced by legislative requirements to have an office per division. Whilst co-locations can save some costs it does little to reduce the number of people or gross square meters leased.
- The requirement for an office per division results in almost 50 per cent of the AEC workforce (i.e. those that staff the offices) being a de facto legislative requirement.

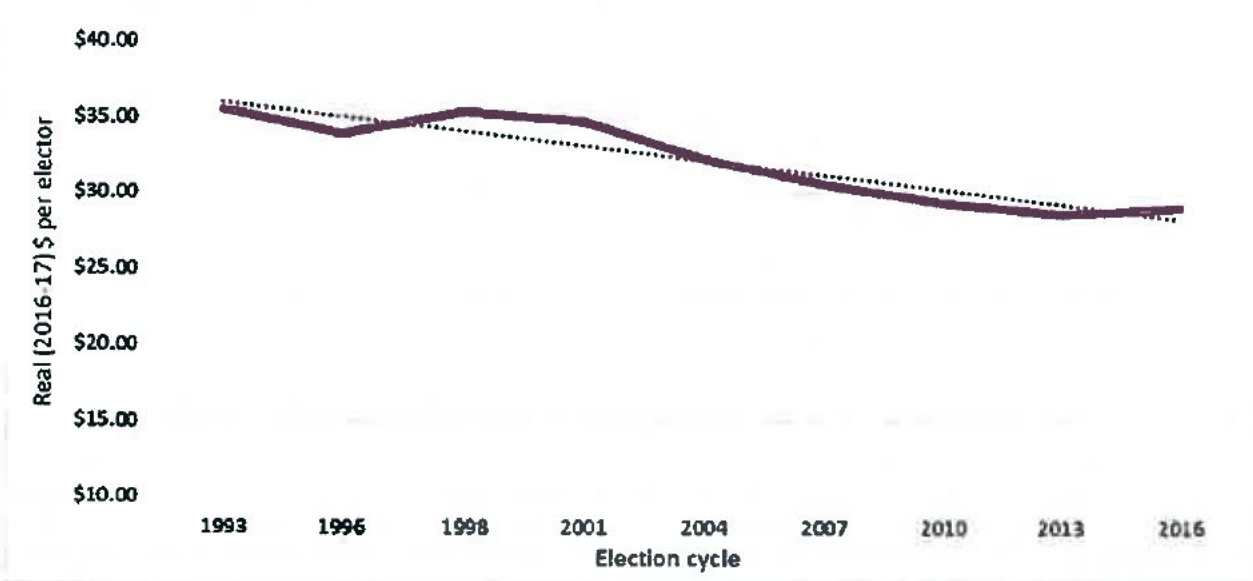
Given the lack of flexibility in this cost driver, and the significant costs associated with supporting this distributed office network, people and property costs continue to grow as a percentage of ongoing budget.

Improved business practices and information technology efficiencies have automated components of the enrolment processing workload. However, a significant volume of enrolment work is still done in divisional offices and any savings from further efficiencies would be constrained by the ongoing requirement to maintain the divisional office network.

Postage costs also place significant pressure on the AEC's budget position, given legislative and operational requirements to correspond with electors. Australia Post's bulk mail prices have increased by around 60 per cent since June 2015. The AEC does not receive supplementation funding to cover these additional costs nor can these costs be passed to electors.

The AEC's funding has not matched the significant growth in the size of the electorate over the past two decades. The figure below shows how the AEC's non-election spending, per elector, is continuing on a long term downward trend.

Figure 2. AEC non-election expenses, per election cycle, per elector



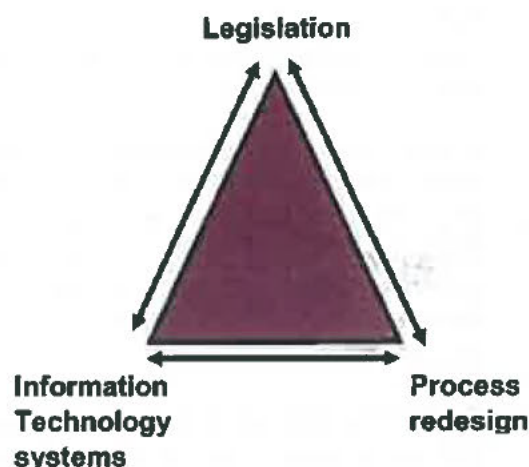
The AEC is unable to harvest savings from its organisational structure to invest in its future. Information technology legacy systems continue to exist and cannot be modernised and the AEC is unable to invest in modern logistical and event management systems and processes.

There is a significant systemic risk for the AEC from the increasing complexity of federal elections. Detailed planning and implementation are required to harness opportunities to reduce complexity, risk, and cost and improve the integrity, efficiency and effectiveness of the conduct of elections.

These opportunities cannot be realised during the conduct of a federal election: rather, the AEC requires investment and development between elections, and the current funding model is not designed to support such an approach.

Processes

Changes to the legislation inevitably result in a need to change and redesign previous processes, and training of staff and polling officials. Alongside legislative change, policies and procedures must be redesigned and tested. Consideration must also be given to the redesign of relevant systems and supporting materials, and assessments of organisational risks. Where possible, this should include the capacity for modelling, simulation and trials to be used as a part of the design process. Processes must keep pace with reforms to systems and legislation – this inevitably requires adequate AEC funding throughout the electoral cycle.



Information Technology systems

The AEC's current election and enrolment management systems were first introduced in the early 1990s. Some 25 years on, these systems are clearly outdated and have become a strategic limitation on agency capability: specifically, AEC information technology systems do not enable the agency to provide an agile response to changes in the legislative, regulatory, demographic or technology environments. The maintenance of these systems and efforts to keep them operating within the modern environment are becoming increasingly costly and present an increasing risk to the integrity and security of the electoral process.

Additionally, these and other related information technology systems are not able to be easily integrated with contemporary mobile platforms, creating an additional ongoing risk that the AEC will not be able to meet modern community expectations.

Critically, the AEC's outmoded election systems do not enable national visibility of election operations. There is no existing information technology system that enables AEC senior management to have visibility of (or even reliable communication with) polling places and staff working in out-posted centres. This means there is no ability to source real-time data during the election to monitor, for example, the flow of voters, ballot paper supply, progress of the count and the progress of critical issues that arise in polling places.

Visitors from other international EMBs have frequently commented on this peculiarity of the Australian electoral system and the substantial risks that accrue to AEC management from conducting an election while metaphorically wearing an organisational blindfold. The net result is that AEC management (quite rightly) are accountable for election outcomes, while only having – in a practical sense – limited means of control at the delivery level.

In a changing external environment, continuing investment in outdated systems that are now past their useful life is inefficient, and investment in systems built for the current and future environments

must now be considered. If left in their current state, these ageing systems pose a serious risk to the ongoing sustainability and integrity of the electoral system.

People

The current temporary election workforce model presents significant risk for the AEC. In the space of five weeks, the organisation grows from a workforce of less than 1,000 to one of 75,000, while a system heavily reliant on manual processes increases the pressure on this new workforce and the likelihood of human error.

Changes to electoral processes and legislation, and significantly enhanced accountability requirements, among other changes, have made the role of the AEC's temporary workforce even more demanding (and far more scrutinised) than ever before. Permanent and temporary staff are dealing with a significantly increased workload and longer hours which results in significant risks to workplace health and safety, including the AEC's ability to comply with relevant workplace legislation. Furthermore, there is a generalised feeling among temporary staff that levels of remuneration no longer match the task.

Perversely, attempts to mitigate the risks of additional complexity through the introduction of additional controls have, in turn, introduced their own governance complexity – the very definition of a 'wicked problem'; that is, one which is impossible to solve due to many interrelated problems

As the size and scale of elections increases, and the level of automation and digitisation remains unchanged, the number of 'decisive moments' where human intervention can lead to catastrophic electoral outcomes increases exponentially.

The current model for recruitment and training of the temporary election workforce is at the end of its useful life. Unless changes are made to the recruitment and training model, there is an increasing risk of significant adverse consequences for future federal elections.

Other jurisdictions are reconsidering their models for employing staff at electoral events. For example, after the 2012 Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly election, Elections ACT identified a need to employ a number of additional temporary staff earlier than at previous elections in preparation for the 2016 ACT Legislative Assembly election.

Additional funding was provided to Elections ACT under the *Public Sector Management Act 1994* to employ temporary staff to support the initiative. The change in staffing arrangements enabled Elections ACT to spread its critical workload, provide back-up for key permanent staff, and allow sufficient time for key temporary staff to gain sufficient knowledge and confidence to manage their projects independently and with minimal supervision.

Meeting stakeholder and community expectations

Internal AEC research combined with external research by the Electoral Integrity Project¹ to assess the voter experience at the 2016 federal election and determine current community expectations

¹ The Australian Voter Experience: Trust and confidence in the 2016 federal elections November 2016

around participating in elections found that, while many Australians are cynical about politics in general, confidence in elections and democracy remains high and relatively stable.

Overall, there is broad trust and confidence in the work of the AEC and the way elections are managed, with voters on the whole having a positive view of the AEC and agreeing the AEC conducts the federal election fairly. However, the research shows this confidence is adversely impacted when there is a delay in announcing the election result, and by the amount of time electors have to wait to cast their vote on election day.

When an election result is close, there is a greater spotlight on the timeliness of counting votes as we saw at the 2016 federal election. The process of counting votes is highly manual and complicated by a legislative requirement to send all declaration votes back to their 'home division' before they can be counted. Bearing this in mind, it is important to note that the AEC provides a diverse range of voting services to keep up with community expectations of when and where electors can vote. This means that votes may have to travel thousands of kilometers back to their home division before they can be counted, delaying results even further.

Queue times

The AEC received criticism about the length of time electors had to wait to cast their vote at the 2016 federal election. The AEC's research referred to above, in respect of voter satisfaction with queue times, found:

- 95 per cent of pre-poll voters were satisfied with the time they had to wait, compared to 73 per cent of those voting on election day
- Satisfaction with the overall voting experience and waiting time to vote has dropped since 2010
- The 'length of time you had to wait' was the only aspect of voting experience for which satisfaction declined
- When asked how long they waited to vote at the 2016 federal election:
 - 73 per cent reported having to wait no more than 15 minutes
 - 27 per cent reported waiting more than 15 minutes (17 per cent for 15 to 30 minutes, 6 per cent reported waiting 30 to 45 minutes and 4 per cent waited more than 45 minutes).
- When asked how long they would be prepared to wait:
 - 49 per cent would be prepared to wait up to 30 minutes
 - 17 per cent were prepared to wait 'as long as it takes'
 - 14 per cent would wait up to five minutes
 - only 6 per cent would not wait at all.

These results indicate that 20 per cent of Australian voters are likely to become dissatisfied and disappointed with the machinery of elections if they are required to wait any longer than five minutes to cast a vote. Given the increasing scale of federal elections, with many more voters at each electoral event, it is unlikely the AEC will be able to continue meeting these community expectations without investing in automation to assist polling place throughput and overall voter experience.

Election results

Many voters were frustrated with the time it took to release election results in 2016, with 62 per cent believing it was completely or somewhat unacceptable. However, significantly fewer felt this way when provided with reasonable explanations:

- 71 per cent felt it unacceptable if the election results were not known for weeks when no reasons were provided
- 62 per cent still thought it unacceptable after being told it takes time to count the ballot papers
- 56 per cent continued to find the delay unacceptable even after being told it takes more time because many people voted by post and the postal ballots still had to be returned to their 'home division'.

Inconsistent election experience (the 'two speed' electoral system)

Election experience is vastly different between state and federal elections, and this gap is widening with each federal election. State electoral commissions are making significant investments in technology and services that will ensure their electoral systems keep pace with community expectations, while in contrast there has been minimal investment in the federal election system.

Most voters are not aware that different EMBs run state and local government elections. To the average voter, there is only one electoral commission responsible for all Australian elections – the AEC. This creates a perception that the AEC is providing an inconsistent voter experience each time they turn up to vote, and begs the question – why can't the AEC provide the same level of service at each electoral event?

Voters are essentially experiencing what can be described as a 'two speed' electoral system. For example, when a voter visits a polling place for a state election, they are more likely to be marked off the electoral roll using an electronic certified list (ECL), with some states having a significantly larger pool of ECLs proportionate to the number of voters in that state/territory. In New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA), some voters have the option to cast their vote electronically. In Queensland, voters receive an individual voter card, including a personalised list of polling places. Further, in many Queensland polling places, those voter cards are scanned and the correct ballot paper is then automatically printed at the point of issue. This greatly increases the speed of voter mark-off which can reduce queue times, eliminate the risk of the wrong ballot paper being issued and also reduce instances of inadvertent multiple voting.

In comparison, at the federal level the voter experience is at a completely different 'speed'. Voters at the federal election will locate their closest polling place by searching on the AEC website or reading a local newspaper. When they arrive at the polling place, their name will be marked off a printed copy of the electoral roll (certified list), they will receive pre-printed ballot papers and a pencil – in line with legislative requirements for the AEC to provide a pencil.

Temporary election workers are also experiencing the 'two speed' election system. Many of the 75,000 temporary staff the AEC employs also work at state, territory and local government elections, often in the same polling place location as at the federal election.

A temporary worker at a Queensland state election is fully trained online. The Electoral Commission of Queensland was able to provide all training online via a learning management system accessible to staff from any computer via the internet. An Officer-in-Charge (OIC) at an ACT Legislative

Assembly election is provided with a laptop to use in the polling place and has access to an online system to report queue times and ballot paper stock in real time, meaning Elections ACT has visibility of any issues as they are occurring. Additionally, training videos were pre-loaded onto OICs' laptops in the ACT enabling staff on election day to review the requirements for conducting polling, the count, and packaging materials at the end of the night.

In contrast, the role of a temporary worker at a federal election is more complex, based on manual processes and is more heavily scrutinised. Changes to federal electoral processes, and significantly enhanced accountability requirements, see temporary workers in supervisory roles undertaking more complex training and often working longer hours. During polling the AEC uses polling place liaison officers (PPLOs) to monitor groups of polling places. PPLOs visit polling places twice on election day to check ballot paper stock levels and resolve any issues. This physical 'eyes and ears on the ground' approach cannot provide the type of real-time information that would enable the AEC to either preempt or quickly identify any issues on election day.

The gap exposed by this 'two speed' electoral system is widening with each electoral event, and must be addressed for both voters and election workers. There is scope to create a consistent approach to training temporary workers, as well as provide access to similar systems – but as outlined this will require significant investment in systems and people.

What we've already done

The AEC has streamlined processes and leveraged technology where it can to deliver electoral services to the community. The agency has recently implemented largescale change to internal processes and procedures, and successfully implemented the most significant electoral reforms in the past 30 years. All this was achieved on the back of the latent complexity in that electoral cycle – implementing major internal reform program arising from the *Inquiry into the 2013 Western Australian Senate election* (the Keely Report) and reports by the Australian National Audit Office.

Other achievements include:

- 95 per cent of eligible Australians are enrolled to vote (the best rate in living memory)
- a new election readiness framework implemented
- a new mandatory online training program in place for all permanent APS staff
- online enrolment and updates available via the AEC website
- online postal vote applications
- an expanded deployment of ECLs
- mandatory ballot paper handling training for all staff
- scanning of postal vote applications and Senate ballot papers.

The AEC also introduced the most comprehensive training program for its ongoing staff in the agency's history.

In 2016, around 180 mainly permanent staff participated in the Election Readiness Program: a two

week residential program using scenario-based learning to take staff through some of the live aspects of conducting federal elections.

Organisational review

During 2016-17 the AEC's Executive Leadership Team undertook a review of the agency's organisational design. The review is finalising a new organisational design to ensure the agency has all the required capability to operate efficiently now and into the future.

In the 2017-18 federal Budget, the AEC received one-off funding under the Agency Sustainability stream of the Modernisation Fund to restructure, allowing the agency to provide a better experience for the voter and for AEC staff (permanent and temporary). The Agency Sustainability stream was targeted at entities experiencing significant financial sustainability and operational viability difficulties. This stream provided one-off funding for initiatives that would improve entities' productivity and efficiency, and ongoing sustainability.

However, a new organisational design is only part of the solution. Further innovation is required but, as already highlighted in this paper, it is not possible without legislative reform and significant investment in the AEC's basic election operating systems and its people.

What the AEC needs

Given legislative constraints and the election event cycle, implementing system and process reform in the AEC will be complex and challenging. However, it is clear that the AEC will need significant investment over the next few years in order to take the critical steps required to sustain the electoral system.

The AEC has identified the following steps that are necessary to ensure the future of the federal electoral system. These critical steps aim to meet three broad objectives:

- ensuring the integrity and long-term sustainability of the federal electoral process
- meeting community expectations of the elector experience
- timely provision of election outcomes.

1. Legislative reform

Innovation is required to enable the AEC to continue to deliver best practice electoral services that can adapt to changes in technology and voter behavior. It is essential that innovation is not prevented because of the prescriptive nature of electoral legislation. According to a recent statement by the NSW Electoral Commissioner at the outcome of the NSW state election, the environment in which election delivery operates "cannot be a straitjacket preventing innovation due to prescriptive legislation. Rather, good and robust legislation is more likely to occur when it is clearly objects and principles based."

The Electoral Act is a complex, intricate and cumbersome document. For example, the relatively straightforward process of determining the order of candidates on the ballot paper takes up two and a quarter pages – 720 words – of the Electoral Act (section 213).

In the federal context, the restrictions contained in the Electoral Act mean the AEC cannot easily utilise technology or make changes to procedures which might help make elections more efficient and strengthen integrity. For example, a trial of electronically assisted counting of ballot papers in polling places is not currently possible under existing legislation. The AEC has previously undertaken an assessment of available technology and found that there is no product available in the market that can meet the current business and legislative requirements. To use another example, under paragraph 233(1)(b) of the Electoral Act, voters are required to fold their ballot papers to conceal their vote before placing them in the ballot box. If the scanning and tabulation of ballot papers were to be trialed at polling places, legislative change would be needed as well as further work to determine how the technology would maintain the secrecy of the vote and conduct of the scrutiny. A full analysis of costs is also required.

The Electoral Act specifically authorises the 'computerised scrutiny' of Senate ballot papers, however there is no equivalent provisions that authorise the use of an electronic count method to undertake a scrutiny of House of Representatives ballot papers. A pilot of the use of scanning technology for House of Representatives ballot papers would be dependent on amendments to the Electoral Act. Given the AEC's experience of implementing a scanning solution for Senate ballot papers, a pilot of scanning technology for House of Representatives ballot papers would be equally as complex and challenging.

The AEC has been proactive in identifying some limited solutions which are possible within the current legislative limitations. The AEC has provided a list of proposed technical amendments to the Electoral Act that would further improve efficiency, integrity and confidence in the electoral system. These amendments are contained in AEC's JSCEM submission 66.8². The most critical are:

- recommendation 16: forwarding of declaration votes (section 228)
- recommendation 3: removal of elector from the roll where added incorrectly (section 105)
- recommendation 14: removal of requirement to produce postal vote applications at preliminary scrutiny (schedule 3)
- recommendation 17: opening ballot boxes and packaging and parcelling (subsections 273 and 274).

These amendments would correct unforeseen difficulties in processes, improve procedures, reduce red tape and enhance the integrity of the electoral process.

2. Investment in systems, people and processes

Investment in the AEC's Information Technology systems

Urgent investment is needed to allow the AEC to upgrade and/or replace information technology systems and allow for cross-system integration.

² http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/2016Election/Submissions

This includes systems to provide operational visibility of election time activities. The use of an electronic polling management system to support voter services and the integrity of the electoral process would enable:

- external monitoring of queue times
- electronic OIC returns
- return of results electronically
- real time monitoring of votes issued and ballot paper stocks
- support efficient and accurate vote issuing
- reduce queuing through better monitoring of staff levels
- increased integrity.

At the recent ACT and Northern Territory elections, both electoral commissions used information technology systems which allowed them to monitor activity and ballot paper stock at every polling place in real time. As noted earlier, at the 2016 ACT election, a laptop computer was provided to every polling place OIC to manage all administrative aspects of their role. This included staffing, accident and incident reporting, communications with Elections Headquarters, electronic ballot paper reconciliation and direct transmission of election results to the online tally room.

Having the financial capacity to implement such a system would reduce risk and contribute significantly to the smooth running of federal elections.

Expansion of the use of ECLs for the next electoral event or beyond

The AEC believes ECLs offer significant benefits in supporting the conduct of a federal election but the process and technology need to be scalable to a broader deployment. However, further work is required to identify a solution that will enable a greater rollout of ECLs and the improvements that can be achieved to accuracy and reconciliation of ballot papers issued. Research analysed after the 2016 federal election found strong support for an electronic electoral roll (including ECLs) and electronic voting to boost confidence in electoral integrity.

The use of ECLs has been considered by a working group of the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ). All jurisdictions agree that using ECL devices at all issuing points would be highly beneficial, however all agree that the high cost of devices and logistical complexities of deployment are significant blockers to achieving this goal. Despite this, the AEC seeks to increase the usage of ECLs at the next federal election but will need significant financial support to do so.

Implementation of the Electoral and Other Legislation Bill 2017 and online functionality

On 30 March 2017 the government introduced the Electoral and Other Legislation Bill 2017 (the Bill) into the House of Representatives. The Bill seeks to implement the government's response to the JSCEM report entitled, 'The 2016 Federal Election: Interim Report on the authorisation of voter communication'. Many of the measures contained in the Bill involve the AEC having new functions which will require changes to the AEC's current administrative practices and systems.

In relation to system modernisation, the AEC is also considering developing new online functionality. The first stage of this would be the development of a portal to facilitate political party registrations.

The next stage would involve an online facility to complete all nomination transactions – including payment. It would streamline the nomination process, reduce administration and the risk of administration errors and reduce the risk of printing errors on the ballot paper.

A possible pilot of electronic voting

While some jurisdictions have adopted electronic voting, the model and breadth of engagement has been varied. Electronic voting trials have been conducted in NSW and WA (remote online voting) and ACT and Victoria (electronic voting machines in certain polling places) to support election service delivery.

The Parliament of Victoria's Electoral Matters Committee (EMC) tabled a report on its inquiry into electronic voting in May 2017. This is the most recent parliamentary inquiry to occur in a state jurisdiction on electronic voting.

Recommendation 2 of the EMC report recommends the Victorian Electoral Commission works closely with the AEC, state and territory electoral commissions to develop agreed principles of integrity and security for any electronic voting system, as part of a coordinated effort to develop a national electronic voting capability in Australia.

As stated previously, the AEC stands ready, if asked, to implement some form of trial of electronic voting. However, in what may be seen as a counter intuitive move, the AEC does NOT recommend a large scale trial of electronic voting for the next election. The costs, risks and time available do not portend a successful outcome of what would be a highly complex project.

The AEC remains active in assessing how it would support the approach should Parliament favour electronic voting in future. The AEC will participate in a special ECANZ workshop on electronic voting at the end of May 2017. The workshop will focus on the current state of electronic voting across jurisdictions and discuss potential ways for collaboration in terms of shared platforms, expertise sharing and cybersecurity. The AEC engages with the Australian Signals Directorate and the special advisor to the Prime Minister on cybersecurity to ensure that AEC election management systems, as well as any potential electronic voting trial, have the most robust cybersecurity measures possible.

Investment in people - engagement of the temporary election workforce

At previous JSCEM and Senate Estimates hearings the AEC has expounded, at length, on the increasing difficulty and extreme risk involved in using a large, lightly trained temporary workforce as the main staffing component in the delivery of a highly complex federal election. One possible way of boosting the overall skill levels of the temporary workforce is for the AEC to engage and maintain an 'election ready workforce'. This would involve recruiting and training approximately 18,750 temporary staff at the supervisory level (an estimated 20 – 30 per cent of the temporary workforce) so they can 'hit the ground running' during the election period. Interactions with this 'election ready workforce' need not be onerous. The broad intent would be to ensure that key temporary staff who work in supervisory roles (e.g. OICs) have been trained, certified as competent, and updated with any legislative or procedural changes on a relatively regular basis. This might only involve one or two days a year between elections.

A joint initiative to establish a professional workforce for state and federal electoral events could be a positive solution, and one which would be actively pursued by the AEC should adequate funding be made available.

3. Stakeholder and community engagement

Modernising the AEC through the implementation of new information technology systems and a new model for engaging the temporary election workforce will require careful planning. To facilitate this modernisation process, the AEC will need to engage with key stakeholders in the planning, development and roll out of any new capabilities. Particular constraints around modernisation for the AEC include the need for legislative change and the ability to implement any new capabilities in line with the electoral cycle. These constraints mean that stakeholder and community engagement is critical to manage expectations and maintain trust in the AEC's ability to deliver electoral outcomes characterised by efficiency and integrity.

Critical next steps

The order of changes to the AEC's processes and systems is driven from any amendments made to the legislation and expectations of stakeholders and the broader community which the AEC seeks to satisfy.

The AEC is committed to collaborating with other EMBs to identify and utilise common processes and systems, thus ensuring these are future proofed.

The changes required to modernise the AEC will not happen overnight. The AEC will need time to adequately develop, test and implement new electoral management systems ahead of an event taking place. This includes time to ensure there are policies and operating procedures in place to support the new systems, and that staff are adequately trained.

The AEC will need to plan strategically to develop, sustain and enhance an electoral system that is able to meet electors' expectations in the future while ensuring flexibility in delivery platforms and confidence in electoral outcomes. As an indication, it is estimated that the AEC will require at least six years to complete the development, testing and integration of a new information technology election management system into its operations. In order to achieve this objective, the AEC will require funding to develop robust business cases to form a sustained investment strategy for the next decade. The AEC will need to engage expert advisers to assist in this development, and to engage with stakeholders and government to ensure a successful outcome. The AEC does not currently have the capability, expertise or funding to commence this journey. It is critical that funding is made available now to allow the AEC to start this strategic planning in investment in systems, people and processes.

A strategic planning model on the lines above would allow business cases to be developed which would identify the quantum of the funding and investment required to ensure the future viability of the electoral system.