

visionaustralia.org



6 December 2017

c/o Mr Nathan Fewkes
Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600.

By email - em@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members;

Re: Australian Electoral Commission Annual Report Inquiry

Vision Australia thanks the Committee for the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the AEC Annual Report 2016-17. We regret that we cannot attend the public hearing, but would like to take this opportunity to highlight a number of issues around accessible voting that are of significance to people who are blind or have low vision.

Our submission is part of our continued campaign for accessible, secret, independent and verifiable voting processes for people who are blind or have low vision across all Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions.

We seek that the Government makes the necessary legislative amendments and provide sufficient resources to electoral commissions to institute a form of electronic voting that is accessible, secret, and independent for people who are blind or have low vision. Additionally, accessible voting options should be available at the same time as all other voters, that is, in pre-polling periods and on election day itself. The iVote system, first implemented in New South Wales and most recently in Western Australia, is the benchmark for accessible voting.

We wish to draw attention to this matter in relation to the third and fourth focus areas of the Inquiry:

- Standards for Australian internet voting, electoral cyber security and physical security and voting points.
- Addressing overly prescriptive parts of the Electoral Act and resolving other technical issues.

Accessible Voting

We note from the outset that we have made a number of submissions and appeared before the Committee in relation to accessible voting practices for people who are blind or have low vision. We again raise issues concerning accessible, secret,

independent and verifiable voting processes, to ensure that they are uppermost in the minds of the Committee as it continues to review the AEC's modernisation program.

In giving our evidence, we expressed frustration at the processes adopted by the AEC concerning voting options offered to people in the blindness and low vision community:

“Regrettably, the federal electoral system has not kept up with advances in accessibility for the blindness and low-vision community and is now one of the worst in the country.”

We were certainly given the impression that the Committee was very interested in our submission. Mr Giles noted:

“with what you have expressed in terms of making sure that we look to the first principle of making sure that all Australians, in this case blind or low-vision Australians, have an opportunity not just to vote but to vote on their own terms with an assurance that it is a secret ballot, a ballot that will be counted, and a vote that will actually be recognised and not generate a failure-to-vote letter. That is something that we will pay very serious regard to as well.”

As acknowledged by both the Committee and the AEC, many state and territory electoral commissions are making significant investments in technology and services that will ensure their electoral systems keep pace with community expectations. To this end, we would like to emphasise that investment in electronic assisted voting options in polling places only does not meet the needs of our community and evidence shows that they will be rejected by them.

Electronically assisted voting options of this type have been introduced in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland – and resulted in the option not being widely available, differences in how it is set up and reliance on voters having to familiarise themselves with a new technology option. The iVote system is, in our view, superior because it utilises mainstream technology that is already widely used and familiar to the community.

iVote is similar to online and telephone banking, which people trust and use regularly. The web form is designed to meet the Australian Government's web accessibility standards (which are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 developed by the World Wide Web Consortium), which means that all members of the community including people who are blind or have low vision who use this technology, can vote using screen-reading software or screen enlargement software.

In New South Wales, voter confidence in iVote continues to grow; there is increasing uptake of the online and automated telephone voting services – in 2011, 47,000 people used these services and in 2015 it was 284,000.

Blind or low vision voters using iVote increased almost eight-fold by 2015 (2011 = 668, in 2015 = 5,296). We are also aware that the Western Australian Electoral

Commission was pleased with the uptake of iVote in their state election in March 2017 which overwhelmingly exceeded their target, and was developed and delivered within a short timeframe. It is our understanding that both NSW and WA intend to offer iVote in future elections.

Vision Australia acknowledges that there are security concerns that experts need to address. However, any concerns in relation to security do not outweigh the rights of people who are blind or have low vision to equal participation in the electoral process. The New South Wales Electoral Commission has said it takes security of voting very seriously and have a multi-layer security detection framework to ensure election integrity. This includes:

- Verification service allowing voters to verify their vote was captured by iVote as cast.
- Audit process to ensure that all votes captured are decrypted correctly and match the votes held in the separately managed verification system.
- Verification that the results, for a given candidate, taken through the iVote method align proportionally with results for votes cast through other paper based voting channels.
- Continual monitoring during the election for anomalous network and server activity.
- Testing and hardening of computers used by the system prior to commencing voting.
- Post-election audit of logs.

The Australian Information Industry Association CEO Rob Fitzpatrick wrote to the Prime Minister last year, recommending that Australia moves toward electronic voting. I will now quote a paragraph from that letter:

“from an industry perspective, challenges such as identity and cyber security risks can effectively be managed. AIIA would be happy to engage directly with your teams to ensure that a safe, reliable and timely e-voting system can be delivered.”

Amending legislation

The third interim report refers to the complexity of the prescriptions in the Electoral Act that, in their current form, impede modernisation of the electoral system.

In the final report, we request that the Committee considers:

- The legislative changes required to enable accessible electronic voting; and
- Whether the current legislative provisions in the Act would allow electronic voting from the location of choice of the voter using applicable phone and internet options?

In addition, our conviction is that accessible voting options need to also be inclusive, that is, made available to the entire community of voters. Legislative amendments must reflect these community expectations.

After more than 100 years of voting, the blindness and low vision community is still waiting for a secret, independent and verifiable means of voting. We hope you will consider the above matters which go to the heart of our democratic rights.

We find it troubling that in spite of our many submissions, both in writing and at hearings before the Committee (and its predecessors), and engagement with various Commission led stakeholder meetings, the federal election system will remain the most antiquated in the country.

I would be pleased to speak further to any of these matters, or provide further information in support of our position.

We look forward to your response and final report, and subsequent deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Karen Knight
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Vision Australia