Seniors United Party of Australia,

██████████████

26th October 2020

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Committee Secretary,
Joint Select Committee on Electoral Matters,
Department of the House of Representatives,
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Dear ████████,

On behalf of the Seniors United Party of Australia I wish to thank the Joint Select Committee for inviting the party to make a submission to the inquiry into elections in emergency situations

Yours sincerely,

Robert Patrech

FUTURE CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS OPERATING DURING TIMES OF EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

A SUBMISSION BY

THE

SENIORS UNITED PARTY OF AUSTRALIA

October   2020

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INTRODUCTION

The Seniors United Party of Australia represents and supports senior Australians. It is very appropriate that the Joint Select Committee seeks information, ideas and advice from those that attempt to represent this demographic and their needs *during times of emergency situations when elections are conducted.*

Two prominent areas of concern for Seniors, particularly for those that are of poor physical health and suffering some physical disability include firstly, their health and safety, and secondly, their right to vote. Where Seniors and the elderly are suffering mental health issues such as dementia and alzhiemers responses from medical experts should be sought by the Joint Select Committee.

While considering the needs of Seniors and the elderly during emergency periods such as during a pandemic thought needs to be given to the carers of these people and their need to be present at polling stations with their patient or when voting by other means.

The Seniors United Party also recognises that there are younger Australians who are also affected by these areas of concern such as physical disabilities and that solutions for issues for seniors and the elderly voting can also be solutions for them.

Of the *Terms of Reference* we will refer to the following:-
    . restrictions arising from a health pandemic
    . access to polling places during times of natural disaster
    . the introduction of safety mechanisms; and
    . alternative voting methods including early, remote and postal voting.

Note:- i. For this submission "polling stations" and "polling places" have the same meaning.

        ii. For this submission the terms "senior", "elderly", and "frail" have the same meaning.

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Restrictions arising from a health pandemic

Australian government authorities have prescribed necessary restrictions on the public during the Covid pandemic. Three of these include social distancing, the wearing of face masks and the cleaning of surfaces. All three need to be strictly maintained during polling at polling booths for all voters, particularly the seniors and the eldery, **and additional polling station staff need to be employed to ensure these restrictions are maintained.**

Seniors and the elderly should be advised well before polling stations are open that they should bring their own masks, surface wipes and pens for marking their voting paper.

Where carers need to be present additional social distancing is needed because of possible limited movement of the senior and the possible lack of appreciation by some seniors for the need to social distance one self.

As the carer, or polling station staff will quite possibly be needed in the polling booth with the senior to assist them to vote **the actual polling booth for Seniors and the disabled will need to be large enough for two people, will often need two chairs and a table to allow for sitting, and will need to be away from the other polling booths so that the information given verbally by the carer to the senior does not influence other voters in the normal voting booths. There will need to be space near the table to allow for wheel chairs.**

To assist in social distancing in the polling station **two or more polling booths for seniors and the disabled should be set up at polling stations to reduce waiting time and the chance of social distancing rules being broken around waiting seniors and the disabled.**

At polling stations where it is known that there is a large parentage of voters that are seniors or disabled, **a long prepolling period for the elections will ease pressure on social distancing. In addition prepolling should be carried out seven days a week with possibly Sunday polling restricted to voting by the seniors and disabled.**

It may be necessary for voting times to be prebooked to ensure there is less pressure for crowding at the polling stations.

Additional assistance to help seniors maintain social distancing could be the placing of chairs at the required social distance so they can rest while waiting. This could reduce movement within the polling station, and outside.

At every polling station several on the spot cleaning staff will need to be in attendance to clean polling booths and chairs.

Preferred methods of voting to ensure social distancing would be postal voting and telephone voting as described in the "Elections ACT Fact Sheet – Enrolment and voting for people with disability" .

The Australian Electoral Commission could have early televised advertising encouraging seniors and the disabled to register to vote using these two methods.

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Access to polling places during times of natural disaster

The access to many prepolling and polling places or stations in the past could not possibly conform to social distancing laws during a pandemic, often because the entry was also the exit. This is a greater problem for seniors and the elderly, particularly if they need close assistance from carers, such as those who are wheel chair bound, or those who require walkers.

To alleviate this problem prepolling and polling places preferably need to be selected which have separate entries and exits with no steps or trip hazards. Where this is not possible the entry needs to be sufficiently wide to allow two wheel chairs to pass while maintaining social distance requirements.

In close proximity to those entrances and exits should be several disabled parking spots and adequate drop off and pick up zones with no trip hazards . These disabled parking spots and drop off and pick up zones should have an adequately protected parking assistant.

There should be a wide, unobstructed path between the parking spots and the entry and exit doors, with no presence of political supporters handing out how-to-vote forms.

Where seniors, the elderly, and disabled need to use the same entry and exit there should be no congregation of people, hence allowing voters to move in and out quickly without loitering. This means there should be no people or political posters near the entrance. This would reduce the chance of physical contact and make the elections fair to all parties.

In the absence of political advertising material outside polling places each Lower House candidate and each Senate party and independent candidate could have limited information on a web site organised by the Australian Electoral Commission, similar to what was done for the recent 2020 Australian Capital Territory elections.

Each local candidate could also have this printed statement on the walls of each individual polling booth, with the positioning of the printed material selected by names out of a hat, or some similar method.

The elderly and disabled often are unable to stand for more than a short period of time.

To assist those voters that can not stand for any length of time chairs or benches should be supplied, being positioned both inside and outside the polling places following social distancing regulations. The chairs and benches should have appropriate signage, and should be continually sanitised and cleaned by employed staff.

Carers, or assistant nurses, or family members are often required to ensure the safe movement of the elderly and disabled.

Where an elderly or disabled voter requires the assistance of another person to enter a polling booth and vote, a probable limit of two assisting people should be allowed at the entrance and exit of the polling place and one main carer allowed in the polling booth, unless permitted by the polling station authority. This would help prevent a congregation of people breaking the social distancing rules at these locations.

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The introduction of safety mechanisms

During a pandemic places including nursing homes and retirement villages can be affected by lock downs, and these lock downs can happen at any time, including election day. In addition to this people may have fallen ill or had an accident on or near the day of the election. These situations could prevent thousands of people from voting and quite possibly change the result of the election, not to mention the problem that these people would be thwarted in carrying out their right to vote.

A solution to these situations is the introduction of phone voting for voters caught up in such situations where there has not been time to register for postal voting. The (Elections ACT FACT SHEET – Enrolment and voting for people with disability) page 3, advises that this form of voting was available for the "blind or visually impaired who cannot or would prefer not to go to an early voting centre. Electors with a physical disability which makes it difficult to attend a polling place or vote by postal vote, may also be eligible to apply to vote over the telephone."

There would possibly be issues in registering voters who at the last minute are caught up in a lock down as they would not have been forewarned of the situation.

To deal with voters caught in a last minute lock down who have not registered for phone voting a new branch of the AEC would possibly be needed to man a phone call centre which could backed up by an automated call centre.

Before taking votes the call centre should need to record the (Covid virus) pandemic health check number to cross check it with health department records to confirm the need for a telephone vote. One health check number would entitle those within the lock down location to telephone vote.

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Alternative voting methods including early, remote and postal voting.

The alternate voting method of **telephone voting** has been discussed under the previous topic "The introduction of safety mechanisms". The **postal voting** method was also mentioned under the same heading.

The body known as Elections ACT which ran the recent Australian Capital Territory elections did not provide **mobile polling services** for institutions such as nursing homes and hospitals during those Covid 19 affected elections. Instead, Elections ACT liaised with eligible institutions to provide postal vote services for the residents of those facilities.

This postal service probably accounted for the majority of patients and residents, however quite possibly missed late admissions to the hospitals, nursing homes, or other institutions, which reinforces the need for the use of telephone voting. Even these two methods, postal and telephone voting, may not be sufficient in these institutions and **electronic voting** may also be needed in these situations.

The much increased need to use larger postal and telephone, and possibly electronic voting systems will require significant increased funding to both set up greater infrastructure, and add additional resources, including time and capital.

THIS ENDS THE SUBMISSION