

July 30th, 2015

To the Members of the **Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**,

Dear Sirs/Madams,

I have some major concerns about the extension of pre-polling for State and Federal elections and the huge increase in people using this facility. In the 2010 Federal Election in Ballarat there were 3426 Absentee votes, 3448 Pre-Poll and 5957 Postal votes out of a total of 89439 votes in the Ballarat electorate. In the State Election in 2010 in Ballarat West there were 2300 Absentee votes, 9741 Pre-poll and 2806 Postal votes out of a total of 41298 votes. This is a huge percentage increase! In the 2013 election, there were 21881 pre-poll votes and approximately 2500 postal votes. These increases are reflected in most electorates throughout Victoria and the rest of Australia. Are there going to be 50,000 pre-poll votes in 2015?

In the Ballarat area, pre-polling for the Federal Election opened on 20th August at St Andrew's Kirk and was open through to Election Day. On 26th August, another venue opened in Wendouree, 6 kms away from the first venue, which was open until Polling Day.

One concern I have is for the political parties having to staff these pre-polling booths for the amount of time. It is a huge strain for the larger parties which have a relatively large group of followers to be able to fill these rosters, but it is almost impossible for smaller parties to manage.

I realise that it is not convenient for some people to vote on Election Day, but there is access to postal voting prior to the event. In the past, the voter had to give a reason for voting before the day, even sign a statutory declaration, stating a reason. But, that is no longer appears to be the case. People just walk up and vote. The changes in figures seem to suggest to me that our voting system is changing or has been changed!

There appears to no reduction in the number of polling booths, either in the country areas or in the city areas. So reductions in staff, and therefore, reduced cost, does not appear to be the reason for the change.

What are the reasons behind these changes? Is it to reduce the number of absentee votes and therefore speed up counting on Election night and the days after? Is it an attempt to reduce the number of postal votes which take longer to process and finally count? Surely a couple of days pre-poll voting plus postal voting should be sufficient for people to organise themselves! Is there a danger that with a prolonged period of time for voting that it is easier for people to cast multiple votes?

If the system is changing or being changed, then people should informed about the changes and why the changes are is happening. The changes should not just happen!

Another major concern that I have was the manner in which these pre-polling votes were counted in Ballarat. The location at St Andrew's Church had not been an appropriate venue for pre-polling, mainly due to the parking challenges. But, it certainly was not appropriate venue for counting 1829 votes lodged at the normal Ballarat polling booth plus 23305 pre-polling votes from Ballarat, Wendouree and Melton. The venue was too small and the furniture was very unsuitable. There were 70 people squashed into two small areas. There were only a few of the cardboard counting tables provided by AEC, the rest of the tables were very low. As a scrutineer, I saw people kneeling on the floor counting Senate votes. I saw thousands of

votes sitting on the floor! I saw the Returning Officer forced to sit at a table on the stage to do his calculations. The staff tried very hard, but at 12.30am the House of Representatives count for the pre-poll votes for the Ballarat centre was still not complete. When I left at 12.30am, the preferences of Green's candidate, Stephanie Hodgins-May were being distributed by very junior staff who had received five minutes of training in this technique. I believe that this is a task usually undertaken by highly trained staff with years of experience, and with 10 candidates it is a task made even more difficult. But, many of these staff had departed several hours before the count was finished.

I believe the Returning Officer, Adrian Claridge did his best in the organisation and control of the counting, but the number of votes to be counted was overwhelming!

I have a major concern with the training of Electoral Office staff in both State and Federal elections. The skills of staff employed for the day vary enormously. There are some staff who have a great deal of experience and complete the tasks very competently, but there are others who have very little idea of the tasks involved and the skills which they need.

In the recent Victorian State Election, the participation of the Union movement, or perhaps people dressed up as Union members, was frightening. In the past, there has been strong union participation, but usually in the form of distributing election material before Polling Day and manning polling booths on Election Day as Labor Party workers. For months before the 2014 Victorian election, ambulances were covered with graffiti condemning the Liberal government. During pre-polling, these vehicles were often parked outside polling booths.

A greater concern, however, were the "Ambos" and the "Fireries" dressed in "fake" uniforms which were meant to give the impression that these people were paramedics and firefighters. They were not handing out registered How-to-Vote cards, they were simply distributing anti-Liberal material. Their physical size and the numbers present were very intimidating to both Liberal Party volunteers and voters. I visited one Polling Booth in the Buninyong electorate on Polling Day and there were six large men in black t-Shirts, red braces and bright yellow pants. I believe that these numbers were repeated in many other electorates. I think that this is a dangerous trend and places our electoral system at risk.

I believe in the Australian voting system. I think it is a wonderful system, transparent and fair. But, I think that the expedient increase in pre-polling is placing strains on the system and threatens the system's transparency and fairness in the future; participation of narrow interest non-political organisations needs to be controlled.

I also believe that the Australian voters must have total trust in the system,

Yours sincerely,

Mrs.E.Joyce Currie