

SUBMISSION on Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Amendment Bill 2022 (" the Bill")

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Dear Sir/Madam

Section 11 of the Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984 provides for an official YES/NO pamphlet to be provided to electors by delivery to every household setting out arguments for and against a proposed law to amend the Commonwealth constitution.

The Bill (Clause 4) proposes to temporarily suspend that requirement until the next Federal election.

A YES/NO pamphlet would therefore be ditched in respect of the proposed referendum on the indigenous Voice to Parliament.

Why would the Government seek to deprive electors of the opportunity of reading in hard copy, or at all, any official or authoritative document setting out arguments for and against the proposal ?

The Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister has stated that the pamphlet is "not needed" as we are now in a "digital age", and partisan arguments can be presented via television, email and social media.

Not everyone of course has ready access to digital media.

Some commentators have also claimed that the publication of the official YES/NO pamphlet gives rise to "hyperbole and falsehoods."

What is clear however is that the various forms of partisan digital media are more likely to give rise to worse instances of hyperbole and falsehoods. The free for all on social media is hardly conducive to reasoned arguments.

It is submitted that the better way forward would be to retain section 11 and the requirement for an official YES/NO pamphlet but to put in place reforms which would make the current system work better.

The contents of the pamphlet may be made subject to minimum standards so that clear and reasoned arguments only are presented and that hyperbole and falsehoods may be minimised or eliminated.

Partisan arguments may of course also be published via digital media.

It is submitted that prior to the referendum on the indigenous Voice, electors should be fully and fairly informed about all the relevant issues. An official YES/NO pamphlet would have an important contribution to make in achieving that aim.

The Government's intention to use taxpayers money to run some kind of general 'civics education' campaign is no substitute for properly informing the electorate about the details of the indigenous Voice proposal.

Tim Tunbridge