



## Introduction

### Role and structure of the AEC

- 1.1 The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is an independent statutory body established under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*. Its purpose is to:
- maintain the electoral roll;
  - conduct elections and referendums; and
  - provide electoral information, education programmes and related services.
- 1.2 The AEC is organised on a geographic basis, with a national office in Canberra, a state office in each State capital and the Northern Territory, and a divisional office in or near each of the 150 electoral divisions.
- 1.3 The national office is responsible for policy development, business support, national training programmes, corporate support functions, and specialist areas including funding and disclosure, international services and information strategies. State offices' responsibilities include coordination and monitoring of service delivery, local training and specific election functions such as Senate elections. The functions of divisional offices include service delivery in enrolment, the conduct of elections and public awareness.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 7.

- 1.4 The Commission consists of the Chairperson (who must be a judge or retired judge of the Federal Court); the Electoral Commissioner; and a part-time Non-Judicial Member (usually the Australian Statistician).
- 1.5 In addition to the Commission there is a Deputy Electoral Commissioner and an Australian Electoral Officer (AEO)/State Manager for each State and the Northern Territory. The two ACT divisions are managed by the NSW State Manager although an ACT State Manager is appointed during election periods.
- 1.6 There is a permanent Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) in each division who is responsible for electoral administration – including maintenance of the electoral roll and preparations for the conduct of the next electoral event – in that division.

## Background to the inquiry

- 1.7 The committee's inquiry into certain aspects of administration of the AEC was referred by the Special Minister of State, the Hon. Gary Nairn MP, on 28 March 2007.
- 1.8 On 21 May 2007, the Minister asked the committee to include additional terms of reference for its inquiry to consider whether the National Tally Room should be retained beyond the 2007 federal election.
- 1.9 The terms of reference<sup>2</sup> for the inquiry directed that much of the committee's emphasis be placed on the impacts of staffing arrangements for AEC divisional offices, with a particular focus on the adequacy of co-located divisional offices.
- 1.10 In its 2003 report on the conduct of the 2001 federal election, the committee's predecessor made a number of observations about the establishment of co-located divisional offices. The then JSCEM reported that:

While co-location of offices might deliver administrative efficiencies, the Committee is not satisfied that the AEC has addressed longstanding concerns about:

- a potential loss of local electoral knowledge, with possible effects on the accuracy of the rolls;
- a reduced service to electors, MPs and candidates;
- a diminished capacity to conduct electoral education and other such functions; and

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2 For the complete Terms of Reference for the inquiry, see p. ix.

- a reduced number of permanent staff conducting elections.<sup>3</sup>

1.11 In its report the committee recommended that co-location of AEC divisional offices not proceed, and that the AEC receive funding to ensure a minimum of three full-time electoral staff in each Division. This recommendation was supported in principle in the Government's response, handed down in October 2003.

## Conduct of the inquiry

1.12 The inquiry was advertised nationally on Wednesday 11 April 2007. The committee received 19 submissions, which are listed at Appendix A, and one exhibit, listed at Appendix B.

1.13 Two public hearings were held in Canberra, and one in Sydney. The witnesses from these hearings are listed at Appendix C.

1.14 The committee also made a site visit to the co-located AEC divisional office in Chatswood, Sydney, on 2 June 2007 as part of its inquiry. The committee appreciated the opportunity to speak candidly with AEC employees at this office, and is grateful to the State Manager for facilitating the visit, and to those staff who took time to speak with the committee.

## Structure of the Report

1.15 The report is divided into four chapters including this introduction. Chapter two examines issues arising from the employment structure and staffing arrangements of AEC divisional offices. Chapter three addresses issues created by divisional offices with shared premises, while chapter four considers the future of the National Tally Room which is staged in Canberra on federal election nights.

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3 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *The 2001 Federal Election: Report of the Inquiry into the conduct of the 2001 Federal Election, and matters related thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

