Antony Green

21 June 2007

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

I am writing to you concerning the JSCEM's current inquiry into the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). My particular interest is the expanded reference handed to the Committee to consider the future of the National Tally Room.

My comments on this subject are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. However, as I have worked on every election in Australia since 1989, and been involved in the vast technological change that has overtaken the reporting of election results since the arrival of the Internet, I thought the Committee would benefit from my views.

I consider that the National Tally Room has outlived its usefulness. It has been an important institution in the past as the point where election results have been delivered to the media, and through the media to the public. However, technological change has made this role redundant.

I attended my first National Tally Room in 1990. At the time, results were only available in the Tally Room. Media organisations were provided with a serial feed of votes, and the back-up in the case of computer failure was to take results from the tally board. The AEC also provided terminals to a computer inquiry system. Both the feed and the inquiry terminals were only available to media outlets present in the Tally Room.

At the 2007 election, attendance at the Tally Room is not required for either the feed of votes or access to the enquiry system. Data files containing results will be placed on an internet file server where they can be downloaded by the media via the internet. The computer enquiry system has been replaced by an internet browser based system that is the same whether the enquirer is in the Tally Room, in a media office or at home.

The growth of the internet means that the media in the Tally Room are no longer the sole intermediary between the AEC and the public. For the first time in 2007, the data will be made available to outlets other than the mainstream media. As was demonstrated at both the recent New South Wales and Victorian elections, there is a small cluster of internet publishers keen to access the feed of results and re-publish them in their own format.

It is often forgotten that a century ago, it was the newspapers that first established a 'Tally Room'. In the 1890s, newspapers competed to make results available by putting tally boards outside of their offices. Newspapers of the day had more extensive networks of reporters and greater access to telegraphs than the electoral authorities. It was the media of the day that took results from local Returning Officers and made them widely known. Electoral bodies only took on this role in the twentieth century, setting up central tally rooms.

Now technology means that Tally Rooms are no longer required to make this information available. In fact, with the internet making it possible for people to access their own results, the roll of television and radio coverage has become more interpretive than providing a simple reporting of results. That has increased the importance of live crosses to election coverage.

Live crosses require the use of expensive technology. This is not available at the National Tally Room, and must be trucked to Canberra, also incurring the cost of staff spending up to a week in Canberra setting-up. The Tally Room also imposes restrictions on the use of modern

television technology such as plasma monitors and video walls that require precise control of lighting, a control not available in the Tally Room.

In addition, each election seems to produce a new level of security at the National Tally Room. In 2004, nearly four hours was lost on polling day as the Tally Room was locked down by security. In 2004, this security clamp down was expanded to include not just the Tally Room, but all the productions vans used by television networks. If the trend continues, 2007 may see the whole of Saturday afternoon lost to security checks.

In short, the Tally Room has become both more expensive and technologically limiting compared to conducting an election coverage in studio. With no restriction on access to data, the Tally Room has simply become a publicly paid for backdrop for the media. The only political 'talent' available in the Tally Room is that arranged to be there by the media. The only advantage for a television coverage in the Tally Room is a background level of aural ambience not available in an acoustically dead television studio.

It is often forgotten that Australia is unusual in having electoral authorities such as the AEC to take on the roll of disseminating results. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, it is the media that fund a company set up for the sole purpose of obtaining results on election night from individual counting centres.

On election night, it is the AEC's role to disseminating results to the media. This was once a task performed through the National Tally Room. It is my view that the National Tally Room is no longer required to perform this role. Setting up the National Tally Room is an expensive exercise for the AEC, and expensive to use by the media.

It may seem sad to lose a tradition like the National Tally Room, but at what point does a tradition become an anachronism? It was also sad when the tradition of sending a telegram on the birth of a child ended. However, sending pictures of the newly born by mobile phone or e-mail seems a perfectly good new tradition.

It is the same question with maintaining a National Tally Room. There seems no good reason to continue spending hundreds of thousands of dollars putting hundreds of electoral officials and media representatives in a concrete and steel shed in the northern suburbs of Canberra. It is the efficient dissemination of results on election night which is the important Australian tradition, not the physical existence of a National Tally Room.

The important task of the AEC on election night is to collate and disseminate election results. The plans in place for the 2007 election do this in an efficient manner and no longer require the conducting of a National Tally Room.

Yours,

(signed)
Antony Green
ABC Election Analyst