

SUBMISSION 93

To: The Committee Secretary, JSCEM Dear Sir, Please accept this submission for the JSCEM's Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election.

I feel I have very strong links to Australia, and consider myself first and foremost an Australian - I own property in Australia, and all of my family lives there apart from my partner (whose family also reside in Australia, and until recently he continued to do contract work for his employer in Melbourne despite being in the UK) and we both continue to pay tax in Australia. We intend to return to Australia eventually, but have the opportunity of international work experience at the moment that is keeping us here. We left Australia in February 2005 and recently returned for a month's holiday, and would return more frequently if we could financially support this. I read the Herald Sun and The Age newspapers online on an almost daily basis, and am a member of the Dietitians Association of Australia where I actively participate in email discussions with Australian colleagues on an almost daily basis. I also have regular contact via informal emails, phone calls and letters from friends and colleagues in Australia related to personal and professional issues. I am a member of the Southern Cross Group, which is also a source of information about issues and events in Australia, particularly those that affect me as an Australian overseas.

I recently voted in the 2007 federal election as an overseas voter, after going through the process to become registered as an overseas voter. I had been taken off the electoral roll in Australia and my mum, who forwards relevant mail to me, didn't think I would be interested in staying on the roll and so didn't forward the mail. While she did apologise for not forwarding the AEC mail to me, it did cause me quite a bit of effort to get back on as an overseas voter and I don't think I would have persevered had I not felt strongly about having my vote heard! I wished that I had arranged this before I left Australia, but I wasn't aware of what I could and should do to stay eligible to vote, and didn't think to find out with all the other preparations that go into a move away from your home country. A few months before the federal election, both my partner and I downloaded and completed one set of forms to re-enrol when a colleague told me the forms had changed and I had to go through the process again downloading the forms once more from the website, completing them and sending them back. I guess we were lucky that we were told before sending off the wrong forms, which would have delayed the process somewhat. I got most of my information on candidates, policies etc from internet news sites but I did find it hard to get 'balanced' viewpoints or detail on policies that are directly relevant to me as an overseas Australian.

Having voted at Australia House in London for the 2007 election, it was worth the effort. I found the organisation was really very good and actually easier than voting in Australia! I was very grateful that I was eligible and able to vote.

I do have four close friends, Australian and with similar strong links to Australia as I have, that wanted to vote in the election but were ineligible (as hadn't registered as an overseas voter before three years post-departure from Australia; or had run out of time when they realised they were no longer on the electoral roll) and they were very

frustrated and annoyed that they were excluded. It bothers me that they have now become a bit disengaged from what is happening in Australia, as I know they have plans to return there soon and with the non-mandatory voting in the UK it perhaps encourages apathy in relation to the electoral and political process - a strength of the Australian system is that everyone (theoretically) votes and thus has a stake in the outcome. Isn't that what we want for all Australians, even if they are overseas for a time?

As an Australian in the UK, I do feel the responsibility of being an ambassador for my country, fellow Australians who are currently working here or may decide to work here in the future - we are respected as hard workers with high standards and this hopefully helps Australia's overall international reputation. I disagree with the time limits for re-enrolling as an overseas voter (currently three years) and the requirement to keep re-enrolling annually after six years as naturally circumstances vary and change. I have plans to return to Australia within six years but I can't see into the future as to work and other circumstances so having me declare my intention to return in six years is a bit unfair. Why limit the time periods for enrolment when today's society is geared to globalisation and the traffic in and out of Australia is likely to grow more in the future not diminish? I feel it would be beneficial to Australia's position in the world if more overseas citizens voted not less, and the current arrangements seem to seek to minimise our voting not encourage it. The criteria for remaining on the roll should perhaps be less related to time spent away and more related to connections to Australia that remain, as well as the engagement in the electoral process - if I continue to vote every three or four years, then I am clearly making an effort to remain involved in Australia and why would I do that if I wasn't intending to return or was no longer 'Australian'?

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission - I hope it is clear enough, as I had only a short time to get my thoughts together in time for the deadline! The main points I want to make are that the criteria for being enrolled overseas should be reviewed to reflect individual connections to Australia rather than tied to an arbitrary set of time limits; more should be done to inform Australians of how to remain on the electoral roll when they leave Australia; more should be done to encourage overseas voters to remain engaged in Australia's electoral/ political system; and consideration of how to harness the great talent of Australians overseas in this engagement process is vital if Australia is to remain a modern and competitive country in today's 'global village'.

kind regards
Dianne Reidlinger