

Geographical challenges in the modern age

The challenges faced on election day

- 10.1 Australia's vast distances and remote locations have always posed challenges for the smooth running of elections. Election day poses logistical problems for voters and the people who are charged with the responsibility of setting up the booths, supervising the voting, counting the votes and the return of the ballot papers to the relevant divisional returning officer.
- 10.2 If elections are held during a holiday period, some voters can find themselves not only away from their own electorate but their own state or territory. With limited pre-poll centres mainly available only in the capital cities in each state, some will not be able to travel the several hundred kilometres to cast their vote.
- 10.3 In rural and remote regions, the weather can have a double-edged impact; voters may be prevented from getting to polling booths and the returning officers may be unable to complete the counting in a timely fashion. Unseasonable weather could hold up the outcome of a close election and under very extreme conditions, the voting may be delayed for several days and those affected voters could be lodging their votes in the knowledge of what has happened elsewhere in the country.

Tyranny of distance

- 10.4 Notwithstanding the huge advances technology has made to enable people anywhere in Australia to stay in touch with one another, distance is and will remain a major challenge for many citizens.
- 10.5 Australia rightly prides itself on being a true democracy. However, for many citizens the realisation of this goal brings with it a personal expense in both time and money. A 10–12 hour round trip is not uncommon for some people on election day in order to record their vote. Technology may overcome some of the difficulties associated with the tyranny of distance, but, as past experience has shown, it is generally the remote locations that are the last to benefit from any technological advances.
- 10.6 Lack of understanding by decision makers who live outside of these remote areas can add to the inconvenience and frustration of electors in these regions when they try to exercise their democratic right. The Member for Maranoa, the Hon. Bruce Scott MP, told the Committee:

our other complaint is access to pre-polling. Once again, this demonstrates the tyranny of distance and lack of understanding of those who receive calls of complaint in Brisbane or, in some cases, at the Electoral Commission in Canberra. People thought, as is generally the case at a state level, they could go to the local courthouse in places like Longreach, Winton and Emerald and pre-poll there. No such facility was provided in the electorate of Maranoa. When these people rang those they had been told to contact, they were told, 'Oh, you can pre-poll in Maranoa.' The constituents then asked, "Where is the nearest pre-polling?" and were told, 'You can pre-poll in Dalby.' One of my constituents said, 'Do you realise that is a 12-hour drive just to pre-poll, to register my vote, because I will be interstate on polling day, and then I will have to drive 12 hours back home?'"¹

- 10.7 Mr Scott's concerns were supported by a former Divisional Returning Officer for Maranoa who told the Committee that running an election in Maranoa at any time is a very tough process.²

1 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, Dalby, p. 2.

2 Mr W Woolcock, Divisional Returning Officer, AEC, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, Dalby, p. 22.

it is a very large division. You have problems with distance, communication and a very large number of polling booths.³

Urban and rural divide

10.8 The 2001 ABS Census of Population and Housing showed that approximately two-thirds of the Australian population live in major cities, a further 20% live in inner regional areas, a further 10.5% live in outer regions and the remaining 3% live in remote locations (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Distribution of population (%)

State/Territory	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote/very remote
New South Wales	71.1	20.6	7.5	0.7
Victoria	73.5	21.0	5.4	0.1
Queensland	52.0	25.7	18.0	4.3
South Australia	71.6	12.3	11.9	4.2
Western Australia	69.7	11.8	9.6	8.7
Tasmania	-	63.6	33.8	2.5
Northern Territory	-	-	52.5	46.5
Australian Capital Territory	99.8	0.2	-	-
Australia	65.9	20.6	10.5	2.9

Source ABS, 2001 Census of Population and Housing

10.9 When the data in Table 10.1 is considered by State and Territory, it is the Northern Territory that has nearly half (47%) of its population living in remote areas. Western Australia is a distant second with approximately 9% and Queensland and South Australia come third with just over 4% of their populations living in similar regions.

10.10 Table 10.2 below shows that the biggest group affected by remote location is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (30% of their population group compared to the national average of 3%).

3 Mr W Woolcock, Divisional Returning Officer, AEC, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, Dalby, p. 22.

Table 10.2 Distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (%)

Remoteness Area	Proportion of Indigenous Population	Proportion of Remoteness Area Population
Major Cities	30.5	1.1
Inner Regional	20.3	2.2
Outer regional	23.1	5.0
Remote	8.5	11.0
Very remote	17.5	38.3
Australia	100.0	2.3

Source ABS, 2001 Census of Population and Housing

- 10.11 The issue of urban and rural divide comes down to two things; how do we cater for the 500,000 Australians living in remote areas and how do we address the special needs of the over-represented group in this category, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders?
- 10.12 Population projections indicate that by 2050 all states except Tasmania and South Australia will grow, with Queensland projected to increase by a massive 73 per cent. Australia's projected growth is estimated to be around 34 per cent over the same period (estimated population of 26.4 million). This will have implications for electoral boundaries and composition of a number of regional and coastal electorates.

AEC demographics

- 10.13 The AEC categorises electorates into four demographic types:
- **42 Inner Metropolitan** Divisions situated in capital cities and consisting of well established built-up suburbs.
 - **45 Outer Metropolitan** Divisions situated in capital cities and containing areas of more recent suburban expansion.
 - **18 Provincial** Divisions with a majority of population in major provincial cities.
 - **45 Rural** Divisions located outside capital cities and without a majority of population in major provincial cities.⁴

4 Submission No. 165, (AEC), Attachment A.

- 10.14 These categories do not fit well with those used in the ABS Census of Population and Housing.⁵ The AEC fourth category, rural, would appear to put all rural constituents into the same category when, in reality, the remote and very remote areas have problems that are unique to their isolation and should be accorded separate attention and action.

The Committee's view

- 10.15 The Committee considered that the AEC should use the same demographic dissection as the census.

Overcoming the urban-rural divide

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

- 10.16 In its second submission to the inquiry the AEC stated:

in the lead up to the 2004 federal election the AEC undertook a pre-election Remote Area Information Program in the remote areas of all states except Tasmania. The program employed mainly indigenous people for a period of six to eight weeks to visit remote indigenous communities to explain our electoral system and how to fully participate. A video featuring Cathy Freeman and actor David Ngoombujarra plus a brochure reinforcing the messages from the video were used to support the program. Posters and stickers featuring Indigenous personalities were also produced and distributed. The posters were also broadcast on indigenous media during the 2004 election.⁶

- 10.17 In the lead up to the election, remote mobile polling booths visited many outlying centres and stations to enable electors to cast their votes.

Remote polling

- 10.18 Remote polling booths travelled along set routes, usually over a number of days, to a series of remote communities and stations and

5 Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote/Very Remote (Table 10.1).

6 Submission No. 165, (AEC), p. 38.

collected votes. All votes collected along a particular route were considered to have been cast at a single poll. Remote mobile polling could take place up to 12 days before polling day.⁷

- 10.19 At the last federal election there were 43 remote polling booths compared to 7,729 ordinary booths. Remote mobile polling booths were used in only five electorates and two electorates accounted for 80% of the mobile booths (Lingiari, NT had 20; Kalgoorlie, WA had 14).⁸

The Committee's view

- 10.20 Clearly, there would be many other remote locations through out Australia that would benefit from such a facility in the lead up to an election.⁹

Pre-polling capabilities

- 10.21 In remote regional areas of Queensland, the practice for some time has been to hold shire elections by way of 100% postal votes.¹⁰ Unlike postal voting at federal elections this is very much managed and supervised at the local level.
- 10.22 Pre-polling in Queensland State elections is available only to those voters who can demonstrate that they will not be able to be in a position on polling day to cast their vote at a designated polling booth in their electorate.¹¹
- 10.23 A number of witnesses stated that a good starting point would be the use of the same pre-polling centres for both State and Federal elections.¹² The trained personnel are already in place if you are able to use the same people who staff the polling booths on election day. These people receive training to fulfil the duties on the day and it would seem to be a waste of a resource if the very same people could

7 Submission No. 165, (AEC), pp. 24–28.

8 Submission No. 165, (AEC), p. 28.

9 Submission No. 1, (The Hon. B Scott MP), p. 3; and Submission No. 163, (The Hon. B Katter MP), Attachment C, G.

10 Mr M Parker, CEO, Warroo Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005 (Dalby), p. 13; and Mr V Becker, CEO, Ilfracombe Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 21.

11 Mr M Rowell, Queensland Nationals, *Evidence*, Thursday, 28 April 2005, (Ingham), p. 10.

12 See *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 9.

- not be used to help staff pre-polling booths in the same towns or regional centres.¹³
- 10.24 In Queensland, the State Electoral Commission (ECQ) makes use of selected courthouses, schools and post offices to help facilitate pre-polling.¹⁴
- 10.25 In a supplementary submission to the inquiry, the AEC provided details of the use of courthouses and State Government offices that are used for pre-polling purposes for state elections. All up, 127 locations are used throughout Queensland and during the last state election, they recorded 43,275 votes.¹⁵ These locations were in addition to the ECQ's own offices in Brisbane and the Gold Coast plus the 89 state returning offices (except where those offices were operated from a Magistrates Courts office). The number of venues for pre-polling at State elections greatly assists those electors who need to cast their votes in this manner. At the recent federal election, the AEC recorded more than twice the number of pre-poll votes compared to the state election but in considerably fewer locations.¹⁶ In response to a recommendation of the Minter Ellison report, the AEC has already committed to undertaking a national review of the provision of pre-poll services.¹⁷
- 10.26 Many residents in remote areas take advantage of pre-polling facilities for State elections as an insurance in the event that they may not be able to get to the polling booth because of rain or some other event.¹⁸ If similar opportunities were available at Federal Elections, particularly if local courthouses could be used for both State and Federal Elections, then many people would forgo the need to seek a postal vote.¹⁹
- 10.27 The CEO of Warroo Shire Council, Mr Michael Parker, believed that the some of the problems experienced with postal voting could be overcome if the local schools could be used for pre-polling purposes.²⁰

13 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 12; and Mr B Hoogland, CEO, Winton Shire Council, *Evidence*, p. 12.

14 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, Dalby, pp. 2-9.

15 Submission No. 168, (AEC), pp. 7-10.

16 Submission No. 168, (AEC), p. 10.

17 Submission No. 168, (AEC), p. 10.

18 Mrs S Doyle, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 2.

19 Mrs S Doyle, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 2.

20 Mr M Parker, CEO, Warroo Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 12.

However, he stated that postal voting is a more efficient system – provided it works, because not everyone in a particular shire has children going to a local school.²¹

- 10.28 The Australian Labor Party in its submission argued for the establishment of additional pre-polling centres in every division in locations deemed to be accessible to the public, such as in major shopping centres, sporting venues and education institutions because it believed that this would help accommodate the ever increasing demands on family time.²²

The Committee's view

- 10.29 The Committee considered that, if the postal voting system was fail-safe, there would be little or no need to put in place pre-polling facilities. Given that every option comes at a price, it may be more cost effective to ensure the problems with postal voting are overcome, rather than spend more money on enhancing pre-polling facilities as a back-up system if postal voting breaks down.²³
- 10.30 However, in view of the evidence provided, the Committee accepts there is a case for more pre-polling facilities to be made available in Queensland. In Chapter 3, *Voting in the pre-election period*, the Committee recognises the extent of the problem, and recommends amendment of the legislation to allow the AEC to set up and operate pre-polling voting centres under urgent notice, as required.
- 10.31 The Committee also endorses the AEC's commitment to complete its comprehensive review of pre-polling arrangements by November 2005.

Postal voting

- 10.32 Experience of local shires using postal voting for their elections suggests that the more decentralised or localised the processing of the ballot papers, the better the chances of all ballot papers reaching their

21 Mr M Parker, CEO, Warroo Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 12.

22 Submission No. 136, (Australian Labor Party), p. 7.

23 Mr M Parker, CEO, Warroo Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), pp. 13–14.

correct destination in a timely fashion and the quicker the response to address any issues relating to damaged or lost ballot papers.²⁴

- 10.33 Mr William Woolcock, Divisional Returning Officer, Division of Groom, in evidence, stated that arrangements are basically designed around people actually voting on election day.²⁵ He stated:

the more people there are that cast an ordinary vote, the faster and cheaper the results that we get are. Postal voting costs a lot more. The process can be flawed, as you have seen, and that the chances of that increase the more people use our postal voting system.²⁶

- 10.34 Ironically, prior to the 1999 referendum, postal votes were prepared manually and locally. Notwithstanding the fact that APVIS system of producing postal votes is far superior to the manual method, the old system was a fail-safe system in that errors could be picked up before the ballot papers were delivered to the electorate itself.²⁷

- 10.35 In the pressure-cooker environment of an election, timely and accurate responses to all electors' issues are paramount. In particular, the role played by local Divisional Returning Officers who are more in touch with the unique features of their own electorate can play a pivotal role in fast tracking problems and providing workable solutions.²⁸ These AEC officers know the geography of the electorate and the frequency and reliability of the mail services.²⁹ Many believe that most of the problems with postal voting in regional Queensland could have been overcome if distribution of the postal ballots took place at the local level.³⁰

24 Mr M Parker, CEO, Warroo Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), pp. 14–15.

25 Mr W Woolcock, Divisional Returning Officer, AEC, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 20.

26 Mr W Woolcock, Divisional Returning Officer, AEC, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 20.

27 Mr R Boyd, Divisional Returning Officer, AEC, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 23.

28 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 10; Mrs H Fuller, Chief Electorate Officer, Office of the Hon. B Katter MP, *Evidence*, Thursday, 28 April 2005, (Ingham), pp. 2–4; and Mr M Rowell, Queensland Nationals, *Evidence*, Thursday, 28 April 2005, (Ingham), p. 11.

29 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 11.

30 The Hon. B Scott MP, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Dalby), p. 10; and *Evidence*, Thursday, 28 April 2005, (Ingham), p. 2.

- 10.36 The Quilpie Shire Council, in its submission, stated that extra time must be factored in for people in outlying/remote locations to receive and return their postal votes.³¹

The Committee's view

- 10.37 Issues surrounding postal votes are discussed more fully in Chapter 3, *Voting in the pre-election period*, where the Committee acknowledges that the local Divisional Returning Officers need to play a greater role in tracking postal vote applications and dealing with issues concerning lost, incorrect or damaged ballot papers.

Preferred methods of voting

- 10.38 Witnesses who appeared at the Regional Queensland hearings listed their voting preferences in the following order (while retaining the option for absentee voting):
- at a booth in their own electorate;
 - pre-polling;
 - electronic; and
 - postal.

Polling booth

- 10.39 In an ideal world, most people would prefer to cast their vote on polling day at a booth in their own electorate. This is the most cost effective way to cast a vote and it enables the AEC to determine the outcome in the quickest possible time.

Pre-polling

- 10.40 Pre-polling would be the next best option to voting at a polling booth because the voters still know that their votes have been recorded.

Electronic

- 10.41 If physical presence while voting is not an option then electronic voting (subject to appropriate safeguards) could provide constituents with an efficient and timely alternative. The Committee has

31 Submission No. 43, (Quilpie Shire Council), p. 1.

considered electronic voting in the context of assisted voting, and more generally, in Chapter 11, *Technology and the electoral system*.

Postal

10.42 Postal voting was the least preferred option because it requires several processes and a considerable time lag before the vote is cast.³²

Absentee

10.43 It was considered that absentee voting should be available at every polling booth on election day, regardless of location of the booth.³³ Quite a number of people unexpectedly find themselves away from their own electorate on polling day and should not be disenfranchised because only selected booths have this facility.³⁴

10.44 Under section 222 of the CEA, absentee voting is only permissible in the voters' own State or Territory.

10.45 Many retirees and holiday makers can spend several months each year travelling the remote regions of Australia and are at a great disadvantage exercising their right to vote either by way of postal or pre-poll vote.

10.46 Currently, there is very limited opportunity to vote outside of an elector's own State or Territory because these pre poll centres are mainly located in the capital cities or major centres.³⁵ For holiday makers and interstate contract workers this may mean a drive of several hundred kilometres to record their vote.³⁶ And in many respects they would be more disadvantaged than people living in the remote parts of Australia.

The Committee's view

10.47 The Committee considered that some of the time lag in postal voting could be addressed through permitting electronic applications to be

32 Mrs S Doyle, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 7; and Mr V Becker, CEO, Ilfracombe Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 20.

33 Mr B Hoogland, CEO, Winton Shire Council, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), pp. 12-13.

34 The AEC advises that absent votes may be cast at all polling places in the state or territory in which the elector is enrolled. Interstate electors may only vote at pre-poll centres prior to, or on polling day.

35 Submission No. 53, (Hinkler Divisional Council of The Nationals), p. 2.

36 Submission No. 64, (Murilla Shire Council), p. 1; and Submission No. 150, (The Western Queensland Local Government Association), p. 1.

made, as is recommended in Chapter 3, *Voting in the pre-election period*. However, although technology might eventually assist in the actual voting process in some way, its more widespread use is largely dependent on broadband access and convincing resolution of security concerns.³⁷ Potential developments in this field are outlined in Chapter 11, *Technology and the electoral system*.

- 10.48 The Committee makes recommendations in respect of pre-poll voting in Chapter 3, *Voting in the pre-election period*.

Your call is important to us - the call centre syndrome!

- 10.49 The AEC call centres received 630,000 calls during the period 30 August and 22 October 2004 and employed 450 operators at a cost of \$2.9 million. According to AEC data, 88% of the calls were answered within 30 seconds but no data is available as to the level of inquirer satisfaction.³⁸
- 10.50 Like all call centres, they could provide a very low cost and timely service but, by their very nature, they lacked the local knowledge that can be so critical to the solving of the problem.³⁹

The Committee's view

- 10.51 The experiences conveyed to the Committee time and time again reinforced the view that call centres have become the bane of modern living. The inability to talk to the same person twice when the initial problem is not resolved only heightens the level of frustration and this is not exclusive to AEC election-time call centres.
- 10.52 The Committee believed that in 2004 it should have been possible for people to receive answers to their queries at the time they made the call.
- 10.53 AEC Information Technology should be upgraded so that voters can be told whether their postal vote application has been received, and if so when their ballot papers were despatched.

37 Mrs S Doyle, *Evidence*, Wednesday, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 6; Mr B Hoogland, CEO, Winton Shire Council, Wednesday, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 15; Mr V Becker, CEO, Ilfracombe Shire Council, Wednesday, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, (Longreach), p. 19; Mr M Rowell, Queensland Nationals, *Evidence*, Thursday, 28 April 2005, (Ingham), p. 9; and Submission No. 62, (Bungil Shire Council), p. 1.

38 Submission No. 165, (AEC), p. 39.

39 Mrs S Doyle, *Evidence*, 27 April 2005, Longreach, pp. 5, 9-10.

Addressing the urban-rural divide

- 10.54 Australia's geography remains a challenge, and this will not change. But the range of the potential practical solutions to help overcome the urban-rural divide is expanding. Many of these are discussed in other parts of the report because they have been considered in the wider context of Federal Elections and not simply as a response to the geographical challenges.
- 10.55 Modern technology could overcome many of the difficulties faced by voters in remote locations, such as applying for postal votes and having their receipt confirmed by email. Chapter 11, *Technology and the electoral system*, discusses some potential electoral application of technology.
- 10.56 Access to pre-polling centres is an issue that was raised in the Minter Ellison report and the AEC is committed to undertaking a nation-wide review of pre-polling services. The Committee will follow up this review with the AEC before the next election to ensure that this option of voting is given due weight in the light of the other recommendation made in this report.

