

Read, Shane (REPS)

From: John E. Wulff [john.wulff@inka.de]
Sent: Thursday, 4 July 2002 9:22 PM
To: JSCEM@aph.gov.au
Subject: Submission

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| Joint Standing | Committee on Electoral Matters |
| Submission No. | 111 |
| Date Received | 5/7/02 |
| Secretary | Shane |

Message:

To: The Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Sir,

This submission is in response to the JSCEM's invitation for public comment as part of its Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election. I will comment on my experiences with the lack of information on electoral matters for an overseas Australian in the past. I will finish up with a practical suggestion on how this could be changed in future.

I have been away from Australia working as a Software engineer for two extended periods, from 1973 to 1983 and from 1987 to now. I have been to Australia regularly for family and business reasons during those absences.

As an Australian citizen, I always felt, that it was my primary political responsibility and obligation to vote in Australian elections - I learned this in school and more forcefully as a trainee for the public service in the former PMG's department. When first overseas in the 70's, I made a valiant effort to fulfil this obligation, which I always also saw as a privilege. As an individual, I am collectively making a decision on how the country will be governed.

My efforts took me to the Australian Embassy in Bonn, Germany in 1973, where I was treated very cordially and my name was registered as an overseas voter. I was told I would be informed by the embassy about upcoming elections and would receive postal vote documents. I was not told I would be struck from the roll, if I did not return to Australia within a certain number of years. I was very chagrined, when I had received nothing from the embassy before the next election. I only realized it had happened, when I saw the election results on TV.

In 1978, when I had to renew my passport I called at the Australian Embassy in Bonn again. I chipped them about not being informed about the last election. The officer apologized profusely, explaining that something had gone wrong, but that he would register me again and everything would be OK. The officer did not tell me, or did not know, that by this time I was not on the roll anyway. You might guess that nothing came from the embassy in the next 5 years. After that I was back in Australia and was able to vote there.

My next effort to vote was for the November 1999 Referendum on the Republic. I felt very strongly about the issue, and also had a feeling, that the result would be close, making it important for me to vote. My efforts writing to the embassy and some frantic phone calls brought to light that I was not on a roll and could not be registered. I was shattered at not having been allowed to have my say.

After this experience I made some enquiries and have been active with the Southern Cross Group, helping to bring the issue of Dual Citizenship

to its successful resolution in April. I had joined the SCG specifically to do something about voting though.

I hereby make a strong plea, that the rules on voting be changed, giving Australians living overseas the same rights to vote as any other Australian. With modern communications most overseas Australians are at least as informed about politics and political issues at home, as the average citizen. With modern communications it should also be easy to reach a very large percentage of overseas Australians eligible to vote by electronic mail. Every year this percentage will rise. Now is a good time for the Australian Government to put legislation in place, to give overseas Australians back their right to vote.

I must congratulate the Australian Government on their very active and professional looking internet presence. With this level of expertise in Canberra it should be an easy matter to put a system in place, to register overseas Australians and to inform them of upcoming elections by email. Such a system would cost very little. I would welcome a system, where on registering, one would allow some or all political parties to have access to ones email address by ticking an appropriate box. Then the parties could inform overseas voters with their views with very little cost. Under this scenario, overseas voters will be really informed and will be able to make a sensible vote. I am sure the political parties will welcome such a system. For the critics, I make the point, that a person registering can elect which party he wants to be informed by or none. I suggest, that in the long term such a form of electronic registration for overseas Australians should become the rule, making compulsory voting for every adult Australian a practical matter.

I hereby ask the committee to consider this suggestion as a starting point for developing a system to make voting for overseas Australians really practical. I thank the committee for having invited us to comment and remain

yours sincerely
John E. Wulff