



Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
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Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>

Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto

SUBMISSION RELATING TO POSTAL VOTING FOR THE 2004 FEDERAL ELECTION

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In August 2004, my husband and I decided to apply to the AEC for permanent postal voter status for both state and federal elections.

We did this because we live 60 km from our nearest town, Blackall, on a mostly black soil road, which crosses a number of creeks on the creek bottoms (no bridges). Over the years we have had, from time to time, difficulty getting to town to vote following as little as 50 pts of rain.

At state elections, we are able to pre-poll vote wherever there is a courthouse. We have exercised this option on those occasions when it looked as though the weather might preclude us from voting on the actual polling day. Sometimes, however, wet weather in the lead up to polling day has prevented us from exercising even this option

At federal elections, pre-poll voting is not available to us, as the only centres where this was permitted in the seat of Maranoa were Dalby (10 hours away) or Emerald (5 hours away). Neither of these towns is in any way a 'centre of interest' for us, giving us no reason to travel to either of these places.

We have been nervous about enrolling as postal voters in the past, because we have only two mail services a week, which are cancelled altogether if small falls of rain occur on mail days. In wet times, this can mean up to six weeks without a mail service at all. Enrolling for permanent postal vote status would not necessarily ensure that we would get a vote, even if the Australian Electoral Commission was efficient in its procedures in getting the necessary forms to us.

On balance, though, it seemed to us to be the least worst option in our situation.

It took several phone calls to the AEC before I was able to ascertain the correct procedure for enrolling as a permanent postal voter for both state and federal elections. I was advised that the form we needed to complete was not available for download from the Commission's website, and it would have to be mailed to us. I expressed concern that this would slow down the process, but was assured that I could fax the forms back, and was given a fax number for that purpose. I asked if I could scan the forms and attach them to an email in preference to faxing due to line problems which make faxing an uncertain event. I was told I could not do that.

I received the forms in our mail delivery on 13th September 2004, and my husband and I completed them immediately. I faxed them both in the same call that day, and received a printed fax report detailing a successful fax transmission.

In due course a postal vote arrived for my husband, but none for me. His arrived the day before we were going away for ten days. I assumed my postal vote would have arrived by the time we returned home. Unfortunately, this was not the case. It was by now only a week or so before the election. I contacted the AEC, and after a number of calls, was told that my form had never been received, and they had no record at all of my application. By then many remote voters in Maranoa were reporting that their votes had not arrived. Bizarrely, it was not whole households who did not receive their votes, just one member, as in my case.

As time was now very short, I decided to abandon the possibility of a postal vote for the federal election 2004, and once again, vote in person at the polling booth in Blackall.

As I still had my original application which I had faxed to the AEC, (which they said they had never received), I held it until just after the election, and then mailed it to them, with the written request that they phone me to verify that it had arrived. I waited until after the election to avoid any confusion over whether I would be a postal voter or in-person voter for that election.

In due course, the AEC advised me that they had received my application.

In view of the above experience, I would like to ask the committee to consider the following points:

- There are now many people in remote areas of Australia with good access to high speed Internet services through satellite, which makes them independent of the often problematic telephone system, which can cause problems when faxing.
- Email is therefore a more reliable way to return written material, which is feasible when people are able to scan the document and attach it to an email.
- It is possible to set up an email requiring an immediate acknowledgement of receipt of an email, something not easily done with a fax.
- All forms should be available for download from the Internet. It remains a mystery to me why the form I needed was not available except by mail.
- Greater thought should be given to use of technology in facilitating voting, particularly for those most remote. While voting is compulsory, the Commonwealth should take responsibility for ensuring that every person entitled to vote is actually able to exercise this most basic of rights. In view of vastly improved telecommunications services, inclement weather and poor mail services should no longer be the reasons why people are not able to vote.
- I submit my quarterly Business Activity Statement online. In order to do this, I downloaded the appropriate software from the ATO, and received a digital certificate in order to communicate with them. If I can conduct my confidential business with the ATO in this manner, I believe it must be possible to develop a system for registered postal voters to access the AEC in the same way.
- When it is not possible to exercise a right to vote, for the reasons outlined in this submission, it is not acceptable to be told by the AEC that if you write them a letter you will not be fined. This sort of response misses the point that what is important to voters who go to the sort of trouble outlined here is the sense of loss through disenfranchisement, not how to avoid a fine.