

# SUBMISSION 31

Dear Committee Secretary,

I write to make a personal submission to the Committee's inquiry into civics and electoral education. This submission addresses the issue of electoral education in the context of Australians overseas, and, in particular, the role of Federal and State governments in promoting electoral education in this context. The key point of this submission is that the current level of information about voting rights and elections provided to expatriate Australians is inadequate.

I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Law at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. I have been living in the UK for nearly four years, but have maintained a connection with Australia, where both my parents, and many of my friends, reside. I am therefore concerned to ensure that I have the right to vote in Australian elections.

On leaving Australia, I was fortunate enough to receive advice from the Southern Cross Group, advising me what steps I needed to take register as an eligible overseas elector. I did this, some time after I left Australia, and voted in the Federal Election in 2004. However, had I not received this advice from the Southern Cross Group I would have had absolutely no idea of how to register as an eligible overseas elector (EOE), or even that I needed to register in this way. I was not given any information on these points when leaving Australia, nor was I advised of any of these issues in my contacts with the Australian High Commission once I arrived in London. As a result of this lack of information, many of my Australian friends living here in London have become disenfranchised, and many have had difficulty establishing how they can get back on the electoral roll.

I also note that, while the AEC does have a fact sheet regarding overseas electors on its website, the ability of the AEC to respond to specific queries from expatriate Australians on this issue appears limited. I know several people who have engaged in lengthy correspondence with the AEC regarding their electoral status, only to receive conflicting advice from different AEC representatives. An issue causing particular confusion seems to be which EOE's are eligible to vote in State elections and which are not.

Further, the information expatriate Australians receive about forthcoming elections while overseas is almost non-existent. It is only by reading Australian newspapers online that most Australian expatriates become aware of elections, and these newspapers, of course, provide no information on how voting rights can be exercised by Australians overseas. I think both Federal and State governments need to make more of an effort, through their High Commissions or Agents-General, and by "tapping into" local expatriate groups, to reach Australians overseas and inform them of forthcoming elections and how they can exercise their voting rights.

I would also like to take this opportunity to make the Committee aware of Recommendation 13 of the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Report of its Inquiry into Australian Expatriates of March 2005. As you may be aware, Recommendation 13 made specific recommendations regarding the voting rights of expatriate Australians, which would greatly improve the situation for Australians overseas wishing to vote. The government has not yet responded to this Report. In the absence of a government response, I would ask this Committee specifically to consider

Recommendation 13 and would ask this Committee formally to endorse it.

Yours sincerely,

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