

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Secretary

THE SILENT MINORITY

Submission to the Australian Commonwealth Government Inquiry into the 2001 Federal Election

Topic: review of the Australian homeless population's access to the electoral process
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Submission funded by: *The Big Issue* Australia
With assistance from: Law firm Clayton Utz
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5th July 2002

Votes for the Homeless campaign

For the past year, *The Big Issue* magazine has been conducting research into the Australian homeless population's access to the vote. The organisation has been running a concurrent campaign to draw attention to the fact that a large proportion of Australia's homeless population (which stands at approximately 105 000 people) is effectively excluded from the electoral process.

Australia is a democracy. *The Big Issue* strongly believes that every effort should be made to ensure that the voting process is tailored in such a way that it affords a real and practical opportunity for every citizen, including those who have been marginalised by homelessness and poverty, to have a political voice.

In drawing public, government and media attention to this situation, the ultimate goal of the campaign has been to instigate change by examining how the electoral process can be improved to better cater for homeless people.

We believe that an inclusive approach is the best option, involving the input of homeless advocacy bodies, welfare services, homeless and formerly homeless people, the Australian Electoral Commission, community groups, members of the public, local, state and federal government and the media.

About *The Big Issue* Australia

The Big Issue Australia is a fortnightly news, current affairs and entertainment magazine set up to help homeless and long-term unemployed people improve their own circumstances.

Vendors sell the magazine from designated pitches in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Geelong, and keep half of the cover price as direct, self-generated income. *The Big Issue* started in the UK 11 years ago and the Australian edition has been operating for six years.

Facts on the 'Homeless Vote'

- There are more than 105 000 homeless people in Australia (source: 1996 Census)
- It is estimated that more than three quarters of these people are eligible to vote in elections
- A high proportion of the homeless population do not vote in elections. The number of homeless people estimated as not listed on the electoral roll totals more than an entire Federal electorate.
- Under Section 96 of the Electoral Act, homeless people may be eligible to vote under the 'itinerant electors' provision.
- There are currently around 3500 – 4000 registered itinerant electors in Australia. In an interview with *The Big Issue*, the AEC has estimated that '99.9 to 100 per cent' of them are not homeless people.
- There have been no previous efforts by government or the AEC to have the homeless listed as itinerant electors.
- A high proportion of the homeless people not listed on the roll are indigenous Australians.

Barriers to homeless people voting

- **Lack of a stable address:** homeless people, by definition, lack a stable, permanent address for purposes of voter registration and correspondence. This fact alone serves to exclude them from the electoral process.
- **Lack of access to information and resources:** the homeless often don't have access to the media, and may have difficulty accessing valuable information that could help them make an informed vote. Information about political candidates and the voting process itself needs to be made directly available to the homeless, and polling booths need to be set up in areas that are easily accessible for this group (e.g. inner city areas; soup kitchens; homeless and welfare agencies; emergency accommodation services and refuges).

Many homeless people are not aware that they are eligible to vote as itinerant electors. Although there is strong support amongst the welfare sector on the issue of improving access to the vote, homeless shelters and referral services do not have the resources to single-handedly inform the homeless population of their voting rights and encourage them to enrol.

- **Entrenched poverty and personal hardship:** homeless people are in a unique situation, in that day-to-day survival is their first priority. While every homeless person's situation differs, there are common problems that recur within this group – many have struggled with long-term poverty and unemployment;

drug, alcohol or gambling addictions; family and relationship breakdown; mental health issues; sexual, emotional or physical abuse; and poor physical health.

Additionally, they usually lack the money, resources and lifestyle stability to keep informed about the political issues of the day. However, *The Big Issue* believes that this fact should not be used as a reason to further exclude them from the political process. Many homeless people would gladly take the opportunity to vote if it were more readily available to them.

- **Never been a target group.** In recent years there has been a big effort made to get more young people on the electoral roll, and to ensure that rural voters can exercise their right to vote.

But the same cannot be said for the homeless population. Not one of the homeless organisations *The Big Issue* has spoken to in the course of this year-long campaign has ever received a visit from the AEC.

The homeless population is not always easy to access – but nor is this group impossible to reach. As an example, during the last Census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics made a concerted effort to count the homeless population more accurately. The bureau even recruited homeless people – people who were sleeping rough in abandoned lots and under bridges – to help comb the cities and find and count others in their situation.

- **Penalties for failing to vote**

(a) **Fines:** if voters enrolled on the normal electoral roll do not vote, and don't write to the AEC and provide a 'valid and sufficient reason for failing to vote', they can be fined. But there is no definition of what constitutes a 'valid and sufficient reason', and homeless people often have great difficulty in both sending and receiving correspondence.

The homeless population is by nature a transient population. When a fine for failing to vote is not received due to their lack of a stable address, additional court costs are incurred, even though the person may not realise they have been fined.

This fine system is prohibitive and needs to be closely examined: it ultimately discourages homeless people from enrolling to vote. As mentioned above, experiences of upheaval, poverty and difficult life circumstances mean many homeless people can not always exercise their voting rights in the lead-up to an election.

Also, homeless people typically cannot afford to pay fines received for minor offences; often, the result is a long and costly series of legal processes that ultimately lead to additional court costs, spiraling debt, and in some cases, a jail term. Fining people who are homeless and experiencing extreme poverty only serves to further entrench disadvantage. One way of overcoming this barrier would be to include a provision in the Electoral Act that states that homeless people, whether registered as itinerant electors or on the normal roll, are not subject to fines if they fail to vote.

(b) **Being struck off the roll:** a registered itinerant elector who fails to exercise their right to vote is subsequently struck off the itinerant elector roll.

Again, this rule discourages homeless people from being able to exercise their right to vote. Homelessness is a condition that deserves special consideration. Homeless people have more pressing concerns than keeping their paperwork in order; in particular, finding food and safe shelter (there is a chronic shortage of emergency and affordable accommodation in Australian cities). Poor health, and lack of money and resources, are other common problems that mean it may not always be possible for a homeless person to make their way to a polling booth.

The Big Issue believes homeless people who don't exercise their vote should not be penalised in any way.

- **Feelings of marginalisation:** many homeless people feel that they have already been left out of their immediate communities and pushed to the margins of society. While many affirm that they do want to exercise their right to vote, others profess a degree of apathy and disillusionment with our political system; this can be attributed in part to their current lack of access to the vote. (A recent study by Melbourne's Hanover Welfare Services found that many homeless people feel alienated from the electoral process, and do not believe that voting will improve their situation.)

- **Other concerns:** it should be noted that any effort to increase the number of homeless people on the electoral roll needs to be monitored carefully to guard against the possibility of coercion on the part of any one political party. The approach must be non-partisan. (In the US 2000 presidential elections, the US Democrat party was accused of offering homeless people bribes such as packets of cigarettes to attend polling booths and cast a vote.) However, with safeguards in place, this situation need not arise in Australia – and again, it should not be used as a reason to exclude homeless people from the political process.

Key recommendations

- (1) That homeless people's access to the electoral process in Australia be reviewed and improved upon
- (2) That any changes to the function of the Electoral Act take into account the difficult circumstances faced by homeless people, with a view to assisting them to participate in the democratic process, rather than penalising them if they do not; in practice, this would mean the abolition of all fines and penalties for homeless people who do not exercise their right to vote
- (3) That the potential of the Itinerant Elector provision to function as a workable option for homeless voters be investigated
- (4) That the itinerant electors voting registration form itself – which is not particularly user friendly – is simplified; and that the itinerant electors provision is subsequently publicised as a valid avenue for homeless voters
- (5) That a homeless person who registers as an itinerant elector, but who fails to

vote, not be penalised by being struck off the itinerant elector roll

(6) That homeless people on the normal electoral roll who fail to cast a vote be exempt from having to provide a written 'valid and sufficient reason' for why they did not vote; and that the fact they are homeless is automatically recognised as being a 'valid and sufficient reason' for not voting

(7) That the Electoral Act be amended so that homeless people who are unable to provide a stable living address can nominate a temporary address, or a 'place of local connection' (as is the case in the UK). *

(8) That the proposed amendment to the Electoral Act requiring voters to present original forms of paper identification at enrolment not be passed. Homeless people encounter great difficulty in presenting such documentation.

(9) That the proposed amendment to the Electoral Act limiting the categories of person authorised to witness a declaration of eligibility to vote not be passed. Homeless people already have very limited access to authorised witnesses.

(10) That both welfare services who work with the homeless on a day-to-day basis, and homeless people themselves, be encouraged to contribute knowledge and suggestions for improving homeless people's access to the electoral process; and that homeless and welfare agencies be given extra resources and trained to assist their clients to register to vote

(11) That the rolls remain open until the eve of an election, rather than being closed within one week of the election being announced; and that homeless voters be permitted register to vote in person right up to the day before the election

(12) That field officers from the AEC make it a priority to visit homeless shelters, refuges, transitional housing, disability support services and welfare organisations to inform and assist homeless people with exercising their voting rights

(13) That mobile polling booths be located in areas that are easily accessible to the homeless population (see above)

* Last year, after five years of campaigning by UK organisation *The Big Issue* in the North, British laws were changed so that homeless people could vote. (Previously, a person who didn't have a permanent address was simply excluded from voting.) The Representation of the People Act 2000 allows homeless people to list a 'place of local connection' instead of a permanent address; this might be a park where the person sometimes sleeps, or a drop-in centre they visit.

No home, no vote: how is that fair?

Our homeless can't even protest about their plight at the ballot box.

By SIMON CASTLES

SOMEWHERE on the British electoral roll, amid the haughty-sounding addresses familiar to us from years of playing Monopoly, are the anomalous words "park bench". Not Park Lane, park bench. This is the address of a homeless man who, thanks to the recently introduced Representation of the People Act, is now permitted to cast a vote — a single but highly significant vote — come June 7.

By any measure, the act is a triumph for the voting rights of homeless people. It allows for those with no fixed address, formerly left off the electoral roll altogether, to register to vote by making a "declaration of local connection". In other words, instead of requiring a home address in order to vote, homeless people can qualify by providing authorities with the address of a local day centre, or nearby cafe, or even, as several rough sleepers have done, a park bench — that is, some location to which they have a connection.

Incredibly, this piece of legislation has the potential to add some 250,000 voters to the turnout at Thursday's British election.

So what is the corresponding arrangement in Australia? In a country that prides itself on its egalitarianism — that loves to imagine itself as free of any British-style class system — what is being done to ensure homeless people vote in our upcoming election? Well clobber, the answer to that one is simple: bugger all.

Paradoxically, it is the very popularity of the egalitarian myth in Australia that operates as a stumbling block to us taking the sorts of measures introduced in Britain. We are convinced there isn't a major homelessness problem here, so related issues — such as the importance of including homeless people in the democratic process — are never even raised.

Yet Australia does have a homelessness problem, a large and growing one. Indeed, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, using information gathered at the last census, puts the homeless population at 105,000. On a single night in 1996, in

other words, you could have packed the MCG with homeless people. News from this year's census will be no better — future analogies will require Colonial Stadium to deal with the G's overflow.

Still, at least considerable effort is being made to include homeless people in the official population statistics. The same can't be said about including them on the electoral roll. In 2001, Australia's homeless will be encouraged to fill in census forms, but not, it would seem, ballot papers.

At present, an Australian citizen who does not have a permanent place of residence can apply to be treated as an "itinerant elector" under section 96 of the Electoral Act. But only about 3500 people are registered in this way, a figure manifestly not representative of Australia's growing homeless population. Besides, as a spokesperson for the Australian Electoral Commission recently told *The Big Issue* magazine: "Based on my experience, I think that 99.9 per cent to 100 per cent of (itinerant electors) are not homeless, but are people like retiree workers travelling around Australia, and seasonal workers."

The AEC admits, furthermore, to having no specific program to inform homeless people about enrolment and voting. The job is a big one and resources are limited (the Howard Government cut funding to the AEC in 1996). The upshot is that Australia's homeless, easily equal in number to a federal electorate, do not vote. Nor will they until an Australian government campaigns to have them included on the electoral roll — something neither major party has shown any inclination to do.

Why not? Well, call me cynical, but surely no government wants voters who plainly aren't going to buy the spin about rosy economic times. Voters who know the emperor is wearing no clothes. Voters, that is to say, who are more than likely to lodge a protest vote against whatever political party holds power.

It's safer all round, therefore, for a government to keep silent on the issue. To turn away and pretend not to see. To act, in other words, akin to you and me, when we steal past a homeless person crumpled in a doorway.

Simon Castles is the editor of The Big Issue. E-mail: simon@bigissue.org.au

001 A PARK SWING?



Somewhere on the British electoral roll, amid the haughty-sounding addresses familiar to us from years of playing Monopoly, are the anomalous words 'park bench'. This is the address of a homeless man who, thanks to the recently introduced Representation of the People Act, was permitted to cast a vote on 7 June.

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simple: bugger all.

Paradoxically, it is the very popularity of the egalitarian myth in Australia that operates as a stumbling block to us taking the sorts of measures currently being introduced in Britain. We are convinced there isn't a major homelessness problem in Australia, so related issues are never even raised.

Suffice it to say, Australia does have a homelessness problem. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, using information gathered at the last census, puts the homeless population at 105 000. News from this year's census will be no better.

Still, at least considerable effort is being made to actually include homeless people in the official population statistics. In 2001, Australia's homeless will be encouraged to fill in census forms, but not, it would seem, ballot papers.

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figure manifestly not representative of Australia's growing homeless population.

The AEC admits, furthermore, to having no specific program to inform homeless people about voting. The upshot is that Australia's homeless, easily equal in number to a Federal electorate, do not vote. Nor will they until an Australian government actively campaigns to have them included on the electoral roll - something neither major party has shown any inclination to want to do.

Why not? Well, call me cynical, but surely no government wants voters who plainly aren't going to buy spin about rosy economic times. Voters who are more than likely to lodge a protest vote.

Safer all-round for a government to keep silent on the issue. To turn away and pretend not to see. To act, in other words, akin to you and me, when we steal past a homeless person crumpled in a doorway. □

Simon Castles
Editor

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in The Age on 5 June

002 WORD ON THE STREET

A NEW DRUG TESTING KIT ALLOWS PARENTS TO SECRETLY CHECK SURFACES FOR TRACES OF ILLICIT SUBSTANCES. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF PARENTS USING THESE KITS?



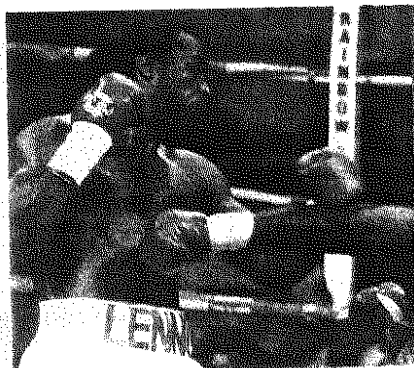
Name: Cameron
Age: 21
Occupation: student

'You should ask your kids first. If they want to hide it from you, that's what they want to do. To go to that extreme is not trusting your kids; but in some cases maybe it is necessary.'



Name: Katie
Age: 20
Occupation: sales assistant

'I think it's a good idea. If their kids are using drugs, parents are not going to get the truth out of them. They can find out for sure and be able to start helping them before it's too late.'



003 THE BIG STAT

COMPILED BY KHALIL HEGARTY

- Estimated value (in US\$) of prize money in a potential title fight between Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis (pictured left): **50 000 000**
- Estimated amount of money (in US\$) generated last year by the international cocaine trade: **92 000 000 000**
- Number of people who visit Nakednews.Com - the world's first

001 THE POWER OF SPEECH



Over a century ago, on a remote island at the edge of the world, history was made: in 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women the vote. Australia followed a close second, in 1902.

Australia saw another landmark in 1967 when, amazingly late in the piece, Aboriginal people finally won full voting rights. These two victories saw women and indigenous Australians gain a democratic voice, and the political landscape began a gradual shift towards being more inclusive.

More inclusive, yes – but inclusive enough? Perhaps not. At last count, there were 105 000 homeless people living in Australia; our next count, the looming census, will probably tally even more. But incredibly, thanks to laws that require all voters to list a permanent address, homeless people effectively cannot vote in elections. Politicians don't even bother trying to win the 'homeless vote' – because there isn't one.

This fact caught the attention of our editor Simon Castles, and Sydney journalist Matthew Koury's story on how Australia's homeless are left out of the electoral process begins on page 24. Although homeless people have more pressing needs than keeping abreast of politics – in terms of priorities, food comes before newspapers – imagine what a difference those 105 000 votes could make. The UK is about to find out: in February, after a five-year campaign by various local *Big Issue* magazines and charity groups, the UK's homeless population was finally granted the right to vote.

Here in Australia, part of what *The Big Issue* seeks to do is to give disadvantaged people a voice – in part, by publishing their writings in the Street Sheet (see page 10). A small step, admittedly, but such opportunities can bear impressive fruit. Take Melbourne vendor Gabrielle, a regular Street Sheet contributor: Gabrielle

has just fulfilled a dream shared by writers all over Australia by having a piece of work accepted for publication in the respected literary journal *Meanjin*.

'Disadvantaged people are silenced,' says Gabrielle. 'My writing voice may never have been heard if not for the encouragement and practical help I've received. It would have remained a voice in the wilderness.' Gabrielle cites the guidance of writers Arnold Zable (currently running *Big Issue* vendor writing workshops), Barry Dickins (a former vendor writing tutor) and 'unofficial mentor' Natasha Cho (who coordinates the website www.homelesswriters.melbournefringe.org.au) as invaluable.

'A person's voice is their personal power,' says Gabrielle. '*The Big Issue* is a stepping stone: it shows that if you just lend a tiny helping hand to someone, you can help bring their voice out into the world.'

Meg Mundell
Acting editor

002 WORD ON THE STREET

FROM 'SURVIVOR' TO 'BIG BROTHER' AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN – WHY IS REALITY TV SO POPULAR?



Name: Naomi
Age: 26
Occupation: teacher

'It's an insight into other people's lives and the way that they live their lives, and everybody's curious to see if they're normal – or we're normal – or if they're strange.'



Name: Megan
Age: 27
Occupation: performer

'I think that essentially people are voyeuristic and they're interested to see if they're normal or not; they want to know what other people do in the privacy of their own homes.'

003 THE BIG STAT

COMPILED BY KHALIL HEGARTY



- Estimated amount (in tons) of dog faeces that is excreted by French dogs onto Parisian footpaths every day: 11
- Amount of money (in \$US) Bill Clinton charges for a guest speech at a private function: 200 000
- Number of troops currently serving in the Russian army: 2 100 000

025 OUT FOR THE COUNT

Every adult citizen is meant to have the right to vote. So why are most of Australia's 105 000 homeless people shut out of the electoral process? Matt Khoury reports. Photo by Marcus Struzina.

Greg lives on a park bench in Surry Hills, a homeless hub of inner-city Sydney. Alcohol is a frequent companion; he sips on bottles of VB as he mutters occasional streaks of wisdom shrouded by a cloud of less coherent utterings.

Greg's living circumstances mean that in at least one official capacity, he doesn't really exist. The voice of Australia's homeless population is muffled almost to silence, although their total number is close to 105 000. And their political voice is non-existent; basically, homeless people don't vote.

'They can't find you, they can't fine you,' says Greg, proud of his non-participation in the democratic process for the last 10 years. He doesn't think democracy is that great a thing, anyway.

'They' are the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), the bureaucratic arm of democracy, which deems voting compulsory for every citizen over the age of 18 with an address. If enrolled voters fail to vote they receive a fine of \$55, which is sent to their mailbox. If they don't have a mailbox, the AEC has nowhere to send the fine. Instead, the non-voter is found guilty in court, in their absence, for failing to vote and failing to pay the fine. Absentee voters can only forget once.

Adrian, a much younger man than Greg, is sharing Greg's bench for a while. His voice and face do not show signs of the continual alcohol abuse that Greg's body and mind have been subjected to. Instead, his ramblings ring from a man determined to change the direction of his life. He voted absentee after he left his fixed address, but was struck off the

electoral roll after he failed to vote.

'It tells me that my vote isn't desired anymore. I didn't pay the fine for not voting, so I suppose it's my fault I'm not on the electoral roll.' He pauses for thought, and finally says: 'I think the issues we are concerned with are different to the issues elections are about.'

So what do the homeless care about? Primarily, fundamental issues like food, clothes and shelter. According to Michael, neither Beazley nor Howard is likely to make much change to the pressing nature of such needs.

Michael, wearing thick glasses and a

conversations revolve around pub talk - common opinions without a lot of knowledge,' he says.

This hostel worker says the amount of newspapers he recycles each week is now one-fifth of the amount he used to recycle 15 years ago, when he started working at the hostel. He feels that the homeless people he is in contact with now seem to be reading less and are less interested in media issues.

Guha Prasad, speaking from Sydney City Mission's Matthew Talbot Hostel in Darlinghurst, says that only about 20 of all the transient patrons who frequent the hostel are listed on the electoral roll. The

There are currently 3522 registered itinerant electors in Australia. So who are these people? Kathy Mitchell, speaking on behalf of the AEC, says, 'Based on my experience, I think that 99.9 per cent to 100 per cent of [them] are not homeless, but are people like retiree workers travelling around Australia, and seasonal workers.'

For a person to be treated as an itinerant, the AEC needs that person to nominate an address for the purposes of correspondence. Essentially, in order to achieve this on a wide scale, the AEC would need to be in contact with the hostels that are aware of the local homeless population.

'The AEC does not have a specific program aimed at informing homeless people about enrolment and voting,' says Mitchell, 'although there has been some ad hoc work in the past.'

'I believe this is mainly because homeless people are a difficult target group to reach with information and our resources are not unlimited,' she says. These resources were tightened further when the Howard Government cut funding to the AEC in 1996.

Mitchell also points out that the criteria for voting rights, which include being an Australian citizen over 18 who has not served a prison sentence of five years or more, require that an elector be 'of sound mind'. Many homeless people who suffer from addictions and mental illness, says Mitchell, do not fall into this category.

Some have raised the concern that electorates could be stacked with itinerants to the advantage of a certain

'It tells me that my vote isn't desired anymore.'

baseball cap, sits in the same corner of the park as Greg and Adrian. 'I am basically illiterate on government,' he says, 'but I know they all screw up. Howard, Keating, Liberal, Labor, Pauline Hanson, doesn't matter. They all screw up and we've gotta pay the consequences of that.'

It seems that while the homeless are counted in the official population statistics, when it comes to voting time they don't count at all. A spokesperson from a Wesley Mission hostel in the inner city, who prefers to remain nameless, says, 'On census night [the government] make sure they have everyone down, and they do that well. But they don't do that for elections.'

The long-term homeless, however, are mainly apolitical and most

rest, he says, don't vote. The refuge has 180 beds, occupied for short amounts of time by various homeless citizens.

Homeless hostels are not encouraged by the government or the AEC to ensure their patrons are on the electoral roll. Most hostel workers have never seen an itinerant elector application form.

An Australian citizen who does not have a permanent place of residence can apply to be treated as an 'itinerant elector', under Section 96 of the Electoral Act. If successful, they are placed on the electoral roll in a seat of previous residence, or where their next of kin is currently enrolled. Alternatively, they can apply to be listed in the subdivision they were born in or, if they are immigrants, the subdivision where they have the closest connection.

party. If this concern about the integrity of politicians is actually helping block homeless people's lack of access to the voting process, then it seems that the homeless are paying dearly for the previous dishonesty of a handful of politicians.

'This issue hasn't got a lot of attention,' admits Mitchell. 'For something to change it would need political attention.'

But Senator Andrew Bartlett, electoral matters spokesperson for the Australian Democrats, says any categorisation of the homeless as being unfit to vote is inaccurate and unfortunate. The qualifications made by the AEC must be specific, he says, and they should not take such a crude blanket approach.

'I think it's symptomatic of homelessness and its invisible nature that these citizens are not on the roll,' says Bartlett.

'The amount of homeless people not on the roll is more than a Federal electorate. The electorate is missing out on their influence and political policies are less likely to be geared towards them. I think it would make a difference if they were on the roll.'

Bartlett says that similar problems exist with young people who are not on the electoral roll. This problem is countered by education through schools and universities and Bartlett suggests that a similar campaign could be conducted within the network of homeless hostels.

Margerate Blakers, speaking on behalf of the Greens in Canberra, has also suggested a policy aimed at including the disadvantaged in the voting process. 'It's just not on,' she says. 'We should get them to enrol and get them to vote.'

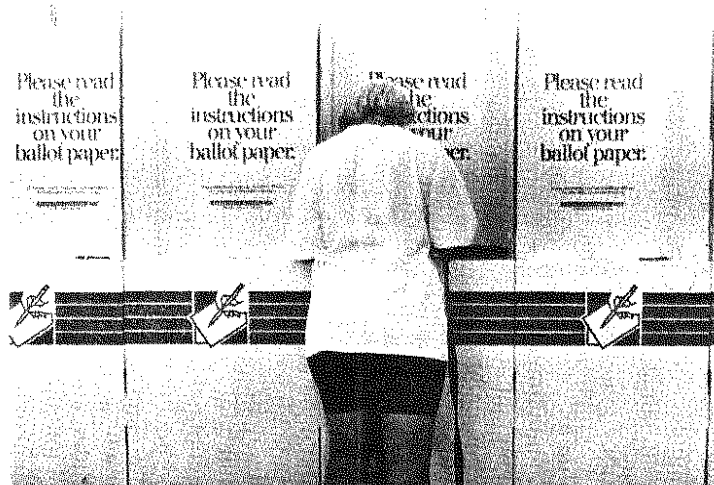


Photo: Reuters

'The amount of homeless people not on the roll is more than a Federal electorate.'

And support for the idea, at least in theory, doesn't stop there. Assistant national secretary of the Labor Party, Tim Gartrell, has said, 'The ALP supports every move by the AEC to maximise enrolment.' While the AEC's efforts to this end do not, on the face of it, seem to have been particularly far-reaching, Gartrell concedes that this is not an ideal situation: 'The current enrolment specifications preclude homeless people from voting. The criteria restricts access to the democratic process.'

Senator Faulkner, shadow minister for public administration and government services, also supports this view. The shadow ministry has examined the question before in relation to nomadic indigenous Australians, and has a general policy to maximise the electorate and

keep the electoral roll open after an election is called.

No Australian government, Liberal or Labor, has ever actively campaigned to use Section 96 of the Electoral Act to have the homeless listed as itinerant electors.

The recent inquiries into the integrity of the electoral roll have focused on the issue of fraud: that is, who is on the roll and shouldn't be, rather than who has been left off the roll but should have been included. Investigations have been geared towards the politicians, not the citizens.

A spokesperson for Senator Faulkner said any argument that uses the perceived threat of electoral rotting as a good reason not to make use of the itinerant elector legislation is an exaggeration, as

an AEC analysis has shown that such rotts don't occur on a wide scale.

'The current system protects the integrity of democracy,' says Lynton Crosby, National Director of the Liberal Party. 'You have to have safeguards that homeless people are not used to rot the electoral act.'

When *The Big Issue* questioned Crosby about the need for such safeguards, he cited evidence from the United States 2000 Presidential election, where the Democrats offered homeless people inducements, including packets of cigarettes, to go to the polling booth.

Crosby also said that homeless people are entitled to a provisional vote in an election by simply turning up to the polling booth on election day and proving they are entitled to vote in that seat.

When *The Big Issue* pointed out that homeless people by definition don't have a permanent residential address and would therefore find it difficult to prove their eligibility, Crosby replied, 'It's hard to argue that people moving around should be able to elect a local member, as they don't have a relationship with that area — unless they can prove they move around within one seat.' This opinion, however, did not seem to apply to absentee voters.

In the meantime, Greg, still parked on his bench in Surry Hills, is on a roll of a different kind. He's continually muttering that all politicians are rubbish, and he doesn't care about them. They talk lots of rubbish, he says, but never actually do anything. He keeps calling elections horse races, saying there isn't a decent horse in the race. He says the world would be a better place without politicians. It was almost as if Greg was getting his own back. □

025.1 VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

After a six-year battle, the UK's homeless can finally vote in elections.
By Meg Mundell.

A law introduced in the UK earlier this year marks a triumph for the voting rights of the UK's homeless population. On 16 February, after a six-year campaign led by *Big Issue* magazines in Britain and Scotland and supported by various charities, new legislation was introduced that gives rough sleepers and those in temporary accommodation the right to vote in elections.

In the past homeless people were unable to vote because they could not list a stable address on registration forms. But under the new Representation of the People Act, an estimate 250 000 homeless people are now able to participate in the democratic process: instead of having to give a permanent address, those with no fixed abode can

now list the address of a 'local connection' — which could be a place where they regularly spend time, even a local cafe in the vicinity where they sometimes sleep.

As well as this new 'local connection' provision, homeless people will also now be able to make use of 'rolling registration' — a system that allows them to register for voting up to a month before an election, instead of having just the one chance to register annually, as was the case previously.

Other vulnerable groups have also been included under the new Act: for the first time, patients in mental institutions (except those held for criminal behaviour) and remand prisoners will also be given the right to vote.

Rough sleeper Kevin Lipiatt from Penzance welcomed the new laws, saying, 'The right to vote may seem like a waste of time at first, but voting can change things.'

'This is good news for homeless people,' says Chris Holmes, director of UK homeless charity Shelter. 'It gives them a voice in the democratic process.' Kathleen Caskie, spokesperson for *The Big Issue* in Scotland, agrees: 'Homeless people can now have a direct influence on the politicians who are representing them.'

The push is now on to encourage the homeless population to have their say, with UK charities and *The Big Issue* joining forces in a bid to get as many homeless people registered as possible. □

021 DEAR P.M.

To launch our ongoing campaign to change the electoral laws so that homeless people can vote in the elections, *The Big Issue* is asking Australia's political leaders to respond to the following letter...

The Hon John Howard, MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2601

June 2001

Re: *Big Issue* campaign - Votes for the Homeless

Dear Prime Minister,

At the coming federal election, most of Australia's 105 000 homeless people will not vote. They are not on the electoral roll because they don't have a permanent place of residence.

The Big Issue Australia is writing to you, and to other political leaders in Australia, to launch an ongoing campaign to change the electoral laws to enable homeless people to vote.

The Big Issue is a fortnightly news and current affairs magazine sold by homeless, formerly homeless and unemployed vendors, who keep half of the magazine's cover price as a direct form of self-earned income. Enclosed is a copy of the magazine containing a feature story examining how the homeless are currently shut out of the electoral process.

In the lead-up to the federal election, *The Big Issue* will be representing Australia's sizeable homeless population in an effort to bring about changes to the voter registration system - changes that will give homeless Australians the opportunity to participate in our democracy. We will be keeping our readers informed of progress and encouraging them to join the campaign.

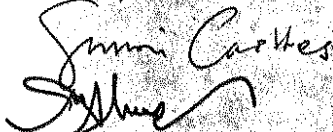
After a six-year campaign by various homeless charities and *Big Issue* magazines in the UK, in February of this year a new Act was passed, which paved the way for Britain's homeless population to vote in their elections. Britain's Representation of the People Act decrees that homeless people are now able to list a 'local connection' rather than a permanent address; they can also make use of 'rolling registration', a system that allows them to register for voting at any time up to one month before an election, instead of having just the one chance to register annually as was the case previously.

The Big Issue Australia hopes to achieve a similar outcome: we demand that for the coming federal election Australia's 105 000 homeless people are given the same chance to exercise their voting rights as other Australian citizens.

Can you please advise us by return mail whether you support our campaign to introduce new legislation, which, through similar provisions to those introduced in Britain, would allow homeless people to vote in Australian elections?

We look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely



Simon Castles and Meg Mundell,
Editor and Deputy Editor
Campaign Directors, Votes for the Homeless
The Big Issue Australia

**THE BIG
ISSUE
AUSTRALIA**

From *The Big Issue*, edition 128, June / July 2001.

This letter was sent out to the leaders of all major political parties in Australia. We are getting varied responses, some supportive - (August)

Note: it has since emerged that the almost completely underutilised 'Itinerant Electors' provision (in the Electoral Act) seems to be the most promising avenue to pursue.

001 UP FROM THE STREETS



Photo: Andy Vokessey

'I became homeless due to my fault and also due to childhood problems, social problems and unemployment.'

These are the words of Alan Priscott, who sells *The Big Issue* in Cape Town, South Africa. But Alan's words would no doubt resonate with homeless people the world over; with all those individuals whose personal experiences, when combined with the wider world of unemployment and gross inequality, have left them out in the cold.

One of the great things about the global street paper movement – of which the magazine you're holding is an integral part – is the way it has given a voice to people so long denied one. Sadly, as a society, we much prefer to walk on by homeless and long-term unemployed people (both literally and figuratively) than to hear their unsettling stories.

Street papers such as *The Big Issue*

have gone some way, I believe, towards addressing this situation. As well as providing an opportunity for the homeless and long-term unemployed to help themselves (\$1.50 of every *Big Issue* sold is direct income for the seller), street papers offer that most rare of things in the world of print media: column inches to the poor and disenfranchised.

There's the Street Sheet, for instance, which runs in every edition of the magazine, and is made up of contributions (writings, photography and artworks) by *Big Issue* vendors and other homeless and unemployed people (see p. 9). There's also the vendor portrait (see p. 8) – certainly the most popular page with readers – which gives brilliant snapshots of individuals struggling and striving at society's margins.

Additionally, this particular edition of *The Big Issue* includes a couple of special features on the subject of

giving a greater voice to the homeless and unemployed.

In what we hope will become a semi-regular feature, street papers around the world recently hooked up a number of their vendors by e-mail so they could share with each other – and ultimately us – the experience of living in poverty, whether that be in South Africa (like Alan, quoted above), Holland, Scotland, Brazil or Australia. This remarkable feature, 'Street Talk', begins on p. 16.

Also in this edition we report on our ongoing campaign to improve the voting rights of homeless people. As Australia goes to the polls, what is being done to ensure that those without an address are able to exercise their democratic right? Deputy editor Meg Mundell has been busy chasing our political leaders for answers. Her story begins on p. 21. □

Simon Castles
Editor

002

WORD ON THE STREET

SHOULD VOTING BE COMPULSORY?



Anthony, 18

'No. If you don't want to vote, you shouldn't be made to. I'd do a donkey vote every single time.'



Joel, 18

'No. In the US it's voluntary, and if you don't want to vote you shouldn't have to.'



003 THE BIG STAT

COMPILED BY KHALIL HEGARTY

- Total number of airline accidents that took place in the US in the year 2000: 3610
- Average time (in minutes) spent by a Palestinian person travelling every day: 69
- Cost (in yen) of renting a 2.3 square metre room for a month in Tokyo: 6600



020 THE LOST VOTE

In May this year The Big Issue revealed that, in Australia, most homeless people don't vote. So we launched a campaign and demanded our political leaders respond. On the eve of the Federal election, deputy editor Meg Mundell reports on what Howard and Beazley have to say about the thousands of Australians whose lives don't count.

Lights, camera, bulldust: the election is almost upon us. John Howard has had those gigantic caterpillar eyebrows groomed for his TV interviews, and Kim Beazley has slimmed down with a punishing cabbage soup regime.

At the time of writing, there's an ad on TV that encourages every Australian

citizen to enrol to vote. Produced by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), it's a heart-warming little number, and quite expensive looking. To the sound of John Farnham belting out 'You're the Voice', the camera follows everyday Australians as they mop floors, play lawn bowls, wash elephants and fly light aircraft. 'On

election day, every voice will be heard — and every vote counts,' says the voiceover.

But there are some places the camera doesn't go: into the dimly lit hallways of Australia's hostels and emergency accommodation services; under bridges; through abandoned buildings and vacant lots; and all those

other hidden spots where Australia's 105 000 homeless people spend their nights.

Perhaps the budget didn't stretch to visiting those places. Or perhaps the voiceover man in the TV ad is speaking codswallop. Because *not* everyone's voice will be heard on election day.

Forgive us for sounding frustrated. ▶

► But for four months, *The Big Issue* has been running a campaign centred on the fact that a high proportion of Australia's homeless population cannot vote in elections. People without an address are excluded from the electoral process. Avenues do exist for homeless people to vote, but those avenues are not signposted and are barely used.

Politicians don't bother trying to win the homeless vote – because, in effect, there isn't one. And a huge chunk of the population is politically silenced.

Organisations working with the homeless population have shown strong support for *The Big Issue's* campaign. Salvation Army communications manager John Dalziel

whom voiced support, trying to actually change the situation has proven to be a headache. In fact, the soundtrack to our campaign has been less John Farnham and more the dull thud of banging your head against a brick wall.

It's not that this subject isn't a big deal: there are issues of democratic representation and outright fairness, and those 105 000 votes could make a big difference. We suspect it's more to do with the fact that admitting Australia has a significant homelessness problem is a bit awkward. It raises some uncomfortable questions. Easier to ignore it.

Some countries seem to have gotten it together on this front. In the

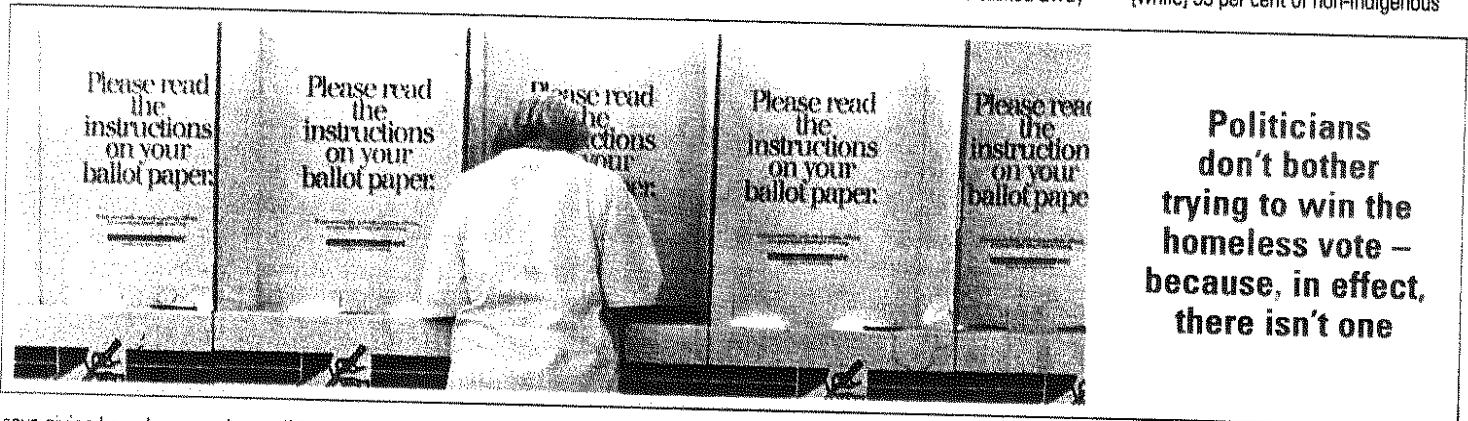
lived previously; where your next of kin is enrolled; or, as with recent immigrants, in the subdivision where you have the 'closest connection'.

But there are currently only about 4000 itinerant electors in Australia: a tiny figure when set against a homeless population of 105 000. What's more, in a previous interview with this magazine (Ed#126), the AEC estimated that '99.9 to 100 per cent of [itinerant electors] are not homeless, but are people like retiree workers travelling around Australia, and seasonal workers.'

In short, the Electoral Act does leave some room for homeless people to vote – but that room is tucked away

hard to get hold of but eventually had some strong words to say. He called for electoral reform: 'Homeless Australians deserve full access to the electoral roll. The Greens demand that the laws be changed to those similar in Britain where there is a special provision for those without a home. Failing this, the current itinerant's roll should be properly promoted and advertised so that homeless people use this process.'

Kim Beazley wins the prize for the second-longest letter. Here's an extract: 'It is appalling that almost all homeless people are not enrolled, only 53 per cent of 18 year olds are enrolled and 54 per cent of Aborigines are enrolled [while] 95 per cent of non-indigenous



**Politicians
don't bother
trying to win the
homeless vote –
because, in effect,
there isn't one**

says giving homeless people a political voice is vital not just for the sake of democracy, but also for the individuals themselves. 'I think it's very important, not least of all because it empowers homeless people and says to them: "Just because you're homeless doesn't mean nobody loves you, or that nobody cares about you."' Ensuring that homeless people can vote, says Dalziel, 'is a way to give some substance to that [assurance].'

None of the homeless services contacted by *The Big Issue* had ever received a visit from the AEC to discuss the issue of the homeless vote. However, these organisations say voting is an important issue for many of their clients: 'It is traditional on election day,' says Dalziel, 'that many homeless services put their people on a bus and drive them to the closest polling booth where they can cast an absentee vote.'

But the catch is, to be able to do that, they have to have already filled in an enrolment form – they must already be enrolled somewhere.'

Although we've had letters of response from several of our country's political leaders (see below), many of

UK earlier this year, the law was changed to give homeless people the vote. Instead of having to list a permanent address, they can now give a 'local connection' – any spot where they regularly spend time. Even Russia recently changed its laws to give homeless people voting rights.

There's been almost no research into exact numbers, but it is acknowledged that a large chunk of Australia's homeless population doesn't make it to the ballot box. But it's a cloudy issue. Depending on whom you ask, the facts vary widely. We do know that the address problem prevents many from enrolling and casting a 'normal' vote. If they are staying temporarily in a hostel, some may give that address. And as Dalziel explains above, if they are already on the roll and can get to a polling booth, they can cast an 'absentee' vote. But if they're not already on the roll, tough luck.

However, Australia's Electoral Act has a little-used subsection – the 'itinerant Elector' provision. To register as an itinerant elector, you don't need a fixed abode. You can enrol in the area where you were born or have

in a high tower and hardly anyone knows where it is.

If your head is reeling after the last few paragraphs – and let's admit it, the finer points of our Electoral Act are hardly sexy – imagine how difficult it is for someone who's homeless to negotiate the paperwork.

Speaking of paperwork, when *The Big Issue* wrote to our political leaders informing them of the situation and asking that the electoral process be made more accessible for homeless people, we did get responses from most. Some were encouraging; some curt; some were your standard response letter churned out of the photocopier.

We got this reply from John Anderson, deputy PM and leader of the National party (well, actually, from his 'senior advisor'): 'Mr Anderson has noted your comments and appreciates your taking the time to draw your views to his attention.' (Gee, thanks John! We really appreciate your second-hand appreciation.) A follow-up phone call revealed, rather abruptly, that Mr Anderson 'will not be making any further response'.

Green leader Bob Brown proved

Australians are enrolled. These dreadful statistics are not simply the result of extreme poverty and low education standards: government policies have also exacerbated the problem.'

(We presume Kim is referring to the policies of both Liberal and Labor down through the decades, not just those of the current Howard government.)

More from Kim, who seems to support *The Big Issue's* campaign: 'All Australians have the right to enrol and to vote and removing opportunities for the disadvantaged to enrol is undemocratic... A Labor government would take direct steps to improve and sustain the enrolment levels of young, indigenous and homeless Australians.'

Taking out the prize for the longest letter (just over two pages) was Tasmanian Liberal Senator Eric Abetz, replying on behalf of John Howard. Eric was pretty helpful, compiling a long lecture about the itinerant elector provision (but not acknowledging that hardly anyone uses it) and providing contact details for two important groups with rather long names: the AEC's School and Community Visits Program Working Party, and the Joint

020.1 SILENT MINORITY

We've heard from the country's political leaders – but what do homeless people themselves think about the whole voting issue?
By Meg Mundell.

As *The Big Issue* went to press, Hanover Welfare Services, a non-government agency set up to assist Melbourne's homeless population, was in the middle of carrying out a survey that seems to be yielding some interesting results.

'We wanted to give people who are experiencing homelessness a voice in the federal election campaign,' says Hanover's research and development manager Michael Horn.

Hanover asked 167 of its clients – people experiencing different stages of homelessness – a series of questions about voting and elections. Although the research was still being collated, Horn says preliminary findings suggest the homeless population feels somewhat excluded from the democratic process.

'Indicative findings suggest that slightly over half of those surveyed believe that the outcome of the election will make either no difference or not much difference to their situation,' says Horn.

Of those surveyed, 40 per cent who were eligible to vote in Australia's last federal election in 1998 did not vote. And early results indicate that some 43 per cent of the people surveyed said that they were unlikely to vote in the upcoming election.

The survey, carried out over a one-week period in October, also asked respondents to name the issues that politicians needed to give top priority. The three biggest issues cited were: unemployment and job creation; the provision of more affordable housing;

and increased assistance for people experiencing homelessness.

The most common answer to the question: 'What should our politicians be doing to assist you in your current situation?' was that they needed to provide more jobs. A commonly cited reason for not voting was that it was seen as 'unlikely to help me improve my situation'.

'These indicative findings suggest that more effort needs to be made to ensure that homeless people have a chance to vote in future elections,' says Horn. □

Hanover Welfare Services' full report will be released towards the end of October. Anyone interested in obtaining a copy can contact Michael Horn on (03) 9699 6388.

Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM).

Eric also said: 'The issue of enrolment and voting for homeless people has recently been included as an item for consideration by the AEC's [above-mentioned] Working Party, which develops strategies for educating Australians about enrolment and voting in federal elections...

'If considered necessary or appropriate, the AEC working party may suggest that the AEC, in its [JSCEM], recommend legislative changes in relation to assisting homeless people participate in the electoral process.'

(As it turns out, the JSCEM is not part of the AEC. It's a separate body.)

Democrats deputy leader Aden Ridgeway passed our letter on to the appropriate person, WA Senator Andrew Murray, who said he strongly backed our cause: 'I am aware of the new provisions operating in Britain and am sympathetic to your view. My party and I are strong advocates of maximising enrolment.

'As a first step, I have referred the British provisions to the Australian

Electoral Commission and have drawn the attention of the JSCEM (of which I am a member) to this issue.'

Andrew, who, true to his word, had followed through and raised the issue with both the AEC and the committee, contacted *The Big Issue* later with a query: 'The JSCEM has asked me to establish how your figure of 105 000 homeless people is made up.' (We didn't make it up, we promise! It came from the 1996 census.)

senators,' he said. 'It's up to the senator concerned to follow it up.' Had he heard of any homeless voting campaign? No, sorry.

All this chasing polities and joint committees around was getting tiring. So we spoke to the AEC direct.

'We want to make sure that everybody who is eligible to vote can have their say,' said AEC spokesman Brian Hallett. 'People shouldn't miss out just because they are homeless.'

'It's appalling that almost all homeless people are not enrolled'

This was all sounding rather encouraging. We imagined the joint standing committee standing – jointly, of course – around a huge oak table, discussing how to make it easier for homeless people to vote. So we made a follow-up call to the JSCEM to see how things were going.

But although Senator Murray did indeed raise the issue with the JSCEM, the committee spokesman we contacted didn't know what we were on about. 'The committee only considers issues raised by individual

Hallett said the issue of the homeless vote was raised within the AEC earlier this year (thanks, it seems, to *The Big Issue's* campaign), but that the commission's main task this year has been preparing for the Federal election.

'Elections are the great leveller. My vote and your vote and Kerry Packer's vote all get equal value,' said Hallett. But, he conceded, 'It's fair to say that [the homeless population] has not been a target group. Our main target group has been young people.' So far, the

homeless vote has not really been high on the agenda, he said, 'but it probably should be... Perhaps this is something that deserves more attention.

'It's fair to say that there are some systemic issues here, to do with the way elections work, that are based on some premises that don't apply to all Australians.'

Hallett said working with organisations that deal with the homeless on a daily basis would be the best avenue. 'We're always keen to work with groups in the community who are difficult to access,' he said. The AEC already has extensive programs in place to reach rural voters, including 'remote mobile polling' – sending ballot-box toting teams into the far outback in four-wheel drives, helicopters and light aircraft.

After every Federal election, there is a public inquiry into how the election was conducted. The integrity of the system is scrutinised, submissions are made, politicians debate the issues, fists are banged on oak tables, a vast amount of paper gets shuffled... and, if *The Big Issue* has its way, laws get changed. Stay tuned. □