

Sent: Friday, 7 June 2002 9:14 PM
To: JSCEM@aph.gov.au

Subject: Submission

From: Linda Reeb

Address:

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.

1. My Voting Story

I am enrolled to vote at the same address as my parents in Australia (my last address of residence).

They very promptly and diligently contact me as soon as the announcement for an election is made. They then arrange for the local electoral office to forward me an application for a postal vote.

This usually takes around 2 weeks to arrive.

I complete the forms, get everything witnessed by another Australian and send it all back as quickly as possible. Then I must again wait for the actual voting papers to arrive.

Once again, they must be filled in, witnessed by another Australian and post marked before the end of election day.

I followed this process for the federal election last year, sending in my application papers before the end of September.

Much to my annoyance my voting papers did not arrive until approximately 1 week AFTER the November 10 election!!!!

Terribly useful !

I was particularly interested in contributing to this election, as foreign policy never has such significance to you as when you view it in action from abroad.

I was denied the opportunity to exercise my right to vote by an antiquated and inefficient system. It is also possible that I may be fined for failing to submit my vote, or struck off the role as a consequence.

How many others had the same experience or gave up because it is all too hard?

2. My view of the situation

The ABS tells us that around 850 000 Australians reside abroad. I think there are significantly more, as I know many whom are not registered with their Consular or Embassy services.

Anyway, based on this figure, more than 4.4 % of the entire population of the country are overseas for any given election.

I suspect that the majority are not registered to vote; don't know how to be eligible to vote; don't know HOW to vote from overseas; or can't be bothered when they find out how much drama is involved with voting from overseas.

This number is equivalent to the population of approximately four (4) Federal Electorates and yet we remain unrepresented and disenfranchised as Australians and voters.

The laws require the Government to make every reasonable effort to notify electors of an impending election. They must give sufficient time for people to register to vote and then give them information about how, where and when to vote.

Yet NO effort is made to notify the huge percentage of the population whom happen to be overseas. Consulates and Embassies will co-ordinate delivery of voting papers, but ONLY after you have contacted them to tell them that you want to vote.

In times past, when communication processes were less sophisticated, this omission may have been able to be justified, but in this electronic age, it hardly seems reasonable. The advent of the internet age means that it is easy to keep up to date with news, issues and opinion across the globe.

Let's put the figures into perspective and compare this number of Australian abroad with other populations at 'home'.

850 000 Australians abroad is approximately equal to:

- Double the entire indigenous population (430K)
- The combined population of the ACT, Tasmania and Northern Territory (300K, 500K & 200K);
- Half the population of Brisbane (1.6M)
- 80% of the population of Adelaide (1.1M); or
- ¼ of the population of Melbourne (3.4M)

(figures courtesy of the ABS, Dec. 2001)

Imagine the response if a Government decided to 'leave out' any of the above groups!

'Oh, by-the-way Brisbane - we're only going to let half of you vote!!!'

3. Possible Solutions

Obviously the task of tracking the movements of every Australian who leaves the country is not realistic. And yet this does not exclude the development of a number of relatively simple and efficient methods of monitoring this population and engaging them effectively in voting.

3.1 Embassies and Consuls around the globe need to be formally required to support Australians abroad through active efforts to register and notify them of significant events such as elections.

3.2 On-line voting is an obvious solution. The prevalence of personal computers, portable laptops and internet cafes, along with the abundance of free universal email address services means that the majority of Australians abroad have cheap and easy access to the internet.

I have a friend who emailed me from an internet café in a remote village in Cambodia last year ! There are very few locations remaining in the world where the internet has not ventured.

Expats should be able to register and vote on-line; as well as be notified of impending elections by email.

An additional benefit of on-line voting would be the capacity to set up voting papers such that informal voting becomes a thing of the past. This is also a service which could be available to Australians at home, eliminating much of the labour intensive processes involved with paper and postal voting.

3.3 A number of other countries recognise the value of their travelling citizens and ensure they have active representation in their home governments and parliaments. Ultimately, Australians living abroad deserve their own MP, whose role it would be to keep them informed of developments at home, as well as to represent their interests abroad and on the home front.

Every experience I have had with Government Offices during my absences from Australia has left me feeling like I am some kind of traitor, criminal or ?non-person? when abroad.

Australians venture abroad for a range of reasons:

- short and long term travel;
- study;
- research;
- business and professional opportunities; and
- personal relationships with foreigners.

For many of us, the way we are treated by our own country during our absences has a significant influence on our decisions to return home.

The skills, knowledge, experience and cross-cultural resources which these people obtain while away from home is of incalculable value to Australia and her future. Not to mention the financial contribution they could bring back to Australian shores.

While we fail to harness this energy and enable it to contribute to the evolution of Australian society, all Australians are poorer and we risk losing it to the benefit of other countries indefinitely.