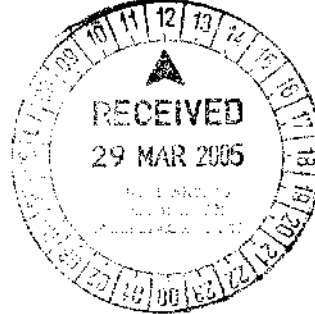


THE NATIONALS

March 22, 2005

The Secretary
 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
 Parliament House
 CANBERRA ACT 2600

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	53
Date Received	29-3-05
Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>



Dear Sir

I write on behalf of the Hinkler Divisional Council of The Nationals in regard to your recently commissioned *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*.

Our Divisional Council wishes to put two points to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters regarding the conduct of the 2004 Federal election.

1) Distribution of Postal Votes

Based on the concerns of our members, comments from the public and media reports, we submit that the Australian Electoral Commission should move away from centralised distribution of postal votes. Although on the surface it might appear that centralisation delivers some cost savings, we must recognise that the integrity of the poll is far more important.

There were instances at the last Federal election where a family - having sought a number of postal votes - did not receive them, or one member of the household received his/her postal vote but not the other family members. There were also well reported instances of the wrong ballot papers being sent to the voters (ie the ballot papers were posted to the entirely wrong electoral division).

Across Australia there are a number of towns with the same name, streets of the same name, and sometimes two similarly named streets in the same town. It follows that the Divisional Returning Officer and his/her staff are in a far better position to know these nuances and therefore play a key role in ensuring ballot papers get to the correct people. In terms of timeliness, Divisional Returning Officers also know the various mail exchanges within their Divisions and can ensure that ballot papers get to voters in a timely and efficient manner. Given that some country areas have mail runs only once or twice a week, missing a particular connection can mean mail is delivered 3, 4, or even 7 days later than might otherwise be the case, despite the best intentions of the centralised distribution point.

If a person in an unusual or emergent situation, seeks a postal vote in the latter part of the pre-poll period, centralisation of distribution may well disenfranchise him/her.

We have heard of instances in the recent election where postal votes, having arrived in country areas in the last week of the campaign, could not be returned for date-stamping by the cut-off date prior to election day. In such instances, we understand that the postal vote envelope had to be verified by the mail contractor as having been received by that date and initialled accordingly. We submit that this would be less likely to occur where mail distribution came from the relevant Divisional Returning Office (DRO).

2) Interstate Absentee Voting

Members received a number of complaints from interstate voters that they could not get to a DRO to vote on election day. DRO offices are not 'close' (sometimes there is 400km between them) and an examination of the Queensland coastline demonstrates how difficult it can be for people visiting centres between the major provincial cities. For example, there are DRO's at Brisbane, Nambour, Maryborough, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns. It is not reasonable to expect voters between these centre to travel hundreds of kilometres to vote if business, holiday, family commitment or emergency situations place them in a locality at a distance from those offices.

This is not confined to Queensland – we know of one Hinkler voter who tried to vote at three different, reasonably-sized towns in Victoria on election day, to find that not one of them was a DRO.

It should also be recognised that the by-passing of major cities on the Pacific and Bruce Highways means DRO's are not readily available to the travelling public. We would therefore submit that up to three additional polling places should be strategically placed in each regional electorate to maximise access to interstate voters.

We further submit that these might include:

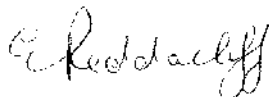
- 1) The second provincial city or major town of the electorate (eg in Hinkler's case, Gladstone);
- 2) Popular holiday destinations off the major highway systems;
- 3) Strategic locations on major highways (eg in Hinkler's case, Childers, Gin Gin or Miriam Vale, all of which are more than 50 kilometres aware from the current DRO)

3) Identification for Provisional Voters

While there is a wider ongoing debate on the issue of the efficacy of an individual having to produce identification before joining the electoral roll, we would submit that there is a strong case for people seeking a Provisional Vote to show some form of basic evidence of their identity to the poll clerk.

Our members have also noted that provisional voting in the Hinkler electorate has increased five-fold since 1993. This is a remarkable trend, given that the electorate has not changed markedly in character over that time. The establishment of the basic bona-fides of applicants adds to the integrity of the poll and eliminates the opportunities for fraud.

Yours sincerely



Betty Reddacliff
Secretary
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