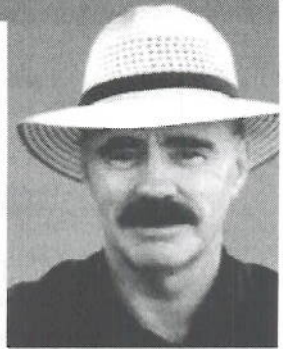




# The Hon Warren Snowdon MP

Federal Member for Lingiari  
Minister for Defence Science and Personnel



9 May 2008

Daryl Melham MP  
Chairman  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
[jscem@aph.gov.au](mailto:jscem@aph.gov.au)  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT

Dear Daryl,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the conduct of the 2007 Federal Election.

I have discussed with my staff and others who understand both the importance of maximising opportunities for electors to exercise their vote and also the logistics and resources available for the conduct of elections in 'remote' and 'very remote locations'.

My brief comments following relate to electoral enrolment, the locations of mobile polling booths, the type of polling booths used in remote communities, electoral education, the use of interpreters, the conduct of electoral officials, provisional voting, communication, flexibility and miscellaneous issues pertaining generally to the Australian Electoral Commission.

## Electoral Enrolment

The Australian Electoral Commission's Northern and Central Australian Remote Areas Strategy (NACARAS) has resulted in improved enrolment in 'remote' and 'very remote' areas. However more needs to be done.

Batchelor College Campus' at Batchelor and Alice Springs have up to 250 students visiting for block learning periods of up to three weeks at a time during the academic year. As well many remote communities have yearly festivals where visitors come from homelands and nearby communities to participate in sporting and cultural activities. The AEC should take advantage of these congregations.

**Recommendation: That the Australian Electoral Commission conduct enrolment drives at Batchelor College Campus' throughout the Territory and at Community Festivals each year.**

Alice Springs:  
PO Box 4007  
Alice Springs NT 0871  
Tel: (08) 8952 9696  
Fax: (08) 8952 5922

Darwin:  
GPO Box 1596  
Darwin NT 0801  
Tel: (08) 8942 3830  
Fax: (08) 8942 3834

Parliament House:  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Tel: (02) 6277 7620  
Fax: (02) 6273 7112

### Mobile Polling Booth Locations

The mobile polling schedule is in need of some revision. It gives the appearance of being based on historic reasons for the choice of locations. Indigenous communities are highly mobile and some locations are no longer occupied whilst others have grown and are therefore deserving of a polling booth. For example Nourlangie Community in Kakadu National Park has not been occupied for at least eight years but still attracts a booth. The community has moved to nearby Whistleduck Creek which does not attract a booth.

Similarly the Palmerston Indigenous Village continues to grow with more than fifty enrolled voters but does not attract a booth. The same can be said for Gunn Point camp and the Amangal Community near Adelaide River.

**Recommendation: That a review of mobile polling locations be conducted before the next election.**

### Type of Polling Booths

It is apparent that a number of community and homeland residents don't get an opportunity to vote because they travel from their community to a larger population centre for any of the normal reasons (health, education, shopping, sport, business etc) and are absent from their community on the day the mobile poll is conducted. The day(s) they are in a neighbouring larger community is not the day that the mobile poll is at that place.

An opportunity for people to vote who would not otherwise have an opportunity to exercise their right and to meet this obligation can be provided by conducting longer pre-poll type booths at the larger communities. The obvious success of the trials of this type at Wadeye indicates that they be extended to other larger communities as well.

In addition in recent elections homelands in Kakadu have generally produced poor electoral turnouts. Yet nearly all Kakadu homeland residents do their shopping, business etc in Jabiru. An extended pre-poll conducted at the Jabiru Community Hall would significantly increase the turnout for Kakadu voters.

**Recommendation: That Wadeye, Maningrida, Nguiu, Galiwinku, Ngukurr and perhaps others have longer opening times for polling (i.e. more than one day) and that Jabiru has a pre-poll booth of more than the current two day period.**

### Electoral Education

The implementation of NACARAS has resulted in improved electoral education outcomes. However it is apparent that more needs to be done. The simple fact is that inadequate electoral education has been a feature of Federal Election planning in Lingiari since 1996.

**Recommendation: That a comprehensive electoral education program be developed and implemented as soon as possible. The program should be aimed primarily but**

**not exclusively at English as a second language speakers and younger people (i.e. those under the age of 35 years).**

### Interpreters

Wherever the AEC uses interpreters in the conduct of mobile polling there is a relatively smooth operation and I suspect much limited incidence of informal voting. However it is apparent that where interpreters are not used or unavailable operations are more problematic and informal voting increases.

**Recommendation: That interpreters be engaged by the AEC wherever there are a significant number of voters who speak a language other than English as a first language.**

### Provisional Voting

Changes to the Electoral Act requiring voters to produce identification to secure a provisional or declaration vote has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of voters lodging these types of votes. In 2004 in Lingiari 480 voters lodged declaration votes that were found to be valid. However in 2007 this group had shrunk to 129.

Evidence seems to suggest that where AEC officials asked voters to produce identification very few had such identification on their persons. Many voters were instructed to return with valid identification. It is apparent that in the main they did not. Where local community members were used as interpreters they generally provided evidence of the valid identification of voters claiming a provisional or declaration vote.

**Recommendation: That AEC polling officials be instructed to seek local community identification of voters seeking provisional or declaration votes.**

### Communications and Flexibility

The AEC should be commended for the excellent service by way of communications they provided to candidates and their representatives in the 2007 Election.

The regular newsletter produced by the AEC was well received. As well AEC officials in Darwin and regional centres were generally very helpful in clearing up issues before they became more serious problems.

In addition the AEC demonstrated genuine flexibility in adding new polling locations when it became apparent that significant numbers of voters were available at another location.

**Recommendation: That the AEC continue to produce newsletter updates to candidates and their representatives and to be flexible in making arrangements for the location of new polling booths as necessary.**

### Miscellaneous

*"Which party do you want to vote for?"*

This question was consistently asked of Indigenous voters by some AEC staff. 'Party' meaning political party is not a word widely understood to have a political context by most Indigenous people. Some connect this English word to 'corroboree' and hence there is sometimes a puzzled, quizzical look in response to the question. This provides some light relief, but doesn't progress the conduct of the voting to any degree.

The approach used by other staff by asking 'who or which mob do you want to vote for?' is more effective.

### Assisted Votes

The rules regarding assisted votes are clear. However not all candidate's representatives understand them and on some occasions AEC officials seem not to understand them either.

At Wadeye the ALP scrutineer had to point out the rule contained in the AEC's booklet to the AEC staff in charge of the booth whereby when a voter indicates that they want a scrutineer inside the booth to assist then that person can do so. Some staff were over-zealous in initiating the process by asking '*Do you want me to help?*'. If left to themselves, voters would have preferred to get someone they are comfortable with to assist them.

### Booth Boundaries

Booth boundaries should be clearly marked and should be clearly and firmly explained prior to the start of polling to all candidates' representatives and repeated on a regular basis given that new workers replace others at regular intervals.

**Recommendation: That the AEC take note of the above and inform all their staff accordingly.**

Once again thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in regard to the 2007 Federal Election and I trust my comments will be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



Warren Snowdon MP  
Member for Lingiari