

Democratic Audit of Australia

Submission to the JSCEM Inquiry into the NSW Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment (Automatic Enrolment) Bill 2009

22 January 2010

Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary,

1. Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The Democratic Audit of Australia strongly supports the introduction of automatic enrolment in Australia and previous submissions to JSCEM inquiries have reflected this. As the current inquiry focuses on “implications of the New South Wales Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment (Automatic Enrolment) Bill 2009 for the conduct of Commonwealth elections” we restrict ourselves here to such matters directly.
2. The next NSW election will be held in March 2011. It is close to certain that the next federal election will be held well before then, very probably before November 2010.
3. We hope the NSW Electoral Commission chooses to postpone public implementation of automatic enrolment – the sending out of letters and advertising and so on – until after the federal election. This would help avoid confusion among people in the NSW portion of the Commonwealth electoral roll.
4. The legislation’s facilities for election-day enrolment are to be applauded, but caution must be exercised. Written electoral rolls came into being in Britain in 1832 precisely because of problems, including delays, associated with election-day “enrolment”. It made sense to sort out who could or could not vote well in advance. Election-day enrolment would be time-consuming for officials and should be a fallback option only.
5. However, automatic enrolment should minimise the demand for election-day enrolment.
6. The plan to have electronic versions of the state’s full electoral roll at every polling booths is a good one and should mitigate concerns outlined in paragraph 4. Officials will be able to quickly determine if an elector is enrolled and where.
7. We hope the Australian Electoral Commission gives consideration to similarly providing electronic copies of the list to all or most polling places across Australia, or at least those with a historically large number of provisional and/or absent votes, at federal elections. Among its advantages would be that it would likely decrease the number of provisional vote applications and very likely “rescue” votes.

8. Another issue is turnout. When politicians and observers draw their conclusions regarding the success or otherwise of NSW's "smart enrolment", they are likely to notice that the percentage turnout has dropped. This will probably occur, for the simple fact that the electoral roll will be more comprehensive, and not all the additional enrollees will turn out to vote.
9. Australian turnout numbers are currently measured as the number of voters as a percentage of the electoral roll. These numbers are quite misleading in many ways and we should not get hung up about them. The important thing to watch is the raw numbers of people voting or, better still, estimates of the percentage of voters as a proportion of eligible citizens.
10. There are likely to be teething problems with the new procedure in NSW. We hope these are relatively few and minor for the sake of NSW voters and to encourage the adoption of a similar procedure at the Commonwealth level.

Peter Brent
Brian Costar