

SUBMISSION 39

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To: Committee, EM (REPS)
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1 June, 2006

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

I take this opportunity in writing to inform you of my own experiences and at the same time to highlight my concerns regarding education and responsibilities under the Australian electoral system.

Taking into account the advice I received from my tax accountant prior to leaving Australia in August 1996, I forwarded to the Australian Electoral Commission an application to be registered as an eligible overseas elector. Unfortunately, I was unaware that my registration would be for a period of 3 years only. In addition, I was not aware that the 3 year period was extended to 6 years.

During each of my overseas postings I have lived in Singapore (1996/98), Bangkok (1998/2003) and now in Paris (since 2003). When I arrived in each of these cities, I registered with the Australian Embassy by providing my address and contact details. I have voted in all Federal Elections since leaving Australia in 1996 with the Australian Embassy (Singapore, Bangkok and Paris). I have always assumed my vote was counted until I received a letter at my Paris address from the Australian Electoral Commission (Division of North Sydney) on 7 December, 2004 informing me that my vote was not counted on the last Federal Election as they could find no evidence in the enrolment records to indicate that my name was, or should have been, on the electoral roll for this Division. At this time, as I did not know that I had in fact been disenfranchised, I presumed that an incorrect ballot paper was used and therefore, the reason my vote was not counted.

By chance I received this year a very informative email ("What You Need to Know About Voting in Australia While You Live Overseas") from the Southern Cross Group in Brussels advising me of the rules about voting from overseas. With this information I immediately sent an email to the Australian Electoral Commission who subsequently informed me by email dated 24 March, 2006 that as my enrolment had lapsed I had been deleted from the electoral roll. I must say that they were very efficient in answering my enquiry within just a couple of hours.

It is, to say the least, extremely disappointing that I was not made aware in the last 10 years of what I needed to know as an Australian living overseas concerning electoral matters. Unfortunately, today I have been disenfranchised and I believe that as an Australian citizen

with the intention of returning to Australia that I should have the right to vote. I am surprised to learn that there are currently approximately 500,000 Australian citizens of voting age overseas who are in the same predicament as myself. I strongly believe that better education for Australian Citizens concerning electoral matters needs to be put into place.

I am surprised that in all this time I have not received any information or updates concerning my rights from the AEC. As mentioned above, I have registered myself at all Australian Embassies in the countries that I have resided and I have participated in all Federal Elections and with this I have therefore duly informed the government of my whereabouts.

My recommendations to improve education of expatriate voters are as follows:

1. Require Australian Embassies to inform Australian citizens by way of a brochure made available within the embassy.
2. Tax accountants should be given detailed information so that they can pass it onto their clients.
3. During each Federal Election a simple brochure could be given to each citizen voting at overseas embassies advising/reminding them of their rights and duties.
4. The AEC could easily obtain details from the Australian Embassies of Australian citizens registered and forward information to each of these citizens.

I am an Australian and will always be an Australian - I take my responsibilities seriously as an Australian citizen, hence my participation in all Federal Elections during the past 10 years. Of course, I must admit that it is through my own ignorance of the law that I have now been disenfranchised however, if I had been well informed in the past of my rights as a citizen overseas I would not have let my registration lapse and would today be an Australian citizen with voting rights.

I am passionate about Australia and will always continue to call Australia my home no matter where I live. It would be great if the Australian Government could look seriously into this legislation and listen to professional groups such as The Southern Cross Group so that changes can be made to protect the rights of all its citizens.

Yours faithfully,

Alison Hogg