

From: Nicholas Evangelou
Sent: Monday, 3 June 2002 4:25 AM
To: JSCEM@aph.gov.au
Cc:
Subject: Submission

From: Nicholas Evangelou

Message:

To: The Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee
on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Members of the Joint Standing Committee,

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. I would like to thank you for the opportunity of voicing my comments.

I am an Australian citizen residing on a long-term basis overseas; currently my residence is in Belgium. I come from the Australian electorate of Canberra, ACT and I departed from Australia in 1990. I visit Australia regularly, at least for a few weeks every year, since I have strong personal and family links there. I expect to settle back in Australia, where my family resides. I maintain a strong interest and keep up with Australian issues through my personal contacts, correspondence with family and reading the Australian electronic media via the Internet.

The last time I voted for an Australian federal election was prior to 1990 from the electorate of Canberra. A few years after my departure from Australia, I tried to vote for the then Australian federal election, but at the Australian Embassy in Brussels where I went to cast my vote, I was told that most likely I was no further on the Electoral Roll and therefore I could not vote. This advice was confirmed with the AEC. A few years later, I was especially disappointed that I was not allowed to vote in the November 1999 "Referendum on the Republic" and again for the 2001 Federal Election.

Had I known prior to my departure from Australia what I had to do to stay on the Roll while overseas, I would have certainly taken the appropriate action. However, as the current rules stand, I still would not have been able to stay on the Roll, as my visits to Australia may not last as long as the minimum required period. I consider that the time limitations allowed under the Electoral Act for:

(a) enrolling from overseas (within 2 years of date of departure);
(b) registering as an overseas voter (within 2 years of date of departure);
are far too restrictive, as usually one becomes aware of the relevant requirements when the need arises. The time period between Federal elections is normally greater than 2 years, so if somebody is unaware of the Electoral Act requirements and does not take the appropriate action, it is possible that the

time limitations foreseen in the Act will have been exceeded by the time any action can be taken and consequently the citizen in question is actually disenfranchised.

Today, in many democratic countries (e.g., USA, EU member states, etc.) there is a worrying trend of less and less citizens participating in the electoral process and measures are being taken to turn around this phenomenon; the legitimacy of the democratic system itself is at stake. In my view, it is extraordinary that a modern, forward looking, democratic and mobile society such as that of Australia would inhibit those of its citizens who show an interest and a will to vote, to do so. The cheapest and the easiest means to increase the number of voters, is to redress Acts and regulations whose usefulness has been lost in time, and today stifle the very intentions they were set to serve.

I believe that the AEC or other Government agencies can also play a more substantial role in providing and distributing information about upcoming elections (Federal, State and Territory). Especially using the Internet, it is possible for these agencies to contact a huge number of voters at a comparatively small cost - be it in Australia or overseas; the underlying technology is not restricted by geographic barriers. At the moment, I receive timely and relevant information (e.g., as in the case of your present Inquiry) from the "Southern Cross Group" or SCG. If a volunteer organisation, such as the SCG, can offer this level of service without any financial resources, I would suggest that the relevant Government agencies with the resources they have, can do as well, if not better.

Further, I would certainly welcome the possibility of optionally voting via the Internet - assuming the confidentiality, security and privacy requirements have been properly addressed. The tyranny of distance is becoming easier to manage.

In conclusion, I consider that the terms of the Electoral Act should be reviewed because currently (at least some) overseas Australian citizens who do maintain a strong interest in and links to Australia, are disenfranchised. In particular, the time limitations for registration as an overseas voter are far too strict and there are no means of appeal once an overseas citizen's name has been taken off the Roll. Further, modern technology should be used to inform voters of upcoming elections and potentially enable them to vote, irrespective of their geographic location.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Evangelou