

SUBMISSION 78

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Commonwealth Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

C/o Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

By email jcsem@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

I attach my submission to the inquiry by the Commonwealth Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry to the 2007 Federal Election.

I am a blind person and my submission calls for the provision made for the 2007 election for accessible voting arrangements for people who are blind or vision impaired to be retained and expanded for future elections.

I would appreciate an opportunity to present this submission personally by giving evidence to the Committee at its hearings in Canberra. My contact details areas above.

Yours sincerely

Robert Altamore BA LLB CM

Commonwealth Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Submission to inquiry into the 2007 Federal election

In this submission, I ask that the Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommend to the Parliament that the provision made for the 2007 election for accessible voting arrangements for people who are blind and vision impaired be retained and expanded for future elections.

I make this submission as a blind person and a person who has, since the age of 10, had a particular interest in Australian politics and society and in the conduct of elections. In my Arts degree I undertook major studies in Political Science. In 2000, I represented the ACT Branch of Blind Citizens Australia (the National peak consumer body) for people who are blind and vision impaired, on the ACT Electoral Commission's Reference Group on Electronic Voting. The ACT 2000 election was the first election at which Australians voted electronically and in which Australians who are blind and vision impaired were able to cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote. In 2004, I was again a member of the ACT Electoral Commission's Reference Group on Electronic Voting, this time also representing the broader disability sector as a member of the ACT Disability Advisory Council. Through these experiences, I was not only able to put forward ideas obtained by my discussions with other people who are blind or vision impaired, on how the proposed ACT electronic voting system could be made accessible to them, I was able to understand and appreciate the concerns of political parties as representatives of their candidates to ensure the effectiveness and integrity of any electronic voting system.

As a person with a lifelong interest in politics and a blind person, I was particularly thrilled to be able to cast my first secret, independent and verifiable vote at the 2000 ACT election. In 2004, the ACT and Commonwealth elections were held within a week of each other. As I needed to do a pre-poll for both elections, I had, within the one half hour, the contrasting experience of casting an assisted vote at the Commonwealth election and a secret independent and verifiable vote at the ACT election. Following the 2007 election, I spoke to many of my friends who are blind and vision impaired and who had been able to cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote for the first time. They were all very happy with the voting experience and hope to be able to continue to vote independently and in secret at future elections. I believe that electronically assisted voting for people who are blind or vision impaired should be introduced as a permanent measure with at least one polling booth at each polling station being equipped to enable a person who is blind or vision impaired to cast a secret independent and verifiable vote. Many of my friends who are blind or vision impaired were disappointed that they could not cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote at the last election because there was either no accessible polling booth in their electorate or because they were unable to travel to the one accessible polling booth in the 29 electorates equipped with facilities for them. I believe that people who are blind or vision impaired should be able to cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote wherever they vote.

A matter which I would emphasise is the need for an adequate lead time up to the election for promotion of electronic assisted voting within the community of people who are blind and vision

impaired and for opportunities during this period for people who are blind and vision impaired to have hands on experience in and training with the system to be used at the election. This is important to ensure that people who are blind and vision impaired are aware that they have the option to cast a secret, independent and verifiable vote and have the confidence to use the voting process. In the ACT, where we have had accessible electronic voting for people who are blind and vision impaired for two elections, we have found that awareness and confidence are the two big barriers to people who are blind or vision impaired using accessible voting processes.

The system for electronic assisted voting used for people who are blind or vision impaired at the last election had some good features that should be retained and built on for future elections. These include: the clear voice, the volume control function, use of the telephone pad keyboard layout and clear instructions on the computer and in writing in accessible formats. I also mention that having the accessible voting booth situated in a quiet area is most helpful. In the two Canberra elections, people who are blind or vision impaired who used the accessible voting terminals provided for them reported as a major difficulty the location of the accessible voting booth in noisy areas of polling stations. This made listening and concentration difficult.

I also want to address the issue of accessible voting information.

The Australian Electoral Commission provides its householder information pamphlet on the voting process in accessible formats and will, on request, provide a person with lists of the House of Representatives and Senate Candidates in their preferred accessible format. This is a vital measure to support people who are blind and vision impaired in casting a secret, independent and verifiable vote and is a valued service which must be continued.

For people who are blind or vision impaired, as for members of the general community, reading of party policies and how to vote documents is a critical part of deciding their vote. People who are blind or vision impaired are largely excluded from this process as Australian political parties have not made their information available to them. Political parties do not provide their how to vote cards in accessible formats. Political party policies, pre-policy discussion documents and how to vote information are often only made available in normal size print or as a PDF file on a website. Neither of these formats is accessible to a person who relies on large print, Braille or screen reading software on their computer to access printed information. I suggest that the failure of political parties to provide their information in accessible format for people who are blind or vision impaired is a failure by them to comply with their obligations under the goods and services provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. This failure of political parties is also unacceptable as they receive substantial public funding for their electoral expenses. I believe that people who are blind or vision impaired should have the same opportunity to cast an informed vote as other Australian citizens. I ask the Committee to recommend to the Parliament that the Commonwealth Electoral Act be amended to make it compulsory for political parties, who receive Government funding to provide information crucial to the electoral process, such as how to vote instructions in accessible formats. The Committee might also recommend that the Electoral Commissioner write to political parties to remind them of their obligations under the Disability

Discrimination Act to make the election information available to people who are blind or vision impaired in accessible formats.