

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee
On Electoral Matters
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

INQUIRY INTO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION (AEC)

I provide the following comments addressing the terms of reference for the above-mentioned inquiry.

I would like to bring to the Committee's attention that I have been employed by the AEC as a Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) since July 1989 however, my comments are as a private individual and in no way should be read as expressing any official AEC view. I would also like to advise the Committee that until recently I was a staff representative on an AEC State Consultative Committee and also a staff representative on an AEC sub-committee investigating the trial amalgamation of a number of divisional offices in the AEC.

The purpose of my submission is to provide the Committee with information that I believe is up to date and relevant to this inquiry. I feel that the committee should be aware of the current situation with co-location of divisional offices as well as the level of staffing resources in divisional offices. My comments are designed to provide the committee with information only and I am not expressing any personal comment on any AEC policy or procedures.

- **The adequacy of AEC co-location of divisional offices, including both financial and social consequences of co-locations.**

I believe that the Committee must ask the AEC to clearly define the term "co-location". The AEC in previous advice to Members of Parliament has defined a co-location of divisional offices as two or more divisional offices sharing the same accommodation but still operating as stand alone divisions, with three on-going (permanent) full-time staff. The benefits of these co-locations were identified by the AEC as:

1. Savings in information technology (IT) costs due to need to provide computer access to only one site and not multiple sites.
2. Possible savings in lease/rental costs due to better bargaining power for larger space.
3. Savings in overall space required due to sharing of common areas such as counter/reception, kitchen, toilets etc.
4. Safer working environment due to more staff working in the one site especially during periods of leave or staff absences.
5. Ability for staff in one division to assist staff in the other co-located division during periods of heavy workload or when staff are on leave or absent.

However, it now seems that the definition of “co-location” has changed quite significantly since the original advice to Members of Parliament. The staffing levels in a number of co-located offices have now been reduced and “new working arrangements” have been introduced. These new working arrangements, in some cases, now mean that divisional staff are no longer working in stand-alone divisions.

There is now cross divisional enrolment processing due the creation of enrolment “cells” processing enrolment forms for more than one division. Election planning for more than one division is now the responsibility of one DRO and in some of these co-located sites there is now only one APS6 and this person is now the DRO for more than one division. The AEC has received legal advice that one person can be the DRO for more than one division.

It appears that the majority of these new working arrangements are similar to what was proposed in the trial divisional office amalgamations which I understand was not widely supported by Members of Parliament.

- **The number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices.**

Divisional offices were traditionally staffed by three ongoing (permanent) full-time staff at the APS6, APS3 and APS2 level funded by the AEC. Funding was also provided by the AEC for the backfilling of these positions during periods of leave.

Since the introduction of continuous roll update (CRU) Divisional offices also received an additional allocation to allow them to employ temporary or casual staff to assist with the processing of CRU letters and enrolment forms. The temporary assistance, as far as I am aware, come from funds provided by our State and Territory joint roll partners.

In more recent times Divisional Office funding has been reduced to the level of 2.6 ongoing (permanent) staff and 0.6 temporary staff. What this means in practice is that in many cases the APS6 and APS3 positions are being filled full-time and the full time APS2 position is being filled by only one part-time staff member in combination with a temporary assistant. The end result of these working arrangements is that there is now less ongoing (permanent) staff conducting elections.

The AEC is funding all divisional offices using this formula regardless of the workload of the division. A decision has been made to move excess workload from a divisional office that does not have sufficient staff to handle the volume of work to another divisional office that is rated as being under utilised. The current policy is not to resource individual divisional offices according to their actual workload demands.

- **Whether the current arrangements meet career expectations for AEC offices.**

Many staff working in divisional offices do so because they enjoy the work and there is an opportunity of working close to home. Many divisional staff have started with the AEC as office casuals and have then been successful in gaining ongoing (permanent) positions including working their way up to the DRO level.

From my time with the AEC I found that the large number of divisional staff have been employed in divisional offices most of their working lives. The AEC was in the past very supportive of those divisional staff looking to further their careers in the AEC. There was always the opportunity to act in the higher-level positions either in their office or another divisional office due to staff leave or for the period pending the filling of vacant positions. Developmental courses also used to be held quite regularly for those staff at the APS3 level that wanting to improve their chances of promotion to a DRO.

Over the past few years there has been very little or in fact no funding provided for the backfilling of positions and staff at the APS2 and APS3 level now do not have the same opportunities to develop their skills and experience. As a consequence of this, staff at these levels are now finding it harder to compete for promotion.

Now that many ongoing (permanent) APS2 positions are being shared by part-time and temporary staff there is now a requirement for temporary staff to perform the functions of a permanent staff member. New part-time APS2 staff are finding it difficult to learn all the duties of the position as they are only in the office 5 days per fortnight. There is now confusion over job ownership at the APS2 level and clearly the roles of an ongoing (permanent) staff and temporary staff have become unclear. In the past temporary staff were employed to assist the APS2 and worked under APS2 supervision.

- **Whether the current arrangements meet community expectations about the appropriate use of staffing resources.**

In the past all divisional office positions were filled with ongoing (permanent) full-time public servants. The staff were employed in a small team, based in each divisional office and they were employed essentially to maintain the electoral roll and to be in constant readiness to conduct a federal election at short notice. Each small multi-skilled team member had great pride in their work at their local AEC office and as federal public servants were very loyal to the Australian community.

The AEC has always been held in the very highest regard by all its major stakeholders and customers in Australia and around the world and this is due mainly to the professionalism of its ongoing (permanent) workforce.

In recent times the level of ongoing (permanent) staff in divisional offices has been reduced and many divisions are now employing temporary staff to carry out the duties of ongoing (permanent) staff. The experience and knowledge of divisional staff is now not at the same high level as it was previously and there is now no longer the overall commitment to the AEC by its staff as many part-time staff are looking for full-time work elsewhere and of course casual staff are often looking for a permanent position.

In my opinion the AEC is not meeting community expectations by employing temporary staff to carry out the work of ongoing (permanent) staff.

- **What any changes to these arrangements would mean for the previous two points.**

It is difficult to comment on any changes until a full review and evaluation of the workload of each divisional office is conducted.

- **What level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews**

Any review of divisional office workload would need to also include the impact on staffing numbers and APS levels if divisions are to conduct ongoing or fulltime habitation reviews. Although the fieldwork associated with habitation reviews is generally carried out by temporary staff there is an argument that additional ongoing (permanent) staff could be better employed to perform this role. Obviously in the non-metro areas temporary staff would also need to be employed. The planning and management of ongoing habitation reviews would remain with the divisional office and there is also the workload created when information is returned by the field staff and then has to be processed by divisional staff.

- **Whether the current APS staffing levels are appropriate for the actual work of divisional staff**

The number of staff and the APS staffing levels in divisional need to be addressed. The original view that “one size fits all” is now very outdated due to a number of reasons but mainly due to the introduction of computerised enrolment processing in divisional offices and the need now for address based or spot on earth enrolment. This has seen the need for each divisional office to now manage an address based computerised enrolment system, which involves individual address verification. Of course rural divisions would have a greater workload here due to non-standard addressing conventions.

Divisional offices now have to conduct high-level eligibility checking; including proof or identification of all enrolment forms prior to data entry and then also have to conduct their own data verification process. Added to this is the constant workload caused by monthly CRU processing due to the ongoing need to keep the electoral roll up to date and accurate. Many divisions now also have developed very successful public awareness programs and this also has resource implications.

Divisional offices now have very different workload demands and simply the number of enrolment transactions processed cannot measure these. Complexity of enrolment and a number of other factors such as some of the issues I mentioned above also need to be taken into consideration.

A number of internal and external staffing reviews have been carried in the past but all seem to have focused on the generic levels of staff across the divisional office network. As far as I am aware no thorough workload review has ever been conducted for each divisional office and until such a review is completed it is very difficult to determine the correct number of staff and the structure of staff required in each divisional office.

- **Any other issues relating to the staffing of divisional and central offices, which may be raised in submission or by the committee.**

In the 18 years that I have been employed by the AEC I have seen, particularly in the last few years, a significant increase in the workload and the demands placed on staff in the AEC's national office, state offices and especially in divisional offices.

At the national office level there has been a large increase in staff and contractors due to these increased demands. The national office staffing levels has also increased where functions once carried out in the state offices have been transferred to the national office.

In general staffing levels in state offices have been reduced as functions have been transferred to either the national office or devolved to divisional offices.

Unfortunately at the divisional office level or the coal face of the AEC staffing levels have been reduced. As I have outlined above permanent (ongoing) staffing levels in divisional offices has now been reduced to 2.6 per division. In practice this means that many divisions are now staffed with a fulltime APS6 and APS3 however the APS2 position is staffed by a combination of part-time permanent (ongoing) staff and temporary staff.

Conclusion

I hope that these comments are of assistance to the committee with its enquiry into certain aspects of the administration of the AEC.

Yours faithfully

Brian McKivat

3 May 2007