

From: Committee, EM (REPS)
Subject: Submission

Dear Sir,

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.

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

Dear Sir,

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.

Every Australian citizen should have the right to vote wherever they are resident regardless of the duration they have lived outside Australia.

21 years ago when we were making arrangements to leave Australia we did not envisage being absent for such a long time. We left Australia for Europe because there were no career opportunities available for my husband in Australia. We were young and excited about the prospect of living in another country and excited about the career and educational opportunities that would be available overseas and not available in Australia. We anticipated that one day the skills and experience that we had acquired overseas would be considered an asset and we would return.

In 1980 when we were making arrangements to leave Australia it was with disappointment we learned, that as we would be living permanently overseas we were not allowed to remain on the electoral roll. In those days "maybe" this was a sensible decision to take as it was extremely difficult to obtain any current news about Australia - except for sport. However, by doing this the Australian Government effectively shut the door in the face of Australians who despite the enormous difficulties still wished to participate in the Australian electoral process. Thus creating a community of disenfranchised Australian citizens who had no voice and became disinterested in the political future of their country.

In the 1980's it was very difficult to keep up with the politics of the day in Australia. Although we lived in the UK some news did filter through. However, we were generally starved of any current Australian news except for sport and bushfires and baby eating dingos! Phoning Australia was a very, very expensive luxury. (These days we can call Australia for the same price or less than it costs to call within Germany) There were no faxes, no email or internet and the post took at least 10-14 days to reach its destination. However, with the advent of communication technology today those Australians who take the time and effort and choose to be informed have the ability to follow topical issues, read legal decisions, read Hansard and listen to Australian radio (ABC) and even see Australian TV.

Whilst living in the UK we took advantage of our rights as Commonwealth citizens and participated in British elections. We now live in Germany and have done for the past 17 years. We and our children remain solely Australian Citizens - dual nationality is not an option. As we are not EU citizens we cannot vote in German elections. Our children will reach their 18th birthdays and NEVER have a legal right to vote. Neither here, the country in which we live nor the country of their citizenship.

I would advocate most strongly that ALL Australian citizens living overseas should have the right to vote in an Australian FEDERAL election or referendum no matter how long they have been absent. I also advocate that the Australian Government should lobby the EU and other foreign governments to allow Australian permanent residents to have the right to vote in elections of their country of residence.

As we were forbidden from remaining on the Australian electoral roll I can only recall accounts I have read of Australians trying to cast their votes overseas. It seems many Australians who have attempted to vote have found it a difficult process. The attempt to remain on the roll often thwarted by the bureaucratic mismanagement of the Australian Electoral Office. If voting rights were to be extended, the Australian Electoral Office would be seriously challenged. Are they up to the job?

I am impressed with some of the contents of the current electoral act as it applies to expatriates. After the period of 6 years has expired it puts the onus of registering to vote on the individual. I believe that the onus on the individual to register to vote is a fair and equitable way expatriates can willingly participate in Australian politics.

Technology and the dissemination of information has advanced whereby we can as Australians living overseas make informed decisions about the leadership of our country or respond to questions by referendum. Some Australians living overseas for a very long time feel that despite the technological advances and their best efforts to remain informed still cannot make fair and informative decisions at the ballot box and some Australians choose to or cannot take an active interest in the politics of Australia. Therefore any decision by the Government to make voting for expatriates "compulsory" may in fact lead to "spoiled ballots" or increased fines for not voting. People should be encouraged to vote and not forced to vote.

I advocate therefore, that every Australian should have the right to vote no matter where in the world they live or how long they have been absent. However, Australians living overseas should be allowed to decide for themselves if they wish to take an active roll in Australian Politics. They should decide whether they wish to register to vote or not.

The mechanics of how Australians living overseas would cast their votes or how or if new overseas electorates would/should be formed should be left up to the electoral commission with consultations from expert lobby groups and individuals. Should there be expatriate electorates? I don't know. However, within the act there is provision for citizens to nominate the electorate to which they would wish to be registered. Perhaps in lieu of overseas electorates this could be applied to Australians living overseas.

If amendments to the electoral act are made then the committee should also consider "KISS" - keep it simple! Australians overseas don't necessarily want to trapse to the next available embassy or consulate to cast a vote. (It is inconvenient enough when we have to renew our passports!) Using the latest secure voting technology would enable Australians abroad to cast their votes from the privacy of their own computers or if that is unacceptable there still remains postal voting.

It is right that all citizens have a right to vote. Under our current living situation we will continue to be unable to vote. My children who are approaching 18 years old will be ineligible and my husband and I in our mid 40s have only ever voted in 3 elections will remain ineligible. Certainly with regard to Universal Suffrage - democracy has failed us.

As a disenfranchised Australian woman, wife and mother of 2 Australian children born overseas but Australian by descent, I believe reform is necessary. Expatriate Australians are not un-Australian but are a large group of people who for many different reasons reside outside Australia. We have concerns and problems that affect us, our friends and families. We are affected too by international decisions Australian politicians increasingly make but we have no political representation to address our interests.

It shows great political foresight that such a committee has been established to even consider that changes to the electoral act may be necessary. I hope the committee will wisely analyze all submissions and make fair and equitable amendments in favour of non-compulsory overseas voting.

Yours sincerely

P Sved
Germany

June 23rd, 2002.