

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	134
Date Received	15-4-05
Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>

Election 2004

I have outlined several matters that were of great concern to me during the election period and its lead up along with my views and proposed solutions.

Overall elections must be run more efficiently, free of serious errors and at the best value per dollar to the taxpayer.

Youth Enrolment

Youth enrolment has historically been low in NSW (and some other states) and to address this issue I always, prior to an election, arrange for an enrolment drive in all High Schools in my Division.

I offer to set up an enrolment and election enquiry centre in each High School during a recess period in a spare room, library or senior student's common room.

If this is not suitable, to the Principal, I will arrange for an enrolment package to be sent to the school containing a stand, pamphlets, information, posters and enrolment forms, which I will pick up later.

I feel this should be done prior to any election. In 2003 the Australian Electoral Officer for NSW initiated an enrolment drive that was a failure due to being conducted in February when only 6.8% of students attain 18 years of age.

I feel an Enrolment drive should be initiated prior to any election scheduled after June in its year, as from August on, 34% of students attain 18 years of age. A similar percentage of 17 year olds will turn 18 by December of the same year (total 64.7%). (This is from data extracted from a table provided by the NSW Education Department on HSC in 2002).

I feel this should be part of a policy not an ad hoc decision by concerned Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) staff.

June 2004

Peter Garrett (MP Kingsford Smith) found he had not been on the roll for 10 years after having voted at every election held during that period.

This can only happen when the AEC does not adhere to its own policy, which is writing to every one whose vote was either rejected or partially admitted. How can anyone correct their enrolment when they are not advised of any error?

In 1999 all Divisional Returning Officer's (DRO's) were advised, in the month after the referendum, not to send out these letters as they referred to an election not a referendum and they needed to be redrafted. This never happened so the letters never went out.

At the 2001 election detailed data for the issue of these letters was captured and input by all DRO's for bulk issue.

But again they were not sent. I do not know what was the reason for non-issue in this particular event.

At an average of 5000 voters affected in each Division, over Australia that means up to 750 000 voters are affected. Also with public funding at \$1.94 per vote, nearly 1.5 million dollars was lost to the political parties in 2001 and again in 2004.

Perhaps we should look at why these people were not correctly enrolled and then look at compulsory enrolment. I have been in the AEC for 25 years and have never seen a compulsory enrolment case.

30 July 2004.

I was advised the Two Candidate Preferred training ballot papers have an error in them. One is shown as informal where it is actually formal. Every DRO was then asked to manually change the ballot paper. This is just not good enough. Last election a sample ballot paper in the Officer-in-Charge's manual had a similar error. If (we) AEC cannot tell the difference between a formal and informal ballot paper then what chance do our polling place staff have?

10 August 2004

A detailed memorandum came out from the AEC's Central office and was confirmed by NSW Head Office, that the removal of Electors names (by objection) after the issue of writ is not allowed. A warning screen had been installed in the AEC's RMANS enrolment system giving a warning to this effect.

The problem is the Australian Electoral Act Section 118 (5) says a DRO shall not remove any elector 's name from the roll during the period AFTER the close of Rolls and polling day, so this direction is so obviously incorrect. The issue of writ occurs 7 days BEFORE Rolls Close. It appears the AEC cannot understand a simple direction in the Electoral Act. How this error went undetected for so long it extremely worrying.

13 August 2004

AEC had an idea to reduce certified lists used in polling booths to save money, ie. These lists cost \$25 each. The reduction took a week to get right as errors in determining the reduction, and then running an internal program to update the reduction failed. This unfortunately resulted in the deletion of all prior forecasting data that had to be re-input.

Additional rolls are supplied to polling places that are used in the morning when queues are at the longest to reduce complaints. Some are used all day where numbers of voters exceed expectations.

So in my case to save 20 lists or \$500, the AEC was prepared to accept longer queues and complaints as was the case the earlier elections, when records were required to be kept of delays, whilst the AEC addressed a myriad of complaints from voters and the media. The extra time taken by DRO's to adjust rolls, re-input data lost in failed programs, ran to in my case 14 hours or \$236 (salary dollars) per day for a loss of \$472 of my time to save \$500.

18 August 2004

DRO's told to split polling booths that run mobiles into two, as the mobile roll has to be scanned to meet conditions of the Australian Electoral Act. ie. If any postal voter, votes at a mobile their postal vote must be rejected. After 2 weeks of instructions and then told to hold off, new instructions were reissued, only to be told later, not to go ahead as there were too many problems with the change. We are now told to "undo" what we were given a strict and immutable deadline to do. These decisions should not be part of any last minute planning changes.

19 August 2004

I sent a public information article to newspapers addressing electors who had changed address but not re-enrolled or were not sure if they were enrolled.

Details of how to access the AEC's Internet site and check their enrolment was contained in this media release. Other states picked up the newspaper article from media cuttings and telephoned me for an electronic copy.

Elector enrolment and its management should be under general policy. The same as youth enrolment, it should not be an ad hoc decision by concerned AEC staff.

26 August 2004

False identity incident

In the previous week one of our (AEC) metropolitan offices reported that a person allegedly representing a waste collection company contacted the AEC office to collect their security bin. A male (wearing a royal blue shirt with an ID tag on a blue cord) attended the counter and advised staff that he was there to collect the bin. As no replacement bin was delivered and no docket issued, this alerted staff to the incident. I was advised there had been a number of similar incidents reported to the NSW Police.

The issue of secure documents being accessed and possibly used by unauthorized persons has serious implications. All staff have now been advised to ensure that the identities of contractors or official visitors to AEC premises are verified before being given access to AEC premises i.e. all ID cards are checked for tradesmen, courier pick ups and waste collection companies etc as a safeguard against such security breaches.

However this still means someone now has full details of any silent electors placed in the security bins, as that data is not shredded. As a minimum, I feel, all silent electors affected in any of the concerned divisions should have been informed of the breach. I know of no follow – up.

A solution offered from NSW Head Office was to ensure that all security waste is shredded before it is placed in the security waste bins. This of course negates the use of the security bin in the first place.

2 September 2004

There was an error on the House of Representatives Single Nomination – 'Independent' Candidate version of the form appearing on the Internet and widely distributed after the election was announced. In part A of the form, where 50 nominators must supply details there was no line 21.

This meant that if this nomination form is lodged with 50 numbered lines completed, ie. the minimum number of nominators – there will in fact only be 49 and not the required 50.

The nomination must therefore be rejected. I do not understand how such a serious error can occur. These errors are becoming more commonplace and I believe one day will invalidate an election.

13 September 2004

When the Berowra Division moved from Hornsby to Chatswood the PO Box was cancelled and a redirection notice was lodged.

However NSW Head Office cancelled the redirection just prior to the election being announced. As happens in all elections (particularly with Postal Vote applications) some electors who still hold the old envelopes post their enrolment forms and postal vote applications to the old box number. As there was no redirection and the BRP envelope did not have a senders address (for return mail) the mail was eventually redirected to the Berowra division after a significant delay.

Many electors and voters were seriously affected by this error.

A simple solution is for all business reply paid envelopes to be printed with a default Head Office PO Box address.

28 September 2004

As everyone is now aware, there have been major problems reported with Postal Vote Certificates (PVC) throughout Australia. It seems that large numbers of PVCs were issued in outer envelopes addressed to the voter with another persons PVC and ballot papers inside.

It took a long time for DRO's to be advised of NSW errors in the postal voting system. I was not aware of problems in other states and territories, until two electors who had not received their PVC from the Division of Canberra telephoned me 2 days prior to polling day. When I checked with that Division as the system showed the certificates were issued three weeks earlier, I was advised 6000 plus, General Postal Voters (mainly ill and incapacitated people) PVC's were not issued, in error, and all had to be reprogrammed for a re-issue to take place.

I find it hard to believe all AEC staff were not kept informed of these errors as without this knowledge we were advising electors to wait as the certificates were assumed to be in the mail.

September 2004

Training of Election officials and memorandums between DRO's and Officer-in-charge (OIC) of polling booths.

For this election every candidate was given a copy of all election circulars or memorandums between my OIC's and myself. I felt the election process should be open and transparent and this would assist all candidates in understanding not only the election process but also the planning that goes on behind the scenes. I received a lot of praise from this initiative.

I then took this a step further and invited all candidates to a training session for my polling place OIC's. Four candidates took up the offer (some sent additional key staff) and I believe everyone benefited greatly from the insight gained, and the opportunity to discuss matters that they were unsure of with both my OIC's and myself.

2004 ELECTION WRAP-UP MITCHELL

93 absent votes (certificates) went missing. I feel this error occurred because of short staffing in the Division and a replacement DRO not being allocated until the Wednesday of the week following polling day.

It took two days and 3 staff to resort all the absent declaration envelopes from all scrutinies back into Divisional order to uncover the error and determine which votes were lost.

The missing absent votes (certificates) were from Bennelong (75) and Kingsford Smith (18).

I felt these missing absent votes needed to be identified by checking the certificates back to counterfoils held and the voters advised of the error with non voter action suppressed.

A business plan to undertake this task was produced and additional hours to complete this task were requested.

To my amazement I was advised to do nothing, my recommendation was not supported. These 93 voters were not informed that their votes were lost and were subsequently issued with non-voters notices.

Election planning and documents

AEC planning for elections is still disgraceful.

For example I have been in the AEC for 25 years and have never once known the polling place election return for the OIC to be free of any errors.

In 2001 and 2004 the Pre Poll return also had serious errors in it, by not providing provision for open ballot papers. Each Victorian divisional voting pack contained 30 open (Blank) ballot papers that had to be accounted for in the total received.

Luckily I prepared my own electronic return that addressed the error from 2001 and ensured it was not repeated in 2004.

Conclusion

There are 150 Divisions in Australia each with 3 staff members. The AEC is currently trying to reduce these numbers further by amalgamating Divisions. Currently, there are 450 staff to conduct elections at the divisional level.

Current staffing in Central Office is approaching 300 at vastly higher (salary) levels than in the divisions. With combined State head office numbers approaching 100, this would indicate the number of staff actually doing the work to management is almost one on one.

This is totally unreasonable, most businesses run on an average of around 5% management to staff. I believe a maximum of 10% to be acceptable.

Then to compound matters all election planning is now centralised in Central Office with few opportunities for divisional staff to get involved. So election planning is now carried out (in theory) by staff that are not actively involved in these tasks. No wonder we are having problems.

Solution

Cut expenditure by reducing management staff to a maximum of 10% of the Divisional total (45) and use Divisional staff to form working parties to review, refine and develop election procedures. Seek ideas from all stakeholders, the political parties, elected members, past candidates, AEC staff and the public.

I also suggest a review and development of electoral procedures should occur in the year following an election whilst it is still fresh in everyone's mind, not at the end of the second year or in the third year just prior to the timing of the next election.

Ivan Freys
Friday, 15 April 2005