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The Secretary,
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,
PO Box 6021,
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600.

By email: jscem@aph.gov.au

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2010 federal election

Submission to:	Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters- Federal
Response Submitted by:	Michael Simpson, General Manager - Policy & Advocacy

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is Australia's largest provider of services to people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability. It has been formed over the past six years through the merger of several of Australia's oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies. These include Royal Blind Society (NSW), the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation, Royal Blind Foundation of Queensland, and Seeing Eye Dogs Australia.

Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families. The service delivery areas include:

- early childhood
- orientation and mobility
- employment
- accessible information
- recreation
- independent living
- Advocacy, and
- working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Our knowledge and experience gained through interaction with clients and their families, and also by the involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation, means that Vision Australia is well placed to provide advice to governments, business and the community on the challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life or in exercising their rights, such as voting, as citizens of Australia.

We have a vibrant Client Consultative Framework, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the Organisation to the Board and Management through Local Client Groups, Regional Client Committees and a peak internal Client Representative Council. The involvement of people who are blind or have low vision and who are users of Vision Australia's services representing the views of clients is enshrined in Vision Australia's Constitution.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision. We employ around 200 people with vision impairment, or more than 18% of our total staff.

Given that Vision Australia is a national disability services organisation, that we provide services at a local level through 72 service centres and outreach clinics, and given that each year we work with over 46,000 people who are blind, have low vision, who are deafblind, or have a print disability, we understand the impact of blindness on individuals and their families. Of the 46,000 individuals we currently work with each year, just under 2,000 are children under the age of 18 years.

Vision Australia believes that it is important for us, as Australia's largest blindness organisation, and given our deep belief that people who are blind should be able to cast a secret and independent vote, to submit comment to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM).

Accessible Voting for people who are blind or have low vision

Regarding the conduct of the 2010 Federal Election, Vision Australia would like to submit comment around several aspects relating to the election which particularly relate to voters who are blind or have low vision. While it is the case that voters who are blind or have low vision are general members of the community and therefore have an interest in all aspects of an election, and electoral campaigns, the nature of vision impairment has consequences for particular aspects of the process including the casting of a vote and in accessing information in order to cast a vote.

JSCEM will recall that, as an outcome of the JSCEM review of the 2007 Federal election and the trial of electronically assisted voting for people who are blind, a recommendation was made to Government that the system used for the 2007 election be discontinued. While Vision Australia did not agree with the recommendation, we understand, and acknowledge, the logic and basis on which the recommendation was made.

In 2007, 850 people with vision impairment used the electronically assisted voting facility via 29 polling places around Australia. Given the cost of the development and roll-out of the system, and that it was only available through 29 polling centres, we were of the view that the system was never going to be viable unless it was extended to other sectors of the disability community, or eventually to the broader community as a mainstream voting option. Vision Australia made this point in our submission to JSCEM at the time.

Following Government's response to the JSCEM recommendation, Vision Australia joined a small working group convened by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) which included the Australian Human Rights Commission, Blind Citizens Australia, the Australian Blindness Forum and Vision Australia. This group worked collaboratively with the AEC in order to explore options for accessible voting that might overcome the alleged shortcoming of the electronically assisted voting system used for the 2007 election- the high cost of vote collected and the impracticality of deployment to significantly more than 29 polling centres.

While the AEC convened working group, including the representatives of the external blindness organisations and senior AEC personnel, were keen to find a solution, Vision Australia is of the view that process delays were a significant contributing factor which ultimately led to an outcome implemented for the 2010 election which was less than optimal. Following the 2007 election during which, in our view, people who are blind got to use a system which delivered a secret and independent vote, there was notionally a three year period during which the 2007 system could have been built upon to overcome the alleged shortcomings. There were significant delays however in Government considering JSCEM's recommendations and, as a consequence, there was no formal imprimatur for the AEC to commission development work. Added to this, the fact that there was no legislative framework in

place which enabled time for the AEC to explore and develop a practical solution to deliver people who are blind a secret and independent vote in the 2010 election meant that we ended up with a less than desirable outcome.

JSCEM will know that for the 2010 Federal election people with a sight impairment were able to cast a vote through the assistance of a contact centre operator. The procedure for this was for a person who is blind to attend a specified early voting centre, be marked off the roll, then connected to the contact centre by the polling official, and to then cast their vote through dialogue with the contact centre operator.

We understand that just over 400 people with a sight impairment cast their votes in the 2010 Federal election using this facility. While the feedback from Vision Australia clients has been mixed, it is evident that the anonymity afforded to voters by having a removed contact centre operator assist with the vote, was welcomed by many. This was a positive aspect of the removed operator in a contact centre approach however at least 2 clients of Vision Australia have indicated to us that their names were, probably inadvertently given to the contact centre operator when the polling official was conversing with the operator in order to ensure that the correct electorate voting papers were collected by the operator for the voter.

There were other logistical aspects of the contact centre voting option that also made it a less than desirable experience for some people. On the first day of operation the NSW based contact centre was not ready for some time after the advertised hour for opening. This was, reportedly, because the ballot papers had not been delivered to the contact centre as expected. The result, in at least one instance, was that a voter at the Enfield NSW early voting centre was marked off the roll at 9:00am but did not actually get to cast a vote until mid afternoon.

There were other minor issues such as the pre paid mobile phones supplied to polling officials to be used for voters to talk with the contact centre operator running out of credit, and routing problems with the 1800 number used by the polling officials to link the voter with the contact centre, however in the main the system worked well. A positive which built on the limited availability of the electronically assisted voting system at 29 polling centres for the 2007 election was that access to the contact centre voting option was available through 130 AEC divisional offices and blindness organisations.

Vision Australia wants to acknowledge the effort put in by AEC staff and polling officials, as they worked hard to deliver a positive experience in spite of logistical problems and knowing that the contact centre option was not fully embraced by many in the blind community. We are disappointed, but not surprised, that fewer than half the number who used the 2007 electronically assisted voting system used the contact centre voting option. It is our view that the main reason for this was that the 2007 system delivered both secrecy and independence. The 2010 contact centre option, on the other hand, delivered anonymity, and it could be argued that this does not necessarily equate to secrecy, and it certainly did not deliver independence. While the AEC worked hard to provide as good as conditions as possible at each of

the locations where people could cast a telephone vote, it was not always possible to provide complete privacy. The contact centre voting option, where to cast a vote a person had to speak their vote out loud, meant that there was always the risk that others would overhear.

One client of Vision Australia said:

“I voted in the 2007 election using the electronic voting machine, and found this to be a very simple and straight forward method and an empowering experience. I used the call centre to vote in the 2010 election and found it to be a complicated process that involved time-consuming set-up procedures, and overall a very poor experience. I did not feel that my vote was secret, and I did not feel that I was afforded the same degree of amenity and convenience as the rest of the community. I would not use this method again if it were offered in future elections.”

Vision Australia is of the view that the AEC should implement a computer assisted phone based voting system along the lines of the telephone voting standard recently adopted by the ECA, Electoral Council of Australia. Vision Australia actively contributed to the development of this standard and we strongly believe that this system would deliver a positive experience for voters, that it would be usable and accessible to the majority of people who are blind, and that it is akin to allowing citizens to have a postal ballot in that it allows the voter to cast their vote without having to attend a polling centre.

Furthermore we believe that a web based voting option should also be implemented for Federal elections as this would enable people who are blind, and those who are deafblind, to use their everyday assistive technology to cast a vote over the internet. It goes without saying that such a system would need to be developed in line with best practice accessibility guidelines.

Vision Australia has recently hosted some user testing trials for the proposed iVOTE system being developed for the March 2011 NSW State election. The iVOTE system allows for both telephone and web based options for voting and both are usable and accessible. The telephone option allows for a person to cast their vote without the need for any human intervention other than the voter themselves navigating the system and casting their vote. This is done using a standard telephone. The web based option allows for a voter to navigate the voting application using the assistive technology, screen magnification, synthetic speech screenreader, or refreshable Braille display, that they have at home or work and are familiar with.

Vision Australia is also of the view that where accessible options for voting are implemented, such as telephone and web based options, that these options be available through the pre-polling period as well as on the day of the election. In some jurisdictions accessible voting has only been made available during the pre poll period and has not been an option for the day of the election.

A concern we have with the development and implementation of telephone and web based options however is the potential delays that could occur and that, notionally, there is only a three year window between elections. Even if a full three year term occurs between the 2010 election and the next Federal election we have seen 6 months, or almost 20%, of the time disappear already. We are of the view that JSCEM should recommend to Government that the AEC be asked to develop telephone and web based options, with the same usability features as the NSW iVOTE system, for accessible voting without delay.

We are also of the view that, even though there was some positive feedback about the contact centre voting option, given that it cannot be guaranteed that the logistical problems wouldn't occur again, and the reluctance of people who are blind to use it, that it should not be seen as a viable option for future elections.

The other aspect we wish to raise for consideration by the JSCEM is the lack of access to local candidate information, party platform positions, and how to vote cards. While the AEC has addressed many of the information access barriers faced by people who are blind or have other print disabilities to general electoral information, political parties and independent candidates are still falling well short of being inclusive. The below quote is from a Vision Australia client:

"I decided to vote above the line, but wanted to know who the party I was voting for would be distributing their preferences too. I was unable to access this information because the "ticket" and "how to vote" card were presented online as an image-only PDF file that represented a completed ballot paper. This was completely inaccessible to me and I was not able to find an alternative presentation."

On raising this issue with the AEC, as we have also done with many of the State and Territory electoral bodies, on numerous occasions the response is that they have no mandate to provide this information but that it is the responsibility of parties and candidates.

Vision Australia strongly believes that people who are blind should be afforded equal access to all material including general electoral information for which the AEC does have responsibility, as well as party and candidate specific information, including localised "how to vote card" information that voters who are blind consider they need in order to make informed decisions. We are of the view that if a bipartisan approach to this was agreed by the JSCEM, a recommendation could be put to Government that will address the problem. We are not confident that simply leaving it to the good will of parties or local candidates, or to the process of leaving it up to aggrieved individuals to lodge Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) complaints, is the way to foster equality and inclusiveness.

Vision Australia would be happy to expand on the above or to respond to any questions members of JSCEM have about the issues we've raised. We would be happy to appear before the Committee.

Recommendations

Vision Australia asks that the JSCEM recommend:

1. That the AEC, particularly the Commissioner and staff involved in delivering the contact centre voting option, be congratulated for their effort to provide accessible solutions for voting for people who are blind or have low vision.
2. That the AEC be directed to develop, without delay, telephone and web based voting options, in line with the ECA telephone voting standard and along the lines of the NSW iVOTE system, for implementation in the next Federal election.
3. That when accessible voting options, such as telephone and web based options, are developed and implemented, they are available for use for the full period allowed for voting including the pre-polling period and on Election Day.
4. That, given the lack of support from the blindness community for the contact centre voting option, this option not to be considered as a viable option for future elections.
5. That political parties and independent candidates ensure that party platform information, candidate information and "how to vote card" information is made available to people who are blind in accessible formats, and that, this be a requirement monitored by the AEC.