

Bertil Smark Nilsson
43 Terebra Street
Palm Cove Qld 4879
Phone (07) 4059 1188
Mobile 0403 928 432
Email jbsn@tpg.com.au

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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

SUBMISSION

Re: Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election

Introduction

The principle that voting at general elections should take place by secret ballot has been established in Australia for a long time. However, the implementation of this principle has not been extended to persons who are blind or visually impaired. A voter in this category has always had to rely on assistance from another person, a friend, a spouse, a Booth Attendant etc. Thus, the confidentiality on these occasions, which sighted people take for granted, has not been ensured for a considerable number of Australian citizens. There have been practical reasons, why this has not been possible, or at least extremely complicated, in the past. However, advances in technology in the last decade have changed the situation dramatically.

2007 Federal Election

At the last Federal Election, the Australian Electoral Commission conducted a trial in twenty nine constituencies aimed at making confidential voting available to blind and visually impaired people. This was achieved through the use of a computer with speech and large print feedback, which was controlled from a numeric keypad. The voting took place at the pre-polling centre during the pre-polling period in the selected constituency.

I am a 65-year-old person, totally blind from birth. I have never been able to vote independently - until last year! I am lucky enough to live in one of the constituencies taking part in the trial. I was able to vote completely unaided, once the system had been explained to me. Information material was available in braille, large print and audio. The help function on the computer was excellent.

Summary

Since it is now practically possible for blind and visually impaired people to vote independently, I urge that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters put forward a recommendation that the voting method described above be available in all constituencies at future elections, federal, state and local.

Bertil Smark Nilsson