

20 May 2008

The Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM)
Australian Parliament House
Canberra ACT

Via email: jscem@aph.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election

Dear Mr Melham,

Vision Australia appreciates this opportunity to comment on matters relating to the conduct of the 2007 Federal election. In addition to the comments made below, we are also happy to appear before your committee at one of the public hearings should you wish to clarify any of the issues raised.

Over the past four years, several of Australia's oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision organisations have merged to become Australia's pre-eminent blindness and low vision organisation, Vision Australia. We are Australia's largest blindness and low vision agency, and we are committed to providing high-quality client centred services. Our vision is that people who are blind or have low vision will increasingly have access to and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

To help realize this goal, we provide early childhood, orientation and mobility, employment, information, recreation and independent living services to clients and their families. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

The knowledge and experience gained through service delivery interaction with clients and their families, and the involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation, well places Vision Australia 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.

Vision Australia believes that it is important for us, as an organisation in the blindness sector, to make comment on the conduct of the 2007 Federal election. This was the first ever election, at a Federal level, to include a method of voting which was fully accessible to people who are blind or have low vision. In that respect it marked a milestone in Australia progressing toward a society which is fully inclusive of the needs of people with a disability.

Vision Australia's involvement in the conduct of the election included:

- Participation on the E-voting reference committee established by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC);
- Arranging and hosting focus groups for people who are blind and have low vision to provide input to the AEC to assist with the e-voting trial;
- Arranging for clients of Vision Australia to test the prototype e-voting machines and to provide feedback to the AEC;
- Promotion of the e-voting trial to Vision Australia clients and vision impaired staff;
- Hosting post election focus groups of Vision Australia clients for the AEC to obtain feedback about the e-voting trial;
- Providing consultancy and contract services to the AEC for the production of digital audio content for the e-voting machines, the production of alternative format, including Braille, instructions for the use of the e-voting machines, and the production of other election related alternative format materials; and
- Providing the use of space at several Vision Australia sites for their use as pre-polling centres, particularly for the purpose of e-voting.

While Vision Australia had a financial interest in some of the above, that is, the AEC paid Vision Australia for the provision of consultancy and contract services and for the short term hire of premises as polling centres, our primary interest in the conduct of the election, and in making this submission to the JSCEM, is from the perspective of people who are blind or have low vision being able to fully exercise their rights in the election process as Australian citizens. From this perspective all of our involvement in participating in the AEC e-voting reference group, the hosting of focus groups, involving clients in the e-voting machine prototype testing, our promotion of the e-voting trial and the post election feedback to the AEC on the e-voting trial, was at no charge to the AEC.

Vision Australia wishes to acknowledge, and congratulate, the members of the JSCEM who conducted a review of the October 2004 Federal election. It was this inquiry, and the recommendations it made, which led to the AEC developing the e-voting machines and to conducting the e-voting trial in the November 2007 Federal election.

Vision Australia also wants to publicly acknowledge, and thank, the AEC E-voting team for the sincere effort they put into conducting the trial. The AEC team engaged with the blindness sector and consulted with the blindness community on all aspects

of the trial. We believe that the smooth running of the trial and the positive way in which the blindness community embraced it was largely due to the AEC team's positive, and disability aware, approach.

For those of us who are blind and have low vision voting in the 2007 Federal election using the e-voting machines, afforded us the first opportunity we have ever had, as people with a vision impairment, to vote in a Federal election with independence and privacy. I lost my sight over 35 years ago as a teenager under 18, so until now I have never voted without someone else, a friend, relative or voting official, knowing how I've voted. For the hundreds of others like me, who voted this time using the e-voting machines, it gave us a real sense of independence and equality.

We understand that about 900 people who are blind or have low vision lodged their vote using the e-voting machines. While this number may seem relatively low, we are strongly of the view that it will grow as people become more familiar and aware of the technology, and as e-voting machines are placed in closer proximity to voters.

There were only 29 sites around Australia with e-voting machines. This constitutes 0.36% of the over 8,000 polling places. People who are blind or have low vision live in every part of Australia and in every electorate. While we are aware that some people did go out of their electorate in order to use the e-voting machines, it was not unexpected that the numbers would be down because of a reluctance to travel.

We acknowledge that e-voting was introduced on a trial basis, as a method of voting for the purpose of the 2007 Federal election, and its use was limited to people with a vision impairment. We ask that the JSCEM recommend that the use of e-voting machines be an integral part of future elections, and that the number of polling places with e-voting machines be increased each election until all electorates have at least one polling place which has e-voting capability.

We also urge the JSCEM to consider recommending that the use of e-voting machines be extended to other groups in the community such as people with other disabilities, including those with a print disability, people with cognitive or neurological impairment, or with language barriers, who might benefit from the access alternatives that the e-voting machines could offer.

Alternatively JSCEM could recommend that e-voting machines be open to use by any person who wishes to use them. This would shift the use of e-voting from a disability access solution to a generic mainstream solution. This option is attractive both from the perspective that it would mean that people with a disability would be using a "mainstream" option for voting alongside others without a disability rather than a "special" solution, and it would spread the cost of rolling out e-voting to tens of thousand of voters rather than a limited number of people with a disability.

Access to election related information, which is usually in the printed format, in accessible formats such as e-text, audio and Braille, was highly valued by clients of Vision Australia. This is extremely important as people who cannot read print as the

result of blindness or low vision, or other print disabilities, rely on alternative format material to access election related information. We urge the JSCEM to recommend that any election related information produced by the AEC for public distribution be made available in accessible formats for every future Federal election.

The use of media channels accessed by people who are blind or have low vision, to obtain election related messages is also an important component of the information mix. All too often people who have a print disability, including those who are blind or have low vision, miss out on important public notices such as the need to enrol, register for a postal vote, nominate as a candidate, etc because the notices are predominately published in print media. It has also been the case that some Government related advertising on television has included important and essential content in a visual medium only. For example a contact number may be presented on the screen in print but is not verbalised.

Vision Australia asks the JSCEM to consider recommending that a version of all AEC election related material targeted at the general community, and published in the print media, also be broadcast on radio for the print handicapped (RPH). There is a network of RPH services throughout Australia and their services are an essential part of the information mix for people who cannot read print.

We also ask JSCEM to ensure that no AEC related television advertising contains "vision only" information such as phone numbers, dates or times, which are not verbalised.

While the AEC, along with other State based electoral commissions, has improved significantly over recent years with the provision of electoral related information in accessible formats and in using disability targeted information channels, political parties have failed miserably. It is almost impossible for a person with a print disability, including people who are blind or have low vision, to obtain the content of party related policy platform in accessible formats such as large print, Braille, audio or accessible e-text. Even where policy related material is available in e-text it is usually in a PDF, portable document format, which is not generally accessible for people using adaptive technology such as those used by people who are blind or have low vision.

The other information barrier which exists, and became even more evident at the 2007 election because people who are blind or have low vision were using e-voting to cast their vote independently for the first time, is the unavailability of "how to vote" cards. This is an essential component of political party information and is seen as vital to many voters as they consider how to cast their vote.

Vision Australia believes strongly that people who are blind or have low vision have the same right as every other Australian citizen to inform themselves about political party and candidate information. Therefore we seek the JSCEM's support for a recommendation that mechanisms be put into place with political parties and candidates to ensure that policy platform and candidate information, including how to

vote cards, be made available on request in alternative formats such as Braille. It is important that formats such as Braille be an option for documents such as how to vote cards as this is the most equivalent and portable as a print document.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) E-voting team be acknowledged and thanked for the sincere effort they put into conducting the e-voting trial.
2. That the use of e-voting machines be an integral part of future Federal elections.
3. That the number of polling places with e-voting machines be increased each election until all electorates have at least one polling place which has e-voting capability.
4. That the use of e-voting machines be extended to other groups in the community such as people with other disabilities, including those with a print disability, people with cognitive or neurological impairment, or with language barriers, who might benefit from the access alternatives that the e-voting machines could offer: or alternatively: that e-voting machines be open to use by any person who wishes to use them. This would shift the use of e-voting from a disability access solution to a generic mainstream solution.
5. That any election related information produced by the AEC for public distribution be made available in accessible formats for every future Federal election.
6. That a version of all AEC election related material targeted at the general community, and published in the print media, also be broadcast on radio for the print handicapped (RPH).
7. That no AEC related television advertising contains "vision only" information such as phone numbers, dates or times, which are not verbalised.
8. That mechanisms are put in place with political parties and candidates to ensure that policy platform and candidate information, including how to vote cards, be made available on request in alternative formats such as Braille.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Simpson
General Manager Policy & Advocacy

Comments from Vision Australia clients and blindness sector chat lists.

- “People who I've spoken to so far, have been really excited about how easy it is and how great it is to be able to vote independently and in your own time. I participated in the tests, and I'm really looking forward to doing the real thing, now that I've decided which way I'm going to vote!”
- “For the very first time, I get to vote below the line independently.”
- “If you live or work near one of the 29 polling places with the electronic machines, I urge you to take advantage of it, either during the rest of this week, or on Saturday, even if you would normally go with family or friends to another polling place on Saturday. If you don't live very close to a polling place with the machines, I still urge you, if you can possibly manage it to find a way to get there, and experience for the first time, one of the most fundamental elements of democracy - a secret and independent vote.”
- “Remember on Saturday, if we vote using the electronic and fully accessible method, we are casting 3 votes: One for the House of Representatives, one for the Senate, and one for fully accessible voting for people who are blind or have low vision!!!”
- “I voted the other day using the Electronic system and it is fairly easy to use. I went there cold and with no practice and registered a valid vote.”
- “I used the electronic voting in Coffs Harbour last week. I found it very simple to use and the electoral officer was extremely helpful and well-trained. She filled out a short questionnaire for me afterwards on how easy I had found it.
- Although I have told various people about it, they say things like "I always do a postal vote and get my daughter/husband to fill it in for me."”
- “It's all well and good if these voting booths are easy enough to get too, but, for me personally, considering I am not into politics as much as I should be, I probably wouldn't bother going to electronically vote if I lived quite far away from them. But agreeing with the majority who have voted using these, I was very impressed with it this time around. There was definitely a huge improvement on last time with the State elections last year! so, honestly, a huge thumbs up to the organizers of this wonderful technology!”
- “Maybe if they opened them up in a few more locations that are slightly More convenient to get to people might use them more. I know someone who would have to travel for 2 hours on the train to vote. Obviously he refuses to do so.”

- “The closest booth to us is in Hervey Bay which is an hour-and-a-half away by road. To get there, I would have to catch a train to Maryborough, (approximately an hour's trip), get the coach to Hervey Bay which drops you at a central point, and then get a cab to the booth! I think electronic voting is a great thing, but given that I work full time and that we would have to arrange baby sitting for the kids if both XXXXX and I wanted to access it, it's just not a good use of time!”
- “Some feedback you could give the AEC is that possibly one of the reasons only 426 people have voted thus far is that very little mention of the possibility for blind and vision impaired people to vote independently has been advertised in the mainstream media. The AEC website does not even have the information on its home page you have search quite a bit to find the information. I wonder what the real commitment is for accessible voting by our politicians and the AEC. I gave the similar feedback to the VEC in relation to the poor turn out.

While on the issue of elections it is very disturbing that issues concerning disability are not even on the radar and I would have thought given the aging of the population that there is even more reason for them to come on the radar.”

- “Thanks for the update. It is great to see accessibility improvements throughout Australia! Just wondering if you are aware that Newcastle/Lake Macquarie isn't on the list. With a population size similar to or possibly larger than woolongong, dubbo, albury etc.. In fact I think Newcastle is the 2nd biggest city in NSW after Sydney. I am wondering why it is not yet one of the areas on the list....how is this organised?? Is it something that could be looked at for the next election? I realise people could drive to Sydney for this, but you are looking at a 5-6 hour return trip just to vote.”
- “Does anyone know how many pre-polling stations there are in Australia before a federal election? These will be the only places VIPs will be able to vote at until electronic voting is available at every polling station on election day. Since there will only be a limited number, I suspect for many VIPs getting to the pre-polling stations, even when there are a lot more than the 29 locations currently with accessible voting, will still be an issue.”
- “Just come back from casting my electronic vote. I was very excited and did not do the practice section. The electoral official said that only 44 people had come to Enfield and so far over 400 nation wide. I urge everyone to please make this a success so that we can cast an independent vote at every election.”

- “I voted on Monday and I was really excited with the fact that I could vote independently a friend took me to vision Australia and he as a sighted person was able to vote as well.”
- “I have been sent my postal voting papers but if there was an electronic voting center near by I would prefer to vote electronically. Does anyone have a list of such locations. I live at Riverwood but can travel in to the city with out a problem. I guess I am after one near a railway station as I am a confident train traveller. I know there is one at vision Australia but that is very much out of the way for me. In the past I have phoned the political party I wished to vote for and they would come to my house and fill out the papers. However it's very uncomfortable if I wished to allocate preferences differently to their how to vote card. So I can get to riverwood, Narwee, the city easily and any station on the east hills line.”