

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Finance and Administration Portfolio

Department of Finance and Administration

Budget Estimates Hearings 2004-05 – 26 May 2004

Question: F3

Outcome: Australian Electoral Commission

Topic: ANAO follow-up audit on the Integrity of the Electoral Roll

Hansard page: N/A

Written Question on Notice: 26 May 2004

Senator Mason asked:

1. In paragraph 2.18 of the ANAO report on its follow-up audit of the Integrity of the Electoral Roll (the report) it is stated that the AEC does not set minimum frequencies for Continuous Roll Update (CRU) activities, and has not demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing and identifying current CRU gaps. Why is this?
2. In relation to paragraph 2.31 of the report, why hasn't the AEC made more rigorous analysis of the range of data sources available, and more strenuous efforts to obtain them? When will the AEC have access to state road transport data? (para 2.42)
3. Can the AEC give an update of the estimate of the number of eligible Australians who are currently not on roll (para 2.61): Does the AEC accept the estimate of 550,000 quoted by the JSCEM in its report on the 2001 Federal Election. (2001 JSCEM report – AEC sub 147, p20):
4. What is the purpose of the Youth Electoral Study? How much will it cost? (para 2.66):
5. Why did the AEC embark on a statistically invalid pilot exercise to review the accuracy of the electoral roll? How much did this aborted exercise cost? (para 3.36)
6. Has the new sample of 227 CCDs been completed? With what results? If not, when is the report expected and will it be given to the JSCEM? (para3.38)
7. Has the AEC delivered the enrolment fraud awareness package yet? (para3.61)
8. What is the outcome of the system for reporting information on enrolment forms verification? Has this been implemented? (para 3.73)
9. Has the Isaacs total habitation review been completed? With what results? If not, when is the report expected and will it be given to the JSCEM? (para 3.76)

10. Where the AEC becomes aware (through returned mail etc) that an enrolment form is in question; is there a flag to indicate that if that person turns up on election day at a polling booth they should be asked to verify their identity and enrolment eligibility? Once the vote has been cast, it is too late to subsequently complete the verification and then find that the person should not have been enrolled?

11. The electoral mailout by the ECQ to "enrolled" voters for the Qld state election showed a return rate of 1.88%. Has the AEC liaised with the ECQ to try and update rolls following the conduct of the state and local government elections?

Answer:

The answer provided to me by the Australian Electoral Commission is as follows;

1. The AEC has now set minimum frequencies for Continuous Roll Update (CRU) activities which have been incorporated in the CRU Strategic Plan. An action item in the CRU Strategic Plan is that yearly Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) be signed by Australian Electoral Officers (AEOs) for each State/Territory and their State/Territory counterparts setting out the agreed enrolment and CRU activities to be undertaken in that State or Territory for the next financial year. The issue of identifying and addressing gaps in CRU data sources will be taken up in the MOUs. The AEC has developed a template for the forthcoming round of MOUs to ensure consistency of content.
2. As indicated in the response to question 1, the issue of access to an increased range of useful data sources has been addressed in the MOUs developed between AEOs and their State/Territory counterparts. In relation to access to road transport data, the AEC now has access to this data in all States and the Australian Capital Territory. (In Victoria, RTA data is supplied to the Victorian Electoral Commission, which then conducts CRU activities, the results of which are passed on to the AEC.) The AEC previously sourced NT RTA data through the Northern Territory Electoral Commission. However, the NT RTA withdrew access to their data following passage of the Northern Territory *Information Act 2003*. Issues regarding access to this data have not yet been resolved.
3. The AEC is in the process of developing an Enrolment Management Information System, which will enable the AEC to provide statistical information on a greater range of enrolment issues than it can currently.

The estimate of 550,000 eligible Australians quoted in the JSCEM report on the 2001 Federal Election appears to be based on information provided in the AEC submissions.

The AEC is analysing the first round of statistically valid sampling of the roll. A report on the statistically valid sampling, including discussion on completeness of the roll will be provided to the JSCEM once finalised.

4. The purpose of the Youth Electoral Study (YES) is to determine reasons why younger people in Australia are less likely to enrol to vote. The data obtained from the four-year study will determine how the AEC might better engage with this target group to ensure higher levels of participation.

This was viewed as a high priority of the AEC because of the lower enrolment percentage of electors in this age group. It was also seen as one of the initiatives towards addressing recommendation 10 of the ANAO report on integrity of the roll. A by-product of the YES project will be an improved understanding of broader electoral awareness in the target group.

The study is estimated to cost \$160,000 in cash funding over the four-year period (or \$40,000 per annum). In addition, the services of selected AEC staff will be used to identify individuals and groups to participate in the study in particular local areas.

5. The pilot exercise was conducted in May and June 2003. The pilot exercise was not aborted, rather it was deliberately undertaken by the AEC prior to receipt of funding for implementation of the ANAO and JSCEM recommendations and prior to receipt of advice from ABS on statistical validity as part of the development and testing the processing system and procedures to be used for the sampling. The results of the pilot were provided to ABS and were used by them in developing the methodology for the statistically valid sample. In the pilot, 30 walks in VIC (Jaga Jaga) and NSW (Lowe) and 50 walks in QLD (Moreton) were doorknocked and follow-up compulsory enrolment and objection action was taken. Further, the AEC found that the exercise allowed for verification and update of Address Register information. The cost of the pilot exercise was approximately \$41,700. This cost does not include Central Office or Divisional Office permanent staff hours.

6. The first round of statistically valid sampling, aimed at testing the effectiveness of CRU, took place in the first two weeks of March 2004. 227 CCDs nationally were selected. However, because it sampled across the nation, the first round uncovered a range of problems that were not encountered in the pilot exercise, such as the selection of rural and remote CCDs, some of which had never been doorknocked before. However, the AEC is currently analysing the results of the sampling. Follow-up activity is still underway. A report should be available by the end of July and a copy will be provided to the JSCEM.

7. Enrolment fraud awareness sessions are currently being held in all States and Territories. All staff involved in enrolment processing should have attended a session before the end of the current financial year. The AEC is also developing an e-learning package on enrolment fraud issues that will be available to all staff via the AEC Intranet. The AEC is also reviewing current policies/procedures documents in light of feedback from staff attending the enrolment fraud awareness sessions.

8. The AEC had intended to commence development of a system to enable collection and reporting of information on "invalid" enrolment applications before the end of the current financial year. However, due to the unanticipated workload generated by the statistically valid sampling project and associated issues, work on this system has not commenced to date. The AEC intends to commence work on this early in the 2004/05 financial year.

9. The full electoral roll review of the Division of Isaacs is nearing completion. The AEC is currently analysing the results. A report should be available by the end of July and a copy will be provided to the JSCEM.

10. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the CEA) does not require, nor does it authorise, the AEC to verify the identity and enrolment eligibility of electors for whom the AEC may have received RTS mail when such electors present to vote. If the AEC receives information, prior to the close of rolls, that an elector is no longer residing at their enrolled address, as a result of RTS mail, or other means, then the AEC would take objection action as required by the CEA. It should be noted that subsection 118(5) of the CEA specifically prevents the AEC from removing an objected elector's name from the roll during the period commencing from the close of rolls for an election, until after the close of polling at the election.

11. The Electoral Commission of Queensland (ECQ) conducted a mailout to all Queensland electors prior to the Queensland State election held 7 February 2004. Returned undelivered mail was passed to the AEC in Queensland for action. Following is a summary of the undelivered mail passed to the AEC and action taken:

No. of RTS items/records	45,214
No. of objections issued	29,895
No. deleted from roll (03/06/04)	24,097

It should be noted that while in excess of 45,000 records of undelivered mail were passed to the AEC, the number of actual objections issued and consequential roll deletions were much less because of enrolment changes made by electors in the interim.

Other roll action taken by the AEC as a consequence of the QLD State and Local Government elections included:

- Prompt forwarding and processing of enrolment forms received on polling day, generally within a week of polling day.
- Actioning of correspondence received by ECQ and Returning Officers relating to enrolment changes.