

Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Budget Estimates Hearing – May 2010

Finance and Deregulation Portfolio

Outcome 1, Program 1

Topic: Electoral Roll Enrolments

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Senator Brown asked:

Regarding the dramatic drop in electoral roll enrolments with 1.4 million eligible Australians not being on the electoral roll:

- a) What has the AEC done in the past year to increase enrolments on the electoral roll?
- b) What activities do you have planned before the coming election to increase enrolments?
- c) Are you projecting that those activities will increase enrolments or just halt the decline?
- d) How much money are you planning to spend to educate voters about getting on the roll in the coming financial year?
- e) Is this enough funding?
- f) What is an acceptable number or percentage of unenrolled voters?
- g) What is the level of funding the commission would need to achieve this acceptable number of unenrolled voters?

Answer:

- a) There has not been a recent dramatic drop in electoral enrolment. There has been, and continues to be, growth in the number of eligible Australians who are correctly enrolled to vote. The number of electors on the roll has grown by more than 260,000 compared with those on the roll for the 2007 election. The growth in the estimated number of people not enrolled reflects the fact that the Australian population continues to grow at a faster rate than the rate of enrolment. The change between the previously reported estimate of 1.2m unenrolled electors, to the recent estimate of 1.4m unenrolled electors, reflects this ongoing trend.

In the past year the AEC has continued with a range of activities and has commenced a series of new and revamped initiatives designed to encourage electors to enrol. These activities include but are not limited to the following:

- Increasing Continuous Roll Update (CRU) mailing to people who are not enrolled and electors who have moved without updating their enrolment. Mailing has increased from 2.5 million letters in 2008-09 to 4.4 million in

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2009-10. This increase resulted from use of new external data sets, new data mining and matching processes and revised system business rules.

Mailing included 1.3 million reminder letters to people who have not responded to the first mail contact.

- A trial of SMS messaging an initial group of 55,000 people who had not responded to earlier AEC mail correspondence reminding them of the need to enrol and vote. The trial is currently being evaluated.
 - Conducting direct telephone contact with electors who had not responded to earlier AEC mail correspondence.
 - Undertaking fieldwork at 57,000 addresses where electors have not responded to earlier AEC mail correspondence, plus some specific fieldwork in remote areas where postal services are problematic.
 - Attending citizenship ceremonies to collect enrolment forms from new citizens.
 - Continuing to have enrolment forms available through the AEC website and at AEC and State Commission offices, as well as at Australia Post, Medicare and Centrelink offices.
 - Extending partnerships with State transport authorities to provide enrolment forms with licence renewals or drivers licence change of address labels.
 - Introducing an enrolment SmartForm for electors to complete online and directing electors to the online form in various communications.
 - Understanding elector motivation better through market testing of CRU letters and researching enrolment triggers. The first findings of this have led to a redesign of CRU letters to focus more on a 'call to action' following findings that this call was not strong enough in the existing letters.
 - Commencing an online advertising campaign directing electors to the AEC website through placing advertisements on websites and increasing AEC visibility in search engine results.
 - Working with schools during Enrol to Vote week (week of 17 May 2010).
 - Working with Triple J's Rock Enrol campaign, as per previous election years.
 - Implementing a new awareness campaign called *Famous People Vote Too* with some well known Australians lending a hand to help raise public awareness of the enrolment issue and target the estimated 1.4 million missing voters, including younger Australians.
 - Commencing delivery of the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program – a comprehensive program of enrolment participation and education to indigenous audiences across the country.
 - Rolling out a series of enrolment AVANT postcards, firstly in cafes, cinemas and stores around the country and then targeted at schools, designed to encourage electors to enrol and participate in the electoral process.
- b) The AEC will:
- Continue with the activities outlined at a) above, plus:

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- i. Include an 'enrol now' message on envelopes in mailing activities
- ii. Send 'Enrol Now' postcards to a large set of vanished electors who were once enrolled but have not re-enrolled
- iii. Send letters targeted at unenrolled 17-25 year olds.

Upon announcement of an election a range of advertising relating to enrolment will also be undertaken, aimed at making people aware that they have only very limited time to enrol.

- c) The roll has grown from 13.6 million at the 2007 close of rolls to almost 13.9 million on 22 June 2010. The AEC will continue a range of activities to encourage electors to enrol and participate in the electoral process with the goal of achieving the 95% participation target set out in the Portfolio Budget Statements 2010-11 (PBS).

Election speculation will undoubtedly trigger greater elector engagement and has traditionally led to increased enrolments. The announcement of an election then acts as a further and specific trigger for enrolment stimulation. For the next Federal election the AEC aims to achieve a comparable level of enrolment as that achieved for the 2007 Federal election.

- d) The AEC undertakes a range of education related activities. The estimated 2010-11 expenditure is:
- \$132,078 (GST incl.) for display advertising
 - \$21,912 (GST incl.) for search advertising
 - \$600,000 for School and Community Visits Program
 - \$520,000 for the National Electoral Education Centre
 - \$132,000 for our Education Team
 - Approximately \$12M for an election information campaign that will include close of rolls advertising

Further costs may be incurred for the *Famous People Vote Too* project during 2010-11.

It is estimated that \$1.2 million will be spent on field activities under the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP) in 2010-11. Education, promotion and facilitation of enrolments is one of the IEPP objectives, along with education on electoral and democratic processes, promotion of participation and activities to decrease the levels of informal voting by Indigenous electors. The \$1.2 million figure does not include Field Officer salaries.

- e) As with all agencies, the AEC must continue to make decisions on how best to allocate available funding to achieve operational outcomes.

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- f) The AEC's objective is to meet the 95% enrolment participation target as set out in the PBS. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), in *Performance Audit Report No. 28 2009-10 The Australian Electoral Commission's Preparation for and Conduct of the 2007 Federal General Election*, notes some of the challenges associated with achieving this level of participation. For example, at paragraph 3.68 the ANAO observes "..., in 2007 the AEC achieved 118,885 extra net enrolments compared with 2004, demonstrating a small gain in enrolment efficiency measured by transaction. These gains were, however, achieved at considerable extra expense." The ANAO go on to note at paragraph 3.69 "The overall result was that the marginal unit cost of each of the net additional 118 885 enrolments...was over \$216, or nearly seven times the unit cost per additional enrolment in 2004". Further the ANAO also note at paragraph 3.70 that "...the benefits of the AEC's pre-election activities were not realised in a consistent fashion across its target groups."
- g) The AEC is not in a position to quantify what level of funding would be required to convince all eligible electors to comply with their obligations under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*.

There are, however, a range of reform and modernisation initiatives discussed in the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' *Report on the inquiry into the conduct of the 2007 federal election and matters related thereto* which, if introduced into legislation, would assist the AEC to better meet the needs of Australian electors by providing more flexible and modern enrolment options. A number of these initiatives, (for example, provision for electors to update their address details electronically), is included in the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Pre-poll Voting and Other Measures) Bill 2010 which passed the Senate on 17 June 2010.