

The future of the National Tally Room

The National Tally Room

- 4.1 The National Tally Room (NTR) in Canberra is organised by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to provide a central point for the display of election results on federal election night. It is one of Australia's largest media gatherings with representation from radio, print, online and television media. The NTR is the focus of the nation for approximately six hours on election night – from 6 pm to midnight – and has been a fixture of Australian federal elections for over 40 years.¹
- 4.2 In the 1950s, each state had its own separate tally room and there was no central or national tally room on election night. The impetus for the establishment of a national tally room came from newspaper chains – who had been organising their own national tally rooms – to analyse the election on more than a seat-by-seat basis. By the mid-1960s, results were released both in the states and centrally and by the late 1960s, the NTR was well established.²
- 4.3 At the 1974 election, results were transmitted by a national computer system for the first time, which has been updated several times since.³

1 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Election night', *Behind the Scenes* <<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/electionnight.htm>>, viewed 17 August 2007.

2 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 3.

3 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 5.

4.4 In March 2007, the AEC floated the idea of abolishing the NTR in favour of disseminating results entirely via electronic means. Following stakeholder consultation which yielded vastly differing views, the AEC announced that the NTR would continue to be staged for the 2007 federal election, which would 'enable broader consideration and assessment of the future of the NTR' for future elections.⁴

4.5 In its submission, the AEC noted that its decision to review whether to retain the NTR was prompted by:

...a realisation that if the AEC were tasked to re-design on a 'blank sheet', its processes for disseminating results to the community, it is by no means clear that an NTR in its traditional form would be, or form part of, the solution chosen in the light of modern technological opportunities.⁵

How the NTR works

4.6 Election figures for the House of Representatives are displayed on a manual tally board, approximately 35 metres x 7 metres, at the front of the room.

4.7 Election results for each polling place are telephoned through to the relevant AEC Divisional Office, where AEC officers enter the figures into the computerised Election Management System (ELMS). Results are then transmitted to the NTR from each divisional office around Australia via ELMS. The results are displayed on rows of computer terminals available to the media and members of registered political parties. The results are simultaneously fed to the television networks who present their election coverage from temporary sets constructed in the NTR.⁶

4.8 The main mechanism for providing access to the figures, both in the NTR and elsewhere, is the AEC's Virtual Tally Room (VTR) system:

- Terminals connected to the VTR are available to media in the NTR. A small number of terminals connected directly to ELMS are also used by AEC staff to monitor the operations of all the NTR systems;

4 Australian Electoral Commission, *AEC to stage Tally Room at 2007 Federal Election*, media release, 18 May 2007. Available online at: <http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Media_releases/05_18a.htm>, viewed 25 July 2007.

5 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14

6 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Election night', *Behind the Scenes*, <<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/electionnight.htm>>, viewed 17 August 2007.

- Hardcopy printouts of the latest House of Representatives figures for a division are printed from ELMS and hung on the tally board. Senate figures are not displayed on the tally board due to the substantial increase in Senate candidates and groups over the last 40 years; and
 - Raw election results data from ELMS is provided electronically (as a 'media feed') to some media organisations who provide their own coverage and analysis on election night and in the weeks following.
- 4.9 In the event of a major computer system failure, if possible, data entry will be redirected to functioning sites. In the event of a total computer system failure, progressive House of Representatives figures will be faxed from Divisional Offices directly to the NTR, and displayed manually on the tally board.⁷
- 4.10 Despite public misconceptions to the contrary, no vote counting takes place in the NTR – it only facilitates the display and analysis of results.⁸

The statutory obligations of the AEC.

- 4.11 In relation to a House of Representatives election, the Assistant Returning Officer at a polling place is required by paragraph 274(2)(f) and subsection 274(2B) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Act) to transmit results of counting 'in an expeditious manner' to the Divisional Returning Officer (DRO); a similar requirement is imposed in relation to Senate elections by paragraph 273(2)(f) of the Act.⁹
- 4.12 The Act does not impose any formal obligation on the DRO or the AEC to publish the results on election night.¹⁰
- 4.13 However, while the AEC has no legal requirement to disseminate the results, there is a public expectation that it will do so. As indicated in the JSCEM Report on *The 1990 Federal Election*, the AEC operates on the basis that there is a clear community expectation that it will do everything within its power to ensure that election results are known as early as possible.¹¹

7 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 2-3.

8 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 8.

9 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 12.

10 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 12.

11 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 13.

The continuing relevance of the national tally room – stakeholder expectations

- 4.14 The NTR is attended by a mix of media, politicians, political advisors, official guests and the public – each with differing expectations and needs.
- 4.15 At the 2004 election, the AEC estimated that 300 journalists and 400 network staff attended the NTR along with 100 party representatives, 100 AEC staff, 160 official guests and 50 service providers, such as ActewAGL, Optus and Telstra.¹²
- 4.16 On 5 March 2007, the Electoral Commissioner wrote to 29 key NTR stakeholders – including the National Secretary of the Australian Labor Party and Federal Director of the Liberal Party – informing them that the future of the NTR was under review and inviting them to respond.¹³
- 4.17 The AEC advised that it received ten responses with ‘few clear patterns emerging.’¹⁴

Members of parliament and candidates

- 4.18 The demands of campaigning mean that apart from candidates in the local Canberra area, the vast majority of candidates are based in their electorates on election night.
- 4.19 The ‘political talent’ (or politicians) present in the NTR are organised by television and radio to appear on their live commentary panels. For example, the ABC in the recent past has had Bob McMullan MP and Senator the Hon. Nick Minchin. As ABC election analyst, Mr Antony Green, appearing before the committee in a private capacity, noted:

Sometimes we will even pay them to come to the tally room, and they will tend to float as guest interviews between the different [television and radio] panels. I notice that there are people on radio who will occasionally end up on television, so there is a bit of sharing of talent. But, increasingly, the only people who are there are the people who have been arranged to be there.¹⁵

12 Australian Electoral Commission, *All Election Eyes on the National Tally Room and Virtual Tally Room*, media release, 7 October 2004. Available online at: http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/media_releases/2004/tally_room.htm, viewed 25 July 2007.

13 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 13-14.

14 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14.

15 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 59.

- 4.20 The committee notes that the last leader of the opposition and/or Prime Minister to attend the NTR was Bob Hawke in 1983, with political leaders preferring to make their base in their home city or electorate on election night. The only party leader to appear in the NTR on election night in 2004 was the then Australian Democrats leader, Senator Andrew Bartlett.¹⁶
- 4.21 Broadcast media are able to overcome these geographical differences with live crosses for updates and interviews – and by sending journalists to cover the election from key sites around the rest of Australia. However, central election venues are considered important for the media, as it is expensive to send crews all around Australia for just a few live crosses during the course of an election night.
- 4.22 The AEC told the committee that it does not keep data on the number of officials in the NTR. However, anecdotally the number of officials varies from year to year – the AEC provides political parties with space in the NTR should they require it, but notes that the parties also have official campaign headquarters elsewhere.¹⁷

Media

- 4.23 The relevance of the NTR to the media differs depending on the type of media and media organisation.
- 4.24 On election night in 2004, the ABC, Sky News and Nine Network were the only television studios to provide full coverage from the NTR. The other networks had a presence in the NTR, but only provided partial coverage.¹⁸
- 4.25 Free TV Australia, the industry body representing Australia's free-to-air television broadcasters strongly opposed the abolition of the NTR on the grounds that it provides a focus for election coverage, and 'symbolises the transparency of the election process'.¹⁹
- 4.26 Head of news and current affairs at Channel Nine, Mr Garry Linnell, appeared before the committee on behalf of Free TV Australia. He noted that the NTR is an integral component of the network's election night coverage:

The tally room serves as a focal point for our coverage. We have Ray Martin and Laurie Oakes down there. There is access not just

16 R. Peake, 'New closure threat to tally room,' *The Canberra Times*, 24 May 2007, p. 7.

17 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 2.

18 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission 16a*, p. 11.

19 Free TV Australia, *Submission no. 13*, p. 1.

to the public but also to a lot of political figures, party members and party officials who are there.²⁰

- 4.27 It was argued that the NTR also generates more interesting or 'warmer' television:²¹

Clearly, as far as the atmospherics go with television, it adds to the event. There is constant movement, a constant buzz and constant noise in the room.²²

Sometimes it does not create the best TV environment because someone will walk in left of centre and walk right in front of the camera. But to me that adds to your coverage: you are going live, you are flying by the seat of your pants sometimes, and it adds a lot more credibility to the whole process.²³

- 4.28 Mr Green similarly noted the atmosphere the tally room provides:

That is the biggest thing we would miss if there was not a tally room. Australians are used to having the buzz.²⁴

- 4.29 Despite its strong association with the tally room, the ABC chose not to make a submission to the inquiry. Mr Green noted that 'they had no particularly strong feeling either way.'²⁵

- 4.30 Speaking in a private capacity, Mr Green noted the sentimental value attached to the tally room: 'it would be sad to see it go; it is fun to be there'.²⁶ However, he also noted that unlike previous years, it is no longer necessary for media to be in the NTR, as they could now get the AEC results online.

- 4.31 No print or radio journalists provided direct evidence to the inquiry. According to the AEC, some Canberra Press Gallery journalists worked from their offices on election night 2004 – preferring the quieter environment. However, Mr Green noted that print media also benefit from the captive audience and contacts that the tally room provides.

The people who would miss the tally room in terms of information would be print media... Usually what happens is that most members of the media will sit there, look at it [the AEC web

20 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

21 Mr G. Linnell, *The National Interest – Radio National*, 26 July 2007.

22 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

23 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 52.

24 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 58.

25 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 57.

26 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 63

terminals] for from 15 minutes to half an hour, decide it is not telling them who is winning the election and will wander over and talk to the Labor Party and Liberal Party people on the far side. So, in a sense, the parties get a lot of assistance from the tally room because there is a captive room of journalists to talk to, and they are often very senior journalists who they can spin a message to...²⁷

- 4.32 Online journalists and bloggers – regardless of their credentials, will have access to the same information feeds as the mainstream media as of 2007.

General Public

- 4.33 The general public have access to the NTR via television and radio broadcasts or they can attend the tally room in person if they are in Canberra.
- 4.34 Channel Nine estimates that approximately two million people watched the ABC and Channel Nine coverage on election night 2004.²⁸
- 4.35 At the 2001 federal election, security recorded 1,522 people entering the public area of the NTR. While there is no official figure for the 2004 federal election, security estimated 4,000 members of the public attended – however, space and security considerations meant that only 300 members could be admitted at any one time. The space required by the media and AEC mean that 6.8 per cent of the floor space was available for the public – this has been slightly increased for the 2007 NTR.²⁹ The AEC told the inquiry that many people who attended the NTR were Canberra locals.³⁰
- 4.36 All four federal MPs and Senators based in Canberra publicly advocated continuing the tradition of the tally room in a bipartisan show of support.³¹

27 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 59.

28 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 52.

29 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 11.

30 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 4.

31 A. Fraser, 'Parties unite for tally room fight,' *The Canberra Times*, 4 April 2007.

Possible alternatives to the national tally room

Virtual Tally Room

- 4.37 Since 1998, the AEC has run an election night website known as the 'Virtual Tally Room' (VTR). The site is updated with results as votes are telephoned in from the polling place and entered into the AEC's election management system. It provides access to progressive House of Representative results for all divisions, state party summaries and national totals and early figures from the Senate count for all States and Territories.³²
- 4.38 The VTR application has been upgraded for the 2007 election (as it has for each election since 1998). It will contain approximately 300 types of results screens, produce approximately 1200 individual pages of results on election night and over 20 000 pages in the post election period. The results will be updated every 90 seconds during the evening and every 15 minutes in the post election period. On the basis of ABS Internet Usage Statistics the AEC predicts there will be 34 million hits on the system on election night, 22 million on the VTR website, and 12 million on the AEC website [reference].
- 4.39 This system is significantly quicker and more comprehensive than the manual tally board – where the display of House of Representatives results is often hours behind the count and the televised/ online reporting.
- 4.40 Free TV Australia told the committee that the benefits of the NTR could not be replicated:
- We do not think there is any way of substituting for the live and transparent nature of the national tally room through a virtual facility on the internet.³³
- 4.41 While the VTR is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, Mr Green explained that it is not a *replacement* for the television coverage:
- A virtual tally room is of little use to the television networks or to the radio, for the simple reason that it cannot drive computer graphics. It is not designed for quick operation, which they use in

32 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Electoral Newsfile, *Federal Election 2004 – Votes and the Count*, No. 120, September 2004. Available online at: http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/Newsfiles/2004/No_120.htm, viewed 17 July 2007.

33 Mrs P. Longstaff (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

the radio, to hop from seat to seat. It is there as a backup, but we have our own system to do that, and we have our own analytical tools.³⁴

4.42 The AEC also acknowledged that the television computer systems are more complex than the VTR, given that the former is involved in predicting the outcome of the election, while the latter is concerned simply with the dissemination of accurate results.³⁵

4.43 Mr Green similarly noted:

The virtual tally room in that sense is not important to us [the ABC] because we do not really use it; we use their raw data. For us, it is important that two things occur: one, that they continue to get the results as they have always done in the past and, two, that they continue to make them easily available.³⁶

Media alternatives

4.44 If the NTR was abolished after the 2007 federal election, it is unlikely that the media would organise their own 'tally room' or centre per say. However, live television coverage of the election would continue, at least on the part of the ABC and Nine Network.

4.45 Mr Linnell told the inquiry of Channel 9's 'Plan B' had the NTR been cancelled for 2007:

We had a meeting about this not long after we received the original letter from the AEC in about March this year We thought, 'We may have to do it out of Sydney – have the anchors in Sydney and then do a lot more crosses around Australia to the relevant party rooms and electorate offices.' That was our backup plan.³⁷

4.46 Mr Green told the inquiry that without the NTR, networks could draw on party functions and technology to compensate for the lack of 'buzz':

If we did not have a tally room, it would change coverage in a big way ... What would be more likely to happen is that there would be a lot more push for the parties to make their leadership functions much larger ... You could make much more use of that as a live cross venue for what is going on. If you were doing it

34 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 57.

35 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 7.

36 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 58.

37 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 56.

from a studio, you would start to make use of things you cannot really use in the tally room. You cannot use big video walls in the tally room because you have to be able to control the lighting to use them.³⁸

4.47 Mr Green cited the instance of the 1999 referendum as an example of how networks would compensate without the NTR:

We did that coverage with a very large round desk, which we talked across, and we did it with a big video wall out of which we did live crosses. Our people who normally sit around in jeans and T-shirts were dressed up properly and we stuck them behind computers on the set, much to their annoyance. They are the sorts of things you do to make it look live, so that people think the television is live and things are happening.³⁹

The logistics, risks and costs associated with the NTR

Logistics

4.48 The AEC considers the NTR is 'one of the more complex individual projects' it undertakes during the course of an election. It includes:

- rental of premises and furniture;
- construction of the tally board and false flooring;
- extensive IT and telecommunications wiring and computer system configuration;
- liaison with media stakeholders;
- recruitment of casual staff;
- security;
- catering;
- a full dress rehearsal before polling day; and
- a dismantling process undertaken under tight time constraints.⁴⁰

38 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 60.

39 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 67.

40 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 2-3.

- 4.49 The construction requires the use of many of the AEC's key communications and IT staff. The VTR exists independently and also requires support: 'the need to support both operations places an additional burden on those staff supporting the VTR system.'⁴¹

Risks

Security

- 4.50 Security concerns and efforts regarding the NTR have increased since 2001 – involving the requisite sweeps of the building before the coverage and security screening for members of the public. Mr Green noted:

Each election seems to produce a new level of security at the National Tally Room. In 2004, nearly four hours was lost on polling day as the Tally Room was locked down by security. In 2004, this security clamp down was expanded to include not just the Tally Room, but all the productions vans used by television networks. If the trend continues, 2007 may see the whole of Saturday afternoon lost to security checks.⁴²

System failure

- 4.51 The NTR has the advantage of providing 'near fail safe figures' for the dissemination of election results in the event of a 'total failure of the frontline computerised systems'.⁴³
- 4.52 Since the introduction of computerised tabulation of votes in 1974, there has been no system failure that required a complete reversion to the tally board to disseminate the result. There were some election-night computer problems in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which required cutover to the manual systems for part of the night.
- 4.53 The computerised systems now used by the AEC are stable, with a history going back 20 years. They are extensively tested which includes the conduct of trial elections – nevertheless some risk of system failure remains.
- 4.54 The AEC told the committee that in a worst-case scenario, if the NTR ceased to function, the Commission would rely on the paper trail from the

41 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

42 Mr A. Green, *Submission no. 14*, p. 2.

43 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 15.

polling places (the Assistant Returning Officers' returns). Results would then be phoned or faxed to another location in Canberra.⁴⁴

Costs

- 4.55 In 2004, the costs associated with the NTR were around \$880,000. Cost estimates for the 2007 NTR are still being finalised (as at August 2007, there were still tender processes in train), but are likely to be around \$1,060,000.⁴⁵
- 4.56 There are also indirect costs associated with the NTR in terms of skilled AEC IT staff, who would otherwise be utilised elsewhere over the election campaign. The AEC advised that it receives in excess of \$90 million in funding for a federal election.⁴⁶
- 4.57 These costs are separate from the costs of the VTR system and web hosting.
- 4.58 Costs are fully borne by taxpayers, as have been the development costs for the computer systems which underpin the NTR's operations.⁴⁷
- 4.59 Media organisations are not charged for using the NTR as a venue for election night coverage, however, they still incur the costs of transporting staff to Canberra and setting up equipment in the NTR. Mr Linnell noted that the outlays for networks in the NTR are 'considerable' but not unreasonable:
- Broadcasters do not regard the cost of setting up a temporary studio at the NTR as an 'unwarranted' expense. Rather, broadcasters believe the enhanced coverage they are able to provide to viewers via the NTR is a necessary and justified expense.⁴⁸
- 4.60 In its submission, the AEC suggested that the media might be asked to 'contribute to the cost of providing the centre' if the NTR was retained beyond the 2007 election.⁴⁹ Mr Linnell noted the Nine Network's willingness to discuss a cost-sharing option:

44 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 16.

45 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

46 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 10.

47 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

48 Free TV Australia, *Submission no. 13*, p. 2.

49 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 18.

We would be more than willing to sit down with them, have a discussion about that and see what we could do.⁵⁰

- 4.61 The obvious risk in any cost-sharing arrangement is the likelihood that some organisations may decide against utilising the NTR if they are asked to contribute to the cost:

Part of the difficulty there would be that some would probably pay because, for some of the bigger agencies, it is probably still worth their while, but for some of the smaller ones, my guess is that, if they had a small charge – and this is a personal view – they might suddenly find that they could do everything that they were doing from the press gallery here or from their offices in a capital city.⁵¹

Committee conclusions

- 4.62 Given the evidence presented to the inquiry, it is clear that the role and structure of the NTR has changed and continues to change. It comes as no surprise that the manual tally board has given way to computer driven results systems generating huge flexibilities.
- 4.63 The committee has found it difficult to gauge community and industry opinion on the subject of the NTR. While good evidence was received from expert sources, it was not a particularly wide sample.
- 4.64 The committee supports the continuation of the NTR given its historical place in Australian politics and elections. Australia is one of the world's longest running democracies, and needs to value its history and traditions. Furthermore, the committee notes, there is a value – and logic – in having a central tally room in the national capital for the federal election. This value extends far beyond dollar or logistical considerations.
- 4.65 There is a view that, by providing a focal point for the display of results on election night, the NTR actually promotes a visible symbolism of transparency in the election process. As one of the AEC's stakeholders suggested, 'Democracy, like justice, needs not only to be done but be seen to be done.'⁵² The committee is of the view that the abolition of the NTR would have a negative impact on the perception of the transparency of elections.

50 Mr G. Linnell, Free TV Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 54

51 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 5.

52 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14.

- 4.66 While the committee notes that some parties may be willing to discuss possible cost-sharing arrangements, the committee notes the view of the Electoral Commissioner who suggested that if all users of the NTR were asked to contribute, some of the smaller media agencies may seek alternative means of providing election coverage. The committee also notes that the cost of the tally room represents less than one per cent of the AEC's total budget for the election.

Recommendation 4

- 4.67 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government ensures that the National Tally Room is retained for future federal elections.**

Sophie Mirabella MP
Chair
10 September 2007