

INQUIRY INTO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

To: The Secretary of the Committee

I am writing this submission as a private citizen even though I am presently an employee of the Australian Electoral Commission.

I have worked for the AEC for the past 10 years in both a stand alone division in Hornsby (Berowra) and since 2003 at a co-location site at Chatswood.

On arrival at Chatswood we had a question of amalgamation hanging over us. Many of the staff were skeptical of such an event and most were relieved when the new Electoral Commissioner, Mr Ian Campbell announced there would be no further amalgamations within the Electoral commission. However, the relief was short lived as a new phrase crept into the AEC vocabulary “workload sharing”.

Only recently, I asked the A/g AEO for NSW what the difference was between amalgamation and “workload sharing”. She explained that amalgamation was when “jobs went” but that wouldn't happen with “workload sharing”. I received the explanation with some cynicism considering the low staff numbers (8 instead of 12) presently in place at Chatswood.

Between August 2003 and August 2006, staff at Chatswood implemented various initiatives to effeciently utilise the co-located staff. This included a sharing of casual staff and sharing responsibility for counter enquiries and mail workloads. At the 2004 Federal election major tasks were allocated to Divisions (Bradfield was responsible for postal voting activities, Berowra managed the office pre-poll centre and North Sydney managed the large off-site pre-poll at Chatswood.)

Since August last year the Chatswood site has been asked to submit methods of how we, the staff, would prefer to see the set-up at Chatswood to further accommodate a “workload sharing” strategy. Every suggestion or proposal submitted was rejected with the comment “that is not what we want”. However, at no stage were we alerted to what was actually wanted until February this year when a DRO from a stand alone division was given full access to re-organise the site in accordance with State Office requirements.

Today, the Chatswood co-located site is divided into three sections. There is a Manager (Enrolment) who is responsible for three staff who only do enrolment work.

A Manager (Administration) is responsible for selection and hiring of casual staff, organising special events such as habitation reviews, counter and telephone enquiries and overseeing office equipment functions and supplies, etc. There is one support staff available.

There are two Manager (Elections) who are responsible for election planning and community education and school visits. There is also one support staff.

Having participated in this recent re-organisation, I have been able to observe a number of changes in attitude of staff members and work place procedures. Firstly, nearly all staff have expressed a reluctance at having to do on-going repetitive tasks. For example, since the State election an APS3 officer's sole duty is to handle defective enrolment forms. He rarely has the opportunity to do any other duty.

Another staff member has commented that she feels she is now in a call centre as all she seems to do is answer the phone. She, however, finds it unusual not to help with enrolment activities, especially when her colleagues are over-run with enrolment forms to process. Staff are concerned that they are losing previously acquired skills that no-longer are relevant to their immediate jobs.

Local knowledge is no longer considered a benefit in performing a job. The attitude of "I'll drive by that address and check it out on the way home" is no longer in place. Staff in general feel as they have had ownership of their division taken away from them. This has resulted in a diminished sense of accountability for tasks across the board. Staff not in the enrolment cell are now frustrated at not being able to contribute their local knowledge in the upkeep of the electoral roll and address register.

The Manager(Enrolment) now spends all her time managing the enrolment process. In a stand alone Division, a returning officer spends little time on enrolment matters. He or she will be aware of how many enrolment forms are on hand to process and may even process some special category enrolment. At Chatswood, the Manager (Enrolment) has to determine who opens the mail, who will stamp up the numbers on cards, allocate cards for processing to staff, process special categories, oversee defective and follow-up enrolment, etc. The process of enrolment at Chatswood has now become a long and drawn out, time consuming task.

My concern is that the majority of staff at Chatswood are now hampered by a lack of exposure to all facets of electoral divisional work. This will be reflected in their experience when they seek promotion to other positions. They are also concerned that come a Federal election, they may be required to step into tasks that they have not experienced for months.

On a personal basis, I have found it difficult to adjust to no-longer being responsible for what is occurring in "my division". Having spent the last eight months acting as Divisional Returning Officer(North Sydney), and having a major role for 7 years in the Division of Berowra, I took great pride and satisfaction in "keeping my division in order". Since February, while in the Manager(Election Planning) role, I have found it frustrating at not being able to oversee functions that would help in a smooth lead-up to and management of a Federal election. For example, special category electors, address register maintenance, and training and selection of casual staff are no longer in my realm of control. In fact, I am highly concerned that come the next Federal election, the Chatswood site will be very much under-prepared to face the rigors of such an event.

When I first arrived at Chatswood in 2003, it was stressed how important it was to keep the Divisions' stores separate at election time. I could understand this sentiment, realising the consequences of mixing ballot papers between divisions. I am appalled that Chatswood now only has one storeroom to accommodate election supplies for the four divisions.

At a recent meeting of NSW Divisional Returning Officers several colleagues from stand alone divisions expressed concern that "Chatswood is a disaster waiting to happen". This embarrassed me to

hear such sentiments as I certainly do not want to be involved in an election disaster. However, I feel as though any input I gave in the lead up to the new “workload sharing” procedure was ignored, simply because it was seen as stumbling blocks to “progress”.

I acknowledge that Divisions all over the country have variable work loads due to a variety of factors, such as high elector turnover, high NESB rates, rural and inaccessible addresses. Having worked in North Sydney Division enabled me to realise the vast discrepancies that do occur. Chatswood site has a mix of two “easy” divisions (Berowra and Bradfield) that have fairly stable enrolment in older and settled areas. Bennelong, although similar, has difficulties due to the high NESB population. North Sydney's enrolment is nearly 50% greater than the other three divisions. A method that could work in Chatswood is for the Divisions to remain autonomous, but for staff to be shared on an as needed basis.

I have serious reservations about the successful conduct of the next Federal election at Chatswood., and have therefore handed in my resignation. I am extremely disappointed as I know I have the ability and experience to manage the ongoing work of a division and in particular the smooth running of an election.

Co-located sites across the Electoral Commission have been received with mixed attitudes. There certainly are financial benefits and staff usually enjoy the broader range of colleagues to work with. However, when Berowra Division left Hornsby it was seen in the area as yet another service that was disappearing from the community. There is no longer a face attached to the Division and I wonder if this could be a reason for the growing reluctance of electors to enrol or open their doors during a habitation review.

I summing up, my main concern with co-locations within the Electoral Commission is the potential for implementation of “workload sharing” principles that take precedence over concern for an accurate electoral roll and address register, employee job satisfaction and successful elections.

SUE MICHIE