

SUBMISSION 52

SUBMISSION TO JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

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To Whom It May Concern

Relevant Term of Reference: Potential to Increase Electoral Knowledge Outside School.

As a recently returned expatriate of seven years, I wish to respond to the Terms of Reference of the enquiry in order to relate our difficulties with the overseas voting system as it stands presently.

Given that nearly one million Australians live abroad on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, the need for easy access to voting facilities cannot be underestimated in a modern democracy. Disenfranchisement of a substantial portion of the population is not indicative of a modern democracy and with the increasing trends towards a globally mobile Australian population, along with the growing international education industry which the Australian government encourages, it can only be expected that students in the future will take advantage of receiving an education at some time offshore.

Our family experience was typical of many. We were not aware that we had to notify the Electoral Office before our departure, and when the first election during that period occurred we were able to vote in Australia House in London because it was within the first three years away.

However, nobody during that election indicated to us that we needed to change our electoral 'identity' to the required offshore status should we intend staying longer than the three year period and so when the next election occurred and we were resident in Geneva, Switzerland, we had been absent for longer than the three year limit and we were consequently prevented from doing so because we had been struck off the roll. At the same time, our son had turned 18 years of age and normally, was eligible to vote in his first election. However he too was similarly forbidden because his parents were no longer eligible.

This is totally unfair and sends the absolute wrong message to an 18 year old about the government's desire to encourage young people to register, and/or participate in their civic rights and/or take responsibility for their civic obligations.

Finally, when we did attempt to vote, before finding out we had been cut off the roll, an Consular employee had the audacity to suggest we were wasting our time anyway

because by the time the expatriate vote was counted the result was worked out already. What kind of message does that give?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Accordingly, if the Government is genuine about wanting Australia to shine as an example of a modern democracy to other less-democratic nations, and is genuine about wanting its young citizens to fully participate in the countries democratic institutions, improvements in the existing situation for expatriates is essential.

- Using elections and voting places as opportunities to promote civic responsibility would seem one particularly useful mechanism.
- Creating a means for keeping track of expatriate's length of stay offshore e.g. by encouraging registering at their closest Consulate or Embassy would also assist, especially if advertising electoral obligations was an ongoing promotional activity.
- Increasing communication with expatriates via online promotion. When expats depart having extra questions concerning enrolment, and staying in touch with the AEC would be an easy way of improving access. A vast majority of expatriates who are living offshore utilize online communication in order to stay in touch with families so this would be a particularly easy method. Those who did not want this information collected would not complete those questions.
- Making it easy for expatriates to vote by not having such a short time period before disenfranchisement occurs would also seem sensible.
- Following along recent examples such as in Italy, where two Australians have been accepted as members of the Italian Parliament catering for the needs of the expatriate community would also encourage more expatriate participation
- Increasing promotion and information at airports and other departure lounges.

I look forward to a more enlightened inclusive approach to government attitudes towards the expatriate community and hope the committee enquiring into these matters can value the significance of having nearly 1/20th of the population living offshore.

Yours sincerely,

Jo Anne Rey.