

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Secretary [Signature]

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THE SECRETARY,  
 JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS,  
 PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
 CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

When your Committee next meets, I ask that it consider changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, to ensure that we who cannot easily access polling booths will have electoral visitors call on us - an essential service we who live in Queensland are provided with at the time of State or Municipal elections.

I am totally blind, while my wife has extremely limited vision.

We previously voted at the easily accessible Salvation Army Hall, Montague Street Greenslopes, but alas, that is no longer available on voting days.

As we found the once we used it, the replacement facility at St James Hall, Kirkland Avenue Coorparoo is awkwardly located in the back yard of the Church. We are not willing to again repeat the exercise of trying to find it!

As a result, we are now registered as General Postal Voters in the Division of Griffith, a situation in which the Act currently discriminates against me as a totally blind person.

Clause 1 (d) of Section 194 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 that refers to postal voting reads:

"the elector shall then, in the presence of the authorised witness but so that the witness cannot see the vote, mark his or her vote on the ballot-paper, fold the ballot-paper, place it in the envelope addressed to the appropriate DRO and fasten the envelope;"

I interpret that Clause to mean that the elector alone should know how the vote was cast.

I acknowledge that I cannot complete my own ballot paper due to my blindness, and therefore must rely on someone else to do it for me.

Clause 1 (f) of Section 194 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 is written in such a way that because of my blindness, I am to be treated less favourably than a sighted person, and expected to indicate my vote to someone known to me. The Clause reads:

"if the elector cannot read or is so disabled as to be unable to vote without assistance, a person chosen by the elector may, according to the directions of the elector, complete the postal vote certificate and do for the elector any act required by paragraph (d) or (e);"

Section 195 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 that refers to the duty of witnesses, provide for penalties against a witness who enables another person to find out how an elector marked a postal ballot-paper.

That Section does not cover a situation where I could be talking to the friend who completed my ballot paper, only to have him/her make reference to the way in which my vote was cast. Surely that one-sided arrangement incorporated into the Act discriminates against me and others in my situation!

With the Electoral Visitor provided to us in Queensland at the time of State and Municipal elections, our ballot papers have never been completed by anyone known to my wife or myself!

I am aware that to ensure their independence, other blind people are seeking to have electronic voting made available to them at the time of Federal elections.

Electronic voting would be commendable for those who are computer literate and able to independently or have assistance to access polling places, however not everyone is so blessed.

Another matter that concerns me is the lack of consistency in the way in which information related to Federal elections is provided to we who are blind. The following analysis of the information we have received for those held in 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004 demonstrates the inconsistencies:

The booklet "Your Guide to the Federal Election" ("Guide") that is distributed to every household in Australia at the time of a Federal election has been recorded on an audio cassette and automatically posted to us on each occasion, though I am unaware of which organisation arranges that distribution.

#### 1996 ELECTION

The "Guide" was recorded on side one, with the full listing of all Divisional and Senate candidates for Queensland appearing on side two of just one cassette.

PRODUCED BY: National Federation of Blind Citizen of Australia.

RECORDED BY: Information Alternatives, Melbourne.

BRILLE IDENTIFICATION: None, nor was there a printed label.

ASSISTANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY: The "Guide" advised that selected newspapers would carry a full list of polling places the day before the election, and that those suitable for wheelchair access would be highlighted.

SENATE VOTING: The "Guide" advised that if an elector chose to vote above the line, they should number just one of those boxes, and leave all the others blank. It was noted that some candidates are not part of a party or group which has a box above the line, and to vote for them, electors had to vote below the line and number every box.

DIVISIONAL OFFICE INFORMATION: The address, (but not the Returning Officer's name or telephone number), was given at the end of the "Guide".

INDEXING: A single tone was provided for people with cue facilities on their recorders to locate the start of information relating to each House of Representatives seat, and also the start of the Senate candidates listing.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of Surname, First christian name and Party affiliation. They were given in the order in which the candidates appeared on the ballot-paper with the sitting member being identified.

SENATE GROUP AND CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of Group number, Party name, Candidate surname, First christian name and party name or initials.

INFORMATION RELATED TO BOXES THAT COULD BE MARKED ABOVE THE LINE: None.

#### 1998 ELECTION

Only the "Guide" was recorded on one cassette for the 3 October 1998 poll, though I have no recollection now of how I discovered that the essential candidate information would not be supplied to us on that occasion.

Regrettably, I have misplaced that recording, but make the following comments based on written notes that are still available.

On 17 September 1998, I wrote a letter of complaint to the Divisional Returning Officer for Griffith.

In it I spoke of having talked to The Accessible Information Service of Royal Blind Society of New South Wales, and of being told they had only been contracted to record the "Guide".

I also told of my experiences the previous evening with consultants on 13:2326 as I attempted to obtain the names of those for whom we were to vote.

The woman who answered my call could not give me that information, but took my details, saying someone would contact me after enquiries were made. Rosemary rang back, but suggested I only required identification of the boxes above the line on the Senate paper. After saying I required all for whom we could vote, she provided the 57 names, though her presentation of the information was punctuated with a number of interruptions.

My letter was answered on 28 September 1998 by Mr G J Webster for the Australian Electoral Officer for Queensland. In the reply he said:

"The cassette was produced immediately after the announcement of the election as it was considered that to delay production to include candidates' details could adversely affect the delivery of the information.

"I apologize for the less than satisfactory service you received when you sought details of the Senate candidates for Queensland. Every person should expect to be able to enquire about the names of all of the candidates and have this information supplied in a form suitable to their needs."

## 2001 ELECTION

The recorded information for Queensland for the 2001 election was presented on two audio cassettes - the "Guide" on one, with the full listing of all Divisional and Senate candidates on the other.

PRODUCED BY: Not mentioned.

RECORDED BY: The Accessible Information Service of Royal Blind Society of New South Wales.

BRaille IDENTIFICATION: The case containing the "Guide" was marked "Election 2001", with the other case being marked "Candidates 2001". Neither cassette was marked with braille, though each had a printed label.

ASSISTANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY: The "Guide" advised that a full list of polling places would be published in major metropolitan newspapers on the Friday before the election, and that those with wheelchair access would be identified. Vision impaired voters who required assistance to fill out their ballot-papers at the polling place were advised in the "Guide" to ask for the Officer in Charge.

SENATE VOTING: The "Guide" advised that if an elector chose to vote above the line, they should number just one of those boxes, and leave all the others on the paper blank. It was noted that some candidates are not part of a party or group which has a box above the line, and to vote for them, electors had to vote below the line and number every box.

DIVISIONAL OFFICE INFORMATION: None.

INDEXING: It was provided on both cassettes for people with cue facilities on their recorders. Voice indexing was used to identify each of the nine section headings on the "Guide" cassette. Voice indexing also identified the start of alphabetical headings on the candidates cassette, with subsequent divisions starting with the same initial tone indexed. There was no indexing provided for the Senate information - we had to guess where its start was located.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of Division name before every candidate, Surname, First christian name, Party affiliation and some business hours contact telephone numbers. They were given in the order in which the candidates appeared on the ballot-paper.

SENATE GROUP AND CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of Candidate surname, First christian name, Party affiliation, and business hours contact telephone numbers, (mostly that of the political party). The groups were not identified at their start, but only by the party affiliation after the Surname and Christian names had been given.

INFORMATION RELATED TO BOXES THAT COULD BE MARKED ABOVE THE LINE: None.

The following is taken from "Getting help from the AEC", Section I in the recorded "Guide":

"For people with a print disability, information on the 2001 Federal Election is available in braille, audio cassette, ASCII disk format and large print. The information will also be available as an audio file from the AEC website.

Despite what was written in "Getting help from the AEC", the candidate information was not made available in braille, ASCII disk format or large print. It was only provided on audio cassette.

#### 2004 ELECTION

The recorded information for Queensland for the 2004 election was presented on three audio cassettes - the "Guide" on one, the full listing of all Divisional candidates on another, and the Senate candidates on the third.

PRODUCED BY: Not mentioned.

RECORDED BY: Accessible Information Solutions, a department of National Information and Library Service.

BRILLE IDENTIFICATION: The case containing the "Guide" was marked by a barely perceptible "Fed Election", with both the other cases being marked "Candidates". None of the cassettes were marked with braille, though they had a printed label, and a printed slip was placed between the cassette and the inside of the case, apparently to assist sighted people to identify its contents.

ASSISTANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY: The "Guide" advised that copies of candidate information in audio cassette and braille would be available on request after the declaration of nominations by calling the AEC on 13:2326. It also advised that a full list of polling places would be published in major metropolitan newspapers on the Friday before election day, and that those with wheelchair access would be identified. Polling places with full wheelchair access would be identified by a wheelchair symbol, and polling places with assisted access would be identified by a figure pushing a wheelchair. Vision impaired voters who required assistance to fill out their ballot-papers at the polling place were advised in the "Guide" to ask for the Officer in Charge.

SENATE VOTING: The "Guide" advised that if an elector chose to vote above the line, they should number just one of those boxes, and leave all the others blank. It was noted that some candidates are not part of a party or group which has a box above the line, and to vote for them, electors had to vote below the line and number every box.

DIVISIONAL OFFICE INFORMATION: None.

INDEXING: For people with cue facilities on their recorders, voice indexing was provided to identify each of the ten Section headings on the "Guide" cassette, and also to identify each of the Division on the House of Representatives candidate cassette. There was no indexing provided on the cassette containing details of Senate candidates.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of Ballot position number, Surname, First christian name, Party affiliation, Address (apparently home or post box), and occupation. They were given in the order in which the candidates appeared on the ballot-paper with the sitting member being identified.

SENATE GROUP AND CANDIDATE INFORMATION: Appeared in the sequence of (before every candidate's name) Ticket letter number, Ballot position number, Sitting member (if applicable), Candidate surname, First christian name, Party affiliation and Occupation. There was however, some variation in some of the information provided. The second Christian name was given for George Henry Brandis, James Walter Savage, Darryl Ross Whitford, John Clifford Cherry and Darryl Angus MacArthur. In ticket P, position 1, only one word (it sounded like "Puffin") was given for the name of the candidate. Addresses were given for Darryl MacArthur and Hatham Coolum.

INFORMATION RELATED TO BOXES THAT COULD BE MARKED ABOVE THE LINE: None.

On this occasion, candidate information was not automatically sent to us. It was not until 29 September that I was alerted to the fact that I had to specifically request it.

If, in future, a specific request has to be made for us to receive the Candidate Information, could that requirement be drawn to our attention at the beginning of the audio "Guide", and not just within the body of the text as happened on this occasion?

Within the heading of "Assistance for people with a disability" for 2004, it is noted that people in wheelchairs were advised if the polling place had full or assisted access. There was no mention of access assistance for blind people.

Although a majority of electors are said to vote above the line on the Senate ballot-paper, the AEC has not provided blind people with any information related to which boxes can, or cannot be marked in any of the three elections where Senate candidate information has been provided to us.

In a call to 13:2326, a consultant told me that there were 21 boxes above the line on the 2004 Queensland Senate paper, however boxes A, D, G, K and O above the line could not be marked as they represented unregistered parties.

I implore the Committee to favourably view the matters raised herein.

I request that your written reply also be accompanied by the same in ASCII text format on a computer disk so that I, a blind person, can read it independently.

Yours sincerely,

Noel Abrahams.

cc: Blind Citizens Australia.