



**Blind Citizens Australia
Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral
Matters Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election**

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Blind Citizens Australia is available for comment at face to face inquiry sessions.

About Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the peak national advocacy organisation of and for people who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. As the national advocacy peak body we have over 3000 individual members, branches nationwide and 13 affiliate organisations that represent the interests of blind or vision impaired Australians.

Electronically Assisted Voting

During the 2007 election the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) conducted a trial of Electronically Assisted Voting (EAV), which allows people who are blind or vision impaired a secret, independent and verifiable vote through the use of a computer. The trial was conducted in 29 polling booths throughout the country, with 882 voters who are blind or vision impaired voting for themselves, by themselves for the very first time.

Blind Citizens Australia would like to thank the AEC for conducting this trial. Feedback from our members tells us that the opportunity was greatly appreciated by many. We believe that electronically assisted voting should be introduced as a permanent measure with at least one polling booth made accessible in every polling station at the next Federal Election so that more of the 500,000 Australians who are vision impaired or blind can exercise this critical right.

One of the key negative responses to the trial came from people who are blind or vision impaired and who were unable to travel to a polling station which featured EAV. Many people who are blind or vision impaired are unable to drive; those living alone are especially reliant on public or community transport to move beyond their local area. It is also difficult for people who are blind or vision impaired to navigate a new route or building without orientation and mobility training from a qualified instructor. Those members who could not travel to an EAV equipped site they were already familiar with were only able to travel to an appropriate site if local authorities organised special transport. As a result, we believe that it is critical for people who are blind or vision impaired to have access to EAV where-ever they vote.

People who are blind or vision impaired also found that if they were able to attend one of the training sessions so that they could understand the process of voting electronically, the prospect of casting their vote was much less daunting and their experiences were more positive. If the Australian government continues to provide EAV at future elections, Blind Citizens Australia encourages the AEC to conduct a large scale education and training campaign in the lead up to the next Federal election. This would be particularly useful for the large numbers of people who are blind or vision impaired and aged over sixty as this group is often less familiar with technology in the first instance.

Further feedback tells us that many people who are blind or vision impaired were pleased with the model adopted by the AEC for their trial. In particular, the use of a numeric keypad and the clear voice, clear instructions and volume control were regarded positively. Voters did say, however, that it would be useful to have the accessible polling booth located

in a quiet part of the polling station; not all voters were clearly able to hear the voice instructions.

Online Voting

While BCA believes that electronically assisted voting is the most viable method of accessible voting for Australians who are blind or vision impaired in the medium term, we are aware that the longer term trend may be towards online voting for all voters. We call upon the Australian government to investigate potential methods of providing both secure and accessible online voting options.

Blind Citizens Australia has expertise in developing guidelines regarding online accessibility. For example, Blind Citizens Australia was heavily involved in the ecommerce work conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to establish online banking guidelines. We would be happy to assist the government to ensure that any future move into online voting is accessible.

Electoral Registration for People with Print Disabilities

Under Part VIII, Section 98 (3) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act (1918)*, a person who cannot sign their own name on an electoral enrolment form must obtain a medical certificate to prove they are unable to provide a signature. Then they must have someone else sign the form on their behalf before they can join the electoral roll.

It is BCA's position that this is unacceptable because it requires people with disabilities such as blindness to be treated differently. In an era where equality is viewed as fundamental to Australian society, this is unacceptable. Able bodied people do not need to provide a doctor's certificate in

order to enrol, and we believe that people who have medical reasons for not providing a signature should not have to take an extra step which is sometimes costly or inconvenient. Blind Citizens Australia calls for the government to investigate changing the legislation so that this unfair obligation is removed.

Accessible 'How to Vote' information

For most people, reading through party policies and how to vote documents is a critical part of deciding their vote. Unfortunately people who are blind or vision impaired are largely excluded from this process. Although the AEC provides information in accessible formats, policies and how to vote documents from political parties are often only made available in normal sized print or as a PDF on a website. Neither of these formats is accessible to someone who relies on large print, Braille or screen reading software on their computer to access printed information.

We believe that people who are blind or vision impaired should have the same opportunity to cast an informed vote as every other Australian citizen. We call upon this investigation to acknowledge the need for better practice in this area, and to recommend that the Australian Electoral Commission remind political parties of their moral and legal obligations to comply with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* by providing information in accessible formats. Again, Blind Citizens Australia would be happy to assist the AEC to formulate any action in this area.