

SUBMISSION 12

Mr Daryl Melham MP
Chairperson
c/o Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA



**Association
for the Blind of WA**
Guide Dogs WA

18 April 2008

Dear Mr Melham MP

Re: Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into and report on all aspects of the 2007 Federal election and matters related thereto.

The Association for the Blind of WA is the principal provider of services to people with vision impairment in Western Australia. For more than 90 years it has worked to maximise the quality of life for people who are blind or vision impaired. The ABS and (Centre for Eye Research Australia) indicates that in 2005, Western Australians who were blind or vision impaired numbered 52,400.

Independence is a significant issue for most people with a vision impairment. It is important to be able to do the things you want to do, in your own time, without being dependent upon the help or support of others.

Prior to the last Federal Election, if people with a vision impairment experienced vision loss to the extent that they were unable to cast an independent ballot in the standard facilities provided, they were permitted to receive personal assistance in the voting booth. This situation has effectively meant that people who are blind or vision impaired have been denied their democratic right to cast an independent, secret and verifiable vote.

The Association was therefore, encouraged to learn that during the 2007 Federal Election, the Australian Electoral Commission was going to conduct a trial of electronic voting for people with a vision impairment. Our organisation provided its strong support for this trial. We promoted it in our client newsletter, hosted and encouraged participation in the equipment demonstration sessions, provided our premises for a Pre-Poll Voting Centre and sourced two people to work with the AEC as sighted guides at the Voting Centre.

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The Association for the Blind of WA maintains a very strong interest in this matter. It is our understanding that a decision about the continued provision of these facilities at future Federal elections will depend upon the extent of their use during the trial.

The number of people who are blind or vision impaired is expected to significantly increase in the forthcoming years. The demographics of this group will change; individuals will be IT literate and will expect even demand, the accessibility of facilities and services to enable their equitable participation in society. The ability to cast an independent, secret and verifiable vote is an important element of one's democratic rights - from both an actual and symbolic point of view.

The Association congratulates the AEC and Federal Government on this important initiative and looks forward to receiving some feedback from this trial. Furthermore, irrespective of any usage data arising from this trial, our organisation strongly advocates for the AEC to incorporate and extend the provision of electronic voting facilities at all future Federal elections.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Margaret Crowley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'M'.

Dr Margaret Crowley
Chief Executive Officer