

Wilson, Frances (REPS)

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To: Committee, EM (REPS)
Subject: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into 2007 Election

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To the members of the The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM)

I appreciate the time given to this inquiry and I would like to inform you of my individual experiences with the electoral system as an overseas Australian.

I left the electorate of McPherson in Queensland in 2005. I return annually as my family still reside there, I have property there, I pay taxes and expect to return to live there by 2010.

By registering with the AEC and some other well known email lists I am informed when changes occur. By listening to Queensland radio stations that stream on the internet, from reading the online newspapers and discussions with family and friends both in Australia and the over one hundred member strong local Australian Club here in South Florida, I keep up to date and informed about Australian issues and in touch with other Australians.

I have always voted in referendums and federal elections, and 2007 was the first time I have attempted to do so from overseas. I am assured by the AEC that currently I am on the electoral roll. I found the information on enrolling from overseas quite confusing and asked many questions before finding the only way to do it was to complete the enrolment forms and post them home, and many of my fellow Australians here decided not to bother. I was extremely distressed when after sending my application for a postal vote through the Washington Embassy I heard nothing and knew if my name was dropped from the roll, I would not be able to re-enrol because of the 3 year rule. I believe Australians should all enjoy the same rights, no matter where they live. Australians overseas who chose to vote have to make a lot more effort in order to fulfill their responsibility and it seems unfair that they are penalized.

I was dismayed by the lack of response to my repeated calls to the Embassy in Washington about my postal vote application and finally resorted to resending it by fax, so that I had a confirmation of its receipt there. Unfortunately there were no booths listed in Miami and the closest polling booth where I could make a personal vote was inconvenient, being a twelve hours drive (one way) in Atlanta and I was unable to take the time to get there, so I had to rely on a postal ballot. I had heard the results of the election, before the deadline for me to have mailed my ballot papers had I received them. But alas they did not arrive in my mail box until the Wednesday after the election. So my first attempt to vote from overseas was an expensive waste of time. I felt disenfranchised but decided to mail the ballot papers in order to request that my name not be removed from the roll. Because I had no way of knowing if this letter was received, I decided to write to the AEC and to the Minister of State to register my dismay and relate my fear of being removed from the roll. After approximately two months on hearing nothing, I contacted the Brisbane radio station 4BC and related my story on air. The host offered to follow up on my behalf and on the next days show a representative from the AEC told us, the listeners, that just by applying for a postal vote I had fulfilled the obligation and would not be removed from the roll. The other questions however were brushed off as being beyond their control. So my question remains unanswered, what happened? Why was my initial application lost, how was I to know that it would not arrive in time? Why were my calls to the Embassy not returned? I was informed by one Embassy staff member that the ballot papers had only arrived on the Monday before the election, was this enough time?

After this experience during the recent election I have given a lot of thought to a fair and equitable voting procedure for all Australian citizens.

My suggestions are as follows:

Citizens overseas should receive confirmation of voting eligibility by mail or electronically when enrolment is processed. I had to constantly check the AEC website as I was fearful of being removed from the roll and had no documentation.

A receipt after the arrival at the embassy of an application of a postal vote. I could not find out if my application had been received. Repeated calls to the Embassy in Washington went to voicemail and were not returned.

An early voting system implemented for overseas postal voters where ballot papers are sent to their chosen mailing address early enough to allow timely returns or alternatively online voting. By my deadline for posting the ballot papers I knew the results, unfortunately I had not received them, they did not arrive until the middle of the next week.

More voting locations where Aussies are concentrated..
My closest place to vote in person was a twelve hour drive (one-way) at Atlanta.

Australians should be able to enrol to vote wherever they live. I called a radio station in Brisbane to express my dismay and was astonished to hear some residents felt that I had given up my right to have a say how my country was run, by choosing to live overseas. I didn't understand their reasoning, I own property, pay taxes and intend to live there again.

Why cant I enrol if I have been away 3 years or more, such limits only disenfranchise thinking Australians. I stay educated and informed about what is happening in Australia, I am committed and loyal to my country and want the best for the place that I love.

I am not forced to vote, I choose to

Thank you for your time

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