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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission

MONDAY, 2 JULY 2007

SYDNEY

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS**

Monday, 2 July 2007

Members: Mrs Mirabella (*Chair*), Senator Sterle (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Adams, Carr, Fierravanti-Wells and Murray and Mr Ciobo, Mr Danby, Mr Forrest and Mr Griffin

Members in attendance: Senators Adams, Fierravanti-Wells and Sterle and Mrs Mirabella

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- the adequacy of AEC co-location of divisional offices, including both financial and social consequences of co-locations;
- the number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices;
- whether the current arrangements meet career expectations for AEC officers;
- whether the current arrangements meet community expectations about the appropriate use of staffing resources;
- what any change to these arrangements would mean for the previous two points;
- what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews;
- whether the current APS staffing levels are appropriate for the actual work of divisional offices;
- any other issues relating to the staffing of divisional and central offices which may be raised in submission or by the committee;
- the continuing relevance of the National Tally Room to members of parliament, candidates, political parties, the media, and the general public;
- the possible alternatives to the National Tally Room flowing from advances in computer and telecommunications technologies, such as the Australian Electoral Commission's web-based Virtual Tally Room; and
- the logistics, risks and cost of providing the National Tally room.

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Committee met at 11.02 am

CHAIR (Mrs Mirabella)—I declare open the first public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission. The inquiry was referred by the Special Minister of State, the Hon. Gary Nairn MP, on 28 March 2007. On 21 May 2007, the minister asked the committee to include additional terms of reference for its inquiry into considering whether the national tally room should be retained beyond the 2007 federal election. The inquiry has received 16 submissions to date, and copies are available on the committee's website.

Today we will be hearing from a range of individuals who either are or have been employed by the AEC in various capacities. We will also be hearing from Free TV Australia and Mr Antony Green to discuss their views on the future of the national tally room. In addition, the committee will be hearing from the Community and Public Sector Union, whose membership includes employees from the AEC and the HS Chapman Society.

I remind witnesses that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and warrants the same respect as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded in *Hansard* and will attract parliamentary privilege.

[11.04 am]

PEISLEY, Mr Brian Phillip, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. As stated a minute ago, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received from you a written submission to this inquiry. Do you wish to present any additional submissions?

Mr Peisley—No. The only change in the information that I submitted is that it pointed out that I was the divisional returning officer for North Sydney. I have recently been promoted to the operational manager's role, which takes in the Chatswood site.

CHAIR—Thank you. Did you want to make a few brief comments about your submission or key parts of that submission?

Mr Peisley—No, I am happy with the submission in its presentation.

CHAIR—I will begin with a couple of questions to you. In your submission, you have stated that you believe the services of divisional offices can be better promoted to the community. In what ways do you think that can occur?

Mr Peisley—My personal belief is that stand-alone and co-located divisions do not service the community. The office structure of those divisions is such that, while they do basic work, the influx of work into those divisions is not meeting the organisation's requirements of processing the enrolment or the work that is going through at the time. We can only do bare basic work.

CHAIR—You have also made comments that currently the division office does not need to close as often as stand-alone offices because stand-alone offices necessarily have a smaller number of staff.

Mr Peisley—That is right.

CHAIR—Did that occur on many occasions?

Mr Peisley—As a divisional returning officer, one of the biggest frustrations I had in the past was that, where you were the only staff member in the office in a stand-alone site, for safety reasons you would have to lock your door. There would be people knocking on the door wanting to come in, and you could not let them in because you were the only person in that office. When you go to bigger sites, if staff are away at least the other divisions are supporting the office opening rules.

CHAIR—So it is really a staffing issue?

Mr Peisley—Yes. It boils down to staffing issues.

Mr DANBY—Could I just follow that up and ask: how widely advertised is your office in the electorates so that people know that it is there?

Mr Peisley—Most of the communities in country divisions know where their electoral divisions are located. They know, for instance, in Calare that there is one in the Commonwealth building in Orange. The divisional locations are reasonably well known by the community because—

Mr DANBY—It seemed to be pretty difficult parking there this morning. How do people who have an issue—

Mr Peisley—Are we talking about Chatswood or in general?

Mr DANBY—Yes, Chatswood.

Mr Peisley—In regard to Chatswood, there are other parking spaces around. There are other shopping centres nearby, and people do walk to the facility at Chatswood and go upstairs. It is no more difficult parking at Chatswood than it would be at Fowler or anywhere else.

Mr DANBY—Your experience is that you do get traffic of people who want to physically come in and see you?

Mr Peisley—Yes. There are people coming to the counters all the time looking for relatives, wanting to update their enrolment or for various reasons.

Mr DANBY—Has some of that been lessened by people being able to go online and look at the roll and stuff?

Mr Peisley—I really cannot answer you.

CHAIR—You have talked about regionalisation of AEC services rather than having co-location.

Mr Peisley—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you considered how this would work in non-metropolitan areas?

Mr Peisley—Yes. In my submission I pointed out that if you have a look at country areas you will see that only about one per cent of country areas in Australia are currently serviced by a divisional returning office.

CHAIR—But wouldn't that be worse if you regionalised it and had several electorates serviced by one rural divisional office?

Mr Peisley—I will use a typical example. A good example is the division of Riverina. The office at Riverina is at Narrandera. The biggest centre is Wagga. There are some 50,000 people in Wagga. The next biggest centre is Griffith. It has some 25,000 people, yet the divisional office is in Narrandera with—what?—3,000 residents. That does not seem—

CHAIR—But that is not an argument to reduce the number of divisional offices in the country.

Mr Peisley—No, but—

Mr DANBY—It is an argument to say that it should be in Wagga.

Mr Peisley—It is an argument to say that it should be somewhere, but it is not servicing the area. Are country divisions really servicing the areas that they are in?

CHAIR—Have you worked in any country centres?

Mr Peisley—I certainly have. I have worked at Eden-Monaro. Eden-Monaro, which is based at Queanbeyan, never adequately serviced the population of the constituents of Eden-Monaro. However, the fact that it was at Canberra and could be regionalised in Canberra would service it as well as—

CHAIR—So you are saying that the people of Eden-Monaro would be better serviced if the office were located within Canberra?

Mr Peisley—I am saying that, if there were a regional area based in Canberra, it would service Hume—

CHAIR—Do you appreciate that, for some rural electorates, the electorate is the region—

Mr Peisley—I appreciate that, yes.

CHAIR—and that to further amalgamate offices would actually take services away?

Mr Peisley—What services are going to be taken away?

CHAIR—If you have two, three or four country electorates working out of one divisional office, country people already may have to travel an hour to get to their electoral office.

Mr Peisley—But only one per cent of divisional offices are located in country areas. What is happening to the other 99 per cent?

CHAIR—But I put it to you—

Mr Peisley—No; what I am saying is that country people are already travelling to areas such as Goulburn and Queanbeyan—wherever the divisional office is located, they are already travelling there. What difference does it—

CHAIR—So you are saying: let them travel a bit further?

Mr Peisley—No, what I am saying is that, with the advent of other facilities such as telephones, internet, emails and things like that, we are able to service from a regional centre better than we can from a country divisional office.

CHAIR—Mr Peisley, I would have to disagree with you on that—

Mr Peisley—That is fine.

CHAIR—because country people already travel an hour or more to get to their divisional office, and the nature of—

Mr Peisley—But—

CHAIR—Let me finish; I have let you have a go. The nature of living in the country means that you do have to travel to access certain services within a region. The question we as legislators have to ask is: what is the reasonable distance, and do we further centralise services, such as important services like the AEC, in larger metropolitan areas? That is a question for the committee and for our recommendations.

Senator STERLE—I think where Mr Peisley is coming from is that it does beg the question of why the AEC office is in a smaller community of 3,000.

CHAIR—That is one electorate. We are talking about the whole.

Senator STERLE—Yes, so I can see—

Mr Peisley—But, in general, why can't there be two regional centres—and I am using New South Wales as an example—west of the Blue Mountains servicing western New South Wales? Currently there are only four anyway.

CHAIR—Because that is a cut of 50 per cent, and that would mean that people would have to travel many hours to get to the office.

Mr Peisley—But are those people travelling? I do not think they are. Personally, I do not believe that the elector is travelling to the divisional office.

Senator STERLE—Because of emails and telephones.

Mr Peisley—I believe that they are using other means of doing that.

CHAIR—Do you have any evidence of that?

Mr Peisley—Do you have any evidence that they are not?

CHAIR—Do you have any evidence, or is that just based on what you feel?

Mr Peisley—My personal opinion is that they are emailing or they are telephoning; they are not travelling to the divisional office.

CHAIR—I just wanted to clarify that your evidence is just anecdotal—

Mr Peisley—Yes, it certainly is.

CHAIR—and your personal feelings, which are geared towards centralisation and a smaller number of offices.

Senator STERLE—Thanks for the tour, Mr Peisley; that really opened our eyes, and it was good to meet a few people. But I struggled to understand the staffing arrangements when I heard about someone who had been there for 20 years as a casual and about the turnover of staff. I asked why there was such a turnover and I was given an answer, but is that constant turnover of staff common in every divisional office?

Mr Peisley—It is hard to say. In some divisions and, again, in country divisions you may have a more settled staff who stay, but in metro divisions there seems to be a higher turnover of casual staff. Permanent staff seem to stay a bit longer. At that particular site, Chatswood, yes, there has been a higher turnover in staff just recently, but, to be fair, there has been a considerable number of retirements. One person has resigned for other reasons and there have been other staff moves that have been managed by management.

Senator STERLE—You have obviously been in the system—a very long time.

Mr Peisley—I have.

Senator STERLE—I note your commentary about the staffing levels, which is certainly coming from someone in a senior position who has worked their way through the system and through the department. On page 9 of your submission you say that the structure does not give leverage to encourage younger staff because entry is at APS2 rather than APS3. For someone who does not understand the difference between APS2 and APS3, can you explain to the committee what the differences are and why that would attract more people?

Mr Peisley—I will explain the basis for that comment. When I was managing the Gold Coast amalgamation project we had a firm investigate the staffing levels. We gave them the duties of the jobs and asked them at what level we should be employing our staff. Our APS2s are our staff who are at entry level and they do a lot of the processing of enrolments. The firm identified that the level of work those people were doing should have been at the APS3 level because in other government agencies they would have been employed at APS3. I went back to management and said: ‘Why do I have APS2s? Can’t they be APS3?’ They said, ‘No, they should be at the APS2 level.’ As I have said in my submission, I am assuming that to change 150 APS2s across all the divisions in Australia at that time would have been a fairly big thing, and to do it just for the Gold Coast would have created a precedent that would have had a flow-on effect. But I am saying that I think you would attract more younger staff into the commission at the APS3 level than at the APS2 level.

Senator STERLE—Is APS3 the entry level in other federal government departments?

Mr Peisley—I cannot answer that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I was there for 20 years, Glenn, and I still could not answer that question, in the government legal sector!

Senator STERLE—I did note, Mr Peisley, that you are employing contractors as well. What I was alluding to—and I think it is quite frightening—is that, if there is contract labour, the staff are no fools and if they have the skills and the clearance to go to one government department and find they are on an APS 2 then they would be doing everything they could, I would think, to get to another government department using the same skills but on a higher level.

Mr Peisley—The lady you were talking to this morning mentioned that she had been at the Electoral Commission for 20 years as a doorknocker. These people usually want to come back to the division and do office work. So, when we get contracts, we offer them some time. When we get an APS2 vacancy, we say that we are going to advertise. Because the expertise of these people builds up, because they have been around, they seem to fit into these jobs.

Senator STERLE—What is the monetary difference between an APS2 and an APS3?

Mr Peisley—Not much. I think it is in the vicinity of \$5,000. I would have to check the pay structure.

Senator STERLE—You did mention it, so obviously you have a lot more insight into what attracts staff than we ever will.

Mr Peisley—I would have to go back and have a look at the salary structure.

CHAIR—You said the thing that has changed is that in your submission you listed your occupation as DRO for the division of North Sydney, working out of Chatswood, and now you are the operational manager.

Mr Peisley—Yes, I am the operational manager.

CHAIR—The operational manager of what?

Mr Peisley—The position is called ‘Operational Manager, Area C, New South Wales’. That means I have 15 electoral divisions in New South Wales that I need to look after, of which four are located at the Chatswood site.

CHAIR—So you have been promoted?

Mr Peisley—Yes, I have been promoted.

CHAIR—And this is more of a regional type job?

Mr Peisley—Yes, I am now a regional type manager.

CHAIR—I can now understand why you liked the regional type arrangement.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You talked about nil financial savings at co-located sites. What is the financial benefit to the AEC in terms of associated cost savings?

Mr Peisley—Rent is the only cost saving I can see from putting two divisions together. They have double the amount of everything but they do not usually end up with double the space. In fact, they probably end up with only a slightly larger space than what they would have got as a one-division site. Maybe they get another 0.5 per cent.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So it is really at the margins. There are no back-office savings or anything like that?

Mr Peisley—No. They still end up with X number of printers et cetera. They shove all this hardware into a smaller site, yet they have two divisions trying to operate from that site.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I notice that you say in your submission that co-location does not really provide much of a financial or social structure for AEC clientele. Could you expand on that?

Mr Peisley—When the divisions choose a site for co-location it is where they get the best rent; it is not where it is ideal to provide the majority of the services from. I note that the chair said earlier that having just regional centres would mean that fewer services would be provided. But I think that is what we are doing in co-located sites. We are moving it to where the cheapest rent is available. Sometimes that means we are not offering the best service to the clientele who need it the most.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You say that, in many cases, actual work in divisions is not being done and only essential work is being completed—that is, basic enrolment.

Mr Peisley—That is in stand-alone divisions. As we explained to you, our work has increased so much and our staffing levels have not increased. As a result of that, we are basically just doing enrolments and keeping our head above the waterline in that enrolment process. Yet our staffing levels in some cases have decreased. We have gone from 3.2 down to 2.6. We have to close stand-alone offices on days when we do not have the full number of staff—when someone is sick and someone is attending a meeting in the city and so on.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You say that, therefore, regionalisation has helped alleviate some of the problems. If I understand you correctly, you are favouring regionalisation. It has reduced some of the problems, but there are still quite a few problems to go. Is that the gist of it?

Mr Peisley—Yes. In every model there are problems that need to be managed and things like that. Can I use an example?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes.

Mr Peisley—Again, it is the Gold Coast office. We regionalised the Gold Coast office. It was the division of Moncrieff and the division of McPherson on the Gold Coast. The services that we were able to provide to the two members far exceeded what they had both received before. Instead of having a division looking after one division, if there was a problem, the member could come to us and say: ‘I’ve got a problem. Can you answer it?’ I had six staff to choose from to solve the problem rather than—

CHAIR—What is the area?

Mr Peisley—It is the Gold Coast.

CHAIR—What is the square kilometre area of those two electorates?

Mr Peisley—I would need to go back and look at that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It is not very big.

Mr Peisley—It is virtually the whole of the Gold Coast up to the McPherson Ranges, down to the New South Wales border, from Southport down to—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It is probably an hour’s drive.

Mr Peisley—You could drive from north to south within 40 minutes—no problem at all.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—How much of your work at the AEC—in particular, staffing and other resources—would be made much more efficient if you had electronic voting and photo ID?

Mr Peisley—There are always benefits in these types of facilities. As to what level we could quantify them currently, we would need to sit down and really look at that. My personal belief is that there is great benefit. In my submission, I point out that I have been to South Africa twice and that they have used quite smart IT systems, which certainly simplified the voting process.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I think one of your staff mentioned to me this morning that even Third World countries are using some form of electronic voting.

Mr Peisley—You only have to look at Brazil and their ballot box. They are able to turn the ballot system around in 24 hours for something like 35 million people, and half of those are illiterate. In 24 hours, they can do the whole count by electronic ballot box. Yes, there are many smart ways of providing services.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—As you have been in the service for many years, can I ask whether any sort of analysis has been done that compares the efficiency of our voting method with other countries around the world?

Mr Peisley—I cannot answer that. You would have to go back to the commissioner.

Mr DANBY—In relation to your comments about permanent and casual officers and regionalisation, your submission calls for permanent review officers to conduct habitation reviews. Would that be done by existing personnel or would you need an extra budget for regional offices around Australia to do that?

Mr Peisley—I am saying there that, to my eyes, the CRU system has worked a little bit but it has not worked well. For the current roll, we send letters out. I sometimes wonder whether every time the electorate sees a letter coming from the Electoral Commissioner it is put straight into the bin. There will come a point when we will need to go back to doorknocking every house and saying, ‘Who lives in this house?’ To do that, maybe we need to be smarter. If we had a permanent doorknocker or someone who was employed to go out and do the whole of an electoral division over a 12-month period—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In other words, you own an area.

Mr Peisley—they could slowly but surely work through an area. This is my belief; this is not the commission’s belief. Maybe there are smarter ways.

Mr DANBY—How would that work? The issue of someone being at a certain address only happens within the last three months; it would not happen at the beginning of the 12 months. Therefore, the officer would have to go back to that area.

Mr Peisley—Right at the moment we are spending lots of money on what we call target reviews.

Mr DANBY—That is what I am saying: aren’t we doing this doorknocking?

Mr Peisley—Yes, we are doing the doorknocking.

Mr DANBY—Targeted doorknocking is a new thing that the Electoral Commission has just taken on.

Mr Peisley—No, we have had what we call roll reviews for many years. The way we are now doing it is that we only go out to those people to whom we have sent many letters and have had no answer.

Mr DANBY—But isn’t that a smart way of doing it: after you have tried to find out something about them and it has not worked, you then go to another method?

Mr Peisley—The way we have done it has been an interesting way. My question is whether it is the smartest way. I guess in my submission I am raising other ways that we can still go out and improve the enrolment that we are trying to get through our targeted enrolment systems. A view may be that we put on a couple of permanent doorknockers who go out and knock over a 12-month period and do the whole division, and then start it over again. It would be a continuous process.

Mr DANBY—You are saying that you prefer permanent doorknockers to a team of casual doorknockers employed in a period before the election—is that correct?

Mr Peisley—I think that we would still need to do both systems. I still think that there would be a need for both systems—that is my view.

Senator STERLE—On page 5 of your submission, you talk about the casual staff loadings and state:

However because the casual salary is taken out of a different financial vote, the work effort of those divisions is hidden because the casual salary is reported differently to that of the permanent officer.

Can you elaborate on that for us?

Mr Peisley—Yes. Most divisions were told to work on 3.2 staff, but because of leave and things like that they staff them at the 2.6 level. The casual staff who go out and doorknock and come in and do processing are paid out of an AEC pay vote, which is totally separate to the permanent staff vote. It is a different bucket of money. While we are saying that we have three staff, in actual fact, because we employ these people to come in for nine months of the year—and I am using that as an example; it may get broken up so that they come in three weeks this month and three weeks that month, and things like that—we are actually hiding the fact that our staffing level is probably higher. It seems to me that it is coming out of a different vote and we are masking the actual facts of our real salary dollars. At the end of the day, they are getting a salary and we are getting a salary. Aren't we masking it?

Mr DANBY—For four divisions, you have more than the equivalent of 12 full timers?

Mr Peisley—At the moment, they have fewer permanent staff. They would probably be operating—and I am guessing—at, say, 10 rather than 12. But with regard to casual staff, they may have another four to five casual staff over a long period who would come in.

Mr DANBY—You have 10 full-time staff and four or five permanent casual staff?

Mr Peisley—No, they are not permanent. They are just casual staff. We ring them and say: 'We've got three or four weeks worth of work for you. Do you want to come in and work?' They will come and work for that, and then they may have a fortnight off.

Mr DANBY—We heard about the lady today who—

CHAIR—Pamela?

Mr DANBY—No, she has been made permanent.

Mr Peisley—Yes.

Mr DANBY—The other one.

Mr Peisley—Sally.

Mr DANBY—She was casual. She is not their permanent casual; she is their casual casual—is that right?

Mr Peisley—Yes. We say, ‘We’ve got two months of work for you; are you available for the next two months?’ and she will come in. But, once that work runs out—

CHAIR—There is no such thing as ‘permanent casual’; it is ‘regular casual’.

Mr Peisley—Yes, she is one of our regular casuals to whom we offer work because we have trained her up to a certain level of expertise.

Mr DANBY—But how does that affect that work? Is she a regular casual or an irregular casual?

Mr Peisley—She is a regular casual.

Senator STERLE—I am trying to understand why. If the commission is going to deliver the best available service, it has to have not only quality trained staff but also the right staffing levels, so what would be gained by floating up all these hours with irregular or regular casuals?

Mr Peisley—If they become permanent positions, if we can prove that a certain area needs more staff, why don’t they get the staff? If they have proof that there is a lot of work in the electoral division, why can’t they have staff to marry the work? Why does it have to be three staff?

Senator STERLE—Yes, supplemented with—not full-time employees. What I am getting at is that your division quite proudly says that you do not have quiet times anymore.

Mr Peisley—No, we do not.

Senator STERLE—You are flat out all year round.

Mr Peisley—Yes, we are.

Senator STERLE—I am just trying to get my head around it for the committee. Why would it be masked in terms of not real—what was the game rule?

Mr Peisley—We are taking money out of a different vote to pay these people. If it were all put into salaries and we offered them permanent work, surely we would be better off.

Senator STERLE—Would it be fair to assume that that could lead to a far more stable workplace?

Mr Peisley—My belief is that it would.

Senator STERLE—That is bearing in mind that there are people who do not want full-time employment—we know that—but there is an ability for people to be employed with the AEC without having to be full time.

Mr Peisley—That is right. A lot of divisions are employing staff at 0.5 or 0.6 days over a fortnight.

Senator STERLE—How long has the 3.2—down to 2.6—system been in place?

Mr Peisley—I cannot answer that. You would have to go to the commission for that.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Peisley, for your attendance here today.

[11.37 am]

MICHIE, Mrs Susan, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission from you. Would you like to make any additional comments and a brief opening statement?

Mrs Michie—I have a few little things I will say; I will probably end up reading most of it. I am here as a private citizen to give my views on co-locations and amalgamated offices, but by no means am I here to run down the AEC. I think the AEC is a wonderful organisation; I worked in the place for 10 years. I think it is a world leader in the conduct of fair and transparent elections, and I felt very proud to be part of that process. However, I feel that the recent workload-sharing practices are putting those values and AEC standards under threat.

I resigned from the AEC because I could not see a way to maintain the standards the AEC instilled in me over those last 10 years. As stated in my submission, a DRO needs to have full input into and control of their division in matters related to casual and support staffing; electoral roll and address register maintenance; polling booth and pre-polling locations; distribution and return of electoral materials, including ballot papers; and fresh scrutines carried on after election day.

As a DRO in the new workload-sharing site, this would not be the case. Instead, for example, I might be responsible solely for the staffing of all booths in the Chatswood site or for the distribution of materials in the Chatswood site. A DRO is accountable for whatever happens in their own division. For this reason, I would not want other managers making decisions that, in effect, put the outcome in my own division at risk. I guess that is why I am here today and have made that submission.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I can understand that it may have been quite a difficult thing for you to reach that decision to leave the service and to give evidence. We really appreciate it. It is very important for us as members of parliament to hear from people who do not have any fear about what others may say of them. We need to hear from a variety of people with differing opinions, so we appreciate you being here today.

I will begin with a question. In your submission, you have talked about the enrolment process at Chatswood now being drawn out and time consuming. You have said, effectively, that it is less efficient. Could you please elaborate and compare what a stand-alone division would do and what is happening at Chatswood.

Mrs Michie—Sure. For the last eight months, I was at the Australian Electoral Commission. I was acting as a DRO for North Sydney, so I guess I can speak in that capacity. For the most of the time I was there, I was an APS3 for Berowra division.

Mr DANBY—Just let me get this clear: the last position you held was acting DRO for North Sydney?

Mrs Michie—That is right.

Mr DANBY—Prior to that, you were the—

Mrs Michie—APS3.

Mr DANBY—That is basically the No. 2, isn't it, in Berowra?

Mrs Michie—Yes, that is right. And prior to that I was one of those doorknockers, casuals, who came into the commission and became permanent. As a clerk for Berowra, my main responsibilities each day were as follows. I would open the mail, maybe—depending on how many staff we had on the day—and process that enrolment. For any special category electors, such as silent enrolments, overseas electors or general postal voters, I would need to go to my DRO and seek approval. He or she would acknowledge those approvals or whatever. We might have to follow up on them. Then I would go and do the enrolment. At the end of the day, most of it was done. There might be some left in the drawer for the next day, but basically that was my job. I would probably have that finished on most days by lunchtime, and then I could go on with other important issues. While I was acting as a DRO in North Sydney, my responsibility was just to keep an eye on the enrolment. I never really did the enrolment, except silent enrolment—I would process that myself.

Mr DANBY—Is that because silent enrolment is only done at a DRO level?

Mrs Michie—It does not have to be, but the level 3 clerk who worked for me was not confident in doing it, and it was always a case of, 'Let's sit down and we'll do it,' but we never did. I guess we just never had the time, although towards the end she was starting to do it. She certainly was able to. I used to do it as a level 3 clerk in Berowra. But, as a DRO, my job for enrolment was just to keep tabs on it. If there were any problems, my clerk might come to me and ask me a question, and I might have to follow up on it. Apart from that, it was just signing rejection letters. If there was a defective enrolment and people had not answered it or for some reason we could not process it, I would sign the letter. That was my job in enrolment.

As we became amalgamated, or workload-sharing practices came into Chatswood, a manager of enrolment was put into place. That was not me; I could only observe. But that person just spent all her time managing the system. Stacks of enrolment were coming in. She then had to sort it out, put it in bundles of 50, choose who to do the actual enrolment and choose people to open the mail, and it certainly was not an efficient way. She spent all her time—her whole, entire time—on enrolment matters.

CHAIR—For the four?

Mrs Michie—For the four divisions. It was a huge job for her.

Senator STERLE—So it was not much workload sharing then?

Mrs Michie—Yes, she was the manager of enrolment, and she had about five staff to do the enrolment. But it was the actual manual, physical part of putting it in piles—there just seemed to be so many hands that it was going through—and choosing: ‘You two can do the letter opening today. When it’s finished, give me the enrolment.’ Then she would do the next step with it.

Senator STERLE—Would there have been an easier way?

Mrs Michie—I do not know. I guess there possibly could have been an easier way, but I think it is much harder to manage more people doing one thing than it is to manage one person doing a lot.

Senator STERLE—Were these conversations had within the workforce, amongst yourselves, in looking for better ways?

Mrs Michie—Not as a group, unfortunately. It was directed of us to do it, and, while we voiced our concerns, we were not really listened to. We did obviously have conversations between ourselves, but not as a group.

CHAIR—Was there consultation with management, with the staff, before the offices were amalgamated? Was there input, or was the decision made and then you were told to fit into it?

Mrs Michie—Ultimately the decision was made for us to fit into it.

CHAIR—Can you just explain what this workload-sharing concept means in practical terms.

Mrs Michie—I was always a little bit confused about the difference between workload sharing and amalgamation. I could not see very much difference between them. Basically, I always got the understanding that workload sharing would be: if one division is having trouble trying to complete something and you are in a co-located site then somebody else, maybe from another existing division at that location, will come in and give a hand—which I think is always what we were doing when we were all under one roof at Chatswood. There were four divisions. It has been like that for four years. While we may not have helped each other with enrolment, we were always willing to help each other in other tasks. I guess at that point we were all fairly possessive of our enrolment or our address register maintenance, but we would help each other in other tasks—for instance, opening the mail. We might do a community education session for someone—anything like that.

Mr DANBY—When did this new process of enrolment start?

Mrs Michie—I am not too sure of the exact date. We started in a gradual way. It may have been towards the end of last year that the four divisions were told to start doing enrolment—we all got access to be able to do that.

Mr DANBY—What do you mean by ‘start doing enrolment’?

Mrs Michie—Across the board, for the four divisions. Up until then—

Mr DANBY—You had your own patch.

Mrs Michie—I was only responsible for doing North Sydney, Berowra did their own et cetera. All of a sudden, the access on the computer system was opened up so we could do anyone's enrolment in those four divisions. So I could pick up a Bennelong card and put that in without a problem. We started doing that, I think, towards the end of last year. In February this year I was on leave for a week, and when I came back it was completely amalgamated. The whole staff had moved, and we were not sitting in divisions anymore. They had been made up into cells. There was an enrolment cell. People from my division were no longer there; they were sitting in another area, in a cell, with another title.

CHAIR—How did the staff feel about that?

Mrs Michie—On the first day I walked in after my leave, because this had happened in that week I was away, the first person I looked at looked up and just mouthed the words, 'Help me.' I think that pretty well summed it up. Everyone was pretty devastated at the time. Not everyone—I should not say everyone—but the majority of people were not happy with it.

Senator STERLE—But they all had these feelings.

Mrs Michie—That is understandable. I understand that, because for anyone going through change it is not a comfortable process. I do understand that, and you have to make allowances for that.

Senator STERLE—Did everyone have the skills to be able to perform the functions of enrolments in other electorates?

Mrs Michie—Not to the same high standard. I think most people pride themselves on the high standard of enrolment within their division. For instance, if you process 100 enrolments, someone else is going to data-check those a week or a month later. It is a really boring process. You will be going through data checking and if you find one enrolment with a mistake you will think, 'Oh, thank goodness; I'm not falling asleep.' Someone may have misspelt something or whatever. You might find one enrolment in 100 with a mistake, and the person who made the mistake will feel really embarrassed. I have made mistakes too, and you always make it a bit of fun and say, 'Hey, you left off a citizenship number.' When we were doing it en masse, I do not think it would be exaggerating to say that there was a seven, eight or 10 per cent mistake rate. The factors involved would be lack of knowledge of local areas and the pressure as well. We were going through a close of rolls for the state election, and the pressure was on individuals to perform at a very high data-entry rate. We had low staff numbers and they had to do a lot of enrolments. I think there were a lot of mistakes during that period where people were not inputting the correct names. A person would go on the roll as a brand-new elector because of a wrong spelling of their surname, and the old name would also stay on, so they were enrolled twice. I am not going to say that was happening at a 10 per cent rate, but those were some of the mistakes.

Another mistake I picked up was when someone typed in 'King Street, Waverton.' King Street, Waverton does not exist in the system. You can go in and see all the King Streets. This person, who did not know the area, actually chose King Street, Putney, which is almost on the other side of Sydney. It is in Bennelong Division but it should have been in North Sydney Division. That was not discovered until after the close of rolls, so we had to get in contact with

that person. That usually would not happen in a stand-alone division because people are so familiar with their area.

Senator STERLE—Does that come down to a lack of training?

Mrs Michie—It is a lack of exposure, I guess. Local knowledge is sort of frowned upon in the AEC these days, because not every division can have it.

CHAIR—It works against the theory of regionalisation, doesn't it?

Mrs Michie—I guess it does, but I am a great believer in local knowledge. I think it is beneficial in a division.

Mr DANBY—What do you say to people who say that, having been trained to a certain level in the AEC in one area, you are familiar enough to supervise and look after a division that you have not been involved with before? Surely people come and go for all kinds of reasons.

Mrs Michie—That is very true. That happened to me. I was moved into North Sydney. We had just had a redistribution, and big maps had been printed. I kept saying to my area manager, 'I feel like a fish out of water here,' and he would say, 'You'll get used to it.' One of the first things I did was to get the big map and put all the polling place locations on it. I put in little dots and numbered them so that I knew where those polling places were for the division of North Sydney. Over a period of months you start to learn some of the idiosyncrasies of the division, but I certainly do not know all of them. I relied a lot on our casual staff in North Sydney, who had been there for years. When I had a problem I would ask them: 'What about these units in the Forum? I thought that was Pacific Highway, St Leonards,' and they would say, 'No, it is actually Sergeants Lane.' They can rattle those things off. It takes a long time to learn those things. If you ask me any question about Berowra Division, I think I could tell you, simply because I have worked there for nearly 10 years. You do learn but it takes a long time, especially with the bigger areas. You do not learn it as well though.

Mr DANBY—The specific thing you are concerned about is: because of moving to a cell-organised office rather than a division-organised shared office, the data entry on enrolment is less careful or less based on local knowledge and, over time, this is going to affect the correct enrolment of people in those four divisions. Is that right?

Mrs Michie—I think so; I think it does. I will give you another example of that. The standard procedure for those people opening the mail is to whip through it, look at an enrolment form, put it in one pile if it is their division and in another pile if it is another division. The forms for other divisions then get sent off through a courier bag or, prior to the workload sharing, handed to the other divisions within that office. When we started doing this enrolment en masse, as a workload sharing exercise, the people who were opening the mail knew their division but were not quite familiar with the other divisions—the little unknown suburbs within the areas. It was just an extra thing to look at, but we noticed that in that first month a huge number of enrolments went through that were unsigned. I thought: 'Why is this happening? The same people are still doing enrolment but suddenly unsigned enrolment forms are going through at a much greater rate.' I think it was because your eye is used to scanning down a form and looking for certain things. This was just one extra thing to look for. People were thinking, 'It's Thornleigh; what division is

that?’ and they were not really going down the bottom of the form to look at the authenticity of it as well.

Mr DANBY—What would previously happen with something like that—would you would send it back to them and say, ‘Please sign it’?

Mrs Michie—We would send them back a fresh form with a letter asking them to sign it.

CHAIR—Do you know what happened to those enrolments that were not signed?

Mrs Michie—Yes, we had to contact all of those people and get them to sign a fresh form. We wanted to fix it up as quickly as possible.

Senator STERLE—How many are we talking about, roughly?

Mrs Michie—A couple of dozen, probably—between 10 and 20, perhaps.

Mr DANBY—So the same process happened in the end?

Mrs Michie—Yes, it is just that they should never, ever have been enrolled. We ended up having to change our procedures a little bit. I suggested at that time: ‘Get out a red pen and tick those boxes. Make yourself go down and look at each box and tick ‘signature’, ‘witness’ et cetera.’ We just had to bring that into it.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So what you are saying is that in the end mistakes have to be rectified and that uses more resources?

Mrs Michie—That is true. People do not always answer that first letter, either, and then you have to send a second letter out or ring them.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—And you are saying that, done at the local level with local knowledge, the process is more efficient. The person who stays in the electoral division for five or six years acquires the knowledge and you do not have to reinvent the wheel every time you go somewhere else.

Mrs Michie—That is very true. And you will find, if people work in the local electoral division, near where they live, they tend to want to stay there. When I was at Hornsby I do not think anyone changed in the staff at all. There was one who was a transfer of a DRO who got a promotion, but it was the same staff for years and years.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It is quite a specialised area, so the staff, I would think, tend to stay.

Mrs Michie—It is. One of the things I was taught when I first arrived in the AEC was be professional but be kind to electors as well. In Berowra division, for instance, in the census statistics in 2001, Hornsby was the oldest community in Australia. We had a lot of elderly people coming into our office. Those people do need special attention. I remember one lady had caught a bus from Galston to Pennant Hills, got on a train and went to Hornsby and then walked up the

hill to get to our office because she wanted to hand her enrolment form in. She did not trust the post. This was not unusual. I often think of people like that. I would hate her to come up to her office to find it closed. How would she get to Chatswood? I just find that those things that were instilled into me, that kindness to electors, have been sort of thrown back in their faces in many ways, in moving out of the area.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Can I ask, and I just asked Mr Peisley the same question, in your observations and your experience, how much of the work of the AEC staffing and other resources will be made more efficient through the use of electronic voting or some sort of photo ID of voters?

Mrs Michie—I guess that using photo ID it will be more time consuming, ultimately. Do you mean people having to show ID when they come to vote?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—No. What I am talking about is—

Mrs Michie—Or when they enrol?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes—if you had some sort of process that incorporated photo ID and electronic voting.

Mrs Michie—As it was for Brian, it is very hard for me to say, and it is not for me to say—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am asking for a personal view.

Mrs Michie—It would probably make it easier. But, having said that, I am married to a software engineer and I know that he says there is no way you can run a really fair election unless you have a paper trail. I certainly would not want to see electronic voting come in until it convinced me that when I press that button that vote is going to be counted properly—and I would want it recounted if necessary. How are you going to do that? How can you prove that those people voted? I think a paper trail is a necessity.

CHAIR—You have made the comment that you have serious reservations about the successful conduct of the next federal election at Chatswood and that is why you resigned. Firstly, can you elaborate on those reservations, if you have not outlined them already, and what you think is at risk? Secondly, in your opinion why has there been this push to amalgamate divisional offices?

Mrs Michie—On the first point, and as I said in my opening remarks, a DRO legally is responsible for the outcome of that House of Reps count at the end of the day. If something goes wrong, it is mud on your face. For that reason—and usually at this point in any election cycle—as a DRO you would be looking at your staff and saying: ‘You need to do this task at election time. How do you feel about this, this and this?’ You have to have complete confidence in your staff when you give them tasks, and you spend this time in the election cycle training them up to do those tasks. For instance, on a simple little thing like mobile polling, where they go out for the votes in nursing homes, maybe that task would go to one of your core casual people or to your level 2 clerk. Right now, if I was still there, I would be giving my level 2 clerk—if I had such a thing; in a stand-alone division there would be—a list of all the nursing homes or special

hospitals where you would need to go. I would say: 'Come and make up a list of the contact numbers and addresses of the local people who work there. Get familiar with that sort of thing now so that when the election is called you have got your list there.' That gives you confidence in your staff because you know your staff know what they have to do.

In a workload-sharing environment I may have no control over anything like that. Another DRO might end up doing that for the four divisions. I am sure they would do it very well, but I do not know that they would. That is my division; I am responsible for that. I am responsible for making sure that my team goes to a nursing home, that it is not left off the list. Maybe that is being petty, but I do not think so because, at the end of the day, the DRO is responsible for that. I want to know those ballot papers for that polling booth have been put in the right box. I do not want to know that, accidentally, Bennelong ballot papers got put in for the polling booth to go to Beecroft. I want Berowra ones put in the right box.

CHAIR—Would it be true that the development of cells and workload sharing has taken direct responsibility away from a particular individual—

Mrs Michie—Yes.

CHAIR—so if something goes wrong perhaps the blame can be spread?

Mrs Michie—Who do you point the finger at? There is no ownership anymore. There is one level 3 clerk I know who is still at Chatswood and since February, when we amalgamated or became workload sharing, all he has been doing is defective letters. This is one of the young people who have come into the AEC; he is the future of the AEC. Yet this boy, who is 30, has spent nearly six months typing up defective letters every day. I am surprised he is still there. It is boring work. He needs to be being trained into the next stage. He needs to learn to do things so he can support his DRO at the election.

On your question of why we have been put in this position, I scratch my head and wonder. I have spent many hours thinking, 'Why do they want us to work like this?' The only reason I can think of is the cost of staffing. I do not think, since we have been at Chatswood, we have ever had 12 permanent staff—at election time we might have had 12 permanent staff. It is easy to cruise along with a lot fewer staff. We all have to get in there and work that little bit harder; that is okay. I think that is possibly the only reason. I cannot see another reason. I have asked, but I have never been able to get an answer.

Mr DANBY—I have a series of questions, but I will have to go through them quickly because we have a limited amount of time. I am very sorry to hear that a person with your experience felt it necessary to resign from the AEC. You must have felt very aggrieved to have had to do that. My experience of officers at the AEC is that they are all very dedicated and very knowledgeable. It is a shame to lose that corporate knowledge. Where were you expecting to go after this? Were you expecting to be appointed as a permanent DRO?

Mrs Michie—I would have expected to. I went for an interview about a year ago, and I was rated No. 2 on the list. The No. 1 person got a position. I was offered a position as a DRO, but that was out at Kingsford Smith, which is at Maroubra, and that did not suit me because I live in Hornsby. I would have expected to be fairly high up in the list for the next round of interviews,

which have just taken place. I would have possibly been appointed as a DRO. I would have looked forward very much to being part of the 2007 election and running a division, but not under those circumstances.

Mr DANBY—After the CRU process, it was discovered that a large number of people in every electorate around Australia had been knocked off the roll. The AEC has made an effort to get some people back on the roll. We found that the number of enrolments was dropping because the AEC had been quite ruthless—I am not being critical of it, because this is part of its mandate—in knocking people off the roll. However, it has not been so successful at putting people back on the roll to ensure that they have their democratic right to vote at the next federal election. In order to compensate for that, the AEC has been doing targeted doorknocks. What is your assessment of the effectiveness of that?

Mrs Michie—I think the targeted doorknocks are okay. They do work to a point. We need to approach this issue from another angle. About five years ago, we were given the direction to go out and do what we call an ‘address register verification’. That basically involved two people driving around in a car and jotting down the address of every house, unit, business, church or park in a street. We were then able to enter that information into our computer system. It stopped fraudulent enrolment. For instance, it stopped people using a park as their address to enrol. If we typed in an address that came up as ‘park’, it would sound warning bells. We would think: ‘Okay, let’s investigate. Maybe they have built houses there.’ We also picked up a huge amount of new development. I think that is where we are losing out. We are not homing in on the new developments. We rely on information from councils, but sometimes councils do not even know exactly what is happening in some of the new developments. These days I am astounded by the lack of information that we get from councils. When we were in Hornsby, there was a lot of new high-rise going up. It was just a matter of walking out the door and around the block to see two or three new units going up in a matter of three months. But the Berowra office is situated so far away that we are not seeing that. I think we need to get out and drive around and do more address register verification.

Mr DANBY—The address register verification was a very valuable process.

Mrs Michie—It was fantastic.

Mr DANBY—Maybe it should be incorporated after elections as part of the AEC’s regular processes.

Mrs Michie—It was one of the better things.

Mr DANBY—Don’t you pick up these addresses with the CRU?

Mrs Michie—Sometimes we do.

Mr DANBY—People at a new block of units have to pay their electricity.

Mrs Michie—Yes. But we do not get information from the electricity people. These days, the only time we get information about a new block of units is when someone sends in an enrolment card with an address we have never heard of. We type it in and it is not there. With this address,

which looks like a unit, we can do one of two things: ring up the council or ring up the individual.

Mr DANBY—Are you saying that none of the databases in the CRU pick up addresses for new blocks of units?

Mrs Michie—No. We add to that database. We will add that new unit to the database when we find out about it. The only way we are going to find out about it is when someone sends in an enrolment. That can come through the CRU.

Mr DANBY—With the CRU in New South Wales, don't you have, for instance, the TAC?

Mrs Michie—The what?

Mr DANBY—The Transport Accident Commission.

Mrs Michie—The RTA?

Mr DANBY—Yes.

Mrs Michie—Yes. But that is not going to give us a full cross-section of a whole block of units. It might give us one address, one unit or maybe a couple units, bit by bit. It also depends on when people change their address with the RTA. It gives us a clue and then we go out and investigate.

CHAIR—It could be over a long period of time.

Mrs Michie—Yes, it is over a long period of time. If we get one letter through and it is unit No. 5, we think, 'That tells us something, doesn't it?' and then we do an investigation.

Mr DANBY—It tells you that there are units 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Mrs Michie—At least. There could be 200 or just five.

Mr DANBY—But you don't ring them up and say, 'How many units do you have in this new block?'

Mrs Michie—We will ring up the council first. Lately, I have found that the council will say: 'Gee, you've opened up another can of worms,' or, 'We don't know. We haven't got that information from the developer yet.' Again, that is surprising. Usually the individual has more information. I am always a bit hesitant to take what the individual tells us. I like to go out myself and see that there are 20 letterboxes there. I might find that No. 14 is missing. If it is in a Chinese area, for instance, you will not find unit No. 14. That is an unlucky number. That happens.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is local knowledge. Your ability to know the area locally makes it a lot more efficient for the work that you are doing. That, in effect, is what you are saying.

Mrs Michie—I am. It is easy to sustain your local knowledge. For example, if I had had that query, I would walk the dog past there that night when I got home.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—But somebody in that DRO—divisional returning office—will no doubt know because—

Mrs Michie—Hopefully.

Mr DANBY—Depending on your political view, the new legislation will significantly or not so significantly change the ability of people to enrol when the election is called. What is your experience of the old system over the past 20 years? Was there a large volume of enrolments in the five-day period of grace that people had to enrol? Was there an age profile to that large number of enrolments? Were you able to process them to the standard of other AEC work?

Mrs Michie—A lot of the young kids enrol for the first time once an election is called. I think mum and dad get on their backs and say, 'This is the time.' So you do get a lot of first-time enrolments coming in. We always processed them to a fairly high degree of accuracy. We had lots of casual staff and they were well trained. You call in that well-trained staff to do it. It is a time, too, when it is all hands on deck. At close of rolls in a stand-alone division or in any division, everyone should be keying in information, even the DRO. If the DRO does not do that, he or she should be feeding the faxes through to other divisions for them to process, because you have to fax through forms received from other divisions. It is a hands-on job at that time for everyone, and that is the only way you get through it.

Mr DANBY—As an experienced AEC worker who has now left the service, what do you think is going to be the effect, on the basis of your experience, with all of those people at the next election?

Mrs Michie—I do not know. I really do hope it runs fine, and it possibly will. There was a senior person who left the AEC a little bit before me. He retired, and he happened to be out visiting Chatswood just before he left. He said to me, 'I think I'll be reading about Chatswood in the newspapers.' That disturbed me, and I certainly hope that is not going to happen. If it does, I do not want to be part of it.

CHAIR—And that concern came out of the change in work organisation to the workload sharing?

Mrs Michie—Yes, that is right.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your attendance here today.

[12.16 pm]

SWITZER, Mrs Dianne, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission from you in this inquiry. Do you wish to present any additional information to your submission or make a brief opening statement?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, just a short one. I am in attendance here today because I am concerned about the staff in the co-located amalgamated office. When first joining the AEC, I was interviewed for a variety of criteria. In an amalgamated site this does not apply anymore. As you know, there are three cells at Chatswood. While I was there, I was not rotated and remained in the one cell, so I was doing the same thing day in, day out. I feel that I would contribute very little to an election, apart from being able to do enrolment, because I have lost my other skills. It places a very heavy workload on other staff, I believe. Two employees have already had stress related problems, unfortunately, and have had to have time off work. The proven casuals are no longer being asked to come in because there is a personality clash with some of the management.

Mr DANBY—Proven casuals?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, casuals who have worked for the AEC for a number of years.

Mr DANBY—So who are the casuals being asked in—new casuals, ones who have less experience?

Mrs Switzer—New ones are in now, yes, who do not have the experience of these older ones.

Mr DANBY—I am sorry to interrupt you.

Mrs Switzer—That is fine. I have now been relocated to another division, a stand-alone division. It was not my idea; I was asked to go. I am finding it extremely difficult to fit in. There is resentment in the office because the casuals there applied for the position that I have now filled. I think that is probably about it.

CHAIR—Thank you for that, and thank you for your written submission. There is one issue I will pursue before I allow my colleagues to ask questions. You have said in your submission that we are losing expertise and a knowledge base from the temporary staff, who no longer want to work at the amalgamated office. What, in your opinion, is the whole list of reasons why they do not want to work in the amalgamated office?

Mrs Switzer—Because of having to work in cells now and do repetitious work. I was talking to one of the casuals last week, who said: 'I'm sick of doing this. All I'm doing is looking at the screen all day, and I'm not able to get up and do something a bit different.' As I said before, the

staff we used to have who came in are just not asked. Some of them are not interested in coming because of the structure of the offices at Chatswood.

Senator STERLE—How long have you been at Chatswood?

Mrs Switzer—Permanently for about four years, but I have been in the commission for about 27 years, on and off.

Senator STERLE—So you would have seen a few changes.

Mrs Switzer—I have.

Senator STERLE—In the previous submission—and I know we ran out of time—Mrs Michie was saying that she had heard commentary by other DROs, I think, that Chatswood was ‘a disaster waiting to happen’. Would you concur with that statement?

Mrs Switzer—I would.

Senator STERLE—Why?

Mrs Switzer—I have been through several elections there, and we have managed them really well. The only problem we had with the last one in 2004 was the postal voting, but that was beyond our control; it had nothing to do with us. That seemed to be the only problem that I could see. But, as the structure is now, I feel that they would have to go off site completely. They would not be able to do it there because they do not have the room anymore. Ballot papers would not be able to be stored there. If it goes off site, that means more staff. They will need more people who know what they are doing.

Mr DANBY—I am sorry to interrupt, but I do not understand why they will not have room now compared to the past. Can you explain that.

Mrs Switzer—Because they have restructured the office completely. With the four divisions, we divided it into each storeroom as to how the elections were going to be held, and each division looked after their own storeroom and had their own materials in there so that nothing was muddled up. But now they only have the facility in the back room for that to happen, with the four divisions all linked together.

Senator STERLE—In your 27 years—and I know you were acting there at one stage as an APS3—

Mrs Switzer—An acting 3, yes.

Senator STERLE—what other roles have you performed within the AEC, at what levels?

Mrs Switzer—I am a permanent APS2, and I have done casual—

Senator STERLE—That is data entry?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, data entry. I have done virtually everything. We have not had the staff to do it, so I have had to do it. I was working for the division of Bradfield for a fairly long time. I have a lot of local knowledge of Bradfield because I live in the area as well.

Senator STERLE—You were acting for eight months at a higher level?

Mrs Switzer—Yes.

Senator STERLE—What was the difference between your data entry as an APS level 2 and your acting position as a level 3?

Mrs Switzer—Because we did not have an APS3 in Bradfield at that stage I was more or less doing the work for both.

Senator STERLE—This was before the amalgamation?

Mrs Switzer—This was before the amalgamation.

Senator STERLE—When the amalgamation came, you went to Chatswood—is that correct?

Mrs Switzer—No, I have been at Chatswood the whole time.

Senator STERLE—So you were an acting level 3 for Bradfield but—

Mrs Switzer—No, sorry, I was acting level 3 for Berowra, but I was an APS2 in Bradfield before that.

Senator STERLE—Okay. What I am trying to get to is: after the eight months of acting, what happened to that position?

Mrs Switzer—We were amalgamated and the position was gone, but it has now been given to a permanent part-time 2.

Senator STERLE—It was gone for how long?

Mrs Switzer—For a couple of weeks, and then I was moved.

Senator STERLE—So that position was vacant—there was no-one staffing that position for two weeks?

Mrs Switzer—No, there was not. It was a little bit longer than that.

Senator STERLE—And it is now a part-timer?

Mrs Switzer—A part-timer who has just become permanent has been given acting permanent APS3.

Senator STERLE—So when you were performing that APS3 position you were doing it five days a week as a full-time FTE?

Mrs Switzer—I was, yes.

Senator STERLE—And now it is a permanent part-timer, but it is not a five-days-a-week position?

Mrs Switzer—She is doing five days a week.

Senator STERLE—I do not know the ins and outs of the AEC but it sounds a little bit suss that a job can be full time and then it is not full time for two weeks and now all of a sudden it is again. Was there a process of interviews?

Mrs Switzer—No, there was not. She was just given the position. I was told I had to go and she was given the position just before I left.

Senator STERLE—How long ago was this?

Mrs Switzer—I have been there about two weeks.

Senator STERLE—Two weeks ago?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, about two weeks ago. I have been in the single division office for about two weeks.

Senator STERLE—I might flick the questioning over to Senator Fierravanti-Wells. I am a firm believer that where there is smoke there is fire, and I cannot believe we have got so many unhappy campers, but I will just shut up for a sec and let someone else ask questions.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In your submission you identify that loss of local knowledge has resulted in an incorrect roll. Can you elaborate on the extent to which you believe the roll has been affected and how this has been affected by change in the office structure?

Mrs Switzer—When we were single divisions at Chatswood, the people who were working in their own division knew the area and knew what was happening and they were alert to the fact that there was building going on. Then it became across the board—everyone was putting on addresses. I am sorry; can you repeat your question?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In your submission you said that loss of local knowledge has resulted in an incorrect roll. I just wondered if you could elaborate on that point and what you mean by that.

Mrs Switzer—It is the address register mainly, because anyone can just add an address. A lot of people do not even bother checking. I was very careful about that because a lot of addresses have been put on incorrectly.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am just playing devil's advocate here. Are you saying that somebody could just go in and invent an address—

Mrs Switzer—It is very easy.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So what you are saying is that somebody can just go in and, hypothetically, add a house here and a house there—

Mrs Switzer—Yes, without checking.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—and build up a little pool of voters.

Senator Sterle interjecting—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am a very suspicious person, Senator Sterle.

Senator STERLE—Terrible!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So you are saying that by being a single division office and having the local knowledge you are more careful and more likely to go out and check—

Mrs Switzer—That is correct.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—because of the local knowledge you have?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, very much so.

Mr DANBY—Senator, just so I understand: you were saying that people at the AEC would do this, or voters—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is the import of what Mrs Switzer is saying, as I understood it. Somebody could just invent an address.

Mrs Switzer—Occasionally we have an elector send in an enrolment form for an address that we have on as another number in another street. This happens quite regularly.

Senator STERLE—I am sorry; I got confused there. You said you have that address but in another street?

Mrs Switzer—Yes.

Senator STERLE—Do you mean you have that name?

Mrs Switzer—No, the address, because there are corner blocks.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Use names as an example.

Mrs Switzer—Mr Smith lives in—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—King Street.

Senator STERLE—How do you know all this!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Anybody who pursues the ABC the way I do has detail—

CHAIR—Mrs Switzer, just ignore these senators!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So: Mr Smith lives in King Street.

Mrs Switzer—Mr Smith lives in King Street. That address in King Street we could have in another street. It is not actually the correct address as far as the council and everyone else is concerned; it belongs to another street. Someone not knowing this will actually put them on at that King Street address and not at the correct address, where they should be.

Senator STERLE—Do you mean the suburbs are different?

Mrs Switzer—No. We have corner blocks. The house is sitting on the corner and it can have two addresses. People are not checking to see whether or not it is put on at the right address.

Senator STERLE—Okay, gotcha.

Mrs Switzer—I am sorry; I was finding it hard to explain to you.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So you are not saying that the AEC do that. It is really that people are not checking.

Mrs Switzer—Yes, people are not checking now to see if that has been done correctly.

Mr DANBY—The previous witness used the expression ‘address register verification’. That seemed to me to be a very good idea.

Mrs Switzer—It is wonderful.

Mr DANBY—It was done physically by you and the AEC staff driving around electorates—

Mrs Switzer—No, I did not do it; I did the inputting for it.

Mr DANBY—But other staff did that.

Mrs Switzer—Yes, we had casual staff doing that.

Mr DANBY—Is it worthwhile doing that as a regular process?

Mrs Switzer—Most definitely.

Mr DANBY—Once every three years, after the election? Or how often?

Mrs Switzer—Probably before an election. You want people on the roll for the election, so it would be more beneficial to do it beforehand. To take Bradfield as an example, there is a lot of building happening on the upper North Shore, and those addresses are going to have to be checked. There are lots of units going up all the way along the highway. Sometimes the council does not have them on for months because it has not gone through.

Mr DANBY—Sometimes there are no people in them yet, and sometimes there are people in them. It is very difficult to find out.

Mrs Switzer—Yes, and people enrol and they are not even living there. That happens occasionally.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Sorry—people enrol from those units but they do not actually live there?

Mrs Switzer—They are not living there until they are officially there—but we cannot check that. We do not know that.

Mr DANBY—Coming back to something you said about the AEC: you were saying that it is possible for people to invent addresses. Are you saying that is a theoretical possibility, or do you have evidence that anyone who is an AEC officer has done that?

Mrs Switzer—I do not have any examples with me, but I could have given you examples of corner blocks where people have enrolled. When I was working in Berowra, there was a rural road numbering problem. There was one situation out Dural way where people were living in one house and there was a house behind. The AEC staff member put a person in a new house behind, whereas they should have been in the front one. The rest of the family were in this other little old house on its own, not with their family. That happens. She was incorrectly enrolled—

Mr DANBY—So it was on the same property?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, and they were given a different number on the property.

Mr DANBY—Okay. So there were not any extra voters enrolled; it was simply the officer of the AEC, on one occasion, making up an address for a convenience in order to say where this voter is.

Mrs Switzer—To put them on the roll.

Mr DANBY—How did they know of the existence of this voter?

Mrs Switzer—Because they sent in an enrolment form. And it is only through data checking that we find these problems. That is why we are very careful with our roll.

CHAIR—Is that a common occurrence where there is a lack of rigorous crosschecking and incorrect addresses are placed on the roll?

Mrs Switzer—It does happen, yes. Luckily we do pick most of them up if they are incorrect.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—What you are saying is that if it is one division it is much easier to pick these things up.

Mrs Switzer—It is easier to keep an eye on it.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You do not think that co-location or regionalisation is the way to go? Should you have the division office in the electorate?

Mrs Switzer—I do. I was doing casual work when the Chatswood offices used to be in Help Street, and there were just the two of us there—North Sydney and Chatswood. From memory, that worked extremely well. But then Berowra moved into the new office a few years ago, and they are way out of their division. Travelling from Wisemans Ferry down to Chatswood is not much fun. Lots of people are ringing up and asking where the office is so that they can come in and have a look at the roll or something, and they just do not even bother coming because they have so far to travel. A lot of these people do not have transport from those areas.

Senator STERLE—I will just get this right: you have been around for 27 years in the system?

Mrs Switzer—Yes.

Senator STERLE—How long at Chatswood?

Mrs Switzer—Permanently for three years, I think it is.

Senator STERLE—And how long as a casual—were you casual there?

Mrs Switzer—I have been non-ongoing.

Senator STERLE—The first time you walked in was three years ago—is that right?

Mrs Switzer—No. I have been casual. I started my life off doing reviews—full habitation reviews, which were, I thought, very beneficial.

Senator STERLE—So could I call you a long-term employee on the Chatswood site?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, because they have had two sites.

Senator STERLE—So why is there such a great staff turnover in Chatswood?

Mrs Switzer—It has only just happened recently.

Senator STERLE—Do you know why?

Mrs Switzer—I consider that they do not want the old people who knew what was going on there to be in the office anymore.

Senator STERLE—How many have left recently?

Mrs Switzer—I can think of three, possibly four, at the moment, and there is one going in the middle of July. That is another one who has been told to go.

Senator STERLE—So that is five. In a staff of 12, we are talking about a rather large percentage turnover. How many of them have been promoted or have moved because they have had promotions?

Mrs Switzer—Only one: Mr Peisley.

Senator STERLE—Isn't Mr Peisley still there?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, he is still there, but he is not in Chatswood. He is now an operation manager, so he is based in Chatswood a couple of days a week. He is not permanently there.

Senator STERLE—So there has been one promotion and the rest have left for other reasons. Are they still with the AEC?

Mrs Switzer—Yes, a couple of them are still with the AEC.

Senator STERLE—They were transferred to other divisions?

Mrs Switzer—They have been asked to transfer, yes.

Mr DANBY—Who is in charge of the Chatswood regional office?

Mrs Switzer—Mr Peisley.

Mr DANBY—A decision was recently made to change the systems for cells. Where was it made—at the state level of the AEC or at the regional level?

Mrs Switzer—It probably started off even higher than the state level.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your attendance here today.

Proceedings suspended from 12.38 pm to 1.27 pm

JONES, Mr Stephen, National Secretary, Community and Public Sector Union, PSU Group

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a detailed, written submission to this inquiry from the CPSU. Would you like to present additional information and/or make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Jones—Yes, I would. Firstly, I am here today as the national secretary of the union that represents employees who work at the Electoral Commission. The submissions we make today and the submissions we have put before the committee in writing have been made on the basis of consultations, discussions and surveys of our members who are employed in the AEC. I do not intend to go over the body of the material within our submission, but I would like the opportunity to make a few key points.

The first is implicit within our written submission but not explicit—that is, we have opposed in the past, and would oppose in the future, any further amalgamation of the AEC divisional offices. Quite apart from the impact that that has on the jobs and workloads of our members who work in the divisional offices, we think there is an important public interest at stake here. These offices of the AEC are the public face of the AEC within the electorate. The employees within them develop, over time, considerable local knowledge and corporate memory of demographics and affairs within their division, and we believe that is lost with the merger, amalgamation, co-location—however it is expressed—of the offices. Quite apart from the interests of our employees, there is a public interest at stake, so we add our voice to those who have given evidence before the committee opposing that process.

I have mentioned the process of workloads, and I would like to emphasise a couple of points made within our submissions. I would be making these points irrespective of the issue of the amalgamation of these offices. Our members are experiencing problems with workloads in these offices. It has always been a problem in the lead-up to an election, but there is an ongoing and underlying problem at the moment. In our view, that is a factor in a number of issues—firstly, in staff turnover within the Electoral Commission offices. As mentioned in our submission, the commission has failed to properly and adequately fill vacancies as and when they arise, which means the work falls upon the remaining staff within those offices. Short-term acting and casual appointments are in no way a long-term basis on which to staff such an important function. We have a concern that the new electoral arrangements that will have effect at this election will exacerbate those issues. We have raised some concerns within our submission, and I have read some of the other submissions that have been put before you about the use of casuals for filling ongoing work requirements within the divisional offices. They are no basis on which to meet the baseload work requirements.

The terms of reference—if I could emphasise the second point—ask members of the public to make submissions regarding classifications, shorthandedness and career structures within the Electoral Commission, particularly the divisional offices. In our written submissions we have made the point that we think there is an urgent and pressing need for a review of job design and

classifications within the divisional offices. We note that that is a process that occurred probably nearly 20 years ago now in relation to the divisional returning officers. We believe the other two standing positions within those offices were also in need of a review of their classification. When you turn your mind to the duty statements that are now being published, against which persons are being employed, you will see that the responsibilities of those positions now exceed the responsibilities and work that was expected of those people when the positions were originally conceived. So we think there is an urgent need for a review to occur. We would not be surprised if the outcome of that review were to lead to a reclassification, at least, of the divisional clerk position and the divisional officer assistant position. We think that is in the interests of the persons filling those jobs and in the interests of staff retention and career opportunities within the divisional offices.

On the anecdotal evidence available to us, the divisional returning officer positions, currently classified at the APS6 level, are being filled increasingly by external applicants, because the career path jumps between the divisional office clerk and the divisional returning officer. There are about two or three bands in the APS classification structure. Quite apart from the work they are doing, there is a perception that that is a jump that cannot be filled by internal recruitment, and we think is wrong. Putting in place those arrangements will address the loss of corporate knowledge in those local regions. It will most definitely be in the public interest.

A third issue we make a point about in our written submission goes to casual employment. Firstly, we think there is an urgent need to review the pay rates of casual employees. On the advice provided to us by our members who are responsible for employing and supervising these people, they are finding it increasingly difficult in a tightened labour market to attract people. They are finding disparities between the wages that are on offer for equivalent work being performed by the state returning officers. They believe that it will be very difficult indeed to attract the requisite number of people to fill those jobs between now and the next election, and beyond. In our submission we point out that fact. We just looked at the Victorian Electoral Commission, where employees are being paid, at the very least, \$1 an hour different, and in some cases \$2 an hour different on a casual rate. There is a need for that to be reviewed. There is a second point, which we have not made in our written submission, about casual employment. Two separate employment frameworks now exist for AEC employees: those who are employed under the Public Service Act—they are required to maintain and fulfil their obligations in a framework of responsibility under the Public Service Act—and the casuals. The casuals are not employed under the Public Service Act. They are employed directly under the framework provided under the AEC Act.

CHAIR—What is the practical difference?

Mr Jones—The practical difference is that they do not have the framework of responsibility and accountability, including the APS code of conduct and the APS values that are spelt out in the Public Service Act.

CHAIR—Could the CPSU at some later stage, not too far in the future, provide us with an additional written submission specifying those differences?

Mr Jones—I would be delighted to do that. When I do, I will also point out that in many instances some of these employees could be employed on a part-time basis under the APS Act on

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and then as a casual on Thursday and Friday under the separate instruments. Some of those anomalies will be pointed out.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Under the divisional office structure, where it is located in the electorate, what is the average number of workers?

Mr Jones—The average is 3.2.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In your experience how much does that vary?

Mr Jones—It depends on the unfilled vacancies but on the evidence available to us it is around 2.6.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So under the divisional office of Mackellar—I live in the federal seat of Mackellar—you have a DRO and, probably, an APS2 and an APS3?

Mr Jones—Yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You are saying that therefore the promotional prospects, if you retain that as a separate unit, mean that when the AP6 goes on, you can move up. And you are saying that, through the co-location, those structures and opportunities are diluted even further than they otherwise are—is that the case?

Mr Jones—I am not sure that I made that point. The point I was making, in terms of co-location, was about workloads and local knowledge. That is an important public interest, quite apart from the career possibilities.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Is the general view of your membership to have just divisional offices located in each of the electorates?

Mr Jones—That is the general view of our membership; yes. In the example you have given me, it is possible—and it has been possible—for employees in those metro or outer-metro electorates to move from one division office to another.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It is a tight-knit community, if I can put it that way. It is an expertise that is particular and peculiar—not in the negative sense but because of the very nature of the work they do.

Mr Jones—There is knowledge and expertise germane to the AEC and there is that which is germane and particular to the electorate or division in which they work.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You say efficiency dividends are greater through having people in the single divisional offices within the electorate. Is that the gist of what you are saying?

Mr Jones—Whether it is an issue of efficiency—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It is more efficient in terms of local knowledge and those sorts of factors which contribute to a greater local understanding.

Mr Jones—I would make the case on the basis of benefits to the stakeholders in the local division. On that case alone, they should be based within the division for which they are responsible. I would be surprised if that was not also more efficient.

CHAIR—You mention in your submission a difference between the casual rates for those working for state electoral commissions and those working for the AEC. Is there a significant overlap of casual staff between the two?

Mr Jones—We are advised that there is, particularly in the outer metro and rural divisions, which is probably not surprising.

CHAIR—You said a review of job classifications has not been undertaken in 20 years. Are there any reasons for that? Have the CPSU had discussions over time with the AEC about this? What have been the results of that?

Mr Jones—I am not advised of any good reason why the review has not occurred.

CHAIR—You mentioned the significant staff turnover and recruiting problems. What would you list as the main reasons for the significant staff turnover and the recruiting problems?

Mr Jones—At the APS3 level, to get on you have to leave the office or wait for the divisional returning officer to be promoted, to retire or to resign. Even in the event that a vacancy does become available at the divisional returning officer level, we are advised that those positions are filled more often than not by an outside applicant. So to get on you have to move.

CHAIR—There is a bit of a question mark or a concern about this. Is the union aware of AEC employees in the past having raised issues of concern about the operation of the AEC and have there been any repercussions? In short, have staff been punished for speaking out?

Mr Jones—I am not apprised of that. I could not give expert evidence to deny that that had occurred. I have not been advised of specific incidents and none come to mind. That is the best evidence that I can give.

CHAIR—Another area of significant concern for me—and I am sure the other members of the committee would share this—is the time lags that are a necessary part of losing staff. You have mentioned the loss of corporate knowledge and recruitment and training. Do you have any anecdotal evidence or any other analysis that could assist the committee in its deliberations? If you do not, is it possible to try and get some? In the lead-up to a federal election the issue of adequate and properly trained staff is of concern.

Mr Jones—I would like to take the opportunity to provide a more detailed response, if I may.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Jones—To be precise, what you are after are specific examples of delays in filling—

CHAIR—I am after specific examples of delays in filling and, at worst, anecdotal evidence of the loss of corporate knowledge and expertise in particular areas and the time lag in training people up. You could add to that any deficiencies in the current changed workload structure in achieving that objective.

Mr Jones—I would like to take the opportunity to provide a further written submission on that.

CHAIR—We would look forward to that. Thank you.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Are you aware of how many workers there are in the AEC system?

Mr Jones—I had a quick look at it this morning, and there are roughly 800 employees.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Is that roughly 800 across Australia?

Mr Jones—That is right. Within the AEC there is the national office, the state offices and the divisional returning offices.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—These are permanent?

Mr Jones—They have permanent employees. They are not all assigned to roles in federal elections. Within the national headquarters—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I appreciate that there is a variety. Roughly how many would you put in the outside, casual sphere?

Mr Jones—The best way to ascertain that, leaving aside the casual pool that is brought on for federal elections—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Leaving those for elections aside—that is right.

Mr Jones—It is about 0.6 times 150, so it is around 75 to 80.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—And most of those are your members?

Mr Jones—It is less so in the casuals. Most of the persons who are permanent, full-time employees are, unless they are also part-time employees.

Senator STERLE—Mr Jones, for the purposes of the *Hansard*, I declare that I am an ex blue-collar trade union official. We went out and visited Chatswood this morning and, of course, there have been some submissions from employees and ex-employees. What is going on out there? Is that a typical AEC office, or is it just one office that has some really bad employment situations?

Mr Jones—I would like to take the opportunity to have a better discussion with our members at this office before I speculate before this committee on the details of what is going on.

Senator STERLE—That is fair enough. I note your comment about when a position comes up as—what is it called?

Mr Jones—An APS6.

Senator STERLE—As an APS6. There are external agencies or external applicants who get into positions. That would send a terrible message to the employees who are long-term or who have structured their career with the AEC. It would send the message that they are either not good enough—

Mr Jones—Which we reject.

Senator STERLE—Me too, most certainly, but I am cutting to the chase. From the point of view that I am coming from, it is obvious that there is no investment put into training of employees.

Mr Jones—There is an enormous investment put into training. But, in our submission, if that is not fully capitalised upon then it is a wasted investment. I assume that the committee has done this, but, if you have a careful look at the duty statements for the divisional returning officer, the divisional clerk and the divisional assistant, you will see that there is a natural progression of experience, training and functionality between each of the three roles.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Following on from that, when you say that somebody comes in from outside, do you mean they come in from outside the AEC family, if I can put it that way, or do you see a situation of movement—for example, a DRO in Mackellar retires and then you see an APS3 from Cook going up to Mackellar? When you say ‘outside’, do you mean outside the AEC family or outside that divisional office?

Mr Jones—They will come from one of three places: from outside the APS because the position is advertised and available—as, in my submission, it should be—to the entire Australian community, from somewhere else within the Public Service or from somewhere else within the AEC.

Senator STERLE—So, with your vast experience as the National Secretary for the CPSU, there does not appear to be a great career path within the AEC—am I wrong there?

Mr Jones—Within certain parts of the AEC, if I could put it that way. Certainly within parts of the state office or parts of the national office there are more opportunities available. But within the divisional offices it is less so. Quite simply, they are a smaller office. It is not our submission that we should redesign these offices to ensure maximum career opportunities for everybody. That is not our submission. What we are certainly saying is that we can do it better than we are doing it right now. Where career opportunities should be available, and where that is consistent with the public interest, it should be done and it can be done.

Senator STERLE—Yes, I agree—only because every submission so far has said the same thing. I made the comment earlier, Mr Jones, that where there is smoke, there is fire. That is how I look at it.

Mr Jones—Yes, that is right.

Senator STERLE—We had a tour around Chatswood, and what struck me as very strange—I will not speak on behalf of the rest of my colleagues on the committee—was that there was a great turnover of staff. We are talking about 12 positions. As it came out earlier on, I think there has been one promotion and four have left. You are looking at, say, 40-odd per cent of staff with very short-term service. I find that quite strange. The reason I ask you what is going on in Chatswood—and I understand you have said you will talk to your members, which you should anyway—is that I thought there might be some light you might be able to shine in a dark corner for us as to whether it is that one division or it is generally across the AEC.

Mr Jones—If I could respond: the jobs have changed, workloads have increased and the labour market has tightened. People say quite simply, ‘If I’m not getting job satisfaction in my current role, I have got a lot of good skills that I could go and seek to apply somewhere else.’ We think the community and the public at large are the losers if that happens.

Senator STERLE—I think you are dead right. In terms of the skills classification for APS2 and APS3, what has changed since the last test case?

Mr Jones—It was not a test case per se. Technology has changed, the legislation has changed and there has been an enhanced educative function. There was always an educative function. That has increased—properly so, in our submission. With a rapid turnover in staff you see functions that were once solely performed by the divisional returning officer now more often being picked up by whoever is there available to do the job—and vice versa, I should say. All those things have changed. The work has changed, the technology has changed, the legislation has changed and staff are turning over more often than they did in the past. So it is all hands to the pump in many of these places.

Senator STERLE—Sure. For the purpose of maintaining quality employees, highly trained staff and, from what I heard today, committed staff—

Mr Jones—Absolutely.

Senator STERLE—Senator Fierravanti-Wells has commented here about being ‘within the family’. That has come out loud and clear.

Mr Jones—Yes. Fiercely protecting that independent family status, may I also add.

Senator STERLE—Yes. The question I am trying to allude to is: if the AEC are losing staff, where are they losing them to—other government agencies? Is there a trend?

Mr Jones—I could not answer that. I am not sure whether the AEC itself conducts exit surveys of its employees. I could not answer that.

CHAIR—We could ask that tomorrow perhaps.

Senator STERLE—Yes. Thank you very much, Mr Jones.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your attendance here today. We have asked you to provide additional material. Could you please forward that when that is prepared to the secretary of the committee.

Mr Jones—Thank you, Chair.

[1.55 pm]

McKIVAT, Mr Brian, Private capacity

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr McKivat—I am appearing as a private individual but I also work for the Australian Electoral Commission.

CHAIR—We have received a written submission from you to this inquiry. Do you wish to make any additional submissions and/or would you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr McKivat—I have no extra submissions, but I would like to make an opening statement.

CHAIR—Please go ahead.

Mr McKivat—As I outlined in my submission, even though I work for the Australian Electoral Commission, the comments I am making are as an individual. I am not trying to comment on policy or make any judgement on AEC policy. The whole intention of the submission was just to bring matters to the attention of the committee that will hopefully help them with their inquiry.

CHAIR—Thank you. Is that the end of your opening statement?

Mr McKivat—That is the end. Thank you.

CHAIR—I will begin by asking a question and I will then ask my colleagues to do the same. You have talked about the need to define the term ‘co-location’—

Mr McKivat—Yes.

CHAIR—because it started off meaning something and has turned into more of a process of amalgamation. Can you please explain how this difference in co-location has occurred in your personal experience?

Mr McKivat—I think co-location started off with the intention of putting two or possibly three AEC divisional offices together with the view to trying to save money, particularly in IT costs by putting computer access into one site rather than having to spend money putting it into three separate sites. I also think the AEC were trying to be in a better position to negotiate leasing arrangements—they hoped that hiring or renting space in one building with three

divisions would give them some potential for savings. I also think that there was the view that more people together in the one office was healthy. Generally speaking, the divisions that I was aware of that were involved in the initial co-locations were reasonably happy with the results. I think what has happened is what I think is happening in most other organisations: there is the push to keep saving money and finding savings by cutting costs. I think the AEC have been trying to see whether they can do the same thing by changing the working arrangements in those sites with the possibility of saving some positions.

CHAIR—Do you feel comfortable telling us if you work in one of these co-located offices?

Mr McKivat—I do not. As I mentioned in my submission, I was involved as a staff representative who travelled around all the states of Australia as part of a subcommittee looking into the trial amalgamations of divisional offices in each state.

CHAIR—You have been with the AEC for nearly 20 years—that is correct, isn't it?

Mr McKivat—Eighteen years.

CHAIR—In that time, have you seen the workload increase and, if so, in what way?

Mr McKivat—The workload has changed dramatically and the volume of work has increased substantially as well. When I joined the Electoral Commission back in 1989, we had the same three staffing positions, at the APS6, APS3 and APS2 levels, in each office and we were very much a non-computerised organisation. We were processing enrolments up to the stage of sending them off to a central position to have all the data entry work carried out by contract staff. We also operated on an elector based enrolment system rather than an address based enrolment system. So the processing of enrolments was generally a lot easier because you did not have to have a physical address on any sort of address register. Back in those days you could enrol people for any variation of an address as long as you had the correct subdivision, whereas now we manage an address based system in which we have individual addresses and we are chasing who should be enrolled at an address rather than where a certain person is enrolled—if you can understand what I am saying. We are operating on: 'We do not care where Joe Blow lives; we only care who lives at No. 5 Smith Street.'

So the enrolment has become a lot more complex. Rural addressing has made that side of it very hard and complex in country divisions. We have also moved from having a two-yearly habitation type review to continuous roll updating in which we are sending out many thousands of letters almost every month to try and encourage people to update their enrolment. So a lot of the processing work that was staggered over a couple of years is now part of the day-to-day activities of the office.

The AEC has also, probably over the last 10 years, really pushed ahead in leaps and bounds into the areas of public awareness with schools and community groups and the like. Recently we have seen legislative changes bringing in proof of identification for enrolment, which is making that process a lot more complicated and complex. We have seen changes to rules in relation to citizenship eligibility for electors and the requirement now for people who were born outside of Australia to verify their citizenship. All these extra checks and balances that have been brought

in since I started here, back in 1989, have made life in divisional offices a lot more busy, a lot more hectic and a lot more complicated.

CHAIR—You have said in your submission that with the increased workload has come a decrease in the permanent staff from three to 2.6.

Mr McKivat—Yes. The current policy of the Electoral Commission is to fund each of its offices with salary dollars for 2.6 ongoing staff and then top it up with salary dollars for 0.6 non-ongoing or temporary or casual staff. Overall, money-wise, that provides the equivalent of 3.2 people, but only 2.6 ongoing staff members.

CHAIR—And there is additional funding to get casual staff when there is a particular increase in workload?

Mr McKivat—There is an opportunity to bid for it, but, generally speaking, the view of the current management of the AEC is that they would rather see workload being moved from one site to another site than see staffing levels increased at a particular site. For example, we were told that, if you had a workload that was estimated to be 3.8, you would have 0.6 of your work taken away from your office and transferred to another office which was rated as having a lower workload. The AEC is looking more at the day-to-day activities in offices being generic and at workloads being shared between one site and another site—‘resource sharing’ is probably a better way to say it. It is about moving the actual work rather than the people.

CHAIR—With the increase in workload and the use of contractors, have you come across any particular examples of problems in efficiency and accuracy due to the use of contractors?

Mr McKivat—Are you referring to contractors as in casual staff or temporary staff?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr McKivat—The problem with it is that we cannot offer casual or temporary people a lot of work. It normally coincides with CRU mail-out times. If you are lucky enough to have three permanent staff in your office, you will be given 0.2 casual. If you have two, you will be given 1.2 casual to bring you up to the 3.2 figure. The problem with casual staff is that we cannot offer them a lot of work, and therefore we are finding it very difficult to retain the good ones who are looking for more work. They are leaving the AEC and going to other organisations. Every time you bring in a casual, you have to train them. That involves a fairly long and lengthy training process. So we are losing money. We are losing value for money by using casual staff because much of the time is spent on training them up in the fairly complicated computerised enrolment environment that we work in.

CHAIR—Without wanting to verbal you, would you say that it is a false economy not to have more permanent staff and to rely on casuals?

Mr McKivat—I do not think it is an efficient way to operate.

CHAIR—In your written submission, you talked about the national office increasing its functions and taking over certain functions that were previously carried out by state offices. Why do you think this has occurred?

Mr McKivat—I could not comment on that. I think the view of the organisation's management was that there was duplicated effort around the states and that there could be possibilities for economy savings if certain functions being carried out in each state office were carried out in one central location and therefore, hopefully, using fewer staff to do so. I am fairly convinced that that was the view, particularly in the area of corporate support. Each state office used to have its own corporate area that did the corporate processing for all the divisions in that state. That function has been taken away and relocated to the national office. We have only one corporate area in Canberra now. It is the same with other functions that states were carrying out. They were going to the national office and were also being transferred to divisional offices.

Senator STERLE—Is there any good news with the co-location?

Mr McKivat—Yes, definitely. As long as it is a co-location in the strict sense of the word. Two offices put together which are, generally speaking, inner metropolitan-type divisions in fairly close proximity to each other and close to the electorate—the finger on the pulse sort of stuff: local knowledge that can carry across divisions that are fairly geographically close together. If they are given the right sort of accommodation and the right staffing resources, there are positives.

I was part of a state consultative council where, as a staffer, I was representing the state of New South Wales. There were comments to me from people who worked in a co-located site, when they were first co-located and were given good accommodation and full staffing resources and were able to operate as stand-alone divisions—in other words, the three staff belonging to division X worked for division X. The comments back were: 'It was good. It was healthy. It was nice to have six people in the office rather than three. We got good accommodation out of all of this. We got moved to a nicer area. We had better opportunities to work closely with our colleagues.' There really were positives.

Senator STERLE—Mr McKivat, you do not work in one single divisional office; is that correct?

Mr McKivat—I work in a single, stand-alone rural division in country New South Wales.

Senator STERLE—Forgive my bluntness, but would you have a handle on what is going on in the metropolitan divisions?

Mr McKivat—Being a staff representative and having been with the organisation for a long time, with the opportunity to build up networks with a number of people around the state, I think I do, yes.

Senator STERLE—I do not want to put you on the spot, so if you do not want to answer please do not. As I said before, we did a site visit to Chatswood, and we have had four submissions. The people at Chatswood today were very friendly and they showed us around, but we have also had submissions saying that it is a disaster waiting to happen. We have heard of

employees who are no longer there. We have heard that there is not a great deal of career path out there. Have you heard anything similar?

Mr McKivat—I have been to the Chatswood a number of times and I have spoken to the staff there as a staff representative. All I can say to you, in all honesty, is that every staff member who was working at Chatswood has been moved out of the site.

Senator STERLE—I will not push that any further. Thank you for that.

Mr McKivat—There is now a whole new bunch of people working at Chatswood. I think that says it all.

Senator STERLE—Yes. I appreciate your honesty. Thank you. By being so honest you have bugged me now. I cannot ask any more questions.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I want to ask you this question in particular because you are in a country area. What work does a divisional officer, with the experience that you have had, typically undertake and carry out? How does this differ between stand-alone offices and co-located offices? Also, how does it differ between offices in the country and offices in the city?

Mr McKivat—The role should not change between stand-alone offices and co-located offices if the sites are running as true co-located sites. As I have said earlier this afternoon, and as I have said in my submission to you, the purpose of co-located sites was not to try to get rid of staff, move staff or relocate work. The idea was to put more than one division together, but remaining as stand-alone divisions. When they were operating on one site they were saving money on accommodation and on IT, but they were still working as stand-alone divisions. There were three people per division working out of the one site on the one floor. That was the idea. So the workload in a co-located office compared to a stand-alone office in a metropolitan area really should not change, but there is the possibility, if someone is on leave in one area or if there is an increase in work in one particular division, for the others to pitch in and help.

That was the general idea of co-locations that the AEC put forward, and staff were generally pretty supportive of that. But what has happened now—I do not know whether I mentioned this to you before—is that the AEC has decided to go a lot further than that. They have thought: ‘Now we have six people working at one site why don’t we try and pull down the barriers? Why don’t we mix the two divisions in together? Why do we want two DROs looking after an individual? Why do we want two enrolment people? Why can’t we create these cells?’ The current policy of the AEC now is to move the enrolment person from division X and the enrolment person from division Y together into one corner and call them the enrolment officers for the site. No longer are we managing the electoral roll or doing election preparation for a division; we are now doing it for a site which involves two or more electorates.

The general view at the moment is that the AEC want to break it down. They do not want individual divisions located together; they want to have a number of people and they want to move them away from their divisional basis to a more generic basis. That is the sort of thing which the staff generally are concerned about. As you know, we have been operating for a long time and we have a wonderful reputation, both here and overseas, as being an organisation that can prepare, conduct and manage elections to the highest degree. We have been so successful

because we have managed it at a divisional level. We manage the enrolment and elections at division level, and we run elections at division level.

The new policy of the AEC is to break down the divisions, not manage them as divisions any more and manage them as sites, and have one DRO do the planning for two, three or four divisions. There are real concerns from a number of staff who are being told, 'You're no longer the returning officer for division X; you're now the manager of the enrolment cell in this particular site.' That is a massive shift from what we have done in the past, and a lot of people have expressed concerns to me that they are worried that they will no longer be able to manage the roll or manage the election at a divisional level because they are not being asked to do it at a divisional level any more.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—We talked earlier with other witnesses about habitation reviews. Are habitation reviews not as regular in the country as they perhaps are in divisional offices in inner metropolitan or metropolitan seats?

Mr McKivat—No, I do not think there is any difference. Habitation reviews have not been conducted now for many years. Roll reviewing now relies on a mailing system and then once every 12 months there is some follow-up doorknocking at addresses where people failed to respond to the letter. That is being carried out across Australia at much the same level and is as frequent in metropolitan as in non-metropolitan areas. However, the metropolitan probably get a better coverage because they are able to doorknock a lot more addresses within reason than those in the rural parts of Australia. We are all doing it at the same time. We are all doing it once or twice a year, but the people in the metropolitan areas are doorknocking more houses and the country divisions are probably saying, 'It's not economically viable to send people out to the middle of nowhere to find one house that did not respond to a letter.' If we were doing a full habitation review, of course, the metropolitan areas would probably visit more houses because of logistics, the country ones would probably do the ones around the main towns and localities, but in the remote areas it would probably not be economically viable to do so.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You talked about the complexity of the work at the AEC having increased. How much would that complexity be affected or assisted if it were integrated with some form of electronic voting and photo-identification systems?

Mr McKivat—I think we have gone now to proof of identification. That has been in since April this year, from memory. That was, I think, a genuine attempt to tighten up the enrolment process. I do not know how difficult photo identification would be. We do not deal with many people in person. Most of our dealings with the public are either via the phone or the mail. Electronic voting is certainly something that is interesting, but it is probably a long way from being introduced at this stage, I think.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Thank you.

CHAIR—I have one particular issue that is of concern to me having a rural electorate. A previous submission strongly favoured regionalisation and said that regionalisation 'would allow more professional service to all clients in the region'. One of the issues raised was that, in country areas, only one per cent of locations have an AEC presence and they do not have many clients visiting those particular AEC offices. From your experience, what particular service is

provided by AEC divisional offices in rural and regional Australia and how would regionalisation—that is, the co-location/amalgamation of several rural electorates—impact on the service delivery in rural and regional Australia?

Mr McKivat—All any regionalisation would do would be to reduce the number of sites that we currently have. I cannot see that that would provide, particularly to country people, anything other than a service inferior to what we have at the moment. Most of the rural or regional divisions around Australia are based in the major towns within the divisional boundaries or in the towns that are more central or easier for the majority of people to visit in person if they need to. I do not see how any regionalisation would do anything other than reduce the opportunity for people to deal with the AEC face to face.

CHAIR—What would you say to the statement that AEC divisional offices in rural and regional areas do not have many clients visiting them?

Mr McKivat—I would say the statement was probably made by somebody who does not work in a rural or regional divisional office.

Mr DANBY—I have five or six questions or comments that I would like you to respond to. We have a limited amount of time, so, if you do not mind, please keep your answers fairly pithy. Firstly, I will go back to the situation at Chatswood. One of the staff testified here before, and I understand that only half—it was not exact—of the permanent staff there have been moved. You testified that all of them have been moved.

Mr McKivat—To the best of my knowledge there is nobody left at Chatswood who was originally there when this amalgamation—it was not a co-location, by the way—process was commenced.

Mr DANBY—When did this amalgamation happen?

Mr McKivat—It has been going on now for a couple of years.

Mr DANBY—So in the last couple of years there have been none—

Mr McKivat—To the best of my knowledge, all of the original people who were at Chatswood who were anti this proposal are either no longer at the site or are in the process of moving from the site.

Mr DANBY—Have we lost all of the corporate knowledge of the AEC from that office or are some of them in other places?

Mr McKivat—I think some of them have asked to move, or are being moved, to other sites. I know one in particular has resigned recently from that site, but I think most of them have sought, or have been asked, to be transferred out of that site to a stand-alone divisional office.

Mr DANBY—What is the cause of this staff turmoil at Chatswood? Is it this unilateral movement from divisional operation to operation in the form of cells?

Mr McKivat—I think that is correct. When Chatswood was first put together a few years ago there were three divisions out there. In recent years a fourth division, Berowra, was moved over there as well. Having four together was always a problem with the way the office was set up. Generally speaking, the four of them worked as stand-alone divisions under the one roof on the one floor. Then in recent times there has been a shift to relocate people, shift people, out of their divisional network and move them into a cell—either an enrolment cell or an election cell. There has been a massive shift, where we have moved multiskilled AEC employees with knowledge of all aspects and facets of the electoral and election process into a cell—and I think ‘cell’ is an apt title there—where they work either in enrolment, in elections or in public awareness but not in all aspects of AEC administration. A lot of people who join the AEC and work in the AEC do so because of the variety of work.

Mr DANBY—I just want to understand this from a wider point of view. I do not mean to be blunt, but why would anyone outside the office care? I ask that deliberately; is it affecting the operation of the office, the end result as to constituents? Would the Prime Minister or Ms McKew in Bennelong be affected by this as candidates? Can you be specific about any of those points?

Mr McKivat—All I can say to you is that the election-type preparation, the way in which we manage the roll, the way in which we prepare and conduct the next election, would be very much different under an amalgamated process from what has been done in the past. Of course, that brings with it some elements of risk because it has not been carried out that way in the past.

Mr DANBY—Okay. So we may see it is risk evident at the next election because of what has happened over the last two years and that this change in structure from division oriented amalgamated offices to cell-type organisations.

Mr McKivat—I think the cell-type organisations go hand in hand with amalgamations, and co-locations are still doing things the way we have done them traditionally and have been done without any hitch in the past.

Mr DANBY—The two last questions I am going to ask you are from another area but follow on from that. The statistics from the Victorian and New South Wales elections show that more than 50 per cent of 18-year-olds were not enrolled. I am very concerned that, despite the government’s advertising campaign, it is a problem. In my view—and, I know, in Senator Sterle’s view and the opposition’s view—because of this totally unjustified, non-evidence based change to the legislation about closing the electoral roll immediately after the issue of the writs, we are going to have a problem. It particularly affects younger people, and since a very large majority of those younger people vote either Greens or Labor, it has an obvious political implication. That may not be the case in this federal election, given how the general opinion polls are going, but I want to know what you think the effect of the early closure of the roll will be where you are working—out in a rural electorate where you are the DRO.

Mr McKivat—The legislation was changed and the AEC has to come up with ways to try to help those particular people. Recently the AEC has embarked on a fairly successful ‘enrol to vote’ campaign with year 12 students. We have had an ‘enrol to vote’ week, and we have had schools get involved with it as well. I think the AEC is trying to do a lot of advertising earlier on in the piece to make people aware that the rolls are closing earlier than in the past. But, sure, I

think that if things close off on the day there still will be people who wait until the last minute and they might miss out.

Mr DANBY—My last question is: you have had experience in the past of the five-day period of grace after the election is announced when lots of people rush to enrol to vote and to clarify their standing. Were there thousands of people involved in your electorate, or were there hundreds?

Mr McKivat—That is typical, but people knew, in the past, that they had a week to do it, and the AEC's advertising campaign was very good. It kept reminding people on a daily basis of when rolls were closing, so people knew exactly what their situation was. Of course, if people know they have got a week to do it they will take a week, won't they?

Mr DANBY—Did you enrol them all to the standard of professionalism that you did with other voters prior to the election being announced?

Mr McKivat—We certainly did, yes.

ACTING CHAIRMAN (Senator Sterle)—Mr McKivat, thank you for your participation in today's hearing. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of grammar and fact. Hansard may also contact you, if required, to check some details concerning your evidence.

Mr McKivat—Thank you.

[2.30 pm]

LINNELL, Mr Garry, Director, News and Current Affairs, Nine Network Ltd, Member of Free TV Australia Ltd

LONGSTAFF, Mrs Pamela, Director, Legal and Broadcasting Policy, Free TV Australia Ltd

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath I advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission to this inquiry from you. Do you wish to present any additional submissions or make an opening statement to the committee?

Mrs Longstaff—There are no additional submissions. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. Broadcasters, in particular the Nine Network, have a longstanding commitment to election coverage from the national tally room. Our submission focused specifically on that issue. The national tally room does provide a central focus for the election night count for the media and for the public, and particularly for the media it provides a common area for accessing commentators and party officials. We do not think there is any way of substituting for the live and transparent nature of the national tally room through a virtual facility on the internet or on the AEC's website. We are very happy to answer any questions that you have. Mr Linnell in particular can answer detailed questions about broadcasters' election night coverage.

ACTING CHAIR—Do you wish to make an opening statement, Mr Linnell?

Mr Linnell—No, other than to reinforce what Pamela has just said, that it adds transparency to the process. We have obviously had a very large commitment to covering the federal election over the last two or three decades and that continues to be the case. The tally room serves as a focal point for our coverage. We have Ray Martin and Laurie Oakes down there. There is access not just to the public but also to a lot of political figures, party members and party officials who are there. Clearly, as far as the atmospherics go with television, it adds to the event. There is constant movement, a constant buzz and constant noise in the room. As for the viewers, over the last two elections, jointly between us and the ABC we have attracted about 10 per cent of all Australians—about two million—who tune in to watch the federal election coverage. That is no mean feat.

ACTING CHAIR—I am sure there are a few on this side of the table who you can count in that. I know that Senator Fierravanti-Wells is dying to jump in and ask you a question.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—No, I wasn't.

ACTING CHAIR—You were champing at the bit like a greyhound coming out of the box!

Mr Linnell—We are still looking for panellists for the coverage.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I thought the ABC might ask me! That is meant tongue in cheek, I might just say to Mr Green, who is in the audience. You mentioned there are impacts of abolishing the tally room and you have outlined some of them. How do you think it will impact on ratings? Mr Linnell, I think you said you had about 10 per cent.

Mr Linnell—When you add up the figures, there are roughly two million people who tune in to Nine and the ABC. We could always move to a sterile studio, based in Sydney or anywhere else, to do our coverage of the election, but the tally room gives viewers the feeling that they are present at a focal point. As I said, there is a lot of movement there. We are able to ad lib our way through in some sections of our coverage by getting people's reactions almost instantly on the floor. We invest a lot of money in our coverage, as does the ABC. We cross all around Australia, with live components, to all of the key players. But you still need to come back to a central point. The tally room is one of those things that has always been there as part of our election coverage, as it is with the ABC, and we want it to continue that way.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Just picking up on that point, it has obviously changed over the decades, and Channel 9 has obviously been following that. How have you seen it change and how do you see it evolving?

Mr Linnell—Technology is changing all the time, and in television right now we are seeing huge leaps and advances that we are coming to grips with. To me it is not a question of whether or not you have a manual tally board that takes a bit longer to update, because those things can be replaced. We are running tickers all the time and we have the latest in computer graphics and computer downloads coming through for us. So, to me, it is not the tally board itself; it is the actual physical location which adds to the atmospherics. That is a hard thing to get across sometimes, to say, 'Well, it's atmospherics and this is commercial TV,' but it does play a large part when you can actually see movement and you have people walking around. Sometimes it does not create the best TV environment because someone will walk in left of centre and walk right in front of the camera. But to me that adds to your coverage: you are going live, you are flying by the seat of your pants sometimes, and it adds a lot more credibility to the whole process.

Mrs Longstaff—Generally speaking, free-to-air broadcasters are finding that the public is demanding, in a whole range of areas, live, event-driven, immediate coverage of news, current affairs, sport and other events. That is becoming more and more the focus of free-to-air commercial television broadcasters.

ACTING CHAIR—When you say 10 per cent, Mr Linnell, do you have a breakdown of that between the channels?

Mr Linnell—Yes, I can get those figures; we have them back at work.

ACTING CHAIR—It would be interesting to see that. I suggest that there is a lot of surfing going on as well between the two.

Mr Linnell—Absolutely, and I would anticipate that. You usually find that other free-to-air networks will program a big-time movie to go up against the election which will often rate quite well as well.

ACTING CHAIR—If you could take that on notice and supply the committee with that information.

Mr Linnell—Absolutely.

Mr DANBY—The AEC would suggest that you could use their virtual tally room as a backdrop. Why should the AEC be providing commercial television and indeed the ABC with a backdrop? I am asking the questions as devil's advocate; I do not necessarily agree with them myself.

Mr Linnell—I am not too sure what the cost entails for the AEC. I know what our outlays are and they are considerable. I think it gets back to the heart of what we were talking about before: the transparency process; the ability for people to see that something is taking place in the national capital, for a start, rather than an election coverage being completely run out of Sydney, or any other city for that matter. I do not have much more to add to that. It is a feel and it is a look.

Mrs Longstaff—We think it is important for members of the public to be able to go and participate in the national tally room as it is for viewers, who get their access through a broadcaster's coverage.

Mr DANBY—You and Mr Green would be able to do your statistical analysis and commentaries regardless of input from the AEC. You do not really need the AEC putting up the figures in the tally room to deliver the kind of result that you are delivering on-screen, do you?

Mr Linnell—Elections are a numbers game, there is no doubt about that. We are in the business of television and we are there to tell a story and to relate what is happening. You can only tell a story about numbers through people. If you are in a studio, you do not have access to the people you would normally find in the NTR.

Mr DANBY—I agree with you, but I felt obliged to ask those questions because I think the AEC needs someone to defend it. I understand why they are doing it and that is because of money. It costs them a considerable amount of money and they are having to put more money into advertising, which I am sure has been on the Nine Network and other networks, to make up for the change in legislation that they might not have had to find otherwise. It is the matter I raised before about the early closure of the rolls. The AEC are quite rightly concerned that there will be tens of thousands of people left off the electoral roll unless they run this extensive advertising campaign within the budget that has been allocated to get people on the roll, and part of the cost is to sacrifice the tally room. They are putting their resources where they think they will get the biggest bang for the buck as far as delivering the largest democratic franchise is concerned.

Mr Linnell—My only answer to that is that once every few years we have an opportunity to take the whole electoral process to Australia, and there are two networks that do that: the ABC and Channel 9, which is the only free-to-air broadcaster that has had the commitment to do that. Our ability to do that and our willingness to invest would probably outweigh some of those other issues.

Mr DANBY—Mrs Longstaff, have you spoken to government about perhaps putting extra resources into the AEC so that they can afford this?

Mrs Longstaff—We had a letter from the Electoral Commission to which we responded, and we copied our response to Gary Nairn.

Mr DANBY—Have you made the suggestion to the government—to Mr Howard, Mr Nairn et cetera—that the AEC is strapped for resources to advertise the change in legislation that they have forced on it, so how about they stump up the money to pay for the tally room?

Mrs Longstaff—We have not made that suggestion at this stage.

Mr Linnell—We would be more than willing to sit down with them, have a discussion about that and see what we could do.

Mr DANBY—That might be a productive suggestion from me.

Mrs Longstaff—I do not think there is any doubt that it would be cheaper for broadcasters to conduct their election coverage from a studio, but broadcasters budget for the event and they regard it as a justified expense in delivering the coverage.

Mr DANBY—You all do it from the one site, don't you?

Mr Linnell—Yes.

Mrs Longstaff—They set up a temporary studio within the national tally room. That is what involves the time, cost and commitment from broadcasters, but they have done it for many years and they have a commitment to continuing that kind of coverage.

Mr DANBY—A virtual tally room would not deliver you any of the graphics, background et cetera that you do not already have.

Mr Linnell—No. We can easily do that ourselves.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I think Mr Linnell was saying that it is the colour and movement.

Mr Linnell—Yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—How much would that affect your ratings? If you were not able to do this and you had just a studio production, how much of that two million would you lose?

Mr Linnell—If I could predict ratings I would be doing very well. It is hard to say. It would depend on the number of promos you put out there and how you did up your studio in Sydney. That is a very difficult question to answer.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—And how good the blockbuster is on the other channel?

Mr Linnell—Absolutely. If you are up against Harry Potter then you are up against it.

Mrs Longstaff—It is a difficult decision for a broadcaster like Channel 9 on a Saturday night.

Mr Linnell—We often find that, by the end of the week, both Friday and Saturday nights are quite critical in the ratings battle. You go into it knowing that, particularly with an election coverage, there are no guarantees, although traditionally we have done very well out of them. The way this year is panning out there is a lot of interest out there in the public, certainly from what we have seen so far and from the reaction we get to any of our political reports. So we are anticipating quite a large audience.

ACTING CHAIR—As I am someone who has a passing interest in numbers on election night, could you tell me which other shows would pull in the 10 per cent that is your viewing audience—to give us a fair idea?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Harry Potter.

ACTING CHAIR—I think Harry is more, isn't he?

Mr Linnell—It depends. Saturday night audiences can change depending on weather in various cities—how many people are inside compared to outside.

ACTING CHAIR—Say, for instance, you threw an AFL game at us—a Victorian AFL game?

Mr Linnell—A Victorian AFL game might pull in 700,000 or 800,000 nationally. We would be anticipating an audience of about a million people, if not more.

ACTING CHAIR—I suppose it would be easier if I asked you what other shows would pull in two million viewers for your network.

Mr Linnell—Very few. I can think of only a handful off the top of my head. Last year the Terry Irwin interview, a week or two after Steve's death, pulled in about 2½ million. An AFL grand final will give you those sorts of figures—over 2 million. But a million on a Saturday night is a very good figure.

ACTING CHAIR—Two million is a substantial number, isn't it?

Mr Linnell—It is, yes. That is a combined figure for us and the ABC.

ACTING CHAIR—That is a combined figure?

Mr Linnell—Yes. I think that over the last two elections it has averaged out at about a million on Channel 9 and about a million for the ABC.

ACTING CHAIR—What will happen if the tally room is abolished?

Mr Linnell—We had a meeting about this not long after we received the original letter from the AEC in about March this year. We were surprised that it was taking place so late in the electoral cycle. We thought, ‘We may have to do it out of Sydney—have the anchors in Sydney and then do a lot more crosses around Australia to the relevant party rooms and electorate offices.’ That was our backup plan.

ACTING CHAIR—You have had vast experience, along with the ABC, in how successful election night counting is; there is no doubt about that. Would that have a great impact on the number of viewers? I am not trying to lead you into a question of professionalism and the like, but I know that a lot of people like the buzz, the noise, the colour and walking past someone while they are speaking, and others missing the microphone.

Mr Linnell—I have no research that would show how many extra people watch because it is held in the NTR. However, our policy is to include more live events, particularly for free-to-air. It has been a trend in commercial television all around the world, particularly when it comes to news and current affairs. Our audience wants to see more live—

ACTING CHAIR—They demand it now, don’t they?

Mr Linnell—They demand it, yes. That is why you see, on news bulletins at 6 pm now, a lot more live crosses to reporters at the scene of a story, rather than a prepackaged story that is done in the studio.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Linnell and Mrs Longstaff, for your attendance here today. You have been asked to provide additional material; would you please forward it to the secretary. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of grammar and fact. Thank you for your submission.

[2.46 pm]

GREEN, Mr Antony John, Private capacity

Mr Green—I appear in a personal capacity. I work for the ABC. The ABC chose not to make a submission to this committee; they had no particularly strong feeling either way. They were happy to take whichever decision the AEC made—whether there would or would not be a tally room. However, I thought the committee might appreciate some of my thoughts on whether we should have one.

ACTING CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these proceedings are legal proceedings of parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission to this inquiry from you. Do you wish to present any additional submissions or make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Green—Yes. The AEC wrote to all the media several months ago a two-page letter explaining their views on why we can do without a tally room now. The AEC concentrated very heavily on the virtual tally room. The point I would make to this committee—it was a point we made to the AEC in our response—was that a virtual tally room is of little use to the television networks or to the radio, for the simple reason that it cannot drive computer graphics. It is not designed for quick operation, which they use in the radio, to hop from seat to seat. It is there as a backup, but we have our own system to do that, and we have our own analytical tools. As I always point out to the AEC, they have some very complex analytic tools to compare results booth by booth, but they do not tell you, through that system, who has won each seat. They are very cautious about that—and they are rightly cautious because it is not their job to predict the election on the election night. It is their job to get the result right; not to get it right or wrong early.

The important thing the AEC does in this country is to give the results to the media. When I first started to do this in the 1990, it came as a serial feed from the AEC's computer. You had to be in the tally room to get it. As late as the last election, you really had to be in the tally room to get the feed of votes. Always, in those days, you had the tally board as a backup if you had to type in votes yourself because the feed fell over. The feed has become much more reliable. There is a lot more bandwidth in terms of providing information. At the next election we will not need to be in the tally room to get the data; it will be published on an FTP site on the internet, where we just pull the data down. We have had numerous discussions with the AEC on the new format for that. The AEC get the data, compile it and send it to the media.

I point out to the committee that in other countries that does not occur. In Britain and America, all the media organisations that are involved in election coverage commit money to a company whose sole job it is to get the results on election night. If you go to Britain, you cannot get an official report of a British election result. They are all conducted by local government, and it is only a local government issue. The media have a representative at every counting centre. They all count centrally: one per multiple districts. The media have a representative at each of those centres getting the results. It is entered into a common computer system which manipulates it,

and then all the media pull down the data from that. It is the same in America, where a lot of the exit polls are done in one night. As well, the official results from the numerous bodies are collated by one organisation which then provides them, with some augmentation, to the media and the different media organisations can use their own analysis on top of that.

What happens here is that the AEC does all that and provides it to the media. If you go back 100 years, it used to work that way in Australia as well. If I go back to the 1890s, which is a period I am familiar with, in those days the newspapers used to put giant tally boards outside their offices on election night. The public would come and watch the results go up on the tally board. That was partly because the newspapers had better telegraph services than the government did in those days, and they were able to get the results in quicker. They would go to the counting centres and telegraph the results in. So our response to the AEC was that the virtual tally room in that sense is not important to us because we do not really use it; we use their raw data. For us, it is important that two things occur: one, that they continue to get the results as they have always done in the past and, two, that they continue to make them easily available. At this election, it will be the first time that other outside organisations will be able to access the same media feed. The first time it occurred was in Victoria at the end of last year.

ACTING CHAIR—Who are those other outside agencies?

Mr Green—They are essentially bloggers. There is a whole bunch of people who like to get hold of that data and do their own manipulations of it. It also means that political parties can get access to it. I know that the Greens took that data in Victoria. I am not sure if the other parties did. So that has expanded who has access to the data. When I started doing this in 1990, it was only the general media that got access to the feed. In those days there were still AAPY services at the front taking the numbers off the tally board as a backup. That no longer occurs.

The biggest difference that the tally room creates in Australia, compared to other countries, is atmosphere. If you watch a British, American or Canadian election coverage, they sound very dead and sterile to us because there is no noise. It is all done in studios and therefore is aurally dead. We did some crosses in 1990 to a studio in Sydney. To ensure there was not that amazing audio drop, we fed the tally room sound by speaker into the studio in Sydney to ensure it sounded like it was not that different. That is the biggest thing we would miss if there was not a tally room. Australians are used to having the buzz. In recent years, the public have been let into the federal election tally room. The only other place where they do that is in Tasmania, which has a fantastic tally room. If you have never been to a Tasmanian election, it is well worth attending one just for the atmosphere on the night.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—And the characters down in Tasmania, I think, Mr Green!

Mr Green—Yes. It was certainly the place that in the mid-eighties elected His Grace, the Most Noble, Duke of Avram to parliament, who was a rather novel character. But the atmosphere is the key thing you get from being in the tally room.

As far as talent goes, the only talent that is there is that arranged to be there by the media. We, Channel 9 and any other networks there will have a collection of heavy hitters. In the past, we have always used Bob McMullan and Nick Minchin. They are our main political talent, and they

are dedicated to our coverage as Channel 9 have dedicated people for their coverage. There is also a collection of other people whom the ABC, Channel 9 and other television networks will encourage to come to the tally room, and often they will come. Sometimes we will even pay them to come to the tally room, and they will tend to float as guest interviews between the different panels. I notice that there are people on radio who will occasionally end up on television, so there is a bit of sharing of talent. But, increasingly, the only people who are there are the people who have been arranged to be there.

The people who would miss the tally room in terms of information would be print media. The AEC may provide that virtual tally room, and I have told them this a number of times: before the election they will leaflet the press gallery, asking: 'Who wants a virtual tally room terminal?' Everyone will say, 'Yes.' They always get many more requests than they expected, and they provide them. Once upon a time it was just terminals. Now it is a web server, and it is the same web server that everyone else has access to. Usually what happens is that most members of the media will sit there, look at it for from 15 minutes to half an hour, decide it is not telling them who is winning the election and will wander over and talk to the Labor Party and Liberal Party people on the far side. So, in a sense, the parties get a lot of assistance from the tally room because there is a captive room of journalists to talk to, and they are often very senior journalists who they can spin a message to. Radio and print would probably miss the tally room. I understand what Garry is saying: the thing we would really miss is that noise, and that is what gives our coverages a lot more life and vibrancy than you see in overseas coverages. We would have to invent some other way of getting around that.

ACTING CHAIR—You were saying that a lot of the political heavyweights or characters are contracted for the evening to do interviews. If things are going bad and you need a giggle and all of a sudden Senator Barnaby Joyce walks across the floor, is there a chance that you can just grab him out of the crowd? Does it work that way?

Mr Green—If someone has arranged for Barnaby Joyce to be there, he will be there.

ACTING CHAIR—Senator Fierravanti-Wells is going to give me a whack around the ear when I walk outside!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Do not look at me, Senator Sterle.

ACTING CHAIR—It was just the first name that came into my head. Are political characters shared? If someone is there with Channel 9, can you cross to them and vice versa?

Mr Green—There is often a lot of competition to get to the camera first. One of the biggest debates that goes on between the networks on the election coverage is if they know the leaders are going to come into the tally room—and there are not many now; Queensland and Tasmania are the last. Federally, the National Party leader often comes to the tally room because the networks will not devote resources to go to Gunnedah with a full media crew to cover one short speech. You often have to come to some agreement about at what point they will be interviewed. You are always pushed to get the camera there first. To avoid people being bowled over by a rush of cameras there is often agreement to have a certain point from where an interview will be done. But sometimes that can be a problem. Queensland has always had a central spot where the leaders do their speeches. One of the problems that occurred at the last election up there was that

it is all very nice of them to do their speeches but they then do a full-on press conference. The last election up there they had very loud speakers and we could not go back to our coverage because Peter Beattie was doing a full-on press conference at full volume across the tally room. We do not have that problem in Canberra. There has not been a Prime Minister or a prospective Prime Minister turn up there since Bob Hawke won in 1983.

If we did not have a tally room, it would change coverages in a big way. If the television was not there, there would still be some room in Canberra where the print and other media would be able to access the results. What would be more likely to happen is that there would be a lot more push for the parties to make their leadership functions much larger. Wherever the Prime Minister is or wherever the opposition leader is there will be more party people there as interview talent. You could make much more use of that as a live cross venue for what is going on. If you were doing it from a studio, you would start to make use of things you cannot really use in the tally room. You cannot use big video walls in the tally room because you have to be able to control the lighting to use them. If you want to shoot big monitors, you have to ensure there is no lighting on them. Admittedly, modern monitors have got better services than the old cathode ray tube screens, but it is still difficult when you have to bring in lots of technology to run a big video wall. So there are things like that that you would like to use in the tally room that you cannot use. If you were not in the tally room, you would use those sorts of opportunities to bring the world to you.

ACTING CHAIR—I believe your submission wholly comes from a political analysis point of view—and, I assume, what people want to see when they watch an election coverage. And I appreciate the previous submission from the broadcasting side. If we were to lose the national tally room, do you think the coverage would be better for those of us who hang out once every three years to watch it?

Mr Green—This came to head after the 2001 election when Channel 7 chose to have Roy and HG in the tally room. I am not sure whether Garry was around at the time. They tried to fly a blimp into all the other networks' election coverage on the night—much to our annoyance. We got a general agreement after that that people were not to interfere with each other's sets for the purpose of doing an election coverage.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Will *The Chaser* be let loose, Mr Green? That is the question!

ACTING CHAIR—You will have your chance to ask the ABC that when we get to them.

Mr Green—My view is that it costs a lot of money to do the coverage from there. There are disadvantages because of the security on a Saturday. At the last general election down there, the tally room was tied down for 3½ hours for bomb checks. The only time I have ever known them to find anything was one year when our computer programmer had taken Vegemite sandwiches to the tally room and the dogs took a particular interest in them. Do not take Vegemite to anywhere that has security is my suggestion.

If we did not have the tally room, we would use other technology to try to make the coverage more interesting. It would change the way the parties provide talent and, instead of the money being spent on travel and transport to take all the equipment to Canberra and run a big outside

broadcast, we would be able to use it for more interesting technology—more video walls, better graphics et cetera. It would also allow us to get away from what I call the ‘footy panel’ coverage, where you have got a bunch of people sitting in front of a board, you cannot shoot over shoulders—because if you put a cameraman behind the panel they will fall off the edges of the floor. There are lots of problems with doing it from the tally room. You would miss the noise so you would have to create some interest in another way. I think it can be done; it just requires a complete rethink.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I thought that the coverage from the ABC during the state election in New South Wales was very good, Mr Green. I am not sure how the state electoral commission operates. Do they have a virtual tally room? How were you feeding the information from the state election for your coverage at the recent New South Wales election?

Mr Green—We have an agreed format with all the electoral commissions about the way the data is provided—a standard packet—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Similar to how it would be with the AEC?

Mr Green—The packet is slightly different and the method of retrieving is exactly the same. They put it onto an FTP—a file transfer protocol. That is a site where you can put a file up and you just pull it down on request. That is what we have moved to, which means that somewhere on the internet you have the address and you just pull that down. That is where we get the data from, and then we manipulate it using the way we think we can analyse an election. I understand that it cost something like \$600,000 for the state electoral commission to run the tally room for the New South Wales election, and there was basically only us and a very small set from Sky television there—plus a bunch of radio outlets. It was very expensive for them. They no longer have a tally board; they use big projection screens.

We objected to tally boards being taken away about 15 years ago, but in those days the cameras that were in use would have flickered with a rear projection screen. With the modern technology, the cameras are more precise and they can also time the flicker on the screens in the background so there is not that problem. If the AEC wanted to replace the tally board with something which is cheaper to run they could do that, but you would only be replacing relatively cheap labour with a tally board with some expensive technology. So I do not think it saves them that much money.

Mr DANBY—How did the Greens use the feed that they got, and how would bloggers and political parties use it as against how you use it?

Mr Green—If you compare the websites of the AEC or a state electoral commission with what the ABC publishes, we do not go to the effort of republishing all the booth information. It is a huge effort for one or two people, which is basically all that is involved in the project for the ABC to generate all that material. It is just too difficult. So we concentrate on augmenting, with political information, what is on the web. We basically call the result. We say who has won each seat. We make predictions. That is what we do. That is a matter of political modelling, and we have been doing that for 15 years so we have got a model. Most of the bloggers that I have noticed, and the Greens in Victoria, have just tended to take that data and republish it, because they could. I am not sure they actually added that much to it.

Mr DANBY—They do not come up with counteranalysis that would be a rival to the ABC or—

Mr Green—I do get rather amused. There is a site called the Poll Bludger, and he does a very good political website. If you watch him on election night, he does a running commentary but most of it is taken off the ABC's TV or radio coverage or off the ABC's website. So he is actually using our numbers. I am well used to the fact, from doing these elections for many years—

Mr DANBY—Hence he calls himself the Poll Bludger, because he is bludging off you.

Mr Green—I am putting on the record something which is a terrible insight, but many of the politicians who come on our panel use my numbers as well. They do not have any additional information from scrutineers. It used to be that a phone call from a scrutineer would get a swing figure to you quicker than the AEC; now that the AEC provides preference counts it is usually no quicker to rely on party sources except in very complex situations.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Except in the very tight ones, I think.

Mr Green—Even then, my observation over the years is that most parties will never give up on a close seat on election night.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I agree with you, and it is really only in those tight ones.

Mr DANBY—There are changes to political systems that make any predictions impossible, like the recent Victorian upper house election results that went on for weeks and weeks. I know that in south-east metropolitan the fifth seat was won by a few hundred votes out of 400,000.

Mr Green—One of the difficulties in elections is that people get very concerned that it takes so long to get a close election right. As I always point out, the closer an election the more accurate the Electoral Commission have to be in the count. In a seat of 80,000 people where you have a member with a majority of 20,000, if there are 200 or 300 votes out in the count the parties do not send the scrutineers along. Scrutineers are as much a part of the electoral process of ensuring the count is done correctly as the people counting the votes. In the case of the last two seats in Victoria, both of them were basically decided by below-the-line votes not by the ticket votes. That is why they were rather hard to predict. A close result will take a long time. It was complex doing the Victorian upper house. There were some problems because it was a new electoral system and the Electoral Commission sometimes have difficulties with their procedures in new systems. Often it is just simply that many returning officers who have worked on many elections seem to pay no attention to the fact that the rules have changed and they continue to do things the way they used to do them, and that causes problems further down the line when things have to be recounted. But these things happen.

Mr DANBY—How much will the Electoral Commission save by getting rid of the tally room? Do you have any knowledge of that?

Mr Green—I think they have mentioned it is between half a million and a million dollars to run the tally room. Some of that cost they would still have; but certainly on the venue, the tally

board itself, the staff—a vast number of things—they would save. For the ABC, most of the staff who work on the election coverage come from interstate, so you are saving a week of TA. You are saving the transport of all the materials to the tally room. You are saving the use of Telstra's optical fibre lines from that shed in the northern suburbs of Canberra.

Mr DANBY—I will give you some commentary that I do not expect you necessarily to respond to. If you are an organisation with a fixed budget and you are not given money to advertise major changes to legislation, unlike other legislation that has tens of millions of dollars applied to it, you have to save the money somewhere because you do not want to be humiliated by a result where hundreds of thousands of people do not vote because they are not aware of these major changes to legislation. So the AEC are doing this advertising at the moment using their existing resources, not extra resources, and that has to come from somewhere.

Mr Green—All organisations face this problem. I will say this about tally rooms. They are a peculiar Australian tradition, and other countries that do not have tally rooms have their traditions of doing election coverages which are different from ours. One thing that has occurred in recent years is that the AEC does a lot of consultancy to Third World countries, and it is interesting that in many of those countries the provision of a tally room for results has been very important for the transparency of the system. But I would say that it is not required in Australia anymore. The transparency of the system with the virtual tally room is that anybody to get results. We increasingly publish a website of results. We have tickers of information. We will probably have results by seat available on interactive television at this election; I think we did a trial last time. There is no doubt that the information is out there and is made available to the public, so I do not think we have a transparency issue in this problem of the tally room—it is no longer required to provide that information to ensure transparency in the system. It has become a very large media backdrop in Canberra. It would be sad to see it go; it is fun to be there. But can I say, from someone who spends the last week in a shed in the northern suburbs of Canberra, that the national tally room is not actually a very glamorous site.

Mr DANBY—I still think it would be preferable if they could do it. I just want to cement my point to you: as far as you know, the AEC have not received any extra allocation from the federal government for advertising for this federal election?

Mr Green—I do not know the answer to that. I certainly know they do not get any supplementation for the tally room. That is just a cost that has been built in—

Mr DANBY—You are aware that, prior to the Victorian and New South Wales elections, up to 50 per cent of 18-year-olds were not enrolled to vote and that the advertising the AEC are currently doing is designed to try and get as many of those people on the rolls as possible?

Mr Green—There are lots of problems with the rolls. We have fixed cut-off dates in Australia. The changes that have been introduced have firmed up that date. I think one of the problems is we do have compulsory enrolment in this country, which is not as uncommon across the world as people think. People forget it is compulsory to enrol in Britain.

Mr DANBY—Do you know how many countries?

Mr Green—Not off the top of my head. I certainly know Britain has compulsory enrolment. I think New Zealand has, and because they only have one election there every three years they go through a process of opening the roll up once every three years and getting everyone to re-enrol or sort out their enrolment. While the roll is fixed on a particular day, if you have not sorted out your enrolment by enrolment day you can still vote up to polling day but you have to vote declaration—you have to go through the process of providing some evidence of who you are and that you live at an address if you want to vote and you are not on the roll.

We certainly are more advanced than Britain, which has always had a fixed date for its polling. I worked on an election in Scotland in 1999. Every year the University of St Andrews used to give the council the names of everybody who had moved into the student flats. So every year two new names would go into these student flats in town, but no-one ever took the names off, so when the election came around four years later there were eight people living in each of these two-bedroom apartments. That is because, in Britain, the electoral authorities move your enrolment around if you move. I think that, legally, most Australian students, who tend to leave their enrolments back where their parents are, are probably breaking the law because it is questionable as to whether that is actually their place of residence. But there is not a definition of 'place of residence', necessarily, and I am not sure—

Mr DANBY—I think it is their 'primary place of residence'.

Mr Green—That becomes a difficulty.

Mr DANBY—It is an emotional thing: is the flat that you live in with some friends for six months really where you live, or do you really live there until you have made a decision to live somewhere permanently.

Mr Green—There is a series of issues with that. It does need a lot of advertising. Most people do not regularise their enrolment until they have to vote, and I think that is one of the problems with the new legislation. The only thing about this election is that we have a relatively rough idea about when the election will be. Given the comment in the newspapers this morning, I do not think the government is going to announce an election for 4 August today, so it has got a bit of time to advertise.

But in a situation such as that which occurred in 1983, which is of course from where a lot of this concern comes, if the government announced the election—I should point out that, prior to 1983, elections always were announced ahead of the formal issue of writs, which gave people the chance to regularise their enrolments. In Tasmania, where the rolls close on the date that the writ is issued, there is still one week in the fourth period between the dissolution and the issue of the writs. So most states have some form of gap period. In the states that have a fixed date for enrolment, such as in New South Wales, where we actually have a fixed date for the election, we also have a fixed date for—

Mr DANBY—I did not realise that, prior to 1983, there was a gap between the announcement of the election and the issuing of the writ, which enabled people to enrol.

Mr Green—If you look at the House of Representatives practice you will find that it still contains a table which states the date that the election was announced in parliament, and you will

find that this date is always listed there, until you get to 1990. Since 1990, no election has been called in a sitting week of parliament. It is always called in an off-sitting week and so parliament is not assembled and not behind. If you go back to, I think, 1984 or 1987, you will find that that was the last time that the election was announced in parliament. Some time in the following week or week and a half, parliament was dissolved and the writs were issued. Once the writ was issued the rolls closed. In the last election in New Zealand, the election was announced four to six weeks ahead of the issue of the writ. So there was a tradition of that. The 1983 election, which was when there was the sudden double-dissolution, caused a lot of the argument about whether we should or should not have a formal period to fix up enrolments.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Mr Green, do you agree with the figure of two million people that Mr Linnell indicated previously? Is it only one million people who watch the ABC, or are there a few more than that?

Mr Green—I think the difficulty of coming up with a figure is basically that a lot of people who want to watch the election are not at home in normal circumstances, watching television. There is a big tradition in Australia of election parties. Also, most political parties will have a central function which everyone goes to after the scrutineering. So most of the people who are most interested in politics may end up not being picked up by any ratings books anyway.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I see what you mean.

Mr DANBY—I see, so that understates the number of people who are watching.

Mr Green—That has always been the case. This is a bit of network rivalry, I suppose, but Channel 9 would often out rate on an election night, and to make sure that they did out rate they would go commercial free, because when they ran commercial breaks people changed stations and did not come back. So we forced Channel 9 to basically run at a huge loss on election night because they could not run advertising. The other thing I would say about the ratings that came from that is that Channel 9 would win the ratings but the feedback we used to get from our camera crews was that, whenever they went to a party, people were watching the ABC election coverage. So there is a lot of unmeasured viewing on election night.

ACTING CHAIR—Yes. I think that is interesting. For we sad souls who sit there and wait for one every three years and think there is something wrong with us—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is right, Senator Sterle.

ACTING CHAIR—We stock up the fridges and all the mates come round and we put the big screen up. I must say that I can relate to your comment that there are a lot of people not in their lounges watching, especially we poor Western Australians, who are still working the booths when you are counting.

Whatever the AEC decide to do, whether there is a national tally room or whether it is done out of studios and each network does their own thing, it is the entertainment value that is important. If there are two million Australians that we can account for, not taking into account others who may have a can in their hand and are in someone's shed—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—They might turn up at our parties. That would be a worry, wouldn't it?

ACTING CHAIR—It would cost us more if we had to put that on.

Mr Green—Election night is one of those things that the ABC is expected to do—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes, it is a tradition.

Mr Green—and we go to a lot of effort to be very accurate. I have devoted a bit of a career to ensuring that election coverages are not just a bunch of people on camera disagreeing with each other; you can actually be informative, actually say something and be detailed. It is very unusual in broadcasting to be as detailed as we are on election night, but you have to be entertaining as well. If you did not have a tally room with that buzz in the background, you would have to bring in your own audience and you would do video walls. There are other things you can do, as I said. If the tally room did not occur, the ABC would probably do those other things.

ACTING CHAIR—Of course there are political commentators and there are political commentators! A good mate of mine in Perth, Paul Bek, always likes to quote you when he is arguing with me. On that note, only because you got the Senate wrong last time, Mr Green—

Mr Green—No, I got the Senate right.

ACTING CHAIR—The balance with the government?

Mr Green—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—Did you?

Mr Green—On election night, I was the first person to call Stephen Fielding elected and I also called Barnaby Joyce on the night.

ACTING CHAIR—Oh, yes, on the night, but there were a couple of senators who we were watching week by week leading up to the election.

Mr DANBY—You said in passing that the footy panels would go if the tally room was abolished. I think one of the most endearing things about all of the election coverage is the group of experts and the repartee that goes backwards and forwards as a situation develops. I do not understand why you would lose those footy panels, as you call them, if you went to the new style without the tally room.

Mr Green—One of the difficulties of the structure of doing a tally room with what I call the footy panel—the five boofy blokes sitting there chatting about politics—is that you cannot communicate. We are all miked up. The problem is that if we talk our microphones come on and we end up talking over someone else. If I want to talk to somebody off camera, it is rather difficult because I am stuck on camera. If you did not have to sit there with a tally board in the background—and the only reason we are there is to have the tally board in the background—you would start your coverage in a different way. You would spread out more. You would not

necessarily all be sat in one line. You would be across a desk. There are various ways you could do it.

We have done an election coverage other than in a tally room and that was in the 1999 republic referendum. The communication was less sophisticated then—we had a serial feed by modem line and we had difficulty with that on the night. We did that coverage with a very large round desk, which we talked across, and we did it with a big video wall out of which we did live crosses. Our people who normally sit around in jeans and T-shirts were dressed up properly and we stuck them behind computers on the set, much to their annoyance. They are the sorts of things you do to make it look live, so that people think the television is live and things are happening. There are many American election coverages where there is a room full of people all with computers. I can assure you that often they are not actually doing anything; they are just there for effect.

ACTING CHAIR—I can assure you that those American ones are as boring as anything. Mr Green, thank you very much for your attendance here today.

Mr Green—Thank you.

[3.19 pm]

McGRATH, Dr Amy, Life Member and Former President, HS Chapman Society

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission to this inquiry from you. Do you wish to present any additional submissions or make an opening statement to the committee?

Dr McGrath—I have been listening with interest today to accounts particularly of the specific example of Chatswood, about which I sent a submission to the minister two or three years ago saying I thought it was outrageous, but I had not heard about the cells, which I think are even more outrageous. And what a dreadful name to give them!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I hadn't quite looked at it in that way!

Dr McGrath—I was reminded of the early days of my husband's fighting the Communist Party in the unions when all the unions were democratic and federal and all the power was in the branches. Mr Danby will probably appreciate this metaphor. My husband fought a famous case where it was proved the Communist Party were committing fraud, forgery and irregularities on a grand scale in 1951. It did not do him any good with the unions; he was a member of the Labor Party at the time. Immediately the Communist Party got power, seizing branches and then the federal branch, they reversed the power. They said that they were acting democratically and they finished up being the most dictatorial of all organisations.

I see the same reversal of power in electoral matters. In 1984 the Australian Electoral Commission was created. Up to that time divisional returning officers issued writs and they were the people who ran the elections. Canberra grew out of the Public Service, and I grew up in Canberra so it is familiar to me that it can become like the Forbidden City, with its own culture and psyche. Canberra grew up staffed by people who had never run an election, and to this day that is virtually true. In my book, you do not put a barrister or a judge in place unless they learn the craft. I heard someone say there are training programs. Training programs virtually did not exist for most of the years since 1984; they have been restored recently. They used to send divisional returning officers up to Canberra to learn up there and they would mutually learn from each other. There were other programs that were state wide, and so on. Chair, I do not want to take up your question time.

ACTING CHAIR—No, please feel free, if you have any other statement you wish to make.

Dr McGrath—I have basically said what I wanted to say about the reversal of power that is being looked at. The next thing I want to add relates to security. I have not heard anybody say that the Electoral Act created this system for one most important role: making the electoral roll as honest as possible. That is its chief effect; all the rest is just structure. I have listened to people today and that question of its role servicing the human voter has not been mentioned. I hear them talking about cost and cost saving. They have been basing the argument for co-location for 20

years on cost saving but they do not cost save themselves in Canberra; in fact, at one stage they donated themselves TV screens when they had a profit. As people talked I remembered that there had been a crisis with the divisional returning officers in that Canberra asked them to agree to amalgamations and threatened them that, if they did not sign, giving away their power in their divisions, they would not get the wage rise. I checked with the public sector union and they said that was correct. In fact they had a three-hour strike—I do not know whether anybody has heard about that—and the public sector union won on their behalf. But I think that was rather frightful.

I want to add that in 2001, when the scandals about false enrolments on the roll broke out in Queensland—although false enrolments have been going on for 100 years, as far as I can see—it all came to the surface through that election in Mundingburra which changed the whole election. The Electoral Commission has constantly told me that you could never change an entire government, but that did happen. That was when three divisional returning officers had the guts to come up here, risking penalties if they came to the joint standing committee, and point out that habitation reviews had been abolished. McKivat is wrong; it was not many years ago. The first was 1997 in Queensland and they were successfully abolished in the next three or four years. So it is a matter of only about seven years since they were all abolished. The divisional returning officers went to Canberra to say—it is in the evidence given to this committee, and I was there and heard them—that the roll was deteriorating and that CPU would never be satisfactory. Habitation review, such as it is, is spot checking. You see, David Farrell—

Mr DANBY—Do you mean CRU?

Dr McGrath—Yes, CRU. I am sorry; I have just been in England talking about the British system. CRU is not satisfactory. I have known people who have been in one place and had three letters. It costs \$25 each mail-out to check the thing and it is mostly done from sitting in a chair. The human element is knowing your electorate and knowing when people could not live in the place they claim to live, which is the big problem when you go into these co-locations. Once you start to move people out of their electorates against the law—and that seems mostly to be of no concern to the Australian Electoral Commission—you lose the local knowledge. That is what they were telling your committee at the time.

Mr DANBY—I agree with you about the effect of losing the divisional focus of returning officers and about the centralisation of power, to some extent, by the AEC, although I do think they may be more efficient than they were in the past. I agree with you about all these undesirable trends. I think it is interesting that politicians across the political spectrum, whether they are Labor or Liberal, understand that, with regard to the impartial operation of the wonderful electoral system we have here in Australia, the system is not broken, so why fix it? This brings me precisely to the next point. I wonder whether you and the Chapman Society regret the government's decision to close the electoral roll within a day or so of the election being announced because of the effect that will inevitably have on restricting the number of people who use that five-day period of grace, which they have had since 1983, to enrol. I agree with you about the undesirable trend against divisional officers. The Australian electoral system works well. Why are we changing this with the early closure of the rolls when the Australian electoral system is much better than other electoral systems such as that in the United States?

Dr McGrath—I am sorry; I do not agree with either of those propositions.

Mr DANBY—You do not?

Dr McGrath—No.

Mr DANBY—I would like to hear why.

Dr McGrath—You have put a particular proposition and I do not have enough time to answer the general. That would be asking too much. The specific proposition was the closure of the roll. The assumption was made that we object to that. We do not. We have supported for 12 years—

Mr DANBY—No, I was asking if you would reconsider it, because I know you are supporting it and it is going to result in thousands of people losing their votes.

Dr McGrath—Of course we support it because it may well disadvantage people who have been lazy or indifferent to their enrolments, but it also disadvantages fraudulent voters. During that period—

Mr DANBY—So we will penalise tens of thousands for a few voters?

Dr McGrath—It would penalise fraudulent voters. Former Senator Stone said that when he did a general mail-out, in that period of seven days, nine out of 10 letters would be returned to mail. Only one would be genuine. I have got other references that are the same. You say that it disadvantages youth. Youth are all provisionally enrolled at 17. There are plenty of DROs going to the schools to tell them they must enrol when they turn 18. They are already on the roll. There was one election in New South Wales in 1988—

Mr DANBY—That is simply not right. I am sorry to interrupt you, but before the New South Wales and Victorian elections 50 per cent of 18-year-olds were not on the roll. This is going to result—if the current trend continues, without this advertising campaign and now without the five-day period of grace—in a very large number of people being disenfranchised.

Dr McGrath—I am sorry; it is the old argument that caused division-wide voting to be introduced without any legal approval of the parliament. I know, because I have talked to the two people—Ralph Hunt and Sir John Carrick—who were there at the time. It is the same argument. You have to alter the argument. You have to alter something for 10 per cent of the voters who do not vote in the same place every time. Over the last 12 years that I have been involved with this, I have not met a person who does not say, ‘Do away with division-wide voting.’ But that was just for 10 per cent. You are arguing for—

Mr DANBY—Explain to me: what was the system prior to that?

Dr McGrath—I am arguing for security of the system. The security of the system ends with the keypad of the Australian Electoral Commission in West Block in Canberra. You cannot get in without knowing the system. From there, it deteriorates all the way down. If you open that seven days for indiscriminate and open enrolment, none of them will be checked.

Mr DANBY—That is not the evidence of all the DROs.

Dr McGrath—In the 1987 election, three-quarters of a million people enrolled in that seven days. How many were genuine?

Mr DANBY—Every single DRO we have had testify has said that they enrol people to the same standard that they enrolled them previously. These are the DROs you were defending in other circumstances, saying they are doing their job, they are doing it to the same standard—

Dr McGrath—I am not defending them; I look at principles. The whole system is based on checking enrolments. You put penalties in in case people have accidents, in case they commit crimes. In this case, the honesty of the roll changed the whole government. A system must be protected from the dishonest. It cannot be opened, as the Labor Party did in 1983-84, so that every door is open to fraud. It was like opening the safe at the bank and saying, 'Come in.' It does not say that people came in, but you cannot have a system that allows that.

Mr DANBY—So you are saying that there is no evidence of actual fraud, but you are saying there is a theoretical possibility for it—

Dr McGrath—There is.

Mr DANBY—and therefore we have got to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of people.

Dr McGrath—Take the Rudd election—when Rudd went and helped Goss get in in 1989. You would not challenge Bob Bottom's credentials. He rang me after speaking to six people who told him to ring me. He found 840 people were enrolled in the water of Pumicestone Passage, on the roll, on documents sent out from ALP headquarters in Queensland. These people had voted. Bob Bottom went and checked that they had voted in one of the booths. You had 800 more votes in one of the booths on Bribie Island.

Mr DANBY—What was the result of that?

Dr McGrath—There is proof that these were fraudulent enrolments because they were in the water and—I kid you not—around the green side of Clayton Park.

Mr DANBY—It is amazing that you and Bob Bottom have picked this up and everyone in the media is too lazy and unintelligent to report it.

Dr McGrath—Let me tell you: I have a statutory declaration about dogs, cats and dead people being enrolled in Port Melbourne in past years.

Mr DANBY—Give them to me and we will track them down.

Dr McGrath—What? Maybe the dogs and cats have gone from your roll. Bob Bottom did not—

Mr DANBY—That is a very unfair thing to say. If you have got evidence of it, you have a responsibility to present it to the Electoral Commission or the police.

Dr McGrath—I have printed it in the book that you have not read yet.

Mr DANBY—You do not have any such evidence, because you would have presented it to the responsible people.

Dr McGrath—Yes, I am sorry. I have sent the book to the committee in the past. Bob Bottom got a reprint of my book with the details in the front. You obviously do not know what I have written.

Mr DANBY—I do know what you have written. I know you have not produced any evidence supporting these allegations.

Dr McGrath—I am sorry, you are talking me down and I have waited all day to give evidence.

Mr DANBY—I am sorry.

Dr McGrath—This question of Bob Bottom and me inventing it, which you have intimated, is wrong, because it was his newspaper delivery man who came to him when the scandals were on in 2000 and said, ‘Strangely, I had all these documents to send’—illegally, mark you; they should have gone through Australia Post—‘to these people.’ Bob Bottom published his document in my book. He got me to reprint my book. Are there any more questions?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Dr McGrath, in your submission you make reference to the AEC downgrading the function of the DRO in every way. Can you give us some examples of that?

Dr McGrath—I certainly can. When they outsourced postal votes to the tune of 700,000 last election—illegally; they have no power to do that—they downgraded the DROs, who still have the power to issue postal votes. You and I know there was a terrible rush, an appalling situation, where even the law was changed—which it should not have been—to get votes out in Queensland by giving the Governor-General power to issue ballot papers. Divisional returning officers could have issued all of those, so why did they outsource them when there is the electronic opportunity for fraud? It is another gateway. Every day, they have the means to print their own postal votes—with their own initials on, mark you. Where are the initials going on the postal votes? That law has never been altered. In fact, when I challenged the Electoral Commissioner at the time about the initials, he said, ‘I would put a facsimile on them.’ The act does not allow facsimiles of DROs’ signatures. They could have printed them and got them out on the same day and there would have been no crisis—like the breakdown of the machine.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You state in your submission that the DROs believe amalgamation or co-locations ‘jeopardise the electoral system’ through a reduced ability to detect enrolment fraud and through divisional staff losing contact with electors in their electorate. Can you elaborate on this?

Dr McGrath—Of course. For starters, how long does it take you to familiarise yourself with an area that you move into? The problem is that habitation reviews have been removed. I did not hear anyone give you a correct version of it. The situation was that a special budget was provided halfway between terms, always mid-term—and it had to be a separate budget—and that was supplemented by members getting returns and sending them out. Too many members were

too trusting and just handed them in to the Electoral Commission. They should have checked them themselves. The budget was provided up until the Electoral Commission came in, and then for some reason there was no budget for habitation reviews between 1984 and 1987. So the conservative parties had to run the election on the 1984 roll. They complained bitterly about that. And this is what happens. The CRU only does about seven per cent—and I might be wrong with that percentage, but it only does a percentage—so you never get around the whole lot. It tends to look at new building sites.

David Farrell got money to do a habitation review in Tasmania that the DROs said was very good. That was only for about a quarter of a million people. David Farrell got the money to do that, but it was a drive-by. I heard some of these DROs saying they were doing drive-bys. I was trying to check on Rockdale in the state election. Drive-bys might tell you that a convent exists there and the numbers are here—Green Park and so on—but you have to knock on doors. I did an investigation for the state election based on the Commonwealth roll because Kevin Ryan, who was standing, had all these pamphlets done in Greek, because of the big Greek community, and the bloke came back and said, ‘I can’t deliver a lot of those; they are vacant blocks or houses under construction.’ It was only by going there and looking that I saw there were a lot of houses under construction. You cannot do it that way. A friend of mine was sent three letters—money is wasted.

ACTING CHAIR—I think it was mentioned in a submission earlier today, that they should get out there and physically knock on the door.

Dr McGrath—My colleague Peter Brun came around Rockdale with me, and you still have all these sections where you drive by convents and schools and there are missing numbers.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Dr McGrath, if I read into what you are saying correctly, the habitation reviews must be done and must be done at the local DO level?

Dr McGrath—All of this cost saving just removes the whole thing further. Local level is the only thing that works. One must remember that in Britain all elections are still conducted by local councils. There is no national system. If we have a national system and for whatever reason we remove it, we must keep the local element.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In summary, you have difficulties with co-locations and your view is—

Dr McGrath—I have been appalled and outraged ever since it started. I have been fighting it.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—And your view is that there should be simply be a divisional office in each of the electoral commissions.

Dr McGrath—I thought you had already changed the law to enhance that. It says that within or for the divisional—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is the issue that we have under consideration. There has been some co-location of divisional offices, and we are looking into the operation of that.

Dr McGrath—Do look at that evidence that I said was given in 2001 about what the DROs said were the first experiments in Queensland and their opinion of them. One or two of them have retired since because it was so appalling.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Is your view that we should simply just go back to having one divisional office in each electorate and preferably a shopfront or something like that?

Dr McGrath—Absolutely. The local offices are what they have in England. They have them in the town halls or somewhere. They are separate too. People who run the elections are separate from the ones who are doing the roll in the United Kingdom.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—One of the problems that have also been raised in this hearing is the recognition factor of the Australian Electoral Commission and what it does in the Australian and divisional offices. If I understand correctly, you say that it should be in a prominent place and obviously recognisable rather than simply tucked away somewhere.

Dr McGrath—Absolutely—up on the main street and well advertised. When I heard about Chatswood, one of the questions I asked was why there were four electorates that were held by Howard's Liberal ministers and why were there not four in South Sydney, where I live, which were all Labor. Why are they there for this extraordinary experiment? I did bring to the attention of the ministers that I have checked with people who are experts. The security gets worse the further you go down. Once you have split those offices, you are not going to notice if there is a crook person in that office. The assumption made is that the Australian Electoral Commission, like every other business I have ever known, is 100 per cent honest. Business generally always gets a bad apple. Why is the assumption that the Electoral Commission is 100 per cent honest? You cannot do that; you have to build it into the system. To reduce it so that nobody has the responsibility: who knows the passwords into the system? I take issue with Mr Danby on this last seven days matter. It is nonsense that people are going to be disadvantaged because people are talking about an election months before it. But, for weeks before, the roll is not checked because they are training all the casuals. These are things that people who run elections are not aware of. I do not think senators, with my apologies, get down in the coalface as much as people in marginal seats.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I think you would be surprised, and I think I probably speak for Senator Sterle as well.

ACTING CHAIR—You would get a surprise; some do.

Dr McGrath—I think that Gary Nairn—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—What I am saying is that both parties have patron senators for seats. As a consequence, we do have responsibilities—

Dr McGrath—Do you?

ACTING CHAIR—We are pseudo members.

Dr McGrath—I do think Gary Nairn has more incentive when he has twice nearly lost his seat.

ACTING CHAIR—That is understandable.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is understandable.

ACTING CHAIR—Can I complement my colleague senator Fierravanti-Wells in that I am actually a duty senator for the seat of Kalgoorlie, which is the largest electorate in the country—

Dr McGrath—Can I deviate to say that my father did the first survey of Kalgoorlie of miner's phthisis in 1909.

ACTING CHAIR—Did he?

Dr McGrath—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—I was a truckie running in there in the eighties, so I can relate to Kalgoorlie. If I can, I would like to say a bit more about Kalgoorlie. I have to support my colleague Mr Danby, because part of my role is to liaise with the Aboriginal communities. In Western Australia we have 289 Aboriginal communities. I take on board your comments that most people are ready to vote and have heard about it, and that kids of 17 are getting it drummed into them at school that they should be ready to vote. Sadly, the majority of schoolkids are worried about when the surf is up, what fashion accessories they can have on their mobile phone et cetera. A lot of them get as much warning and notice as possible and then, all of a sudden, there is an election on and they think: 'Crikey! If I don't vote I am going to get a fine.'

Dr McGrath—Still, that can be dealt with another way, just as you had weighted electorates in Western Australia and Queensland. That was wrongly rubbished. To a certain extent you should have different rules for certain white-collar and weighted electorates—certain electorates with Labor-type voters. For those, rules should be different. I have always thought that.

ACTING CHAIR—Could you explain that a bit more?

Dr McGrath—We try to give the same rules to two totally different types of electorates. You could probably even keep the seven days, if you wanted, for those particular electorates. There is no reason why you should not. But the seven days should be off for the big city ones where you cannot see what is going on.

ACTING CHAIR—Could I clarify that. I was saying that, with the disenfranchisement of young ones, our Indigenous communities—

Dr McGrath—You could create a special zone. There is another thing I would like to tell you, which is against Mr Danby. In 2003, I think it was, Beattie suddenly called the election. Bob Longland had said the roll was in perfect order, that it had all been checked and everything else. That was on 8 December. I have been in London for three months, I have to comment. They suddenly called the election on about 8 February with practically one day's notice. Bob had said the roll was perfect and that all the young people were enrolled, then suddenly he announced that

three-quarters of a million were not. Of those, there were 250,000 young people who were not enrolled, and that is with them having all the freedom, the seven days and everything else. And it had been like that for years. So the seven days did not make any difference.

ACTING CHAIR—I would argue that it would be interesting to know the figure for those who did enrol between the issuing of the writs and the closure of the seven days.

Dr McGrath—We have evidence. Two Queensland DROs did a survey in 1988 on this three-quarters of a million people. They found six electorates in which the result would have been different. They found that, of that 750,000 enrolled, 100,000 were taken off immediately after the election. If people are going to stack rolls, and they do—I advance that assumption without qualification; I have had too much evidence of it in my lifetime—they put them on in that last seven days and take them off just afterwards. One hundred thousand names were taken off in Victoria and New South Wales.

ACTING CHAIR—I know that in the last federal election 423,000 enrolled in those last seven days. That included enrolments and those updating their details. I am about to get tapped on the shoulder because there are planes to catch. Is there anything else you wish to add?

Dr McGrath—No, but it is nice to have the freedom of not being attached to any organisation. I add that ID for enrolment is coming in England because they are out of denial of fraud in England. They are going to keep a database.

ACTING CHAIR—On that note, thank you very much for your attendance here today. If you have been asked to provide additional material, would you please forward it to the secretariat.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Fierravanti-Wells**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 3.50 pm