COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

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

TUESDAY, 3 JULY 2007

CANBERRA

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Tuesday, 3 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, 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; and
- 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.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 9.32 am

CAMPBELL, Mr Ian, Electoral Commissioner, Australian Electoral Commission

DACEY, Mr Paul, Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Australian Electoral Commission

DAVIS, Ms Barbara, First Assistant Commissioner, Business Support, Australian Electoral Commission

PICKERING, Mr Tim, First Assistant Commissioner, Electoral Operations, Australian Electoral Commission

ROGERS, Mr Tom, Australian Electoral Officer and State Manager, New South Wales, Australian Electoral Commission

WIGHT, Mr Daryl, Australian Electoral Officer and State Manager, Victoria, Australian Electoral Commission

CHAIR (Mrs Mirabella)—Good morning. I declare open this 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: to consider whether the national tally room should be retained beyond the 2007 federal election. The inquiry so far has received 16 submissions and copies are available on the committee's website.

I remind witnesses that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of the 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 contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege.

I welcome representatives from the Australian Electoral Commission to today's hearing. We have received two very detailed submissions from you to this inquiry. Are there any additional matters you would like to add to those submissions, and would you like to make a brief opening statement on some of the major issues you have raised?

Mr Campbell—Yes. Given that the submissions were only provided to the committee late last week, I would like to summarise some of the major points in them. I will not take very long. As we know, the AEC is accountable to the federal parliament and the government to deliver three outcomes for the Australian community: an effective electoral roll, an impartial and independent electoral service and a community informant about electoral matters. The challenge for the AEC, and this comes out in one of our two submissions, is how to deploy our staff to deliver these outcomes in a three-year business cycle. As we are driven by the cyclical nature of key electoral events, there is a slight complication in that we do not have an exact timing of each federal event until it is announced by the Prime Minister. To put it another way, the AEC is unlike many other federal agencies in that it does not have a steady, largely predictable flow of work. We do have a predictable flow of work, but it is not actually always predictable in terms of weeks and months.

We have found over time that a staffing model that is solely aimed at maximising resources during an election period can result in excessive staff levels during non-election periods. We believe that staffing levels in divisional and state offices demand a flexible approach to enable a surge capacity for federal elections and other business priorities.

Another point we make in our submission is how the social and technological changes that have affected the Australian community are giving rise to expectations for improvements to electoral services and different means of service delivery. In this way, and I have said this on a number of occasions in front of this committee and in front of Senate estimates committee hearings, our legislation can at times be a source of impediments in meeting these demands by the electorate, especially about technologies. From this case, I note that the legislation does not allow the AEC to move very far in implementing any government service on the internet—in other words, we cannot have online access in terms of enrolment or to change enrolment.

The AEC's work to achieve its required outcomes and its responses to community and stakeholder expectations together suggest the best organisational arrangements for delivering our services in different metropolitan, regional and rural markets—and they are very different. We have 150 divisions and, while they might fall into a number of categories, those that are in the middle of large cities are very different to those that are out in rural and outback Australia. A fully distributed network comprising an individual office in each division with only three staff will not always be the best solution. The conclusion of our submission is that a singular view of what constitutes the best work locations and staffing levels for achieving the AEC's outcomes is not necessarily appropriate, and we think that co-location is not necessarily a pivotal issue. We think it essential that the AEC has the flexibility in determining business locations and staffing levels best suited for delivering effective electoral services and meeting client and stakeholder expectations in different metropolitan, rural and regional locations.

I will now move to the second submission: the national tally room. The national tally room is the name that historically has been given to a large media centre in Canberra which has been used to facilitate the dissemination of key electoral results by the media. The key issue that we address in our submission is that the election result systems that underpin the operation of the national tally room have evolved and changed so significantly over the last 10 to 15 years that we think the purpose of having a national tally room is no longer clear-cut. As is set out in the AEC's submission, I wrote to many stakeholders earlier this year. The responses have been spelt out in the submission, including how many nil responses we got, which I found to be one of the most interesting elements. Those who did respond expressed a range of views from neutral to positive or, 'We don't mind; we don't need a tally room'.

Today, and indeed for the election that will be held later this year, the AEC will provide comprehensive, timely and reliable election results via what we call the virtual tally room, the VTR, with the raw results data fed directly from our computerised election management system. The media organisations use the VTR and direct their raw election results data needs for their own coverage, so they actually play with our raw data. In the past couple of elections some media organisations have chosen to deliver coverage from the national tally room while others have chosen to provide coverage from different locations, including some from their desks in Parliament House.

The national tally room is a large media centre with limited access to the public. We have a mud map here that shows you the floor plans for 2001 and 2004 and how little space was available to the public; it is mainly for the media. Some media outlets, when we put this issue to them, came back and said, 'But this is very important for the public because it's the public seeing the count occurring.' As I am sure all members of the committee know, there is no counting occurring out at the expo building in Canberra. Basically what is there is a wooden tally board, which is well behind what we have on the internet—which is therefore well behind what the media and the public can have. In effect, what people are seeing is a media room in action, with a small number of the public walking through.

CHAIR—For the benefit of my colleagues, we might proceed by going through your submission section by section. We will go through the first one, the background section. One of the issues you have raised—which is also expanded further on in the submission—concerns the limitations regarding technological changes and social changes. You mentioned e-government services in your oral submission. Could you please expand on that. From what I read in your submission, the only issue of substance raised was regarding signatures and not being able to enrol online. Could you expand on that and any other relevant matters that are part of the technological changes that you believe the AEC is prevented from fully utilising?

Mr Dacey—We have been finding more and more over the last few years—a lot of this is anecdotal; I do not like to rely on anecdotal evidence but we get this as hard evidence as well— that there is a general feeling out there that people would like to communicate with us electronically. When we contact people saying, 'We know you have moved but when you move you need to update your enrolment, and to update your enrolment you need to complete an enrolment form, sign it and send it in to us' a lot of the time the reaction is, 'With other government agencies I can just ring them up or I can change my address on the internet' or 'You know I've moved—just change my details for me.' The requirements of the Commonwealth Electoral Act are that when a person becomes eligible to enrol or wants to change their enrolment they must complete a new enrolment form, and that includes a signature. It is a restriction that people cannot telephone us or email us to say they have changed their address, or they cannot complete an enrolment form online. They can complete an enrolment form online, but they need to download it, print it, sign it and send it to us. We feel that that is in some way contributing to—and we have appeared before committees before about a small decline in enrolment—people being less reluctant to deal with government agencies, such as ours, in hard copy with pen and paper. They want the ability to liaise with us and to communicate with us electronically. Whether that is as simple as a telephone call to change their address or whether it is doing something online, we get comments like, 'I can do my banking online but I cannot update my enrolment online when I change address. I have to physically fill out a form, put it in an envelope and put it in to the AEC.'

Mr Campbell—One very good example is the ability to lodge tax returns online. The other point, to reinforce the point that Mr Dacey made, is that the fall away in enrolment that we have been observing—and members of the parliament have also been observing it—is largely in the 18-to-25 and the 25-to-35-year brackets. Those brackets, particularly the 18-to-25 bracket, are the generations that have grown up using e-type technology. They are not used to forms, and it is not intuitive to them, when they move from point A to point B, to do a new enrolment process at point B.

Mr Dacey—A lot of the people we are getting this evidence from are not actually disengaged with the system. They have already been on the electoral roll. It is just that that younger cohort move regularly and, when they move, they do not understand the need to physically fill out another form. It is not as if we are trying to get people who are disengaged. They are people who have been enrolled in the past. But when they move they expect us to be able to easily facilitate a change for them.

CHAIR—So that is what you mean when you refer to 'social and technological changes affecting the Australian community'?

Mr Dacey—That is the main issues, yes.

CHAIR—So you say that this is only anecdotal and you believe it is contributing in a small way to a minor decline in enrolments.

Mr Campbell—I am not sure that we would use the term 'small way'.

CHAIR—You said that it was contributing to a small decline in enrolments.

Mr Campbell—That is right, but I think you said contributing 'in a small way' to the decline.

CHAIR—A small decline in enrolments.

Mr Campbell—Yes.

CHAIR—For us—and, of course, you raised the matter of cost saving as well—it is an issue of balancing the integrity of the electoral roll with the convenience that you have identified in an anecdotal way perhaps in a certain age group and whether the obligation to fill in a form and to sign it is too onerous. I suppose it is similar to applying for a passport or changing passport details. Other than the cost saving, have you analysed the potential for electronic electoral fraud? I have been on other committees where evidence has been taken that financial services fraud via the internet is growing. Have you investigated that at all?

Mr Campbell—No, Chair, we have not. But, if we felt that the committee or the parliament was disposed to move in that direction, we would certainly do that research. Can I make an observation: I know electoral fraud is of significant concern and we should always aim for 100 per cent accuracy and completeness, but we are observing the process for the coming smartcard, which will directly affect Commonwealth benefits, and the fact that people can now lodge their tax returns completely on the net. To me, that probably indicates that in some part the parliament, at least, has an increasing confidence in people being able to do transactions in an e-way sense.

Ms Davis—Just recently we have seen a marked increase in the number of people—and we can probably give you the numbers—going to our website as our advertising campaign is rolling out. People have been going to the web to download forms. We will be doing more research on this so that we can present the committee with something other than anecdotal evidence—which I think is the term you used. By rolling out the advertising campaign, which we are tracking very closely, we expect that the majority of approaches to the commission will be through the web—

again, just a sign of the nature of how people are utilizing different technologies rather than going to the bother of going to the post office.

CHAIR—I find it difficult to believe that it is so onerous for someone to go to the internet to print out a form and fill it in.

Ms Davis—We find the preference is to go to the internet rather than to a post office or to another outlet—for instance, Centrelink offices or Medicare offices, where we now have enrolment forms available. We will be tracking very carefully the percentage of forms that come in to us from each of these different outlets. We anticipate that the majority of forms will be downloaded from the web and posted in that way.

CHAIR—There is a big difference between downloading a form and filling it in manually and doing it electronically.

Ms Davis—Definitely. We are just reflecting the preference of the electorate to do things in a way that they see as ease of access for themselves.

Mr Campbell—On 10 June we started a pilot project whereby people could send an SMS to us asking for an enrolment form. The next time we meet with you we will have the outcomes of that pilot. Again, that is trying to get to the young people. We are at least trying to make it easier for them to ask us for an enrolment form. We can do that within the act. We will have the results of that pilot for you next time we meet.

Senator STERLE—So you will have a break down of age demographics as well?

Mr Campbell—I do not know what the break down of that evaluation will be, but we will break it down as best we can. That is trying to go, within the limits of our legislation, with what we think is happening with the young people.

Senator ADAMS—I have been regularly doing a lot of doorknocking—250 doors, two days a week—in the seat of Hasluck. Somewhere along the line in the campaign, there has been a terrific lot of movement through the demographic of that area, with new homes being built. Is there any way that real estate agents—either those letting or those selling properties—could have enrolment forms? Somewhere the message is not getting out there. People have everything else but they do not have an enrolment form to change their address. I think it was the week before last that we gave out 500 forms. Three of us were out there doorknocking. The message is not getting out there to elderly people—in fact, all age groups.

Mr Pickering—We have attempted on a number of occasions to use initiatives, including real estate agents, in all the states and territories around Australia to varying levels of success. One of the systems that we utilise with our divisional staff is to encourage them to make contact with real estate agents within their divisions and to provide them with enrolment forms as part of the process of the change of house. The other thing that we involve ourselves in is getting information from the rental bond board. We obtain that information and then post out enrolment forms to people who have recently registered with them. That has been very successful in capturing a change of occupation of a rental property and also stimulating that enrolment process.

Mr Campbell—The experience that your workers have gone through is not new to us in a sense, either. We do not necessarily have the cards back yet from those 280 addresses where the cards were left. We have done a very big doorknocking exercise right across the country in the last three months and in our continuous roll update, our mailing, we write to addresses where we know that the people there are not enrolled; and often we even know who they are. We give them the forms in the letters, yet our response rate on average across the country is about one-third. In other words, people are receiving the cards at the house and—the sort of comment we make is— they sit on top of the fridge. If you know who the 280 are, we could probably watch how many of them come back in a timely fashion.

A second point to this is about how people handle forms. We send out several million letters with forms in them every year to addresses. As I said, we are getting about a third of those back. At the end of May, we started our six-week advertising campaign. We are in week six now, and I hope you have all seen the ads. With the new proof of identity changes that came in on 16 April, the form has gone to the new proof of identity. We changed the colour, so it is easier. We have the purple form now; it was the green form before. What we are also finding now—because of a correlation or causation—is that coinciding with the advertising campaign is a slight increase in the number of forms coming back, but we are getting a lot of green forms back. This means that we have to go back to them and say: 'The green form is no good. Fill in the purple form.' That is an issue for us to manage, but the point is that even when you get the form in the house, people do not necessarily sit down at the kitchen table and fill it out immediately; the form just sits there. We only get a third back that we send out through CRU.

Senator ADAMS—My next point is that a number of people think that, because they have not moved out of a division, they do not need to change their address. They say, 'We've only shifted from X and we are here, but we're still in the same division.' There is something missing somewhere. I do not know whether you have to ramp up that campaign. But, as far as the doorknocking is concerned, I did not get to one door where your people had been. Perhaps we are just missing those particular areas. We have covered the electorate fairly well and we are not picking that up either.

Mr Campbell—From the middle of March until the next week or so we will have doorknocked over 1.1 million addresses in Australia as a one-off special exercise.

CHAIR—We might move to the next section, paragraphs 5 to 9, inclusive. You talk about the continuous roll update and the electoral cycle and reliance on information from 'trusted organisations about people experiencing life events'. Can you please explain the data-matching process that you go through with this part of the roll update?

Mr Pickering—The process with the continuous roll update is that we obtain roll information on changes of address to other databases—for example, Australia Post, Centrelink and road transport authorities. They provide us with—

CHAIR—Is that the only information you get?

Mr Pickering—They are the main ones. I mentioned earlier that we get data from rental bond boards and others as smaller agencies—

Mr Dacey—And local councils.

Mr Pickering—We get local council information as well.

CHAIR—That would come in on a regular basis?

Mr Pickering—Yes it does—to the national office.

CHAIR—Does that go to the state office?

Mr Pickering—To the national office for those big databases, because that is where our central mainframe computer is held. This is a computerised data-matching process. We obtain the change of address information from those databases and compare that with the roll information we have. If our roll information is behind that of the external database, it stimulates a letter that Mr Campbell spoke about before where we mail the elector enrolment forms letting them know that they need to re-enrol for their new address after their qualification period.

CHAIR—What is the time frame? The information comes from the relevant organisation, goes to head office—

Mr Pickering—It comes to the national office on a monthly basis.

CHAIR—Then you process it and send the information to the relevant divisional office?

Mr Pickering—No, we do a centralised mail-out, but the return mail comes back to divisional offices. We have a step in the process where divisional offices can have a look at the proposed mail-out data so that they can cull any information based on any local knowledge that they might have or recent enrolment forms that have been received while national office have been undertaking the work. That work is done in the divisional office and then the central mail-out occurs.

CHAIR—Is that always a part of the process—that divisional office—?

Mr Pickering—Involvement?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Pickering—In most occurrences it does, yes.

CHAIR—So how do you determine when it happens and when it does not happen?

Mr Pickering—It depends on the type of database that we are comparing against. For example, if we are utilising information that is already on our system as distinct from drawing comparative data from external databases, it may not require involvement of divisional officers because they are working in that roll management system all the time.

CHAIR—So what is the time frame of you getting information to match against your database, wash it through and then a letter finally going out?

Mr Pickering—Our aim is to get the information on a monthly basis. Once we receive that information, we try to do a mail-out within the following month. But it depends on what other activities are taking place, because we are receiving this information all the time. If, for example, there is an election on, a close of rolls and the rest of it, the continuous roll update program is suspended for that period of time, because it causes confusion for electors when enrolment forms are going out and the rolls have closed. That is picked up again some months later. So some of those downloads have much larger amounts of data in them. Therefore, they are not always on a regular basis.

Mr Campbell—When we talk about close of rolls we are talking about close of rolls for all three layers of government—it includes local government. So we have this close of rolls all year round across Australia.

CHAIR—With the continuous roll update, has that evened out the workload for divisional officers?

Mr Pickering—I do not think you could say it has evened out the workload.

CHAIR—Or has it created a more even spread of the workload?

Mr Pickering—Throughout their working year it has created a more even spread, but as far as from division to division, no, it has not because—

CHAIR—I meant within divisions.

Mr Pickering—Right; I just wanted to clarify that. Yes, it has.

Senator STERLE—Mr Pickering, you were talking about the input from local councils to assist in updating elector information. What information do the councils send through?

Mr Pickering—The contact we have with councils is at divisional level. Whenever changes are made by councils, for example, the creation of new areas for habitation, once they have been gazetted by the council that advice is given to the divisional staff and it then becomes part of the area for us to monitor. Once people start living there, of course, we know that the addresses that are being claimed for are real addresses and so can be and are enrollable.

Senator STERLE—Is that all councils across the country?

Mr Pickering—That is the instruction we have with divisional staff, that one of the main ways for us to keep our address register up to date is by getting up-to-date information from councils. We encourage that for all divisional staff.

Mr Dacey—There is a different level of cooperation depending on the council. Some of our divisional offices have extremely good relationships and some councils are very cooperative; others are not quite so cooperative. But, as Mr Pickering said, our basic rules are for divisional

staff to get as much information from councils as they possibly can. That can include, for some councils, even things like when new wheelie bins are allocated. We know that if a new wheelie bin has been allocated to an address in a new subdivision then someone is living there, so that is a trigger for us to get enrolment forms from that household.

Senator STERLE—There are a couple of suburbs in Perth, in the federal electorate of Fremantle, that over the last 20 years have gone absolutely bonkers. They were traditional housing commission homes—you know the style: little three-bedroom asbestos, one bathroom, on a quarter-acre block with a chook pen out the back—and now every second one has been subdivided and a new house has been built out the back. Do the councils give you ongoing assistance or updated information on that sort of thing?

Mr Dacey—Yes, they do but, as I said, it is variable. I cannot answer specifically for the councils in Fremantle but I know our staff in WA in general have a good relationship with councils and get as much information as they can. It really depends on the cooperation of each individual council. In the main I think it is fairly good, but some are not quite as cooperative as others.

Mr Campbell—Today we have here the state manager from New South Wales, Mr Tom Rogers, whom I think you met yesterday, and the state manager from Victoria, Mr Daryl Wight. Unfortunately I do not have other state managers here. Mr Wight might have a couple of things to add to flesh out the answer.

Mr Wight—Our relationship with councils, as Mr Dacey said, is variable. Some councils are extremely good. They may themselves be e-wise and so we might get things electronically from them. Sometimes a council and a federal electorate have the same boundaries, so that sometimes makes it easier to do business with that council, but in other cases part of a division might be covered by one council and another part by another. The relationship with each council can vary as well.

Certainly, all of our division staff seek a business relationship with the councils, and that is in a number of areas. One is in terms of the work relating to addresses. That is one part of the council. Another might be, as Mr Dacey said, work relating to wheelie bins or services provided by a council. That is another part of the council. Citizenship ceremonies are yet another part of the council. So we might have two, three or even four different parts of the council engaged by our divisional staff. Again, even between those areas, the performance sometimes varies. There are some councils in Victoria with which we have no relationship; they are just not interested.

CHAIR—Which councils are they?

Mr Wight—I could probably get a list of them for you.

CHAIR—That would be useful.

Mr Wight—They might have manual records and not be able to transfer any data to us and not be interested. They might see themselves as there to provide services to their constituents and their communities rather than to another government organisation. So that is the sort of relationship we will have. Some are excellent and some are not so good.

Senator STERLE—I am sure, Mr Wight—and I do not expect an answer to this—that if local election voting became compulsory, they would be falling over themselves to knock your door down and give you all the information. Do not answer; it is quite all right.

CHAIR—It is.

Senator STERLE—But that is a serious gap that we should be addressing in some way, shape or form. I am sure the councils, with what their ratepayers are paying in rates, should have an obligation to pass that information across federal agencies, as the AEC is. Another thing that came out yesterday from one of the submissions which talked about New South Wales councils was—and I am sure Mr Rogers can help me out here—that there are some fantastic relationships with some and then there are glowing examples of incompetence in others in terms of assisting in putting people on the roll or letting the Electoral Commission know what is going on. An example was where a big block of land was converted to a high-rise block of units; I think it was in the Chatswood area. Forgive me; I cannot remember the name of the electorate, but it is quite a large one. With that sort of thing it would be interesting to hear how many people were on the roll three or four elections ago, in pre-development days, compared to now. That is why I am saying that I think there is a gaping hole that we have to address in some way, shape or form and that the councils should come on board and assist with sharing information.

Mr Wight—Yes. What will happen with the high-rises is that we might get information from the council that there has been a new subdivision or building put on that site. We might therefore know of the address but we may not know how many units there are in that complex or how high or wide it is. But we will start to get applications for enrolment from that address. So, when someone comes from unit 7 or whatever, we will make sure that it is indeed an address that someone can be enrolled at and we will only put unit 7 on our books. So we do not just create something that says 'units 1-100' of that development that someone may come along and apply for. We will create unit 7 only so as to make sure that only someone who is enrolling will be enrolled at that address.

Ms Davis—At the same time, that also stimulates other exercises. That particular set of blocks might be involved in what we call a targeted doorknock. There are varying levels of success with that too, because sometimes they are secure access buildings and it depends on the relationship that you are able to form with landlords or councils in order to gain access to even leave calling cards, so to speak.

Senator STERLE—I appreciate that. I will leave it at that, but could you provide to the committee the relationships with councils not only for Victoria, Mr Wight, but for all states. Mr Campbell?

Mr Campbell—Yes.

Senator STERLE—Thank you.

Mr Dacey—As Mr Wight pointed out, one of the issues in dealing with some of the councils that we consider not quite as cooperative as others is that they perhaps have manual systems, are short staffed, lack funding and find the provision of information to us a bit of a chore. One thing that could be considered is that we have demand powers under section 92 of the act. I do not

have the act with me but, if I am right, those demand powers currently extend to Commonwealth and state agencies. Maybe some thought could be given to extending those demand powers to local governments as well. We do not want to get them offside. They might want to cooperate but, because of lack of resources and the particular way they are structured, they might find it difficult. That is often the case. But it may assist us to get information if we have those demand powers.

Senator STERLE—I think that is a very good point, and I will come back to it when we talk about co-location and cost.

CHAIR—Going back to my question about the continuous roll update, I was interested to hear that it is suspended in the lead-up to a local government, state government or federal election.

Mr Campbell—It is not suspended nationally when it is local government or state government. We only suspend it in the area. For example, in the lead-up to the New South Wales election and the Victorian election last November, we suspended it in those states but we did not suspend it in other states.

CHAIR—But looking ahead at the next federal election, for example—in 2010, in all likelihood—there is also going to be a state election in that year. In a particular state, the continuous roll update could be suspended for a significant period in that electoral cycle.

Mr Campbell—Yes, it could.

CHAIR—The fact that we have, for all sorts of reasons—mainly cost reasons—moved away from the global doorknock to the continuous roll update further diminishes the ability of the AEC to keep a more up-to-date roll. I would be interested in seeing a timeline of the last three years, state by state, where the continuous roll update process has been suspended, to get a better idea about how long, during the electoral cycle, that has been carried out in each state. Are local government elections held at the same time in every state, or at different times?

Mr Dacey—The statewide ones are mainly held at the same time, but there are a lot of by-elections, as you know. In talking about suspension of continuous roll update, before continuous roll update came into being and we did what we called 'habitation reviews', they were also suspended at the time of an electoral event. If there was a state election in New South Wales for, say, the three months before or the two months before, if we had people in the field doing doorknocks, we would pull them out, because of the confusion.

CHAIR—Sure. But it was more comprehensive. They are both not perfect—

Mr Dacey—We would have to look at compensating in other, obviously more costly, ways through advertising and those sorts of things.

Mr Campbell—We will in some months time be providing a report on this. We have been doing a target enrolment strategy since the middle of March, and we went to more than one million addresses. We went to addresses where we knew there were people living who were not

on the roll. I am just raising this in the sense of habitation. Our hit rate at the moment is about 30 per cent—

CHAIR—Of door to door—

Mr Campbell—Of door to door where we know there are people living who are eligible for the roll and are not on the roll. At the moment our hit rate across the country is 31 or 32 per cent—of actually getting cards from those addresses. My point is that while habitation reviews might have been successful in past ways of operating, we are not convinced now that they are any more successful—

CHAIR—What used to be the hit rate?

Mr Campbell—I cannot answer that.

CHAIR—You could get back to us on that. In your submission you talk about the increasing resistance to face-to-face, door-to-door requests—perhaps reflecting a change in attitude.

Mr Dacey—I think a lot of it is changing attitude. We are getting information from our field staff, who have been out since March, that people are not that cooperative at the door these days. The hit rate Mr Campbell was talking about, of forms back, does not mean that we have not got the other 70 per cent of forms there. They could be either left there or we have made contact and they have said, 'Yes, we will post it in.' But there is more and more reluctance now, with security and all sorts of issues for people.

CHAIR—I understand the increasing resistance to direct mail. We as politicians have experienced that in our communication with our electorates. I suppose the optimal form of communication is that face-to-face contact. You cannot do any more than that. Perhaps it is a reflection of a more general malaise in the community, an attitude towards the political process, which neither you nor we can do anything about.

Mr Dacey—I think the issue is bigger than the AEC issue. We have seen it as a general trend that there has been less cooperation over the years.

CHAIR—What are the demographics of this group of people who resist enrolling, even with face-to-face contact?

Mr Campbell—We will have this data when we finish the targeted strategy, but my guess would be that it is probably in all divisions. It may be more prevalent in some divisions than in others—for example, in some of the inner-city divisions where you have a large number of secure access buildings that are very hard to get into. I would not want to hazard a guess about any particular demographic that are less likely to answer a knock on the door or that are less likely to be cooperative when they get a knock on the door. We will have to wait to see and then map that against the divisions. We do know internally that some review officer staff are better than others. You would find as you are doing your own doorknocking that there is a particular skill in getting to a door, engaging the person and getting something from them—in this case an enrolment form. We find all around the country that some people are very good and others do not have anywhere near the same success rate.

CHAIR—It could be interesting to see whether it is the people living in the high-rise secure buildings or whether it is a different group of more itinerant people or whether it is a mixture.

Mr Campbell—I think it is a mixture, but we will know more when we finish our evaluation.

Ms Davis—Certainly in our recent exercise in New South Wales in the division of Blaxland we found evidence of the commissioner's point about the type of review officers. A special effort was made to recruit review officers to go around and doorknock, reflecting the demographics of the particular division. Interestingly enough, we are finding that the return rate of the actual forms there is much higher. As of last week, it was in the order of 58 per cent for that division. We will be looking at those strategies to determine if that variation in return rate is significant and what it might be attributed to. Perhaps that will mean a more focused effort on the review officers we try to attract. That is easier said than done, given that it is such intermittent work.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Do you choose different people to go around doing this work of knocking on doors? Take the electorate of Mackellar, for example, where I live. Would the person who is going around doorknocking today be the same person who will be doing it tomorrow? Is it always a different person doing the job every time you have a particular campaign?

Mr Campbell—I will ask Mr Wight to answer. I suspect the answer is yes and no.

Mr Wight—Yes and no, Senator. There is generally a core group of casual staff who would have done this type of work, a targeted doorknock, perhaps once a year over the last several years—maybe people who have been on the books for 10 years of more. They would be supplemented by some new staff as others go off our register, if you like. But they are all casual staff, they are engaged for that purpose and we provide them with training before they do their doorknocking. But it will be a mixture of those who have done this sort of work over many years and those who are new—to supplement our casual workforce.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am not saying it should be one way or the other. My concern is this: isn't it more cost-effective having one or two people who know a particular area continue to work that area, rather than having to train people on a continuous basis and reinvent the wheel every time you decide you are going to go out and doorknock in, say, Mackellar? I know the electorate of Mackellar; I live there. It has its own peculiarities, as do the seats of Berowra and Bradfield.

When we listened yesterday to what happened in Chatswood, I would have thought that some of the issues could be more effectively dealt with if you had one or two people whose responsibility it was simply to do Mackellar, or Berowra, so that they know the area and become familiar with it, and so that every time you are not reinventing the wheel and having to train people. It should be done on a continuous basis so they get to know the area and understand who lives in a particular place. I cannot understand why you do not do that.

Mr Campbell—It is a simple question of money. I have nowhere near the money to do that, Senator.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Let us go back a bit to the days when you had one divisional officer. You had a division and you had three staff, traditionally, attached to it. If I understood correctly, they did all the work in that divisional office. Is that the situation?

Mr Dacey—No; it was exactly the same as it is now. They still employed casual staff to do their habitation reviews. The habitation reviews were not done by the permanent staff in the office. So it is the same situation. Some of those people, as Mr Wight said, who are still doing habitation reviews or targeted doorknocks for us may well have been doing them 10 or 15 years ago.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Putting aside the cost for a moment, is that the most efficient way of doing it? For example, if you had one person in each division whose job it was to oversee habitation, would that result in a higher compliance rate or a higher enrolment rate than the sort of system that you now have, in effect, using casual labour? I am taking the cost out of it.

Mr Campbell—I understand what you are saying.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—What would be the ideal to reach 100 per cent?

Mr Campbell—I think the ideal would be to go to direct address change rather than walking the streets. The answer to your question is not simple. In some localities the answer may well be yes, if we had someone who was permanently on the footpath, like Australia Post is in many parts of Australia—but not in areas where people are not home during the day and do not want to open their doors at night, or in areas with secure access or where you move away from the very high density metropolitan divisions—Mackellar is high density—to rural divisions and remote divisions. Part of what we say in the submission is we do not think there is a one-size-fits-all because the country is so diverse, and people in the country are so diverse. Coming back to Mrs Mirabella's question earlier about what the demographics are, if you are in an area where people are willing to open the door to people knocking on it, with appropriate clothing and badges, et cetera, then that might give you a slightly more complete and accurate role, but it is a question of government priorities, in terms of whether it is worth the dollars.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—It could be your friendly person from the Australian Electoral Commission, whom people get to know and see around the neighbourhood. I know that might sound simplistic, but I am not thinking in financial terms. Your presence helps in raising awareness of you as an entity in a local area. If you have a person who goes around all the time in a particular electorate, and that is their job, could that not be an option?

Mr Campbell—Yes, certainly in the way you have expressed the proposition. Raising our profile, being known, being aware and being seen around must at worst have a marginal impact. But it then does come down to priorities and what is the most cost effective way of doing things. For example, you could not do that in Kalgoorlie—not the town of Kalgoorlie, the division of Kalgoorlie—which is about 98 per cent of Western Australia's land space. Grey is the same.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—But for the majority of seats—

Mr Campbell—In the seats around here, in the ACT, we have Eden-Monaro and we have Hume. With the redistribution Eden-Monaro has lost Batemans Bay, but it still goes from Queanbeyan to just south of Batemans Bay on the coast, down to the border and to the western side of the Snowy Mountains. You could not do that with one person. You would have to find a different way to do it. With Indi, you might be getting closer to doing it with one person, but you have got a number of reasonably sized towns in Indi, so you might want a person in each of those towns—which would bring you back to the position that Mr Wight and Mr Dacey have been talking about. We would have to rely on casuals there, where it might be a part-time job, 50 per cent of the time or whatever. I am not trying to be difficult. It is what we say in the submission. We have a very diverse country.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—If I had to quantify it, for example, in a seat like Indi, perhaps Mackellar, it would be one full-time person. But in a seat like Kalgoorlie it could be five full-time people. Do you see what I am getting at?

Mr Campbell—I am not even sure about Indi, but certainly in Mackellar, which is a reasonably compact metropolitan division—

CHAIR—I did the calculation, and I think it would take seven years of one person doorknocking—working eight hours a day, without travel time and without food or comfort stops—to doorknock the whole electorate.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am trying to get a handle on the extent and the extreme of the issue.

Mr Campbell—I understand that, Senator, and we might want to have a very vigorous debate about the state of the roll, but the fact is that in this country you will never have the roll 100 per cent complete and accurate at any point in time. You cannot have it. There are two things. People die, and it might take a few days for us to be notified—but we get notified. People turn 18, and might not enrol for a couple of weeks. People become new citizens. Most people fill the forms out at the citizenship ceremony—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—We were told yesterday that 10 per cent do it on the day.

Mr Campbell—I think you will find that it is more than 80 per cent. I am not sure what you were told yesterday, but it is certainly not 10 per cent anywhere in the country. The act says that you have to wait 30 days after moving before you enrol at your new address. We have had legal advice because of a very celebrated case the year before last in Victoria. A person enrolled 20 days or thereabouts after moving, and there was some concern. Indeed, an objection was raised by a member of parliament, for whatever reason. The legal advice we had said, 'Once you have processed the form it is a legal enrolment.' But the act says that you do not change your enrolment until 30 days after you move.

Mr Dacey—You have to establish an entitlement first, and that takes 30 days.

Mr Campbell—It is impossible in this country—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—At any given point in time—I take your point.

Mr Campbell—It then comes down to where the government wants to put their resources, and the resources it gives to the AEC. It then comes down to what sort of bang you get for the buck, as to how effective it is.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Sure. In terms of habitation reviews and those sorts of things, do marginal seats get priority? In those seats is there likely to be a greater focus and concentration on the accuracy of the rolls? For example, take a seat which is very marginal—at a particular point in time it could get down to 100 or 200 votes, as opposed to a seat like Bradfield, which is safe one way, or Grayndler, which is safe the other way. Is that how you operate? Do you prioritise seats?

Mr Campbell—No, we do not prioritise seats according to marginality, and what is in the parliament at the moment. We do not do that. It has been raised with us a number of times by members on both sides of parliament, and the answer is no. A seat that was marginal in 2004 may not be a marginal seat in 2007, and a seat that was safe in 2004 might be the one that the whole country hangs on for 10 days after the election.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I take your point.

Mr Campbell—Rather than do that targeting, we say, 'We try and do the best we can in every division.'

Mr Wight—On that point, we might target those who have not responded to one of our letters. They might be a group that we target for a doorknock. We send them a letter because we have had some information that their address has changed, but they have not responded. Therefore, we make a personal visit to their door, for example.

Senator ADAMS—Who is responsible for notifying you of a deceased person?

Mr Dacey—Under our legislation, the registrars of births, deaths and marriages have to notify us. But there is now a national fact of death file where all the state registrar information is amalgamated into one national database, and we get access to that on a regular basis.

CHAIR—You have talked about direct enrolment, which basically means that the AEC would have the power to change an enrolment if they had relevant data, whatever that may be—

Mr Dacey—Direct address change, yes. We are not advocating that we should automatically put people on the roll for the first time; we are saying that, once a person is on the roll, if we have information from one or more trusted agencies who can verify that that person has moved, it would certainly be a much simpler and less resource-intensive process for us if we could change the address of that person on the basis of that information.

CHAIR—You are correct in your submission that this will create quite a bit of discussion amongst relevant stakeholders.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Won't it make people lazy?

CHAIR—Not just lazy—it appears that a lot of the changes undertaken by the AEC are driven by the need or the desire for cost savings. The committee will have to consider this further. It is a very fine balance between the objective of cost savings and the higher purpose and objectives of the AEC.

Mr Campbell—I would not want you to think the AEC wants to put forward to the parliament for consideration direct address change for the purposes cost savings, because it does not; it is for the purposes of trying to have a more complete and accurate roll.

CHAIR—Perhaps, but some of your other recent changes—the co-location/amalgamation—certainly seem to be driven by budgetary considerations.

Mr Campbell—Before my time that may have been the case but only two co-locations have been put in train in the last couple of years. They are the ones I mentioned in the submission—Fowler, Prospect, Banks and Blaxland—and they are not driven by cost considerations. But I cannot say whether in history that might have been the case.

CHAIR—We might have a more detailed discussion on that.

Mr Dacey—For example, about 70 per cent of enrolment transactions—it can vary—processed in our divisional offices are changes, rather than new enrolments. If we could get a lot of those changes done automatically, it would free up our staff to do a lot more meaningful work in looking further at the integrity of the roll. At the moment, a lot of our staff are spending their time processing, following up and trying to get information from those, for example, 70 per cent of people who move. If we get some of that information electronically and it was verified, whilst we are not looking at what savings we might get from that, we are looking at where we could then divert that staff time into more meaningful work, looking more at the integrity of the roll rather than just the process of getting people on the roll.

CHAIR—It also has potential for incorrect amendments to the roll—for example, if you are relying on council rate notices.

Mr Campbell—Mr Dacey did use the term 'trusted source'.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Can you give us some examples of what that sort of trusted source would be?

Mr Dacey—It could be a government agency such as Centrelink or the Australian Taxation Office. We certainly would not be taking information from, for example, private companies or whatever. We would be looking at other trusted government agencies. As we have said before, it is also meeting a growing community expectation that people have that choice.

CHAIR—Trust as determined by who, Mr Dacey?

Mr Dacey—It could be legislated. It could be discussed in government or parliament. We would be putting forward agencies that we consider to be trusted agencies

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So any legislation would include the source—

Mr Dacey—That could be in regulation, for example.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes—and you would envisage that they could cross-match information from a particular source.

Mr Dacey—Correct.

CHAIR—We will now move to the next section, 'Implications for the AEC's staff', paragraphs 10 to 13 inclusive. You have talked about appointment of external applicants having greater management experience gained in other government agencies. Of the new DROs appointed, what proportion would be from outside the AEC? I think you said there were 50 new DROs

Mr Campbell—We will have 51 or 52—because we have had another 54-11 retirement in the last couple of days—new DROs who were not DROs in the last election, but 11 or 12 of those were in the AEC at the election. So I think the figures are 40 out of 51 are new to the agency. They are spread across the country; they are in rural and regional Australia and in the cities.

CHAIR—In a divisional office with three staff, I question how much management experience is required, begging the question of whether there is too much emphasis on some sort of management experience as opposed to practical hands-on experience in dealing with elections. Many members of parliament would not have any management experience or an MBA, whether from a top-flight institution or some C-grade institution wanting to earn money selling these MBAs, but would still have to manage staff of at least three for a backbencher and more for those who are burdened with the responsibilities of higher office. So why have you put such a big emphasis on management experience for divisional officers? Is this really a first step to further regionalisation or co-location or amalgamation?

Mr Campbell—I might ask Mr Wight to answer the first part of your question. Mr Rogers, who has been involved in some recruitment exercises recently in New South Wales, could also share his views. While they are thinking of their answers to your first question, the answer to your second question, on regionalisation et cetera, is no.

Mr Wight—I can talk from a Victorian point of view. For this election we have 10 divisional returning officers from outside the agency who have recently been promoted, appointed or transferred and a further nine who are AEC staff who are now doing a divisional returning officer role for the first time, so they are either acting in the job or they have been internally promoted. What we look for when we are recruiting is a skill set. We are after someone who can manage a key project such as an election, and who can manage government programs, if you like, or AEC programs such as our electoral roll maintenance program and our public awareness program. So there are key skills of project management and program management, as well as the regular administration skills that you require, the supervision skills and so on. We have found that we are running about fifty-fifty in Victoria: some came from inside, some came from outside the AEC. Most of those from outside of the AEC came from the public service more broadly and I think two may have come from the private sector out of that 19 in Victoria. If we recruit someone who has the requisite skill set but not AEC knowledge, we go through, as we are currently, a fairly comprehensive election management program for those staff.

CHAIR—You are in the process of doing that?

Mr Wight—That is correct.

CHAIR—When will that be completed—considering that we are facing an election very soon?

Mr Wight—I think the last module is on 25 July.

CHAIR—Is there a test that they have to pass?

Mr Wight—No.

Mr Campbell—It is called the federal election!

CHAIR—It is a bit late by then, Mr Campbell!

Mr Wight—We train the staff in many aspects. It is mainly knowledge and theory, and it is also practice. It is about how to throw preferences—those practical counting skills, on the one hand, as well as knowledge of the voting systems, on the other hand. It is those sorts of skills plus all of the AEC's own internal technical systems knowledge—from how we do preliminary scrutiny of declaration envelope ballots through to how we input results into our election system.

CHAIR—Would you provide us with the training module and details of the period over which that is conducted for those who have been employed from outside the AEC?

Mr Wight—Certainly. We are also running this program for internal people who are doing the DRO role for the first time. Although they may have an AEC knowledge base, we are now looking to improve their skills base because they are now doing a DRO job for the first time.

Ms Davis—Our state managers also have a wide variety of support mechanisms for people in these roles in the lead-up to the election. The state manager in Western Australia has a buddy system. Each individual DRO is paired with a divisional returning officer who may have run several successive elections. That buddy system will be playing out in the lead-up to the election as well as on election day. There are various mentoring programs and other support programs for people who are new to these roles.

Mr Campbell—There is a contextual issue that might help the committee. In last year's Public Service *State of the service report*, the AEC had the pleasure of being the oldest agency in the public sector. For the last three or four years we have been running along at second or third oldest, but we are now the oldest. By that I mean not the age of the agency but the average age of our staff. That, in a sense, is a real plus for the agency—but it also has a downside. When the CEA came into play in the early eighties, the commission was created and 20-odd new divisions were created. We had quite a few people in their mid-30s or thereabouts going into DRO positions—and they have stayed with us right through since 1984. A lot of those DROs are now getting to retirement age. That is not being helped by the CSS 54-11 issue—and I think you all know what I mean by that. We have had two people in one state foreshadowing that they are going to retire before the election because they will get to 55 when we think the election is going

to be held. On the plus side, over a period of 20 years we have had a very stable workforce of DROs. The downside is twofold: there is a group of people who have sat below those DROs and have not really had the chance to get to that level; and that means current management is now facing the circumstances of a having a significant number of new staff, some of whom, because of the numbers involved, will have to come from outside. I acknowledge everything that Mr Wight has said, but the reality is that the numbers are such that some of them are going to have to come from outside. So the downside of our stability over 20-odd years is that we have a period—which started a couple of years ago and which we think will go for another three or four years—when we have this sort of turnover.

CHAIR—Has there been any planning to cater for that? For example, I would have thought that having this increased pool of casual and part-time labour would have enabled you to feed that in.

Mr Campbell—At the same time that the DROs have been very constant, so have the staff and their divisions. In some divisions, particularly in the inner cities, that is not true. But if you go to rural divisions or divisions that are on the outskirts of cities, that office and the work there is very convenient for those people. They live in the local community. You will know they do things in the local community.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Take Calare, for example, or any outer seat like that, the chances are that they have been there probably for 30 or 40 years.

Mr Campbell—Actually the DRO of Calare has not been in that job for so long, but her family have been in the region for 100 years and she has lived and worked in Orange all her life. When an organisation has stability—and stability gives you good processes and good operations, which is all good—sooner or later when people get to retirement age, and a large number of them are, we have to work that through. And we are working it through.

CHAIR—This argument about using and feeding through casual and part-time staff—and it is an argument used by others who worked in the AEC—to the APS2 and 3 positions—

Mr Campbell—They are fed through to the twos and threes.

Senator STERLE—Aren't they good enough to apply for a DRO job later with the correct training?

CHAIR—Or an APS3?

Mr Rogers—Yesterday or the day before I farewelled an APS2 who had been in the agency for 30 years. That APS2 did a fantastic job and made a great contribution, but in no way wanted to do anything else other than be an APS2. I would hazard a guess that, despite what systems we may have in place as an agency, a large number of our staff do not seek that additional career advancement.

CHAIR—Have you conducted any survey to that effect?

Mr Rogers—When we advertise the jobs we do not get the applicants. That is the test.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Your APS3s do not apply?

Mr Rogers—Many of them do, but many do not.

Mr Campbell—And a number of the DROs who have been appointed across the country in the last 12 months are AEC APS3s. There have been some appointed.

CHAIR—There is this movement to talk about management experience and to use the language of the corporate sector—project management, business objectives and all of that—which, I have to say, seems rather peculiar when I read documents from the AEC. All this gobbledygook, management stuff has infected every part of the Public Service, including the AEC—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—For those of who were there for 20 years—

CHAIR—Perhaps this talk acts as a disincentive if staff know that there is an active policy to seek people from outside the organisation.

Mr Campbell—There is no active policy. We, like every other public sector organisation, recruit on merit. We have had programs at various times. New South Wales—and unfortunately Tom was not there—had a system about four or five years ago. What was it called, Barbara?

Ms Davis—CAN, the clerks action network, ran a program which was called bridge the gap. Given the particular structural nature of the divisional offices which by necessity has to reflect the work value of the positions that we have to have, we were conscious that many of those people had grown through the organisation, exactly as Mrs Mirabella has outlined. They worked as a casual on many events and came in and worked on the roll, and were appointed to an APS2 and then to an APS3. Not the majority but a significant number of those people had aspirations for further career development. I think the program in New South Wales saw significant returns. Each state manages this issue and the smaller states can do this in a much more intimate way. As Mr Wight's experience shows us, of the 19 new DROs in Victoria, nine of those people have grown through the organisation themselves, but we have tried to do what we can to facilitate that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I was at the Australian Government Solicitor, but I can certainly say that in the public sector there is a quantum leap from APS3 to 6. That is the reality, and I think we need to understand—certainly I understand—the difference. Two and three is one thing, and then to move to a six immediately is a big gap. If you had a four, a five and then a six in the office it is a different ball game—you would have a progression through.

Mr Campbell—I probably should not say this, as it might take the debate another way, but that is what the amalgamated offices—as distinct from co-located offices—tried to achieve.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—But they have still only got the APS2, 3 and 6.

Mr Campbell—No; this is where there is a confusion. There is no formal amalgamation program—that stopped a couple of years ago. I will name the amalgamated sites for you: the Gold Coast, which is Moncrieff and McPherson; Ipswich, which is Blair and Oxley; Hobart,

which is Denison and Franklin; and Midland, which is Pearce and Hasluck. They are what are called amalgamated offices, not co-located offices. They are ones where there is a structure with positions between the three and the six. The co-located offices do not, because the co-located offices are, if you like, stand-alone divisional offices that are sharing premises and, depending on how the staff are working together, may be sharing work. There is a big difference. But the amalgamation process stopped in 2004.

CHAIR—Are you saying that Chatswood is a co-located office not an amalgamated office?

Mr Campbell—Most certainly.

CHAIR—For practical purposes, it looked to me like an amalgamated office and operated like an amalgamated office because there were no distinct separations between the different divisions. DROs were called cell managers.

Mr Campbell—One of the reasons I asked Mr Wight to come here is that I thought it would be useful for you to have some background on Ringwood, which is the Victorian equivalent of Chatswood. But let me first make an observation, if you can bear with me for a minute or two. We have several issues in the commission. One is the level of staffing we have in divisional offices—the actual quantum of staffing, as distinct from the levels. A second issue is the level of work. No matter how you look at our workloads, we have divisions in Australia that have very diverse workloads. There are some where 80 to 90 per cent of their work in a non-election time frame is enrolment and there are some divisions that have three times the enrolment transactions of others. You then have to marry that with how complex those transactions are and, if they are rural transactions, how many councils you have to deal with. So you have to bear all that in mind. But the fact remains that we have a great diversity of workload in our divisions.

What the agency had been doing for some time as we were trying to come to grips with our resources after the finance review was to get our state and divisional office resourcing at the level we could afford. That meant that some divisions ended up going below three, but some divisions were still well above three; some were up to four. So about 18 months ago there was quite a wide debate within the agency involving DROs. A number of DROs said to us, 'This is not working because in effect you are only funding me for two staff and, while my workload might be less than in those divisions in the next town, it is not fair to me because you are not giving me enough resources between elections to have casuals and non-ongoings and temporaries coming in to skills so that I have a skills base of casual staff and when the election comes they will come in full time and be able to run the pre-poll centre and do postal voting because they are experienced staff.' We said to them, 'We understand what you are saying, but we can't give everybody an equal amount of resources when the workload between divisional offices is so different.' So what we came up with was workload sharing. If we allocated resources at a common level right across the country for our 150 divisional offices, we would have to have some sharing of work between divisions, otherwise we would have a great inequity in the agency where one division with 3.2 would be working flat out—head down, backside up, to use the colloquialism—whereas the people in the next division would not be working as hard because the flow of work was not there. So we agreed that we would fund all offices at roughly the same level, which is 3.2, as mentioned in our submission, but we would start a process of workload sharing. We are still in the process of unfolding that.

That is then an issue of saying to staff: 'You work for the AEC. Therefore if the AEC has a requirement, because the workload is really bursting at the seams somewhere else and this division has capacity, then we expect to have assistance.' I will give you two examples of that and then I will stop. One is co-located locations, and they vary. Chatswood has only recently moved to the processes you are talking about, whereas some other co-located offices have been doing it for a lot longer. The one at the state office moved to this sort of cell at the same time as Chatswood. I would never want to be in an environment where the agency had people working in the same physical location, let alone in different locations, and one division's people were working flat out while the others were sitting there watching them. Thankfully, the overwhelming number of staff in the AEC understand that and they are working towards it.

I will give you the best example that I can. In Victoria in the close of rolls for the state election last year, where there was a very significant last-minute inflow of forms, we had people in divisions spread around Victoria who were ringing the state office every day and saying: 'We've done what we have. Can you give us forms for another division?' Mr Pickering actually sat in the division of Gorton for three days in that close of rolls period. In a sense that was happening because they were working as I like people in the agency to work; they worked together as one. I have digressed a long way because I wanted to put the workload sharing on the table, but in a sense Chatswood is not an amalgamated site and is never going to be an amalgamated site in the old definition. That definition is gone.

Senator STERLE—Chatswood is co-located, not amalgamated?

Mr Campbell—Yes.

Senator STERLE—So each division has its own dedicated people, or do the divisions actually share the workload?

Mr Campbell—They are working together. My understanding—and Mr Rogers can talk more about it—is that they have been together since 2002 in the Chatswood building. In the middle of last year, that site and the site in Campbell Street, which is Grayndler, Wentworth and Sydney, went through a process whereby they went down to Ringwood and looked at what the people in Ringwood were doing. There are four divisions in Ringwood, which we can come to if you want to.

Senator STERLE—Could I get back to Chatswood, because I am so confused about the difference between 'amalgamated' and 'co-located'? What you just said to me flies in the face of the evidence we had yesterday.

Mr Campbell—They are working together; they are not amalgamated. 'Amalgamated' is a dead word.

Senator STERLE—Why do you have possible amalgamation sites in your submission?

Mr Campbell—That is explaining the history of it. If you read it you will see that we distinguish between 'amalgamated' and 'co-located'.

CHAIR—I do not think anyone would disagree with you about maximising the work opportunities and workloads of staff at the AEC, but there is a significant difference between four divisions being under the one roof, each working, completing their duties and then assisting other divisions—that is sharing work and helping others in the office, as any of our staff would do when they had completed their tasks—and restructuring to join all the staff in one pool and then allocating them to certain cells, which is what has happened at Chatswood. Please accept my apologies, but to me it does seem to be a bit of doublespeak: 'Let's not use the word "amalgamation" because that is bad; let's call it "workload sharing",' which in effect is code not for sharing work but for restructuring management and staff along individual departments rather than divisions.

Mr Campbell—I can understand the potential for confusion here. Let's put aside the terminology 'amalgamated and 'co-located', because 'amalgamated' died three years ago but there are sites that are still co-located. 'Amalgamated' was a very particular model where, for example, if you had two divisions you had only one DRO. In a non-election environment in the Southport site there is only one DRO. We go to two DROs at the election. In the Midland office, which is Hasluck and Pearce, there is only one DRO. We go to two at an election but we have a structure underneath it, and it is the same in the Ipswich office.

In the co-located offices—Chatswood and Ringwood are the same—there are four PSL6s, four PSL3s, four PSL2s and casuals. I know what you are saying but, going back some years, officers who were co-located in the same physical location were having fights over who would answer telephones or go to the counter. That is not the way to operate. It has been done on a state basis; there has been no national directive that the co-located sites should do this. What has evolved in the co-located sites is a variation of practice. The Sydney management looked at how the Ringwood site was operating. The Ringwood site has four outer metropolitan divisions. It has been there for nine years. They looked at how that site was working and how the people enjoyed the work there. They then worked through a process in both the Campbell Street site— which is the three inner city divisions—and the Chatswood site. I have been in the Sydney site twice in the last couple of weeks, and their major issue, as I understand it from the staff, is not about streamlining work but about the sheer volume of workload. They are three of the busiest working divisions in the country, and we are trying to get them in a process where they might start sharing with a couple of divisions nearby. Chatswood is going through the same process.

CHAIR—If they are some of the busiest in the country, why was there a need to go to this rigid co-located/work sharing model, when they were already filling their capacity for work?

Mr Campbell—The issues of co-location and workload sharing are totally different and they came at different times.

CHAIR—I know they came at different times, but it appears to me—and I think I speak for my colleagues—that co-location has now become a code word. It has assumed a different meaning. Its meaning has now become not just co-location of different divisions under the one roof but a whole change to management structure and a whole change of responsibility. You may have DROs, but they are not DROs in the conventional sense that members of parliament would understand. For example, there is not a single DRO that is totally responsible for the conduct of the election in Bennelong, for example, because they are managers of a cell. That could be administration or election preparation—

Mr Campbell—There will still be the divisional returning officer for Bennelong, Berowra, Bradfield—

CHAIR—But they are not responsible. If, for example, the DRO for Bennelong is in charge of the administration cell and something goes wrong with the enrolment cell, they are not directly responsible, because another DRO, so to speak, is head of that cell. There is a significant change to how people are working and to whom they are responsible.

Mr Campbell—Okay. I understand what you are saying. I just want to make one point. It is different in workload sharing, because in effect we are actually in the process—if we are not already doing it—of having workload sharing between the city site, where there are three divisions, and Banks, Blaxland or Watson—

Mr Rogers—Not yet, but we are in the process.

Mr Campbell—In effect, that site of three still has a very high workload compared with the divisions around it. Perhaps I will explain one thing, and then I really should ask Mr Rogers to talk about Chatswood, and I would like you give Mr Wight a couple of moments for Ringwood. The other observation I would make—and I would need to make this in a careful sense—is that we have 46 divisions that are in a form of co-location/amalgamation. That is one-third of the country, almost. They are in 18 sites. As I understand it, the only submissions you have received have been from one site—four divisions on one site. You have not received them from anywhere else in the country.

CHAIR—No. But that does not mean we are not in a position to consider the philosophy behind the change.

Mr Campbell—I am obviously not saying that. I am saying that I am not sure that it is equally fair to draw a conclusion from one site and four divisions that are going through change at the moment and applying that to the whole agency. I am sure you are conscious of that.

CHAIR—We understand that, but there is a very dangerous shift that some of us have identified again on this cost-saving measure and greater centralisation of the AEC. Mr Peisley's evidence yesterday hinted perhaps at an even greater diminution of services and AEC visibility when he made the ridiculous comment that it would not matter in the country because 99 per cent of country areas do not have an AEC office, instead of talking about the percentage of the population having access to an AEC office. It was an insult to our intelligence for him to go along those lines. Any attempt to further diminish services, particularly in rural and regional Australia, will be vigorously opposed. I am sure you have recognised that, as I see from your submission regarding rural and regional Australia. But it is not the only area about which we are concerned.

Mr Campbell—I understand that. What is happening in Chatswood, Ringwood or anywhere else has nothing to do with cost savings. It is not to do with cost savings. The comments made by the officer in Sydney about regionalisation are not AEC policy; they are not my policy. And you have quite rightly pointed that out. Perhaps it would be useful if we went to Mr Rogers on Chatswood and then to Mr White on Ringwood.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—If there are no cost savings in it, why have you done it? Why have you moved from a situation where you have a divisional officer in their own area, with all its local knowledge and services, and a profile of the AEC at a local area? I just do not understand why you have done it. Is it just a way of keeping people occupied between elections? Is it a more efficient way of keeping them occupied? I just do not understand, Mr Campbell.

Mr Campbell—As I said, in the last two years, we have proposed only two co-locations to the minister, and they are both explained in the paper. Chatswood was well before that. Chatswood covers North Sydney, Bennelong, Bradfield and Berowra. Three and a half of those divisions are all part of North Sydney—the division in which you live, which is Mackellar, Warringah or the other two on the coastal side. The terms of the so-called absolute perfect local knowledge that a North Sydney AEC officer has compared with someone who is in Bennelong, I would challenge. To my view, the terms of the North Sydney division and Bennelong and Bradfield are all in a very similar area of Sydney. It is not local knowledge in the same way that you might expect in Kalgoorlie or, indeed, in Eden-Monaro. The other thing is that three-people offices create issues. At times, we have had to close three-people offices. Unfortunately, in a lot of the locations in metropolitan Australia, if we have two absences and we are down to one staff member, we close the office for safety reasons.

CHAIR—Can't you bring in casual staff or something?

Mr Campbell—If you find out at 8.30 or at a quarter to nine in the morning—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Take a medical benefit fund, where basically all that a friend of mine had to do in the job was to go around and fill in for staff.

Mr Campbell—We do that. I will give you an example. This time two years ago in Victoria, we had a problem when the flu seemed to be endemic and we had periods of time when we had to close two or three offices a day. Sometimes a staff member would stay in the office behind the locked doors and we would put up a sign saying, 'Ring 13 2326', and we would get the phone call, or the staff member would work in a neighbouring office. But the reality of life is that three-person offices lead to problems about how you keep them open continuously. It is not a criticism. Staff want to do it. But there are some locations in Australia where I will not have an office open for one person because of safety reasons for that individual.

Senator STERLE—We have three-person offices as well.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That is right.

Senator STERLE—We are faced with the same problem, but we also do not have a fantastic pool of casuals where we are trying to feed 5,000 people with two fishes and one bun.

Mr Campbell—I understand you have three-person offices. I do not want to name them in this committee, but there are offices that we would not leave open if, for instance, there was just a female officer on duty—although I do not want to be sexist about it.

Senator STERLE—We are not arguing about that, Mr Campbell. That is honourable, that is a good work practice. What we have noticed in the submissions in the last 24 hours is that there

has been great criticism of the AEC trying to feed so many casuals rather than narrowing the pool and giving them a greater coverage of hours per week. It is a very simplistic statement for me to make, but businesses around this country are confronted with this every single day of the year and they manage their way through it.

Mr Campbell—And they manage by using—

Senator STERLE—The good ones do manage their way through it. Please do not take that as any disrespect, but I think from what we heard yesterday there probably are some better work practices that the AEC could implement to circumvent these situations when flu is rife in a certain state.

Mr Campbell—Can we turn to Mr Rogers now?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Rogers—I might expand on this and talk about the Sydney site as well. It is interesting to see the differences between the sites and the way they are progressing through the process. I spoke to one of the DROs on the co-located site in the Sydney office yesterday. She said that, in her view, the staff at that site have a more interesting range of tasks to complete as a result of the co-location and that they are also better able to handle the vicissitudes of work because of the workload sharing process that is in place.

CHAIR—Can you expand on that?

Mr Rogers—Sure. When you were at Chatswood you saw, in your terminology, Madam Chair, that there were cells—an enrolment cell and an administrative cell—

CHAIR—No, not in my terminology; that is how they were described to us yesterday.

Mr Rogers—in the way that they are processing work. They are not necessarily fixed. So, whilst an APS2 might work in one of those areas for a period of time, after that they are rotated into another area and they get to do a range of other tasks.

CHAIR—Is that a greater diversity of tasks than they would otherwise perform in a stand-alone DRO office?

Mr Rogers—That is correct.

CHAIR—Can you explain that?

Mr Rogers—Yes, I think I can. An APS2 in a stand-alone office would potentially be involved in a fairly limited range of tasks, but in a larger office they may get the scope to be involved in a larger range of tasks because of the workload sharing.

CHAIR—We received evidence to the contrary yesterday; that, with the co-located/amalgamated office structure, there was greater specialisation—that people were put in

these cells and performed the one task for a longer period and there was less opportunity to be multiskilled and perform other tasks as they would need to do in a stand-alone situation.

Mr Rogers—My understanding of the specifics of Chatswood is that in February this year state management instituted a consultation process with the staff there to try to assist them to introduce some new practices. We actually put a project manager in there in late February of this year to try to help develop some of those processes. My understanding also is that it was at the request of the staff there that we provided that full-time project manager. So, whilst that may have been the case, we are still going through that change process. It is only relatively recently that we have instituted those practices. But, certainly as we move through that process on the Sydney site, people are being rotated and will be rotated through other cells; they will not have just the one task to perform. One of the issues that the committee commented on at the Chatswood site was that there seemed to have been a great throughput of staff there. That might have given the impression that some staff are being stovepiped into one area, but that is absolutely not the intent and will not be the long-term outcome of that workload sharing at a co-located site.

CHAIR—I still do not understand. If the tasks performed in co-located office obviously have to be the same as they the tasks performed in a stand-alone office, why is there—

Mr Rogers—A greater range if it is the same task?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Rogers—Because they are simply dealing with different areas, for a start; they are dealing with a greater area.

CHAIR—Are you saying that in a stand-alone office there is a greater segregation of duties than in an co-located office?

Mr Rogers—Yes.

CHAIR—I have difficult in coming to terms with that.

Mr Campbell—Chatswood is in the very early stages. Perhaps we could talk about Ringwood. It has been together as a co-located office since 1998.

Mr Wight—The Ringwood quad—as we call it—co-located site was a project initiated by staff in 1997. All members of those four divisions, which were Chisholm, Casey, Deakin and Menzies, were consulted. The Ringwood site began in earnest in 1998. Again, at the initiative of staff, in consultation with management, it was organised along functional lines. It has been operating along functional lines since 1998. Those functional lines are: enrolment, or roll management; elections; public awareness; and what we are now calling administration.

At election time, each DRO performs the full range of functions relating to their particular electoral division. They take nominations, they are the returning officer and so forth. In non-election times, one of the DROs does the planning for all four of those divisions' election preparation. They inspect all the polling places, probably with another staff member from the

site—which is not necessarily work that staff member would get if they were in a stand-alone site. It might just be the DRO doing that work. But on a larger site, where there are more people available to perform the function, it might be that several people perform that role.

Similarly, as you have no doubt heard in other evidence and from other submissions by the AEC, enrolment is our bread and butter function for the majority of our three-year cycle. So a fair proportion of the staff are involved in enrolment activities right across that three-year cycle in terms of processing enrolments and handling inquiries from our CRU mail processes and responses back from those. Other work may be organising doorknocks. Another area is public awareness. That might be a DRO with one or two other staff. They will visit schools or community groups to conduct programs and leave brochures or speak to those groups. Otherwise, they will seek enrolment forms. The other category is one DRO in a one-person unit. They will look after the broad administrative things that are required in any modern office environment, be it PCs, staff contracts, petty cash or any of those sorts of administrative things that we need to deal with as an agency, including local training.

So that is the split in Ringwood. Because it is co-located, we have made a commitment to the members for those four divisions that we would maintain a pre-poll centre in the home division at election time. That was a deliberate strategy. As we were not going to be in the division relevant to some of those members, we made that commitment to have—

CHAIR—Do you mean that pre-polling week that is conducted out of the AEC office?

Mr Wight—It is the three weeks from—

CHAIR—Yes, but usually the two weeks are at a place other than the AEC office.

Mr Wight—Other than the divisional office, yes.

CHAIR—But the divisional office has it in the first week?

Mr Wight—Yes. In fact, at the quad we have the whole three weeks available at three centres in the relevant divisions as well as for the whole time it is still available at the divisional office. Every divisional office is a pre-poll centre for the whole three weeks. But, in most cases, there is another site.

CHAIR—That is not very well publicised.

Mr Wight—At another site there is a usually a stand-alone office. It may be in another city if it is a rural division, or it may be near another shopping centre if it is a metro division. That is one thing that we do in relation to co-located sites in Victoria.

Senator STERLE—Is it just Ringwood that does that?

Mr Wight—No. The other co-located site in Victoria is Melbourne and Melbourne Ports, which is in Casselden Place in the city. We have a pre-poll centre in the division of Melbourne Ports—Mr Danby's division—at election time.

Senator STERLE—Okay. Sorry to digress.

Mr Campbell—In all divisions in Australia, irrespective of whether they are co-located or not, there is at least one pre-poll centre physically based within the division.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Then, of course, you have to tell everybody about it. If you had the office fixed there for the three years, everybody would know about it. Don't you then have to go through a process of advising people, and there are costs associated with that? I am coming back to the one office in the one division. Yes, it is all very well—you have done all the sorts of things, Mr Wight, that you are talking about—but at election time don't you then have to incur costs associated with setting up that office, advertising, letting people be aware and dealing with all the sorts of issues that perhaps would otherwise not be dealt with if you had an office permanently in that division?

Mr Wight—Certainly there are costs incurred in those three weeks. We publicise that locally, we advise the candidates so that they can alert their scrutineers and so on.

Mr Dacey—If I could come in as well, in the main, they would cost—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I can appreciate that you are going to say to me that it is not a lot of cost.

Mr Dacey—No, in the main I was going to say to you that they are costs that we would normally incur whether it was a stand-alone division or not. In a lot of cases the pre-poll centre is separate from the divisional office anyway, because the divisional offices are not suitable as pre-poll centres because of their physical attributes, location or whatever. In a lot of cases we would set up a separate pre-poll centre anyway. In terms of advertising, whether it is the divisional office or whether it is a separate pre-poll centre, we have those costs anyway because we statutorily need to advertise them.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In those divisions where you have a fixed office and you do not have it co-located, what is your measure of the success of your public awareness? How do you measure whether you have been successful in going out there and attracting attention to the AEC—your school visits and all that sort of thing? For example, I would like to understand the success of your school interaction with Berowra when you have your office located in Chatswood, particularly with little schools tucked away up in the rural areas in Berowra.

Mr Campbell—I think the issue is broader than that. I will be careful here. One of our concerns is that we have not managed to contact or get into as many schools as we would like. There are a whole host of reasons. Indeed, the committee brought down a report on civics education in recent times. One of the issues—and this does come back to us—is our staff skills base. I do not think it is a question of location at Berowra, which out of the four divisions we are talking about is the one that does get into the rural parts of north-west Sydney; it is a question of whether or not our staff are skilled or feel confident in going. If you are going to go into schools there is a real issue about what we do in rural areas. We have environments in some of our rural divisions where it is very hard for a DRO to get around. I think it is a lot easier for the four DROs in Chatswood to get to the schools in those four divisions than it is for some of our rural and regional DROs.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—If you have a divisional office in its own division, I would have thought that that at least would offer a greater degree of exposure to the AEC in that area and perhaps make it a bit easier to foster than if you are collocated in four seats.

Mr Campbell—I think you will find there is no correlation between the success of getting into schools or communities and whether you are in a co-located, an amalgamated or a stand-alone site.

Mr Wight—Further to what the commissioner has said, if I were looking at the Ringwood quad, one of the indicators we would look at if we were targeting, say, year 11 and year 12 students is the number of enrolment forms that we might collect. In the financial year just ended the Ringwood quad made 140 presentations to schools—I think about 12,000 participants all up—and we got about 3,000 enrolment forms from that target group. The presentations I have just mentioned were for all presentations, not just years 11 and 12. That is over the odds in comparison to the average in Victoria: they were more successful than other divisions in Victoria.

CHAIR—If, as you say, things run more smoothly, there is greater job satisfaction and there are greater opportunities available for staff in co-located offices, why not just put everything in the one office in Canberra and make it a mega-office? Wouldn't that be the best?

Mr Campbell—No. In a sense, whenever you are running an organisation that has three layers and a very big network, you have to look at the infrastructure constraints and opportunities that you are facing, the transport routes and all sorts of issues. But I would never go down that path. I have already denied the regional issue and I certainly would not go down that path.

CHAIR—Could you provide some information on a couple of points that have been raised. Table 7 shows divisional closures in each state. Without wanting to point the finger at any particular divisional office, are you able to provide a breakdown of how many days each office was closed?

Mr Campbell—Yes, I think so.

CHAIR—Only if that does not cause a particular issue.

Mr Campbell—The closures would have been due to staff illnesses, unexpected family illnesses et cetera.

CHAIR—In paragraph 12.13 you identify certain offices as being in dangerous areas where there is a high degree of crime, which limits the ability of staff to be by themselves. Could you identify those for us?

Mr Campbell—Certainly.

Senator ADAMS—Table 7, on divisional closures in 2005-06, states that the offices were closed for 2,087 days. As far as management is concerned, if we did that in our offices I do not

know quite where the public would go with that. So what are you going to do in terms of relief staff or doing something with your management so that this does not occur again?

Mr Campbell—Before I get to that, I think there has to be a recognition that the flow-through work in an AEC office is very different to the flow-through work in your office or the office of a member of the House of Representatives. Outside of an election period—but not in the pre-poll voting period—99-plus per cent of contact made by voters with our offices is by phone or by letter, not in person. The number of people who come to the counter in our offices is very small, including people in their own divisions. We have a phone system so we can handle the phone calls, and the mail comes through. I think we can give you the figure for 2006-07, which is far lower than the 2,087 days. We still have circumstances where offices will close for a day or two, but it does not cause any disruption because we have very few people coming through the door. Our interaction with the voter is not through the door, while a lot of your interaction is through the door. It is a very different set up.

Mr Wight—For Victoria for 2006-07, as opposed to 2005-06, the total would be less than 10 days across the whole state across the year.

Senator ADAMS—Could you provide us with those statistics?

Mr Campbell—We will do that. To answer the second part of your question: Victoria then started to have this process of phone arrangements very early in the morning and, when they found out that people were not coming in, they did bring in the casuals. So we learnt from that experience. But we will give you the figures for 2006-07 for all states.

Senator ADAMS—Is there a rule about employment of family, where an officer might employ their spouse or relatives?

Ms Davis—We are currently looking at that policy as we speak, but at the moment our policy is that there is no prohibition on employment of relatives, but there is due process to be followed. For instance, if there is an applicant for a particular position in a divisional office, then the divisional returning officer would remove themselves from the selection process and their area manager might take on that role. It will be a merit selection, but we say to our staff that it is an ethical issue—it is not a black and white issue—and consider it carefully, particularly if it is a close relative or spouse. We do have circumstances in our offices where those relationships exist, particularly in smaller centres.

Senator ADAMS—Following on from that, with the complaints process, if there is family involvement what happens then? Say one member of the family was out doing something, a member of the public complained about them, and their superior officer was a family member.

Ms Davis—That would certainly have to be elevated. It is such a sensitive area. It is an ethical issue for us. We have discussions with staff about these scenarios and how they would be handled. We try to get our staff to make the judgments about how those scenarios would be handled. The practice would be that the person with whom they had a close relationship would remove themselves from the process. Even though they might be the first point of call in that instance, they would be expected to report it to their own manager, who would then take over that process as it moved forward.

Senator ADAMS—For the general public it is a matter of perception. I am from a rural area in Western Australia, so I look at those sorts of issues, and it does not look good when you have a number of family members employed. I know that everyone is supposed to be bipartisan, but unfortunately these things do happen. When you are a member of parliament, it is a little difficult to explain that to the public.

Mr Campbell—Senator, do you have particular cases in mind that you could give me outside the meeting?

Senator ADAMS—I will talk to you later.

Mr Campbell—I agree with you about perception and I also think we have to follow due process. If in a division a large amount of the casual work or the field officer work is going to immediate family members, we would need to know about that, because part of the process that Ms Davis is talking about is not being followed. Could you please write or email me with some details?

Senator ADAMS—I will talk to you about it later. One of those members has since retired; it arose in the last election.

Mr Campbell—Sometimes when these sorts of cases arise, we find out that they may not be a one-off. I would ask you to give me the details and we will see what we can do.

Mr Dacey—Senator, is this more in relation to casual staff and polling place staff than permanent AEC staff?

Senator ADAMS—We will leave it until later.

CHAIR—Could I ask you to provide additional information. In paragraph 13.8 you say:

The AEC has identified a range of skills that it requires for DROs and their managers in order to improve the effectiveness of the divisional office network.

Could you give us a comprehensive list of those skills and any relevant guidelines?

Mr Campbell—Yes, and I will also give you an outline of the training program that all DROs have gone through in the last 12 months.

CHAIR—We might move on to paragraphs 14 to 22, including the appendices. Could you come back in the next few weeks to discuss the tally room submission?

Mr Campbell—Certainly.

CHAIR—We will move on, then, to those next paragraphs. I have one point to make. In paragraph 17.3 you refer to the state electoral authorities having concerns about 'the inflexibilities involved in the AEC's three-tiered organisational structure'. I can understand their saying that, but we are dealing with a slightly different bureaucracy—we are dealing with a federal government under a federal system. My comment, if I can be so indulgent, is that it is not

really for the state bureaucracies to tell the AEC how to structure themselves. But I would be interested to know what inflexibilities they are referring to.

Mr Campbell—We did that by way of giving you some background, not to leave the committee with any impression that we have bowed to, or done anything at the behest of, our state government colleagues. We have not.

CHAIR—I can understand why, for ease of their own workload in their own structures, they would like to see particular changes but—

Mr Campbell—A major concern they have is that they pay to us $9½ million a year as their contribution to the maintenance of the roll. We would argue that the roll costs us more than $18 million to run; our PBS statements show that we think it is probably up around $70 million a year. They then argue that the reason we have such a high cost base is because we have a divisional office structure—albeit some of them are co-located or amalgamated, we still have 150 different places that you can hang a hat on for a division. A number of our state colleagues argue that that is inefficient and they would rather not do that.

CHAIR—Oh, they've gone down the cost-savings model perhaps at a more accelerated pace than the AEC! I will leave it at that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—The polling booth staff and the casual staff: are there criteria for their employment? I think someone mentioned to us yesterday that you go through and ask them a series of questions. But are they, for example, precluded from being polling booth staff or casual staff in the AEC if they belong to a political party?

Mr Dacey—Yes, that is correct. We have a political neutrality policy, which is particularly relevant to polling booth staff, of course.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So all employees of the AEC are not members of a political party?

Mr Dacey—They make that declaration that they are not members of a political party.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Thank you. Mr Campbell, you said earlier that amalgamations were not driven by cost savings. But at A3.1, in the history part of it, it is very clear that it was driven by cost savings and efficiency measures and that is why you embarked on this process of investigating rationalisation of divisional offices.

Mr Campbell—In relation to what I said, Senator, all of my comments about cost savings are in the current tense, in the last couple of years. Nothing of what we have done in the current processes has been cost saving. I am not going to talk about what some of my predecessors might have done five or seven years ago.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Do you have targets in the AEC about cost saving and targets and stuff like that? How does it work?

Mr Campbell—No, we—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Is it a bit like other departments, where you get bonuses if you achieve your cost targets?

Mr Campbell—I don't know how they are looking at me when you ask that, Senator! No, we do not. We go the other way—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I just ask the question, Mr Campbell. I have asked it in other areas.

Mr Campbell—We have an internal budget process: it gets allocated and people have to manage within their budget. But there are no bonuses if you make savings and, indeed, there are no penalties if you overspend because by the time that has happened we in management are aware of what is happening.

Mr Dacey—Could clarify my terminology, Senator. You used the terminology: can our polling place staff 'belong to' political parties? My clarification is that they must make a declaration that they are not politically active or seen to be politically active.

CHAIR—Which is interesting.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Could you just go through that again?

Mr Dacey—The declaration is made that they are not—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In their own view.

Mr Dacey—In their view—politically active or seen to be politically active.

CHAIR—Does that cover trade unions?

Mr Dacey—It is really in their own view.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I see. So it is up to them. If they do not think they are politically active—

Mr Dacey—If we have evidence that they are politically active we would not employ them. But if we do not know particularly much about their background and they make the declaration that they are not politically active or seen to be politically active we take that on face value.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So if, hypothetically, you have put out a general request for expressions of interest from people who might want to be casual workers, polling booth workers et cetera, and you get 10, 20 or 30 people, what sorts of checks do you undertake on them? Do you simply ask them a series of questions? How does it work?

Mr Dacey—Perhaps we could provide you with the process we go through in recruiting and selecting casual staff and polling place staff.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes, but can you just give me a brief outline?

Ms Davis—It might help. It relates somewhat, Senator Adams, to your earlier question. We have had instances where it has been brought to our attention that staff we might be employing have connections that are seen to be inappropriate, either by ourselves or by members of the public. There have been instances where employment has been ceased for that reason.

Mr Campbell—Ultimately, we do not do background checks. We will come back to you with this information, but we do not do background checks. On polling day we employ around 65,000 people, so we obviously cannot do background checks on all of those. We depend upon them answering the question honestly and openly. On another point, I understand that yesterday in Sydney there was some questioning by you, Senator Fierravanti-Wells, about multiple voting and nonvoting, et cetera?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes.

Mr Campbell—In December we provided a report to this committee. Of course, you were not a member of the committee in December of last year. So, having heard that you were asking those questions, I have given the secretariat another copy of the paper for you.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Thank you very much.

Mr Wight—Madam Chair, I think the committee may have a copy of a document from our AEC internal newsletter relating to the quad. We will table that.

CHAIR—We should also move to include the additional document provided by Mr Wight, which we will add to the AEC submission. Is it the wish of the committee that the additional submission by Mr Daryl Wight of the AEC dated 3 July 2007 be accepted as evidence and authorised for publication? There being no objection, it is so ordered. Thank you for your attendance here today.

Resolved (on motion by Senator Adams):

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 11.43 am