

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into the 2001 Federal Election

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**A nationwide, interdenominational organization committed to
Christian Ethics - Research, Education and Action**

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Introduction

Firstly we would like to thank the Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon Eric Abetz, for initiating this Inquiry.

We believe there is great concern in the community about a number of aspects in relation to the current procedures for Federal elections in Australia.

This submission addresses what we see as the main issues requiring attention by this inquiry.

We believe these to be electoral integrity and the lack of democracy in our voting system which leads to discrimination against the discerning voter.

Integrity of the Electoral Roll and voting procedure

Essential to the conduct of free and fair elections is the integrity of the actual voting system. The current use of a manual registry at the polling booth and a system without physical identity checks on every voter is totally inadequate for today. The system is far too open to abuse, especially that of multiple voting and voting with a false identity.

If people are to take voting seriously, they must believe that complete integrity exists.

Firstly, a system of electronic voting and identification should be immediately instigated so as to be operational by the next federal election. (Assuming that this is not earlier than three years away this should be possible.)

This should be a computer based system of identification. It could easily be established if based on that already in use for tax file numbers. The tax file system could easily be expanded to give every Australian a 'file' number upon reaching their 18th birthday. This would then be used in conjunction with items of identification such as date of birth, passport number and/or home address to verify their number on a computer terminal when registering to vote and when voting takes place.

We believe that technology already exists that could allow those with computers in their homes to actually vote via their home terminals, simply by logging into the AEC web site, once such verification and identification was established.

If the above system cannot be instigated by the next election, a minimum requirement of identification, before voting, must be established. We suggest this should be (1) identification such as a driver's license, bank statement or passport and that (2) a centrally controlled computer database, with terminals at every polling

booths be established so that AEC staff can verify such identification to ensure that each person can only vote once.

To ensure an up-to-date system does not carry over any fraudulent activity already in the system, every prospective voter should re-enrol once the new system is established.

Although some inconvenience may be caused to some individuals, we believe that with proper education most people would readily accept the need for such identity checks.

Clearly the current system of an individual simply having to fill out the enrolment or re-enrolment card and have that witnessed by anybody who claims to know the person is totally unacceptable. It is far too easy for this system to be abused and for people's faith in the integrity and value of their vote to be undermined.

Our recommendation:

The solution to the loss of integrity and trust in the electoral roll and voting system is

(1) To instigate identity checks for all voters and establish a centralized data base check at every polling booth.

(2) To instigate electronic voting on line from home or polling booth after identity checks are established.

Wide publicity should be given to the obligation of voters to enrol personally at the electoral office with proof of identity and proof of address.

Lack of democracy in Australia's voting system.

The lack of democracy in the current electoral system arises due to our method of

- 1) Compulsory voting
- 2) Compulsory Preferential Voting System
- 3) The inability of 'ungrouped' candidates to have a box above the line on the Senate voting paper.

To make Australian Federal elections truly democratic and non discriminatory we need to replace the above with the following

- 1) A non-compulsory voting system
- 2) Optional Preferential voting in both Houses of the Federal Parliament
- 3) Removal of the 'above the line' voting option for the Senate in conjunction with the implementation of Optional Preferential voting

Detail

1. Removal of Compulsory voting

It is right that all Australians should have the right to vote but compulsory voting forces some people to vote when they are ill-informed or simply have no desire to do so which can be for a variety of reasons. Some will be genuine and others simply convenience or even because of apathy. Regardless of the reasons they ought to have the democratic right to choose not to vote.

Compulsory voting does have a distinct advantage for major political parties. They have the monetary power to present the image that any other vote is a 'wasted' vote – they also have the power to be the most prominent presence at any polling booth and therefore have the ability to be the most persuasive toward the undecided, often disinterested, voter.

Optional or Non-compulsory voting is without doubt the only truly democratic system of voting.

2. Replacement of Compulsory Preferential System with Optional Preferential

The compulsory preferential system is not only undemocratic it is discriminatory toward the discerning voter. It is undemocratic because it forces people to vote for EVERY candidate. It is discriminatory for the same reasons – this system forces people to give a vote to people they have no desire to endorse. Regardless of the fact that the vote may never be allocated, a voter is still forced to endorse a person who may have a lifestyle or religion they are totally opposed to.

EXAMPLE. A Christian is forced to endorse a homosexual or a Muslim regardless of the fact that a true Bible believing Christian would never willingly want to endorse, in any way, either that lifestyle or religion.

It is totally wrong to suggest that a person's private life, lifestyle or religion have no bearing on their political role. A person's personal values are going to be reflected in their political decision making if they are elected - therefore electors have a right to ask about personal values of candidates and SHOULD have the right to not give them any endorsement whatsoever if they so desire.

Therefore the only democratic and non-discriminatory system is OPTIONAL preferential voting.

An Optional Preferential System allows a person's ballot paper to truly reflect their personal preference. A person is also able to legitimately make a 'protest' vote, either against a Party or individual, by NOT voting for either a particular Party's candidates or simply a particular candidate.

In the House of Representatives, a voter would be able to vote for a single candidate (ie just a 1 against their name) or could vote for 2, 3 or more candidates. One or more blank squares would still mean that the vote was valid.

Optional preferential voting would also eliminate the need to have an "Above the Line" voting system in the Senate. Even if people gave a vote to just one person in the Senate paper, the overall totals would still ensure that those with the most endorsement from the community were elected. If it was seen as desirable to avoid a large number of single votes in a Senate ballot, a voter could simply be required to number the equivalent number squares corresponding to the number of vacancies (I.E. 6 in the case of a state) as a minimum.

3) Removal of Senate 'Above the Line' voting option

This method of voting encourages sloppy voting because it allows the disinterested voter to vote without thinking past his/her first vote. It also creates a culture of disinterest in having a specific voting intention. Because ungrouped candidates are unable to have a box above the line and most people are seduced into voting above the line, ungrouped independents have a very difficult task attracting enough voters to give them any chance of being elected.

The system gives political parties a great deal of power to direct preferences, not only to their own party candidates, but also to influence who else gets into the Senate.

Above the line voting is usually a blind vote since most voters are unaware of the group's proposed preference distribution.

Voters are familiar with indicating their own preferences on the House of Representatives ballot paper.

The only significant difficulty voters may have with indicating their own preferences on the Senate ballot paper is likely to be the large number of names on the Senate ballot paper. This objection would be overcome by 'optional preferential' voting.

We also believe that Senate candidates should not be members of a political party which is another reason why we are opposed to the above the line voting option which, as stated above, favours the larger parties.

This system would eliminate the need for the collection of preference sheets from all Parties and would save the AEC having to print large numbers of wall charts or booklets showing preference allocations.

The removal of above the line voting, in conjunction with Optional Preferential voting system, would therefore greatly reduce the cost of elections even without considering the possible savings in the cost of producing a smaller ballot paper due to having just a single voting option.

There would also be a reduction in the time spent by electors in filling out the voting paper in comparison to the time it takes a discerning voter who has to number all squares in order to direct his/her own preferences.

Summary of these Recommendations

Legislate to remove the compulsory requirement to vote.

Introduce 'Optional Preferential' voting into the ballot for both Houses of the Federal Parliament.

Remove the 'above the line' voting option for the Senate in conjunction with the implementation of Optional Preferential voting.

An additional suggestion:

Advertising and the distribution of 'how to vote cards' should be banned from outside polling booths.

The distribution of how to vote cards is confusing and intimidating to the voter. It also disadvantages the smaller parties and independents who are unable to man all polling booths. As an alternative, the AEC could post or provide a single sheet with the recorded preference allocations, or a single notice board could be provided at polling booths where parties/candidates could post their preference allocations.

Conclusion

Australia portrays itself as a democratic country and claims to have a democratically elected Government. As can be seen from the above this is far from true with the current regulations appertaining to Federal elections. It is time for this to change.

Sadly, mainly through Party manipulation, much of today's Federal voting legislation has become discriminatory and it is time for this to change.

The above suggestions will go a long way to redress the balance of both democracy and freedom of choice for the Australian voter and, we believe will result in the whole of Government becoming one where the people have a far greater say as to who leads this nation into the future.

We must constantly work to maintain vigilance to ensure we do not regress again into a system so open to abuse, manipulation and even corruption.

We call on the current Federal Government of this great nation to legislate to ensure that the integrity of our electoral rolls and voting mechanisms is improved and that the democracy, integrity and non-discriminatory nature of our voting system is re-established.