

**Submission by International Social Service Australia
to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**

17 February 2014



ABN: 12 004 508 641

Inquiry into and report on all aspects of the conduct of the 2013 Federal Election
and matters related thereto

Submission:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the issue of Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) change of practice to public access to the electoral roll and recent enforcement of the Act of 1918.

International Social Service (ISS) Australia is a not for profit, non-government organisation providing a range of social work and legal casework services across international borders, as the Australian arm of the global ISS network. One of ISS Australia's core services is intercountry post adoption tracing and reunification services.

When ISS Australia receives requests from adopted people and birth family (via our overseas ISS partners) to search for someone in Australia, the Australian Electoral Roll is the key search tool we use. It is disappointing that in the wake of State and Federal Government Apologies for wrongful past practices, and when extra funding has been made available to address the mistakes of the past, the AEC's announcement has reinforced the implementing legislation created in 1918 and adversely affected our ability to assist people affected by adoption with search, outreach and reunion services.

ISS Australia believes that such restrictions to accessing the electoral roll are not in keeping with international practice. Our experience in searching for family members separated by adoption overseas shows that the public or services can access full name and address details on many overseas electoral rolls.

For instance many of our post adoption requests involve New Zealand. In New Zealand any member of the public can access a person's name, address, age and occupation on the NZ electoral roll. The majority of our post adoption requests involve the United Kingdom. Fortunately the UK also has public access to the electoral roll; in fact there is even the option to access electoral roll online via www.192.com. By paying a small fee 192.com will provide details of the person's full name, address, age range and details of other occupants of the residence.

It should be noted that before the AEC changed their practice to public access to the electoral roll, the public and services in Australia were only able to access a person's full name and address but not their age or age range. These limitations still provided the public and services with challenges, especially when looking for someone with a very common name, i.e. John Smith.

Additionally in other countries such as the UK and NZ, the birth, death or marriage (BDM) records are public records unlike Australia where access is again subject to restrictions. The BDM limitations in Australia made the electoral roll an even more critical search tool.

It is ironic that even despite the National Apology for Forced Adoption it is still easier to search for a lost family member in the UK or NZ, rather than in Australia.

In conclusion, I ask that consideration be given for the public and services to access the Electoral Roll for the purposes of post adoption searching and family reunification.

Yours sincerely

Damon Martin
Manager, NSW Office

National Office

Level 3-315 Flinders Lane,
Melbourne Vic 3000, Australia

T: (+61) 3 9614 8755

F: (+61) 3 9614 8766

Toll Free: 1300 657 843

E: iss@iss.org.au

NSW Office

Level 1, 518 Kent Street,
Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

T: (+61) 2 9267 0300

F: (+61) 2 9267 3886

E: issnsw@iss.org.au

www.iss.org.au