

Submission by the NSW Find and Connect Service for Forgotten Australians and Former
Child Migrants to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

SC

March 2014

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 Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) change of practice in relation to public access to the electoral roll and the recent enforcement of the Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1918.

Find and Connect is a federally funded service which came into being as a result of the 2009 National Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants. The service helps clients gain access to their care files, provides counselling regarding their care experience, and assists with family tracing and reconnection.

This submission outlines our concern about the AEC's change of practice with regard to public access to the electoral roll. We have been made aware that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters will consider the issue of public access to the electoral roll as part of its Inquiry into the 2013 election. We would therefore like to take this opportunity to explain why the new enforcement of restrictions, stated in the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 with regard to public access to the electoral roll, severely impacts on the work we undertake with clients who are seeking information about their family connections.

In the National Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants of 16th November 2009, the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, specifically noted that:

*“Many Forgotten Australians and child migrants continue to need help in **tracing their families**. That is why we’ll be providing a National Find and Connect Service that will provide Australia-wide coordinated family tracing and support services for care leavers to locate personal and family history files and **reunite with members of their families**, where that is possible.”¹*

It is believed that upwards of 500,000 Australians experienced life in an orphanage, home or other form of out-of-home-care during the 20th century.²

The change in practice by the AEC also counteracts principles expressed in the 2008 National Apology to Indigenous Australians and the 2013 National Apology on Forced Adoption. Both Apologies acknowledged the importance of providing **assistance in reconnecting with lost family** for people affected by past adoption practices.

The significance of the Federal Government Apologies and the various Apologies issued by individual States is substantially diminished, if individuals affected by removal from their families, are denied an effective means to trace and reconnect with family members. The newly enforced AEC restrictions have made it virtually impossible to locate present day relatives of individuals who suffered the trauma of being separated from their families at a young age.

The electoral roll is a key research tool in locating present day individuals resident in Australia. Our clients have often not had contact with family members for forty years or more, and have limited knowledge of their parents and siblings. Whilst resources such as birth, death and marriage certificates, newspaper notices and other family history sources, enables the Find and Connect Service to trace details about these families, locating the present day addresses of family members without access to the electoral roll, poses significant challenges. There is no other resource which lists current information for such a large proportion of the Australian population. For instance, whilst the electoral roll provides

¹ National Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants 16 November 2009

² Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children, Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee (August 2004)

the full name and address of a given individual, the current telephone directory provides only an initial and surname. Use of the telephone directory is not effective, as it makes it extremely difficult for our service to know whether we have found the correct individual, especially if their surname is popular. Additionally, often only one person per household may be listed in the telephone directory rather than every adult at a given address, and a far larger percentage of the population opt out of having any listing at all.

In countries such as the United Kingdom, the birth, death and marriage records are open to the public, whereas there are far more restrictions around access to similar records held by the Registries of Birth, Death and Marriage across the Australian States. These restrictions have meant that access to the electoral roll, which previously existed, enabled our service to meet a key priority in our work with Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants.

Historic versions of the electoral roll up to 2008 are available in various locations such as State Libraries, but more recent material is not being deposited. Whilst such historic records can be of assistance in certain circumstances, this information will become less useful over time as the information becomes more outdated. The importance of access to the current electoral roll will therefore only increase in the future.

It is also interesting to note that restrictions in public access to the electoral roll in Australia are not in keeping with practices found in other countries. For example, in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, public access to the electoral roll is readily available, either at electoral offices (NZ) or online (UK). Indeed, the electoral rolls of those countries provide even more information about the individuals recorded there, than those found in Australian records. Despite the National Apologies and the Government's acknowledgement of the importance of family reconnection, it is far easier for us to trace a family member of a Forgotten Australian if the person we are seeking lives in Wellington (New Zealand) or London, than if they live in Sydney, NSW, Australia.

We appreciate that the electoral roll has a more important function than simply being a handy research tool for locating people. However, we cannot stress too strongly the usefulness it provides to services such as ours in helping locate missing family members. The removal of access to these crucial records following the AEC's implementation in February 2013 of the restrictions stated in the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, has severely hampered our work. We are aware that the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, section 90B states that 'persons or organisations that the electoral commission determines are appropriate' may be allowed access to the current electoral roll without charge, and we would suggest that government funded services such as Find and Connect, and adoption agencies who have a remit to assist with family reconnection, be afforded access to the electoral roll.

We respectfully request your urgent intervention to enable us to better provide Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants with the opportunity to reconnect with their families, as intended by the National Apology of 16th November 2009.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

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