



To: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters - regarding public access to the electoral roll

Thank you for providing the opportunity to express our concerns about the change in practices in Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) offices regarding public access to the Australian Electoral Roll as per section 90A(5) of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918.

Who We Are

We are two mothers who each suffered the loss of a child to adoption in the 1960s. We are also co-facilitators of a post adoption support group we formed five years ago to enable adults separated by adoption to meet regularly. We initially comprised a small group known to each other from our attendance at the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) which opened in Sydney in 1991. Our membership has subsequently increased by referrals mostly from PARC. The group is not affiliated to or funded by any organisation.

In addition we are "Friends of PARC", who volunteer as guest speakers at PARC meetings and provide telephone or face-to-face support as requested for clients of PARC. Our education and employment background is in welfare.

Our Concerns

- The recent restriction by the AEC will severely impact people carrying out post adoption searches, who are seeking information on their family of origin or their children lost to adoption. The Australian Electoral Roll has been the key search tool utilised when searching for lost family members for many years.
- The decision counteracts the promise in the **National Apology on Forced Adoptions** which states:

*"To redress the shameful mistakes of the past, we are committed to ensuring that all those affected get the help they need, including access to specialist counselling services and support, the ability to find the truth in **freely available records** and assistance in reconnecting with lost family."*

- The AEC's change in practices significantly undermines individuals as well as professional post adoption support services in their endeavours to reconnect people separated by adoption. The restriction is damaging and disrespectful to those newly seeking to reconnect.

Background Facts

- Current practices favour open adoption where possible so that the parties are now able to retain a level of contact. Past practices caused much despair through the secrecy that closed adoption imposed. Thus for many years people were unable to seek lost family members until changes in legislation occurred, which in NSW was more than 20 years ago. The Australian Electoral Roll then became a vital tool to aid their reconnection. It has been utilised since then by post adoption services as well as by individuals.
- It is common for people separated by adoption to have already been disempowered by the processes that occurred in their adoption experience and the subsequent impacts are life-long. Thus, by being able to personally access such information when they feel ready individuals can be assisted towards their ultimate empowerment and healing.
- Many families that lost a child to adoption, and adopted people themselves, are now ageing so that impediments to their search are a very real threat to their ability to ever reconnect with their lost family members before death inevitably intervenes.
- Parents and children separated by the practice of closed adoption will never have the opportunity to share a parent-child relationship and cannot regain the lost years. To be able to reconnect and possibly build a caring and respectful relationship can help to ameliorate some of the damage and grief their separation caused.
- The unsupported mother was often forced or coerced into parting from her child. The child had no choice in decisions that adults and social workers made on their behalf. People separated in this way often have a strong desire to reconnect with each other. For the adult adoptee it is also often a search for heritage and identity. Their disempowerment resulting from past practices is compounded by the AEC's recently announced restriction, which in turn deepens the grief that their initial separation caused.
- Personal experience also shows that such restrictions to accessing the Electoral Roll do not match international practice. I, Jenny Pickles, was able to search for my own son, born and lost to adoption in England, on the readily accessible Electoral Roll, which is also available online. In addition Birth, Marriage and Death records in England are similarly available for viewing shortly after registration. It is understood that the New Zealand records are also publicly accessible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We respectfully urge the Joint Standing Committee to consider our concerns as outlined above. The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 is now almost 100 years old. While we recognise that the Australian Electoral Roll is not a search tool from a legislative perspective the recent AEC change has closed the most important avenue of search for individuals and post adoption services.

- We urge that the Joint Standing Committee considers a review of that legislation or the implementation of a policy in relation to public access, to bring it in line with international practice

Agencies funded for post adoption services cannot effectively perform all aspects of their work without access to the Australian Electoral Roll. As well as providing counselling, they must be enabled to search records on behalf of those separated by adoption as intended in the recent National Apology on Forced Adoptions.

- We thus urge that a new policy be implemented by the AEC to enable professional adoption service providers to be granted special dispensation to access the Australian Electoral Roll for the specific purpose of searching on behalf of their clients.

Individuals separated by adoption must be able to personally access information about lost family members to enable them to feel empowered and to heal. As a social construct, adoption has been sanctioned by legislation. Therefore legislation needs to be enacted, so that those individuals are able to access information in accordance with the promises of the National Apology on Forced Adoptions.

The AEC's restriction causes individuals separated by adoption to consider the promises of the State and Federal Apologies to be damaging and contradictory when "*freely available records*" can no longer be accessed. Importantly, many are now ageing so that barriers to their search are a real threat to their ability to reconnect before the parties die.

- We urge therefore that people who wish to conduct their own search be granted permission to gain access to the Australian Electoral Roll by providing photo identity and relevant adoption documents supplied by their respective government department.

Jenny Pickles and Dianne Nicholson

Co-facilitators Adoption Focus and Support Group

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