

Council of State Retirees' Associations Victoria Inc.

[Assoc. No. A0032928Z]

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir/ Mme

Age Qualifications for Postal Vote and General Postal Vote

Federal and Victorian state electoral procedures allow a voter to obtain a postal vote for a specific election or referendum, or elect to become a General Postal Voter and automatically receive a postal ballot paper for all subsequent federal, state or municipal elections and referenda. Other states and territories have similar but not identical provisions (sometimes included in "Early Voting" provisions). In each case, eligibility criteria relate to difficulties encountered by certain voters in attending and voting at specified polling places at the prescribed times.

Victorian eligibility criteria to become a General Postal Voter include "having attained 70 years of age". Western Australia has a similar provision, but Federal and other state/ territory provisions do not include this qualification. This can lead to confusion amongst elderly voters in Victoria and WA, who may have registered as a General Postal Voter under this provision, become used to receiving state (and municipal) postal ballot papers as a matter of course and then fail to vote in a Federal election when the ballot papers fail to arrive in the mail, especially if a Federal election should happen to follow within a few months of a state election.

More generally, many elderly persons throughout Australia find it harder to reach a polling booth than when they were younger, which can be due to a general "slowing down", even though they may not meet the strict criteria of disablement. This can be exacerbated by a loss or restriction of a driving license and/or a lack of public transport, especially in outer suburban or rural areas. Where accessible public transport does exist during the working week, it is often infrequent or non-existent on Saturdays, the usual polling day in Australia.

On behalf of my organisation (which represents the interests of over 50,000 retirees from various sectors of Victorian public sector employment), I would urge the Commonwealth to include provision for "having attained the age of 70 years" to be accepted as a sufficient criterion to be eligible for a postal vote, for either a specific poll or on an on-going basis as a registered General Postal Voter. We do not believe that every Australian voter would want to take advantage of such a provision immediately upon reaching 70 years of age, but rather that it should be available when needed, without having to prove or admit to some arbitrary level of difficulty, disability or inability. This provision has already benefited many elderly voters in Victoria and WA, and should be extended to all elections and referenda in this nation.

We first submitted this proposal to the then Joint Standing Committee in 2009, via the relevant Minister. It was included in the Green Paper published later that year. However, an early General Election in 2010 apparently forestalled any further consideration of it, and it was not taken up by the next Joint Standing Committee.

Like younger Australians, the over-70s have both the right and responsibility to vote, but it is surely the responsibility of Commonwealth, state and territory governments to make it easier rather than harder for older Australians to responsibly exercise that vote. With postal voting procedures (including General Postal Voter provisions) already in place, it should not be difficult to extend this "over-70" qualification to Commonwealth elections and referenda. And we believe that Commonwealth support for the lead already given by Victoria and WA would go a long way towards securing nation-wide adoption of this measure.

Yours sincerely

(Ian Thomas)
Hon. Sec.
Council of State Retirees' Associations Victoria Inc.