



3 rd March, 2014

The Hon Mr Tony Smith MP Chair,
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
PARLIAMENT HOUSE ACT 2600

Dear Mr Smith,

Re: Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the conduct of the 2013 Federal Election

This submission specifically addresses the voting system in the Homelands areas of the Northern Territory.

Voting before Policies have been Announced:

Of particular concern is the current undemocratic process by which residents of Homelands are required to vote in advance of policies having been announced. This clearly is unacceptable.

For example, on 5 September 2013, the Liberal Party announced plans for massive cuts to the legal aid budget for Aboriginal peoples. This was a policy that would directly affect Aboriginal people of the Homelands where voting had commenced on 26 August, 2013.

In order to address this situation timeframes require review. Currently voting in Homelands commences two weeks before the election date and this may need to be reduced. At the same time, in order to preserve a democratic process the cut off date for policy announcements may need to be considerably earlier than is currently allowable.

The Use of Acronyms:

It is understood that a box is provided on the party registration form whereby a party can give the option to the AEC to use the acronym for the party. We would like to suggest that acronyms should not be used on ballot papers other than if a party specifically requests its use. We wish to cite the following example.

The President of the Australia's First Nations Political Party unwittingly placed a tick in the box allowing the acronym, AFNPP, to be used. At no stage, however, did he expect it to be used on the ballot paper. The ballot paper used full names for ALL other parties but chose to use the acronym AFNPP for this party. This was NOT the longest of the names on the voting paper. No alerts were provided to the party that a local decision had been made to use the acronym. Clearly, the action of ticking the box allowed AEC officers to make this decision even though there was no obvious reason for doing so. The acronym had never been used by the party and was not recognised even by those in the party.

It should always be kept in mind that Australia is a multicultural society and in remote communities the English language is often a second, third or fourth language and that very many people are unable to read. The use of acronyms therefore creates one further layer of difficulty in participating in what we are attempting to achieve democratic process.

It should be noted that during the ABC Election coverage on the evening of 7 September, Kerry O'Brien referred to two parties in WA that had done well which he said they had no idea of who they were because "only their acronyms were provided". Viewers were therefore never enlightened further as to the names of the 'unrecognisable' parties.

Knowledge of Candidates – Advertising by the AEC:

An Aboriginal voter with a good command of English was interviewed by SBS regarding his difficulties at the polling station (Attachment 1). He explained that he lacked knowledge of the parties or individual candidates. Having watched television, most people he felt were very familiar with Mr Rudd and Mr Abbott but of very few others, if any. When looking at the voting papers at the polling booth, he found that neither Rudd nor Abbott was listed. The names on the ballot paper were mainly unfamiliar to most people who rely on television for information.

We would like to suggest that the AEC could assist by advertising voting cards and candidates on local television and radio stations with helpful explanations in language.

Many third-world countries with multi languages have overcome these difficulties. As far back as the 1960s Malawi was using simple symbols for the different parties e.g. a lion, an elephant and so forth. In many countries photographs are used to assist those of other language groups and especially to assist those who do not read. This method of assisting with identification has occasionally been used in Australia.

Provision of Interpreters and Materials in Language:

We understand that the AEC has taken steps to improve communication with Aboriginal voters with the development of a 'how to vote' video in a number of Aboriginal languages. We strongly commend this action. The use of the video has reduced the need for interpreters but the video alone cannot answer the many questions regarding the voting process which remains confusing to many. Certainly the video is a step forward in assisting people to understand the process **but it should always be accompanied by a qualified interpreter able to answer questions.**

Inequitable timeframe for voting in Remote Areas:

Timelines:

- Announcement of Election: 4 August
- Election - 7 September: This allows 34 days before voting
- Close of Candidate Nominations - 15 August: This allows 23 days before voting
- Nomination of Preferences - Saturday 17 August by 12 noon: this allows 21 days before voting
- Voting in Most Parts of Australia - 7 September: this allows 15 business days for party preparation
- Voting in NT Communities - commences 26 August: this is just 5 business days for party preparation

Currently the approach being taken by the AEC is that those Australian communities that are most distant and without ready communication services are provided with the least amount of time in which to organise for an election. We believe this should be reversed. Additionally we would ask that the AEC share their air transport with registered parties and their scrutineers as a way of transporting information to these hard-to-reach areas as a means of ensuring some level of equity, especially to smaller parties.

Equity between Parties:

Access and difficult communication have made it very expensive for small parties to attend polling booths. Where larger parties have the resources to charter small planes, **this is not the case** for smaller parties. A state of considerable inequity is being established whereby on polling day, representatives of smaller parties are unable to afford to visit communities to explain their policies or to answer the questions of voters. A further development along these lines appears to be the payment of local people who agree to hand out the 'how -to-vote' cards and represent the well-resourced parties. While it is appreciated that there are no laws preventing such payments, there is the development of a scenario whereby small parties cannot hope to compete with their highly resourced opposition. As a result the people in remote areas do not have the same opportunity to access information about all their options as is the case for other Australians.

People living in the Northern Territory are some of the most disadvantaged in Australia. Many are non-English speaking and a high percentage of the people are unable to read. When it comes to their having a basic right to vote for Government through a democratic process there are many hurdles to overcome. The difficulties of the AEC are understood. Having said this, we believe that it would be a good starting place to acknowledge that currently, those living in the most inaccessible areas of the country are not being provided with an equitable service. We believe every voter has a right to:

- be informed as to when and where voting will take place
- be able to access a polling booth
- have help to understand the voting process
- be able to ask questions, if required through an interpreter, about the process
- be able to identify the different parties
- have access to information about all the parties that are represented on the voting paper
- not vote until the policies of the parties have been declared

It is clear from what has been said earlier that much is still needed to be done to achieve these criteria.

Thank you for inviting us to make this submission.

Regards,

Michele Harris OAM

On behalf of 'concerned Australians'