



THE SENATE

LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

17 May 2018

Senator Pauline Hanson
Senator for Queensland
S1.88
Parliament House
PARKES ACT 2600

Dear Senator Hanson,

Thank you for your correspondence to me, as Committee Chair, dated 26 April 2018. While I provided an initial personal response to you in April, the committee has agreed to address your concerns, relating to the use of an online poll for its inquiry into the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Commitment for Australian Citizenship and Other Measures) Bill 2018, in this separate response.

At the outset, it is important to be clear about the committee's intentions in agreeing to use the poll. As you are aware, a near-identical bill was the subject of a thorough committee inquiry in late 2017, during which time the committee received and processed approximately 14,000 submissions. Many of these were form letters, or were so brief as to render them little more than an indication of support for the bill. Nonetheless, the receipt, clearance, processing and publication of so many individual submissions required a great many resources. You would be aware of the significant workload of Senate committees, and the need to allocate available resources across numerous inquiries in a way that enables each inquiry to be properly conducted and reported upon. The committee's experience during the 2017 citizenship inquiry, and in similar situations in the past, was that achieving such a balance in the face of so many submissions was extremely difficult, and yet yielded little by way of useful evidence.

However, the committee was equally mindful of the need to receive the views of those who might make only very brief submissions, or express their views through a form letter, as opposed to formulating a full and original written submission. After considering the circumstances of this inquiry, including the fact that similar online solutions are used in other chambers both here and overseas, the committee agreed that it would proceed with an online poll. You have agreed that, when consulted on the proposal, your office indicated its support but subsequently indicated to me that you had changed your mind.

The online survey for the current bill received in excess of 140,000 responses. Had these responses arrived as submissions the secretariat would have been unable to read, assess and publish them in any useful timeframe, quite apart from the effect such an effort would necessarily have had on the time devoted to other inquiries.

Your letter also raised concerns at the potential for respondents to take the survey more than once. The Senate Public Information Office (SPIO) has advised the secretariat that the survey settings were

such that a respondent was able to complete the survey only once using a given internet browser and email address.

Your letter also raised concerns at the prospect of foreign nationals participating in the survey. The committee is not able to determine exactly what percentage of responses came from outside Australia. However, the committee accepts your evidence that foreign social media and related sites encouraged foreign nationals to access the online survey. The survey software does not provide a functionality to accurately determine the origin of responses. However, the committee may elect to seek the mailing address of respondents to future surveys it conducts, thus giving the committee an indication of how many responses originate overseas.

At the committee's recent meeting, you relayed reports to the committee that potential respondents were unable to participate in the survey at times on 26 and 27 April. The secretariat has been advised by the SPIO, in consultation with the operators of the survey application, that no service outage was reported on those dates.

Finally, you requested that the committee disregard the survey results, and that they not be published. As you are aware, the committee considered that request and agreed that the most appropriate course of action was to publish the results alongside your letter to me, and this response. The committee considered that this would allow members of the public, and members of the committee, to make their own conclusions about the survey, in light of your concerns and this response. As you know, committee members base their views on legislation that is before the committee on a range of evidence, and will give all evidence the weight they consider appropriate.

Yours sincerely

Senator the Hon. Ian Macdonald
Chair