

December 12th, 2013

To The Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,
Parliament of Australia.

In the Ballarat area, pre-polling for the Federal Election, 2013 opened on 20th August at St Andrew's Kirk, Sturt Street, Ballarat and was open through to Election Day. On 26th August, another venue opened in Wendouree, 6 kms away from the first venue, which was open through to Polling Day.

I have a concern about is for the political parties having to staff these pre-polling booths for that amount of time. It is a huge strain for the larger parties which have a relatively large group of followers to be able to fill these rosters, but it is almost impossible for smaller parties to manage.

I found that the period available for pre-polling varied from state to state which seemed to be a situation which was difficult to understand. Victoria, one of the smallest states in geographic terms, had the longest period of pre-polling while Western Australia, with its immense distances, had a much shorter time of pre-polling.

I realise that it is not convenient for some people to vote on Election Day, but there is access to postal voting prior to the event. In the past, the voter had to give a reason for voting before the day, even sign a statutory declaration, giving a reason. But, that is no longer appears to be the case. People just walk up and vote. The rapid increase in pre-poll figures seem to suggest to me that our voting system is changing or has been changed! If the system is changing or being changed, then people should informed about the changes and why the changes are happening. The changes should not just happen! If the situation remains the same, then I can see a situation when almost everyone votes in the three weeks leading up to an election!

There appears to no reduction in the number of polling booths, either in the country areas or in the city areas. So reductions in staff, and therefore, reduced cost, does not appear to be the reason for the change.

What **ARE** the reasons behind these changes? Is it to reduce the number of absentee votes and therefore speed up counting on Election night and the days after? Is it an attempt to reduce the number of postal votes which take longer to process and finally count? Surely a couple of days pre-poll voting plus postal voting should be sufficient for people to organise themselves! Is there a danger that with a prolonged period of time for voting that it is easier for people to cast multiple votes?

Another major concern that I have was the manner in which these pre-polling votes were counted in Ballarat. The location at St Andrew's Church had not been an appropriate venue for pre-polling, mainly due to the parking challenges and the location on a busy street. But, it certainly was not appropriate venue for counting 1829 votes lodged at the normal Ballarat polling booth plus 23305

pre-polling votes from Ballarat, Wendouree and Melton. The venue was too small and the furniture was very unsuitable. There were 70 people squashed into two tiny areas. There were only a few of the cardboard counting tables provided by AEC, the rest of the tables were very low.

As a scrutineer, I saw a number of people kneeling on the floor counting Senate votes.

I saw thousands of votes sitting in piles on the floor!

I saw the Returning Officer forced to sit at a table on the stage to do his calculations.

I saw 70 people squashed into a tiny space with insufficient room to move.

The staff tried very hard, but at 12.30am the House of Representatives count for the pre-poll votes for the Ballarat centre was still not complete. When I left at 12.30am, the preferences of the Green's candidate, Stephanie Hodgins-May were being distributed by very junior staff who had received five minutes of training in this technique. In the past I had always seen this task undertaken by highly trained staff with years of experience. With 10 candidates it was a task made even more difficult. Many trained staff had departed several hours before this stage of the count was finished.

If the current pre-polling system is to continue, then there needs to be adequate trained staff and appropriate physical conditions for both the lodging of these votes and counting of these votes. The conditions in Ballarat should have been condemned by Worksafe!

Security was a major concern! In past elections I have **NEVER** scrutineered in a polling booth where anyone was allowed to leave the Polling Booth and then return. On Election night at St Andrew's, there was a constant stream of people leaving and returning, many to have a smoke outside. One of the polling booth workers brought a message into me from my husband who was waiting for me outside the polling booth. Boxes of votes were simply put into the back of a station wagon to be transported to the Electoral Office.

I believe the Returning Officer, Adrian Claridge did his best in the organisation and control of the counting, but the number of votes to be counted was overwhelming! My experience in Ballarat showed me that if mistakes were not occurring, then it was more by accident than design and planning. The problems in Western Australia showed me that my concerns were totally justified.

My solutions to my concerns are

1. Limit the reasons for people pre-poll voting, or at least ask them to give a reason.
2. Ensure that adequate premises are hired for the count which can cope with the number of votes, the number of staff and the number of scrutineers.
3. Count the Senate votes after the House of Representatives count is finished.
4. Ensure that all staff are adequately trained.
5. Ensure that pay rates are sufficient to recruit appropriate numbers of staff.
6. Ensure that adequate security is present to ensure that no-one can tamper with the count.
7. Introduce some form of electronic voting roll.

I believe in the Australian voting system. I think it is a wonderful system, transparent and fair. But, I believe that it survives on trust. If this trust is lost, then Australian people will have reason to doubt the results. This would not only be a disaster in the short term, but would severely damage the

system for many years. I think that the exponential increase in pre-polling is placing strains on the system and threatens the system's transparency and fairness in the future, but I do seem to be a lone voice in expressing these concerns,

Yours sincerely,

Mrs.E.Joyce Currie