

## **Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**

### **Inquiry into the 2025 federal election**

This submission is based on the direct experience of three volunteers who worked at the Brighton Pre-Poll booth in the Goldstein electorate during both the 2022 and 2025 federal elections in the capacity of volunteer booth co-captains on behalf of the [REDACTED] Candidate, and [REDACTED]. Our experience was that there was a significant increase in aggressive and intimidatory behaviours between the two elections to the point that at times we felt unsafe and the overall experience was traumatising.

Our interaction with voters over both elections is that they overwhelmingly want to fully participate, value and enjoy their civic democratic duty. The Australian concept of the “democracy sausage” epitomises this and needs to be protected. If the same level of intimidation is repeated in 2028 that would be of serious concern, while further escalation progressing along the 2022 to 2025 trend would be detrimental to the voter experience and deter many volunteers from assisting with the election at all.

We want to be clear we have no criticism of the AEC staff at the booth as we considered they did the best they could under very difficult circumstances, as we set out below.

By way of context, 15,306 votes were cast for Goldstein at the Brighton Pre-Poll out of the electorate total of 118,871. The booth also served the neighbouring McNamara electorate, with 4,865 McNamara voters using the Brighton Pre-Poll booth. That is over 2200 voters per day, approaching double the average of Goldstein voters voting on the day at each of the polling booths.

The Brighton Pre-Poll booth was busy every day with voters almost always required to queue, often for periods of 20 to 45 minutes, with much of this time spent outside the designated 6m line. The necessity to queue beyond the 6m line created ideal captive and corralled conditions for many of the disturbing and dangerous incidents we witnessed and experienced.

The Goldstein electorate has been identified by commentators as one targeted by third parties and proxy groups, and as the site of behaviours that were intimidatory towards campaign workers and voters. We observed multiple incidents which did not seem to conform with existing legislation, but which did not result in any penalty or other action taken. Additionally, we also observed behaviours that were not aligned with the overall goal of providing a safe environment, but which may not be covered by existing legislation. Our submission therefore addresses inadequacies in both the way in which existing legislation is applied and enforced as well as changes we believe are needed to legislation.

#### **Response to Terms of Reference:**

Assessment and review of the purported increase in incidents of aggressive conduct, deliberate obstruction, and intimidating behaviour towards voters,

political participants, volunteers, and Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) officials

We observed a significant increase in aggressive and intimidating behaviours towards voters and volunteers at the Brighton Pre-Poll between 2022 and 2025. These behaviours were the result of organised, well-resourced campaigns by groups that were not themselves running candidates in the election. The following are illustrative examples of incidents from these groups we faced more or less on a daily basis.

**Example One:** The group J-United (JU) were a consistent presence at the Brighton Pre-Poll with their ‘Repeal the Teals’ campaign. For those unfamiliar with this group, these links provide an overview of their purpose, funding, close connections to the [REDACTED] Party and support from Advance Australia:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

JU workers were frequently involved in aggressive and intimidating behaviours towards voters and [REDACTED] volunteers. Without invitation and while announcing they were “authorised”, JU workers would thrust ‘Repeal the Teals’ leaflets directly into the hands of queuing voters, leaning into their personal space to tell them that [REDACTED] and her supporters were ‘antisemitic’ and that they should put the [REDACTED]’ and [REDACTED] last. Voters had no way of avoiding these incursions. JU workers were also observed targeting [REDACTED] volunteers who they believed to be Jewish, including telling them they were ‘self-hating Jews’.

JU workers insulted, threatened and disrupted the work of [REDACTED] volunteers handing out HTV cards for their candidate. They frequently videoed [REDACTED] volunteers without permission and reported that they were live-streaming these videos. JU workers would shout to queuing voters that they were being harassed by [REDACTED] workers if their claims of antisemitism were questioned. They frequently and loudly threatened to ‘report’ [REDACTED] workers to the AEC although it was unclear what they would be reported for.

A JU worker followed one [REDACTED] volunteer to her car, videoing the whole time. This JU worker moved to the rear of the vehicle with what appeared to be the intention of videoing the number plate, which is a form of doxxing. Some of our volunteers were reduced to tears by these and other intimidatory behaviours they experienced from JU workers. Some decided that they could not return for future volunteer shifts due to the level of harassment. We also know from the [REDACTED]’s volunteer coordinator that some of their younger volunteers went home crying after similar interactions.

It is difficult not to conclude that the JU objective was to curtail the effectiveness of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] volunteers in the democratic process. JU did not have a candidate in the election. However, the close connection between JU workers and [REDACTED] Party workers was apparent, including with shared personnel. J-U workers were observed changing t-shirts and undertaking shifts for the [REDACTED] Party candidate and vice-versa. The behaviours of the workers varied depending upon which t-shirt

they were wearing. The only direct targeting of Jewish voters we observed from a worker in [REDACTED] candidate [REDACTED]'s t-shirt was by one who stood close to the 6m line holding her Star of David necklace out so that every voter had no way to avoid seeing it as they entered the Pre-Poll.

Slandorous claims of antisemitism against [REDACTED] and her team were not confined to the Pre-Poll or Polling Day booths. They were augmented by campaign activities such as leaflet distributions in the Goldstein electorate and anonymous letters dropped in the letter boxes of houses displaying [REDACTED] corflutes that accused those households of 'hating Jews'. These incidents were covered by the news media including

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

However, what was clearly apparent was the captive and corralled nature of more or less continuous queues at Pre-Poll booths provided a significant opportunity for those with negative and disruptive messages to target [REDACTED] volunteers as well as voters.

**Recommendation One:** Increase the number of Pre-Poll booths in electorates such as Goldstein to reduce numbers at each booth and reduce the possibility that queuing voters can be targeted for lengthy periods of time beyond the 6m line.

**Recommendation Two:** Give greater discretion to the AEC to designate the 6m line in such a place as to reduce the possibility of queues forming beyond it. Presently, AEC has the discretion to position the 6m line at the entrance to an enclosed space around the building in which a booth is located, such as a school. Perhaps the concept of six metres should be abandoned and replaced by a generic rule that the AEC has the right to determine the position beyond which campaign volunteer activity of any kind cannot occur. In the case of the Brighton Prepoll, the so-called 6m line in 2022 was drawn further away from the entrance than was the case in 2025. While this placement would not have prevented voters being exposed to harassment and intimidation in 2025, it would have reduced the large 'harassment zone' and resulted in a safer voter experience in 2025 by increasing the 'no go' area for volunteers and campaign materials.

**Recommendation Three:** Remove the right of anyone other than a candidate or Party to display or distribute materials within say 200m of a Pre-Poll or Polling Booth.

**Recommendation Four:** Make it an offence to physically approach a voter once they have joined a queue for a Pre-Poll or Polling Booth without invitation to do so and confine verbal interactions with voters in such a queue to offering an official HTV card for a candidate.

**Example Two:** The far-right group, the National Socialist Network (NSN), targeted the Brighton Pre-Poll and intimidated voters and volunteers. The most significant

incident occurred on the last Friday of Pre-Poll. Around 3pm, when the queue was consistently 20 minutes or more, a truck stopped opposite the entrance to the Pre-Poll booth and men dressed in black offloaded large speakers and sound equipment. They proceeded to broadcast at loud volume anti-immigration and other offensive messages for around an hour. Their messages included direct attacks on Goldstein candidates, including but not limited to, [REDACTED].

The queue went very quiet. Parents were covering the ears of their children. There were shocked looks on the faces of many voters and volunteers. The AEC manager was called out and responded by calling the police. Given the reputation of this group and reported violent events, it was unreasonable to expect him to deal with the situation alone. The police took over 20 minutes to arrive. They then did nothing but watch from a distance of about 20 metres. The police advised that there was 'nothing we can do'.

Prior to this incident, the AEC manager had advised campaign volunteers that it was illegal to broadcast anything that could be heard from inside the 6m line. The relevant portion of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 is Section 340 on the 'Prohibition of certain behaviour near polling booths and pre-poll voting places'. This section forbids anyone from campaigning for or against a candidate using:

- (i) a loud speaker;
- (ii) a public address system;
- (iii) an amplifier (whether fixed or mobile);
- (iv) a broadcasting van;
- (v) a sound system;
- (vi) radio equipment;
- (vii) any other equipment or device for broadcasting; and
- (d) that activity is audible:
  - (i) within the polling booth or pre-poll voting office (as the case requires); or
  - (ii) at an entrance to the polling booth or pre-poll voting office (as the case requires);or
- (iii) within 6 metres of an entrance to the polling booth or pre-poll voting office (as the case requires).

In the circumstances described above, the AEC manager called the police for assistance in relation to an alleged infringement of S340. The police failed to take any action and the result was that hundreds of voters were forced to listen to an extended broadcast by a group with a history of violence while queuing to perform their legal duty to vote. It was a frightening and unacceptable experience that must not be allowed to occur again. With no consequences from the Brighton Pre-Poll the National Socialist Network duplicated the action on election day. Again, no police action was taken. Our fear is this will embolden the group and lead to an escalation of voter intimidation at future elections. The possibility that next time, such a situation may lead to physical violence is very real.

**Recommendation Five:** Empower the AEC to request the police remove people from the vicinity of booths who they judge to be acting in violation of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918. Where those actions include the use of

equipment leading to the broadcast of sound audible at the 6m line, authorise police to confiscate that equipment for the period of the election.

This recommendation also relates to ToR: ‘potential reform of safety and security arrangements, including consideration of the powers, processes, and capacity of the AEC to manage and address increasingly threatening or disruptive behaviour’.

The threatening behaviour from members of the NSN was also evident when they queued to vote. Volunteers were being aggressively engaged in an intimidating manner to the point we pulled all our volunteers away from handing out HTV cards until the NSN members were inside the polling booth. This was an unacceptable affront to the democratic process,

**Recommendation Six:** When the AEC deem that there is potential for further threatening, disruptive or other illegal behaviour to occur at a Pre-Poll or Polling Booth, empower the AEC to request that a visible police presence is maintained at the booth during opening hours.

#### **Response to Term of Reference:**

The implementation and operation of the **electoral reform** passed by the 47th Parliament, particularly regarding **the use of money or capital in the most recent election;**

Well-resourced groups who targeted the Brighton Pre-Poll included Advance, Australians for Prosperity, J-United and Better Australia. These groups were not running candidates but due to their resources were dominant voices. Only J-United had workers consistently present at the Pre-Poll. The other groups operated by covering as much of the surrounding area as possible, including trees, fences, advertising boards and nature strips, with signs and bunting featuring attack advertising that targeted [REDACTED], so-called ‘[REDACTED]’ generally, and the [REDACTED]. The result was that queuing voters had no option but to be exposed to these attack ads for long periods of time. On election day, every polling booth we saw was also covered in their advertising.

There were such close connections between these groups and the [REDACTED] Party that they effectively served as proxies for them. For example, the [REDACTED] Party’s Cormack Foundation reportedly donated \$500,000 to Advance.

[REDACTED]

For example, the ABC reported that Australians for Prosperity was ‘registered in the name of public relations consultant [REDACTED], a former media advisor to then-[REDACTED] MP [REDACTED], who lost his seat in Sydney's northern beaches to [REDACTED] in 2022. [REDACTED] is the group's campaign manager and [REDACTED] is its spokesperson. The group's executive director is former [REDACTED] MP [REDACTED], who held the seat of [REDACTED] until losing in the 2022 election to the [REDACTED].’

[REDACTED]

These groups were also interconnected and shared resources. For example, Advance provided J-United with t-shirts, flyers and corflutes, and reportedly even shipped the items to Melbourne.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Our experience was that the combined effect of all of these proxy groups at the Brighton Pre-Poll was to create an environment that was dominated by the groups dispersing negative messages rather than by the candidates actually contesting in the seat. The slanderous accusation that [REDACTED] and her volunteers were antisemitic was made repeatedly, loudly and aggressively. While a candidate might be held publicly accountable, and might therefore pull back from openly harassing and slandering people, similar constraints are not in place for proxy groups. The reformed Act does not address this issue. Given the caps that will be in place on expenditure by candidates, parties, and Disclosure Entities, there are now strong incentives in place for more of these ‘Significant Third Party’ groups to form.

While the groups named here effectively operated as proxies for the [REDACTED] Party in the Goldstein electorate, they could equally align with any Party or candidate at future elections. Given their political alignment, the [REDACTED] seems highly likely to be their focus at the next election. No Party should take comfort from the fact that they were not the target in 2025.

The limits on spending by any particular entity provide an incentive for Significant Third Party groups to proliferate. With Australia’s preferential representation compulsory voting system – which we fully embrace and support – campaigns against a major candidate are effectively campaigns for their principal opponent. This is not reflected in the current funding cap framework.