

Please accept this submission for the JSCEM's Inquiry into the 2010 Federal Election.

I am an Australian citizen living in the USA

I have been living outside Australia since 1996.

I am not currently on the Commonwealth electoral roll, having been removed in 1998 while seeking exemption to vote in local council elections. I was never informed of the category of overseas elector during the process, but was summarily removed by the AEC returning officer, apparently without the option of appeal.

My experiences with the Australian federal electoral system while offshore have given me the impression that the Australian electoral commission has little sympathy for the situation of disenfranchised Australian voters, while the members of the government and opposition generally remain unaware of the provisions that can strip Australian citizens of the right to vote within three years of leaving the country.

This situation was made abundantly obvious in 2010. In expectation of an extremely close federal election, both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition prepared letters addressed to the overseas Australian population, urging them to "exercise their right" to vote in federal election. These letters were made available in the US through the Australian-American Association, and the Advance.org organization. The irony of the letters was palpable - I would certainly exercise my right, had I had that right. I addressed letters personally to both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition in response to their own letters, highlighting that the vast majority of Australians living outside Australia had lost their right to vote due to the current laws as implemented by the Australian Electoral Commission.

The leader of the National Party, I believe, did respond to the Southern Cross Organization on this matter, saying "I cannot understand why anyone would not enroll as an overseas elector". The answer to that question is simple - very few people are aware of this category. I was not until more than three years after I had been removed from the electoral roll. At a time when Australians are showered with notices from the Dept of Foreign Affairs when leaving the country ranging from matters of travel warnings in certain countries, superannuation and taxation rights/responsibilities, and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, there is still no notification from the Australian Electoral Commission that on leaving the country, you could lose the right to vote in 2 or 3 years.

I personally urge the Committee to recommend that this vast disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of Australian citizens be ended as soon as possible. However, the very least, the Committee must demand that an adequate education campaign be carried out so that most Australians are aware of the overseas voter category, aware of how to enroll, and aware of the consequences of not doing so. At least then, future Australians traveling overseas can at least decide if they want to remain eligible to vote in Australia, rather than being forcibly removed from the rolls with no recourse after it is too late.

Sincerely,

Ross Mair