

A Collaboration of National Community Organisations

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4th March 2011

The Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA
Fax: 61 2 6277 4710

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2010 Federal Election and matters related thereto

Dear Sir

I am writing on behalf of the Australian Collaboration, an association of leading national community organisations whose names are listed below, to make a submission to the above Inquiry.

The submission relates to two matters, automatic enrolment of eligible voters and campaign finance.

Automatic enrolment of eligible voters

The Collaboration strongly supports the introduction of automatic enrolment of citizens who are eligible to vote. It urges the Committee to recommend this course of action in order that it can be endorsed by the Parliament and applied by the Australian Electoral Commission in time for the next federal election.

Our reasons for proposing this course of action to the Committee are as follows:

At every recent federal election large numbers of Australians who are otherwise eligible to vote have not been able to do so because they have not been enrolled. This might be because they have just reached an eligible age and have been unaware that they have to apply to get onto electoral rolls or because they have been preoccupied with other matters and found it difficult to take the initiative. Voters who have already been on the rolls and have changed address or name may also be unaware that they have needed to re-apply to get back on the rolls. They may have many other legitimate reasons to explain why they have failed to take the necessary steps.

Whatever the reasons may be, it is a major democratic deficit in Australia's electoral system that large numbers of Australian citizens do not vote in federal elections because they are not on electoral rolls.

To ensure the greatest level of participation from its citizens and to have governments that are elected by the full population and have the broadest mandate, Australia requires its citizens of a voting age to vote at elections. But if large numbers of Australians who are otherwise eligible to vote are not on electoral rolls and therefore unable to vote, the opportunity to achieve these objectives is significantly diminished.

In the past, automatic enrolment was impossible to achieve because there were no adequate means to carry it out. Today this is not the case. Today there are many different electronic data bases that can be used to make automatic enrolment possible.

Automatic enrolment is increasingly occurring around the world. It is clearly an emerging trend for all western democracies.

In NSW, the *Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment (Automatic Enrolment) Act 2009 (NSW)* has been enacted. It was followed by a trial in the recent Victorian election. So a major step forwards in Australia has already taken place. The adoption of automatic enrolment for federal elections would not be a step into the unknown.

We especially want to emphasise that this should be considered a matter of basic principle for the future of Australia's democracy and not looked at in any partisan political way.

National campaign finance reform

In this part of the Collaboration's submission the Collaboration wishes to confine itself to a few matters of principle.

Inappropriate funding for political parties has significant potential to exercise undue influence or to corrupt. It can do so by providing greatly unequal resources for political parties and thereby give some parties better chances of electoral success than others. It can also do so by the way in which political funding can be used to curry favour and influence the decisions of ministers and the government. This does not have to be done blatantly. The influence can be subtle but nonetheless effective.

It is widely agreed that the existing system is in need of serious reform.

The *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Political Donations and other Measures) Bill 2010* is now before the Parliament. It is to be commended as a step in the right direction but is only a minor reform when serious reform is necessary.

Other western democracies such as Canada through its *Federal Accountability Act* have introduced very strict new electoral funding regimes.

Major reforms of electoral funding have been introduced in NSW through the passage of the *Election Funding and Disclosures Amendment Act 2010*.

That one of these bills was introduced by a right of centre government and the other by a left of centre government illustrates that this matter should be looked at as a strictly non-partisan move to strengthen the practice of democracy in Australia.

In the light of these existing models, overseas and in Australia, the Australian Collaboration urges the committee to make recommendations for a much more systematic reform of existing electoral funding regimes.

Any reform should be based on a set of agreed principles. The core principles are:

- Integrity – the need to ensure that the measures will minimise the risk of undue influence or corruption;
- Fairness – the need to ensure that all parties and participants have fair access to resources; and
- Transparency – the need for citizens to be adequately informed about the financial transaction of participants in elections.

The reforms would of course need to meet many other criteria such as efficiency and effectiveness of operation.

The Australian Collaboration

Australian Conservation Foundation; Australian Council of Social Service; Australian Council for International Development; CHOICE (Australian Consumers' Association); Federation of Ethnic Community Councils in Australia; National Council of Churches in Australia; and Trust for Young Australians.

While the submission is made on behalf of the Australian Collaboration, the views expressed in this submission are not necessarily those of individual organizations and their networks.

Yours sincerely

Professor Emeritus David Yencken AO
Chair, Australian Collaboration