CPSU (PSU Group) Submission:

Joint Committee on Electoral Matters

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

March 2011

Introduction

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is an active and progressive union with approximately 60,000 members. The CPSU represents workers in the Australian Public Service, the ACT and Northern Territory Public Services, the telecommunications sector, call centres, employment services and broadcasting. We are a national union with members in every state and territory. Our members work in the areas of administration, sales, engineering, communications, information technology, legal, technical, scientific research, broadcasting and many other fields. The CPSU is the principal union for employees at the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).

Overview

The CPSU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' "Inquiry into the conduct of the 2010 Federal Election and matters related thereto".

Consultation with CPSU members, and staff more broadly in the AEC, has identified that the 2010 Federal Election presented significant difficulties for AEC staff. Anecdotal commentary and specific surveying shows that AEC employees found this election to be the most problematic and stressful in recent memory.

The CPSU submission relates to three key issues:
1. Recruitment of temporary Polling Officials
2. Training of the newly engaged Polling Officials
3. Roll management

In each of these areas, the CPSU submission will focus primarily on the implementation of new technologies, and the impact of these systems on AEC staff.

Recruitment of Polling Officials

From late 2009, staff at the AEC were aware of the development of an operating system to be utilised in the recruitment of Polling Officials. This is called the Online Recruiting System (ORS). There were a number of identified dates for the roll-out of ORS, which were not met. As the date for roll-out was pushed back, staff began to express concerns around how ORS could be implemented if an election were to be called prior to the system going "live". AEC management made repeated assurances that this would not occur, via both written communication and verbally at staff meetings. Despite these undertakings, a decision was made to implement ORS to coincide with the calling of the 2010 Federal Election.

This meant that there was no live testing of ORS prior to implementation, resulting in additional problems being encountered within the already challenging environment of an early Federal Election.

The ultimate roll-out of ORS presented a range of challenges, not only for permanent AEC staff, but also for Polling Official applicants engaging with the system as end-users. These included:

- The timing of the implementation resulted in an overwhelming majority of permanent staff not receiving sufficient training in the use of ORS.
- Initially, ORS was very slow. This proved particularly problematic for permanent staff, who were working to immutable and challenging timelines.
- During the early stages of implementation the AEC Helpdesk struggled to provide accurate and timely solutions to issues raised by staff, due in equal measure to a lack of familiarity of staff with ORS and it not having been properly load tested.
- CPSU members state that ORS did not support basic reporting functions, necessary to allow oversight of a Division's recruitment trends and statistics. Other important information, such as Polling Official's contact details were not displayed on ORS screens.
- ORS was designed to interface with existing AEC systems, notably AECPAY. This interface did not work as intended, resulting in a large number of errors in the payment of Polling Officials, including under or over-payments, or in a lack of payment being made at all. Not only did this impact Polling Officials, but also permanent staff that were the AEC's primary point of contact with Polling Officials. Problems with the payment of temporary staff are yet to be fully resolved by the AEC, with the AEC still endeavouring to recoup over-payments at the time of drafting this submission. Other problems relating to the provision of payslips flowed from this lack of integration, making it difficult for many Polling Officials to satisfy requirements for reporting income to Centrelink.
- The system did not allow for a Polling Official to indicate a "tax exempt" status for work undertaken for the AEC. This caused difficulties for many Polling Officials attempting to liaise with Centrelink in relation to payments issued by that authority.

Training of Polling Officials

The AEC developed and launched a new technology system for training Polling Officials in tandem with the implementation of ORS. This platform is named Checkpoint. As with ORS, the timing of introducing Checkpoint, as well as the inadequate level of testing of the product led to various serious issues for both permanent staff and Polling Officials:

- As with ORS, CPSU members state that the opportunity to undertake training or to familiarise themselves with Checkpoint was not adequate. This meant that permanent staff were unable to provide support to Polling Officials or to use the system themselves.
- Users describe Checkpoint as difficult to navigate. There was no capacity to revisit a question once it had been answered. It was also reported that navigating from one completed module to the next was problematic.

- Depending on variables such as computer hardware, operating systems and internet connection type, many Polling Officials found difficulties in utilising Checkpoint. These factors resulted in some Polling Officials being unable to access the system entirely. In many other cases Checkpoint was very slow, often leading to the system "freezing".
- The Helpdesk facility was not in a position to provide accurate or timely advice, either to permanent staff or Polling Officials. CPSU members believe this was a result of staff not being sufficiently familiar with the product prior to it going live.
- When Polling Officials reported problems with Checkpoint, they were often advised to download (or print off) the content of training modules. This advice potentially led to the Polling Official incurring costs from their internet service provider for excess downloads, given the extremely large nature of the packages. As many Polling Officials are of modest and/or fixed means, this process is most undesirable, and certainly served to erode goodwill towards the AEC in some instances.
- The alternate method of training delivery was via hard copies of the training manuals. As a result of the widespread issues with Checkpoint, possibly combined with ambitious forecasting of online training take-up, a shortage of manuals emerged during the election preparations.
- Checkpoint's testing functions were routinely reported to be unwieldy and time consuming. The indicative times for completing the training were often being exceeded by many hours. Polling Officials received payment for undertaking training, the excess time to complete the training served to make this sum nominal rather than an appropriate payment for the time spent completing modules.
- As a result of the difficulties in accessing training through Checkpoint, a significant numbers of Polling Officials discontinued efforts to complete the modules. This led to two outcomes, Polling Officials severed their employment relationship with the AEC, or Polling Officials presented for work on polling day without having undertaken the necessary prior learning. CPSU members state this had significant effects on the efficient running of the Federal Election, and created an unacceptable level of stress for both themselves and Polling Officials.
- Polling Officials who did complete training modules were surprised and concerned to find that the pass mark for each component was set at 1%. While this most likely stems from oversight, the implicit message for Polling Officials could only be construed as being negative.
- As with ORS, CPSU members found the reporting functions of Checkpoint failed to meet their needs. For example, staff have described an inability to access necessary information on the training completion rates of Polling Officials attached to their Divisions.
- CPSU members believe the content of Checkpoint was inadequate in some circumstances. The training modules for Officers in Charge (OIC) have been specifically mentioned as an example.

Roll Management

In August 2009 the AEC implemented a new roll management system – GENESIS. The GENESIS technology was designed to supersede various

functions of the existing platform, the Roll Management System (RMANS). However, RMANS remains an integral component of AEC activities, including the processing of silent electors (and other special category enrolments), and processing postal votes and declaration envelope scrutiny.

In early development and implementation of GENESIS, staff quickly identified, and articulated, strong concerns about the ability of GENESIS to cope with a high volume scenario, typified by a Close of Rolls. The staff concerns were twofold; that the system hardware was not powerful enough to allow speedy processing and that the processing itself was cumbersome.

CPSU Members have stated that the GENESIS inability to cope with the close of rolls period was brought to the attention of the AEC's senior management team, particularly those responsible for roll management, via a range of channels. These included user testing groups, the National Consultative Forum, Infra reporting functions, state conferences, upward feedback and simulated Close of Roll exercises. There is a high level of frustration and anger amongst staff that concerns were largely dismissed. Indeed, staff argue that the aforementioned simulated Close of Roll occurred largely at their insistence, after having earlier been postponed.

It was only during the simulated event, which took place two weeks prior to the calling of the Federal Election, that the full extent of GENESIS' limitations became apparent. The simulation exercise comprised a 4 hour "full load" test, during which time the system crashed. It is acknowledged that AEC management took immediate steps to improve the capacity of GENESIS, however this did not entirely mitigate the problem. Nor did it address the enduring issues with the workability of the system.

CPSU members with experience using both GENESIS and RMANS routinely report the increased level of complexity when processing an enrolment with GENESIS. Users describe a repetitive, and arguably unnecessary, process of inputting, checking and finally verifying data. These verification processes were not a feature of RMANS and slow the rate of input significantly. Standard entry rates using RMANS were in the range of 30 to 40 enrolments per hour. Using GENESIS this figure is widely reported to drop to 16 to 18 enrolments per hour.

The impact GENESIS had on the Close of Rolls is clear. An unprecedented amount of time and resources were absorbed during this period. Staff worked extremely long hours, including weekends, in a struggle to meet deadlines. The example of Victoria serves as a case study: The stated deadline for closing the rolls in Victoria was 6pm on Saturday, 24th July. The rolls were not finalised until late on Wednesday, 28th July. There has been an effort on behalf of the AEC's senior management to place the blame for the excessive length of the Close of Rolls process on the High Court decision to extend the date for closing of rolls. CPSU members state that this is not the case. It was the nature of GENESIS that was the problem.

In response to ballooning deadlines and repeated requests from staff, AEC management progressively culled fields which needed to be filled in when completing an enrolment with GENESIS. These fields still needed to be completed at a later date. Finally AEC management allowed a partial reversion to RMANS. It was only when this occurred that the backlog of enrolments was dealt with in an efficient manner.

Summary of Issues

In making this submission the CPSU recognises the inherent complexities faced by the AEC in conducting a Federal Election. It is understood that the AEC engaged in excess of 66,000 Polling Officials, and facilitated the receipt and processing of over 13 million votes during the 2010 Federal Election. It is further acknowledged that a number of external factors served to exacerbate difficulties during the 2010 election. There is no argument that a need for modernisation and more efficient use of technology exists. However, the issues arising from the 2010 event serve to demonstrate that implementation of new processes and technologies is best done in a structured, pragmatic and inclusive fashion.

CPSU members in the AEC express disappointment at the timing of the implementation of the ORS and Checkpoint systems. There is further discontent that failings of the GENESIS system that were identified were unheeded by AEC senior management. It is argued that these newly introduced systems created significant negative effects during the 2010 election period.

By implementing untested systems, in which staff were not trained, or comfortable in using, and using systems where identified problems had not been addressed, the AEC triggered a set of entirely foreseeable issues. Implementation problems played out in an already highly pressured environment, unnecessary and redundant workloads were created. CPSU members have reported working unprecedented levels of overtime during the 2010 election. These facts lead to increased stress for AEC staff. All of which are obvious concerns for the CPSU.

Further, the CPSU is concerned that the relationship between the AEC senior management and its workforce (both permanent staff and Polling Officials) has been severely strained by the events of the 2010 Federal Election. Many staff have expressed a diminished faith in senior management of the AEC.

The CPSU notes improvements in stakeholder engagement by AEC management since the 2010 Federal Election. This has manifested in management's response to the identified failings in the systems highlighted in this submission, and has included input by the CPSU. The CPSU was represented on the Post Implementation Review Board, which analysed the three systems and their effect on the election. The CPSU endorses both the rigour of this process, and the broad findings. However, it must be noted that a gulf remains between senior management and the operational workforce.

This can only be remedied with the passage of time, and the genuine effort of all stakeholders.

Recommendation

It is recommended that future implementation of new technologies in the AEC adhere to a framework which fosters genuine employee engagement, and ensures a timely and orderly development and implementation of new systems.

The goals of such a framework should be to ensure an optimal outcome is achieved for eligible voters and AEC staff, that staff are appropriately trained in the use of systems, and that the capacity of the AEC to deliver world class election events is in no way compromised.