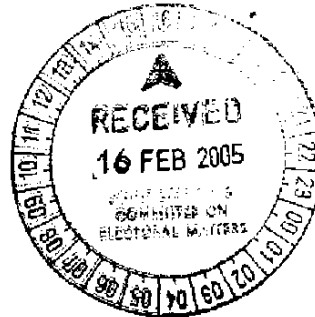




THE HON BRUCE SCOTT MP
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR MARANOVA

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	1
Date Received	16.2.05
Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>



BSJN

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir

I write in regard to your recently commissioned *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*.

I wish to convey the experiences of my electorate in dealing with the near failure of equitable suffrage as a result of the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) poor handling of postal votes within the electorate of Maranoa.

It appears that the **centralisation of the distribution of postal ballot papers** was the primary cause of so many people not receiving their ballot paper, although the problems were so diverse that there may be many contributing factors.

One of these contributing factors was the **conduct of the Brisbane office of the AEC**. The service and advice provided by the Brisbane AEC was inefficient, with inconsistent rulings made in an ad-hoc manner.

In the mid stages of the election period (two to three weeks out from polling day), my office began taking calls relating to people not receiving ballot papers. Normally this would have been too early to gauge any problem, however the incidence of wives receiving ballot papers but husbands not (and vice versa), aroused great concern.

The concerns of my office were communicated to the AEC with the response simply being that the postal votes were on their way. This was subsequently found to be incorrect.

Getting the job done in Maranoa

My office continued to enquire after the progress of constituents' ballot papers and each time (up until the last week of the election period) were told that the relevant ballot papers were on their way.

At a point where it was **logistically impossible for voters to receive their ballot papers on time** (due to the frequency of postal services), it was discovered that up to 700 ballot papers had been spoiled in the production phase and had not been sent.

Had the state office of the AEC taken heed of numerous concerns raised earlier, the realisation of the spoiled ballot papers may have occurred at a stage more conducive to alleviation.

Furthermore, the **centralisation of the process** meant that the AEC was unable to respond in a timely manner to correct the failings of the system. Therefore I strongly recommend that postal vote distribution be done at the very least at a state level or preferably at a local divisional returning office level.

The **divisional returning office has a keen knowledge of the electorate's geography and accessibility** via postal services. I feel that electorate-based processes can be implemented with a sensitivity to the electorate's unique characteristics and the tyranny of distance inherent in having voters spread over a land mass half the size of Queensland.

Additionally the electorate had approximately 7500 voters who had been transferred into Maranoa due to a redistribution.

Ideally, if enquiries were handled by the local AEC office we would not receive complaints of people from Longreach being told by a centralised call centre to travel to Dalby to pre-poll, given that this is a 24 hour round trip. During the election period my office received many calls from people who were frustrated and angry at not having received their postal ballot paper and having a severe lack of **reasonable access to a pre-polling opportunity** (see my recommendations below).

The Brisbane AEC office was neither quick nor consistent in resolving the issues arising. **Conflicting information was provided** as to how people could reapply for postal votes as well as at what stage the postal votes would be received until. Confusion reigned as to the role of postal contractors in being handed completed ballot papers after the date of the election.

The sheer ambiguity of the situation was frustrating for my constituents and could have been avoided had the advice of my staff been accepted at an earlier stage.

To further exacerbate an already deplorable situation, **nearly 100 voters whose original ballot papers had been spoiled received New South Wales senate ballot papers** with the correct House of Representatives ballot papers. This occurred due to the increased pressure exerted upon the local AEC office because of the initial problems caused by centralised operations of the AEC.

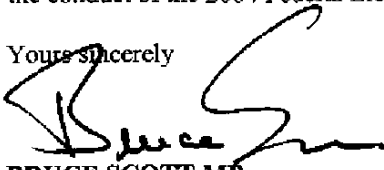
Accordingly, I have highlighted some points of concern which need to be addressed in this Inquiry.

- **Base the posting out of ballot papers in each Divisional Returning Office of the AEC.**
- **Offer accessible technology for people to apply for postal votes ie. have the form online and able to be submitted by fax**
- **Conduct pre-polling in all major centres for two to three days prior to polling day. Major centres could include Longreach, Winton, Emerald, Charleville, Quilpie, Roma, Dalby, Goondiwindi, Warwick, St George and Cunnamulla**
- **Provide universal mobile polling for all Aged Care facilities**
- **Create more interstate polling booths (ie. at least one in each town) particularly in school holiday periods**
- **Provide more pre-polling opportunities in areas renowned as being shift worker townships ie. Emerald, Rolleston etc**
- **Take into consideration remote mining/industry operations (ie Jackson Oilfields) and perhaps provide additional postal services during the election period or provide mobile booths to visit these areas.**
- **Implement a tracking system for checking the progress of voters' postal vote applications and ballot papers.**

Accordingly, I would be pleased if you could take my comments into account during the course of the Inquiry, on the basis that my constituents feel affected by distance and remoteness normally without their right to vote being stripped from them due to a bureaucratic bungle.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to air my most sincere concerns in regard to the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election.

Yours sincerely



BRUCE SCOTT MP

16 February 2005