

Mr Daryl Melham
Chairman
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Chairman

Re: Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters regarding 2010 Federal Election

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on matters regarding the 2010 Federal Election. I have sought comment from a variety of sources including electors in my seat of Lingiari, members of my staff and volunteers involved in the election.

Generally speaking the Australian Electoral Commission was very effective in communicating with the candidate's team throughout the election period. Mr Greg Hibberd deserves special commendation for his professionalism in that regard. When issues arose Mr Hibberd was quick to contact members of my staff, and thorough in any follow-up action that was required of the AEC.

The remote polling booth schedule needs a serious review. The schedule of communities that receive a mobile polling booth appears to be largely based on historical information and in some cases no longer adequately represents where electors reside. For example there are a number of homelands across ArnhemLand that historically have never been offered a mobile polling booth, certainly in recent times. With the growth of population in many of these smaller homeland communities it is apparent that a schedule drafted many years ago may be 'out of date' as far as where electors reside now. Homeland Resource Centres like Laynhapuy in North-east ArnhemLand, Marthakal on Elcho Island, Bawinanga at Maningrida, Julalikari at Tennant Creek and Demed at Gunbalanya could provide more 'up to date' information on where electors actually live.

The multiple booths approach offered by the AEC at a large population centre like Wadeye has proven very effective in maximising elector turnout there. Such an approach should be extended to larger population centres like Maningrida, Nguiu, Gunbalanya and Galiwinku.

One problem encountered in the multiple booths strategy at Wadeye was that the AEC team did not know where the nominated place for each booth was physically located in the community or in some cases did not let the candidates' booth workers know the location. The consequence was that voters did not have access to the how to vote cards for the candidate of their choice and consequently were effectively disenfranchised from voting for who they wished to or they voted informally.

Some AEC mobile teams were rather more inexperienced than in previous elections. For example the AEC team doing the Kakadu and western ArnhemLand run had no-one who had ever been to many of the small communities that had booths in that region. The effect of that was that the AEC team was late arriving at virtually every booth on the run with the

exception of the large booth at Gunbalanya. As a result in many cases electors grew impatient with the unscheduled delays and many walked away without waiting for the opportunity to vote. Every mobile polling team should have at least one member, preferably the team leader who has visited the communities involved so that time is not wasted finding the community. It should be noted that many homelands are not sign posted for privacy reasons especially in popular tourist areas like Kakadu.

The timing of the 2010 election created issues for some AEC mobile teams. For example booths at well patronised tourist centres like King Ash Bay in the Gulf Country and Cooida in Kakadu had very large numbers of interstate absentee voters which meant that booths had very long queues and waiting times before Lingiari (local) electors could actually vote. Once again Lingiari voters found this to be very frustrating and many walked away without voting. The AEC must recognise that 'dry' season elections in the Northern Territory will mean that large numbers of interstate electors will seek to vote absentee in Lingiari and booths at well known tourist centres that are likely to attract them need to have correspondingly longer opening times.

One consequence of these type of delays was that scheduled booths either did not open at all on the day scheduled, for example Wandangula in the Gulf Country or were very late in opening with a consequent fall-off of electors who were prepared to wait eg Campbell Springs (Munyini) near Borrooloola.

The same point is made for the pre-poll booths during in the townships where many tourists spend time such as Katherine, Alice Springs etc. The large number of tourists voting pre-poll resulted in long queues and wait times at the pre-poll booths and exacerbated the difficulty experienced by the AEC in recruiting sufficient staff for the booths. The wait times made it difficult for people from remote locations who were in town doing business of one kind or another and who would consequently not be able to get to their normal mobile booth out bush, to cast their vote while they were in town in the time available to them, as the departure time of their transport back to their home locations by plane, bus or other vehicle is often beyond their control.

It appears that very few enrolments were actually facilitated by mobile teams in the 2010 election. Younger electors who came to vote, often found not to be on the roll were turned away from enrolling and voting and sent out of the booth with an enrolment form and instructed to fill it in and return it to the AEC. Very few of these forms would have been returned and it appears that the AEC missed an excellent opportunity to enrol first time voters.

It was apparent on many mobile polling runs that AEC officials were not totally familiar with the assisted voter provisions applicable to Federal Elections. The training of AEC mobile poll staff needs to emphasise the value of encouraging voter assistance by family members and friends. There has been a trend in recent elections for AEC staff to either ignore or not understand voters indicating, not always in words or if spoken, not usually in English, their desire for assistance by someone they are comfortable with. Local ALP booth workers were regularly turned away from assisting relatives and friends who had requested their assistance. This was apparent at the Borrooloola, Wadeye booths among many others. The consequence is an unnecessary informal vote.

It was similarly apparent that many AEC officials were not familiar with provisional voting provisions. Many electors whose name did not appear on the roll were turned away even though they believed they were entitled to vote and had done so before. Officials did not inform these electors of their right to claim a provisional vote.

The difficulties experienced by AEC in achieving their charter of optimising participation ultimately by the maximum number of voters possible casting a formal ballot mirrors the difficulties experienced by Australian Bureau of Statistics staff in the conduct of each Census in remote locations. The ABS is putting increased resources into longer term training of staff who reside in the remote communities,

I note that many vehicles hired by the AEC for mobile polling runs, although 4WD, were of the lightweight type (eg RAV4) and are not really suitable for the more difficult road conditions likely to exist in Central Australia and ArnhemLand. Whilst I appreciate there may be resourcing issues with the hiring of larger more robust vehicles the safety and comfort of AEC mobile polling teams should be of prime consideration.

Voter education in Indigenous communities is more important than ever before. It appears that there may well be a whole generation of Indigenous electors that has never received any such education service. The higher than usual informal vote is testament to this.

In conclusion I wish to thank all Australian Electoral Commission officials for their efforts in the conduct of the 2010 Federal Election.

Yours sincerely

Warren Snowdon MP
Member for Lingiari