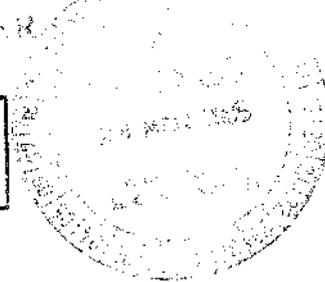




PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA THE SENATE
SECRETOR RUTH WELLS

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Submission No. 49
Date Received 24-3-05
Secretary [Signature]



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

Dear Secretary

Submission to the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to the JSCEM *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*.

I would like to bring to the Committee's attention problems that I witnessed first hand with the Australian Electoral Commission's handling of postal votes in the 2004 Federal Election.

As the committee would be aware, the AEC decided to centralise the processing of postal vote applications; ending the long standing practise of processing them at AEC divisional offices.

This led to backlogs and delays that threatened to disenfranchise many postal voters. I know of many cases where elderly people applied for postal votes in the first week of the campaign but did not receive their ballot papers until the day before polling day. Considering that this was quite a large problem in metropolitan areas, there is little doubt that it had quite a substantial impact in our remotest country areas.

Those living in the remotest parts of Western Australia rely on a weekly or sometimes twice weekly mail plane for their postal service. This fact, compounded with the backlog in processing Postal Vote Applications that was created by returning to a centralised processing system meant that many hundreds, possibly thousands of voters in the electorate of Kalgoorlie were disenfranchised in the 2004 Federal Election.

I witnessed this firsthand in October when I took part in the mobile polling in the Kimberely, in Western Australia's far north-west. While mobile polling rightly serves the aboriginal communities quite well the small numbers of people living on the vast cattle stations in the Kimberely do not warrant a scheduled visit from the AEC's flying squad. None-the-less, two stops in my journey were made at station houses in order to access nearby aboriginal communities. At both of those stations I was told that they had not yet

received their ballot papers through the post and due to the schedule of the mail plane, would not until after the election.

As it is doubtful these were isolated incidents, thousands of people may have received ballot papers after 9 October. Further I am not aware of this being a problem in previous elections, which leads me to the conclusion that the decision to centrally process PVAs was a mistake that should be rectified and not repeated. The system was not broke, so why did it need fixing? Divisional offices had proven themselves capable of processing PVAs in a timely fashion for many years and had the local knowledge and experience to deal with them effectively and on time.

I would ask that this committee recommend in its report that divisional offices of the Australian Electoral Commission again be entrusted with the responsibility of processing Postal Vote Applications.

I would also like to touch on the subject of the formal distribution and fresh scrutiny of ballot papers in marginal seats. While the AEC were at most times professional and helpful during the process that I attended, for the seat of Swan, there are areas where the AEC could provide better support and training to its staff and subsequently improve the accuracy and time it takes to arrive at a final result.

It was apparent in Swan that some of the staff were quite unprepared for the level of pressure and scrutiny they would be put under. Some did not seem to understand the role of scrutineers and therefore resented their presence. This was especially true for the first few days of the count.

It was also disappointing that the AEC apparently lacked the resources to be able to rotate more experienced staff into the tally room to take over from those AEC staff that were not coping well with the pressure or were holding up proceedings by constantly losing count etc.

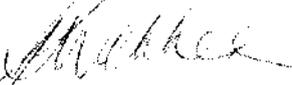
The committee should look at the level of funding provided to the AEC for staffing and the AEC's current ability to train and retain experienced staff. I believe that cut backs in the AEC's budget are affecting that ability, to the detriment of the accuracy of election results.

One last area of concern I had with the conduct of the election relates to the story of a Postal Vote applicant that I know, who the AEC claimed was not on the roll, due to her not responding to a letter they claimed to have sent her. The applicant, who had been enrolled to vote at that address for many elections and had voted as such, had no recollection of ever seeing such a letter. By sheer coincidence, a campaign volunteer saw this woman's application on the campaign's postal vote co-ordinators desk. This volunteer had a relative by the same name who had died about a year earlier. As it turns out, the AEC had removed both women from the roll. What concerns me is that the AEC counter staff refused outright to look into why this woman had been removed from the roll until they were confronted with this evidence, at which point they actually looked into their records and confirmed the error.

Apart from the areas concerned mentioned above, I believe the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election was professional, transparent and accountable. Probably due to the large number of experienced DRO's and senior staff employed by the AEC in Western Australia.

If you require any further information on the issues I have raised, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Ruth Webber
Labor Senator for Western Australia
22/03/05