



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Finance and Deregulation**

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Statement by the Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon Joe Ludwig

**Government response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral  
Matters: *Report on the 2007 federal election electronic voting trials***

September 2009

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) for conducting the inquiry into the conduct of two electronic voting trials at the 2007 federal election. One trial involved remote electronic voting for Australian defence force personnel serving overseas, and the other involved electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or vision-impaired.

The JSCEM report made five recommendations, including that both trials not be continued due to the high average cost per vote of the electronic voting trials in comparison to ordinary voting.

The Australian Government supports, wholly or in principle, all five recommendations of the JSCEM report.

While the Australian Government accepts that costs associated with the electronic voting trials were high in comparison to the cost of ordinary voting, the Government is committed to improving Australia's electoral system and to seeking viable voting options for all electors.

The Government will continue to seek to develop sustainable cost-effective solutions to provide opportunities for all Australians, including those who are blind or vision impaired and defence force personnel serving overseas, with accessible voting options at future federal elections.



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The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is working closely with representatives from peak bodies including the Human Rights Commission, Vision Australia, Blind Citizens Australia and the Australian Blindness Forum, in considering cost-effective options to enable electors who are blind or vision impaired to cast a secret and independent vote at the next federal election.

The AEC will also re-visit options for the provision of electronic magnifiers at various sites, where needed, to assist vision impaired voters at future federal elections.

Defence and the AEC will also be working together to maximise participation of defence force personnel serving overseas at federal elections and postal voting will remain available to all defence force personnel deployed overseas.

As a result of this trial, minor legislative amendments will be made to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* to ensure that the AEC and Defence can establish an effective Assisted Returning Officer model at the next federal election.

The Government recognises the obstacles faced by many who require assistance to participate in the Australian federal election system in particular, the difficulties faced by the vision impaired and Australian defence force personnel deployed overseas. While the 2007 federal election electronic voting trials proved not to be sustainable, the Government remains committed to examining further options that can be utilised at future federal elections to assist all voters to fully participate in the Australian federal election system, without costing the taxpayer more than is necessary.



**Government Response**

**to the**

**Report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**

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**Recommendation 1** – Given the additional burden imposed by remote electronic voting with its paper-based backup systems on defence force personnel in operational areas and the relatively high average cost of voting at \$1,159 per vote compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election, the committee recommends that remote electronic voting for defence force personnel should not be continued at future federal elections.

**Response:** Supported.

**Recommendation 2** – Given the support of the Department of Defence and the Australian Electoral Commission for the ‘Assistant Returning Officer’ (ARO) model that is likely to increase the probability that defence force personnel serving overseas can cast a vote and have it included in the count, the committee recommends that the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* be amended to facilitate the implementation of the ARO model for voting by selected Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas. The model should have the following features:

- AROs may be appointed to issue pre-poll votes from static locations and provide mobile pre-poll facilities to smaller out posted camps in areas of operations;
- AROs may be appointed to issue pre-poll or postal votes to electors who are serving on naval ships on overseas deployment where this service is suitable and appropriate;
- AROs may be appointed to receive postal vote applications and issue postal votes to electors within operational areas and may receive completed postal votes from electors in order to facilitate their prompt return to the relevant DRO;

- Registration as General Postal Voter to remain available to all Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas, in case they are not in the service area of an ARO; and
- Streamlined postal voting procedures should be implemented for those areas of operation where the ARO model will not be utilised.

**Response:** Supported. Minor legislative changes to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* will be required for the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the Department of Defence (Defence) to develop an effective ARO model for implementation at the next federal election.

**Recommendation 3** – Given the importance of gaining full commitment by the Department of Defence to the implementation of the ‘Assistant Returning Officer’ model, the committee recommends that the Department of Defence ensure that an officer at a suitable level of rank be appointed to oversee electoral operations and to ensure those operations are conducted and resourced effectively.

**Response:** Supported. Defence will identify the relevant officer and advise the AEC expeditiously. It is also important to note that operational considerations and restraints at the time of a federal election may impact upon the employment of the ARO model in some locations. General Postal Voting will remain available to all ADF personnel serving overseas, including those who may have access to a Defence ARO, to maximise the opportunity to vote.

**Recommendations 4** – Given the high average cost per vote of \$2,597 for electronically assisted voting compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election and a concern that participation will not increase to sustainable levels, the committee recommends that electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision should not be continued at future federal elections.

**Response:** Noted. See response to Recommendation 5.

**Recommendations 5** – Assisted voting provisions in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* give people who are blind or have low vision the opportunity to seek assistance from a person appointed by them in casting a vote at federal elections and referenda. Electors who have low vision may benefit from the provision of electronic magnifiers. The committee recommends that the government provide sufficient resources to the Australian Electoral Commission for the deployment of electronic magnifiers at sites where there is likely to be demand from electors who have low vision.

**Response:** Supported in principle. The Government notes that the AEC has been consulting with peak bodies for persons who are blind and have low vision to consider cost-effective options to enable voters who are blind or have low vision to cast a secret and independent vote at the next federal election. The AEC is to report to Government on the outcome of these consultations, including costings, by December 2009.