
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Review of certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

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Chair's Foreword

Effective electoral administration is a vital component of a healthy democracy. With a federal election approaching, it has been a timely exercise for the committee to review certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission.

The terms of reference required the committee to direct much of its focus on the staffing arrangements across the AEC's divisional office network. Currently, there are 150 AEC divisional offices in 135 locations across Australia.

The committee received evidence which raised a number of concerns regarding workforce issues in some AEC divisional offices. These concerns related to employment structure, staffing levels, career opportunities for staff, retention issues and the effectiveness of co-located divisional offices.

Specific concerns came from the co-located divisional office in Chatswood, which services four electoral divisions in NSW. The Committee conducted a site visit of the Chatswood office as part of its inquiry, and appreciated the opportunity to speak directly with AEC employees about some of the issues identified in submissions.

Without an extensive body of evidence to draw on, however, it is difficult for the committee to determine whether the concerns raised during the inquiry are symptomatic of widespread issues within the AEC. While the committee is not in a position to draw comprehensive conclusions, it considers the concerns which were raised to be significant enough to warrant further investigation. Therefore the committee has recommended that the Auditor-General examine the issue of workforce planning in the AEC in further detail.

The committee was also asked to consider whether the National Tally Room should be maintained beyond the next federal election. The committee supports the continuation of the tally room and is of the view that the abolition of the tally room would have a negative impact on the perception of the transparency of

elections. Furthermore, the committee notes the value and logic of having a central tally room in the nation's capital which extends beyond any dollar or logistical considerations.

On behalf of the committee I would like to thank all those who participated in the inquiry.

Sophie Mirabella MP
Chair



Contents

Membership of the Committee	viii
Terms of reference	ix
List of abbreviations	x
List of recommendations	xi

REPORT

1 Introduction	1
Role and structure of the AEC.....	1
Background to the inquiry	2
Conduct of the inquiry	3
Structure of the Report.....	3
2 Adequacy of divisional office employment structure.....	5
Introduction	5
Staffing configuration of AEC divisional offices	6
Criticisms of 'workload sharing'	8
Issues for the AEC	10
Career opportunities for divisional office staff.....	10
Appropriateness of staffing levels and APS classifications	12
Retention issues.....	14
Committee conclusions	15
Staffing requirements for ongoing habitation reviews	17
Committee conclusions	20

3	Divisional offices with shared premises	23
	Introduction	23
	‘Co-located’ versus ‘amalgamated’ divisional offices	25
	Amalgamation by any other name: what does co-location really mean?.....	27
	‘Regionalisation’	28
	Financial and social impacts of co-located offices	29
	Opportunities for staff and corporate knowledge.....	30
	Roll integrity	32
	Accessibility for clients	33
	Office closures	34
	Case study: Chatswood divisional office	35
	The Ringwood ‘Quad’.....	38
	Committee conclusions	38
4	The future of the National Tally Room	41
	The National Tally Room	41
	How the NTR works	42
	The statutory obligations of the AEC.....	43
	The continuing relevance of the national tally room – stakeholder expectations	44
	Members of parliament and candidates	44
	Media	45
	General Public.....	47
	Possible alternatives to the national tally room	48
	Virtual Tally Room.....	48
	Media alternatives	49
	The logistics, risks and costs associated with the NTR	50
	Logistics	50
	Risks	51
	Costs.....	52
	Committee conclusions	53

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Submissions to the inquiry	55
--	-----------

Appendix B - List of exhibits.....	57
Appendix C - List of hearings and witnesses.....	59

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Divisional office staff (ongoing & non ongoing) – head count at 30 June 2006 (<i>i</i>).....	7
Table 2.2	Divisional office ongoing staff age at 30 June 2006.....	11
Table 2.3	Divisional office ongoing staff separations – 2005-2006.....	14
Table 3.1	Divisional offices in shared premises.....	24
Table 3.2	Divisional closures – 2005-2006.....	34



Membership of the Committee

Chair Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP

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Members Mr Steven Ciobo MP

Senator Judith Adams

Mr Michael Danby MP

Senator Kim Carr

Mr John Forrest MP

Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells

Mr Alan Griffin MP

Senator Andrew Murray

Committee Secretariat

Secretary Mr Stephen Boyd

Inquiry Secretary Mr Justin Baker

Research Officer Ms Judith Ireland

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Terms of reference

- the adequacy of AEC co-location of divisional offices, including both financial and social consequences of co-locations;
- the number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices;
- whether the current arrangements meet career expectations for AEC officers;
- whether the current arrangements meet community expectations about the appropriate use of staffing resources;
- what any change to these arrangements would mean for the previous two points;
- what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews;
- whether the current APS staffing levels are appropriate for the actual work of divisional offices; and
- any other issues relating to the staffing of divisional and central offices which may be raised in submission or by the committee;
- the continuing relevance of the National Tally Room to members of parliament, candidates, political parties, the media, and the general public;
- the possible alternatives to the National Tally Room flowing from advances in computer and telecommunications technologies, such as the Australian Electoral Commission's web-based Virtual Tally Room, and;
- the logistics, risks and cost of providing the National Tally room.



List of abbreviations

AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AEO	Australian Electoral Officer
CPSU	Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)
CRU	Continuous Roll Update
DOFA	Department of Finance and Administration
DRO	Divisional Returning Officer
ELMS	Election Management System
FTE	full-time equivalent
JSCEM	Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
NTR	National Tally Room
VTR	Virtual Tally Room



List of recommendations

2 Adequacy of divisional office employment structure

Recommendation 1 (para 2.52)

The committee recommends that the Auditor-General conduct an audit of workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission, with a view to determining whether the Commission's workforce planning strategy is supporting effective practices in human resource management for divisional office staff and achieving efficient and effective outcomes.

3 Divisional offices with shared premises

Recommendation 2 (para 3.80)

The committee recommends that, as part of the audit on workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission proposed in Recommendation 1, the Auditor-General also examine the efficiency and effectiveness of working arrangements in co-located divisional offices.

Recommendation 3 (para 3.81)

The committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission includes an evaluation of the performance of all co-located divisional offices in the upcoming federal election in its submission to the JSCEM inquiry into the conduct of the 2007 federal election.

4 The future of the National Tally Room

Recommendation 4 (para 4.67)

The committee recommends that the Australian Government ensures that the National Tally Room is retained for future federal elections.



Introduction

Role and structure of the AEC

- 1.1 The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is an independent statutory body established under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*. Its purpose is to:
- maintain the electoral roll;
 - conduct elections and referendums; and
 - provide electoral information, education programmes and related services.
- 1.2 The AEC is organised on a geographic basis, with a national office in Canberra, a state office in each State capital and the Northern Territory, and a divisional office in or near each of the 150 electoral divisions.
- 1.3 The national office is responsible for policy development, business support, national training programmes, corporate support functions, and specialist areas including funding and disclosure, international services and information strategies. State offices' responsibilities include coordination and monitoring of service delivery, local training and specific election functions such as Senate elections. The functions of divisional offices include service delivery in enrolment, the conduct of elections and public awareness.¹

1 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 7.

- 1.4 The Commission consists of the Chairperson (who must be a judge or retired judge of the Federal Court); the Electoral Commissioner; and a part-time Non-Judicial Member (usually the Australian Statistician).
- 1.5 In addition to the Commission there is a Deputy Electoral Commissioner and an Australian Electoral Officer (AEO)/State Manager for each State and the Northern Territory. The two ACT divisions are managed by the NSW State Manager although an ACT State Manager is appointed during election periods.
- 1.6 There is a permanent Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) in each division who is responsible for electoral administration – including maintenance of the electoral roll and preparations for the conduct of the next electoral event – in that division.

Background to the inquiry

- 1.7 The committee's inquiry into certain aspects of administration of the AEC was referred by the Special Minister of State, the Hon. Gary Nairn MP, on 28 March 2007.
- 1.8 On 21 May 2007, the Minister asked the committee to include additional terms of reference for its inquiry to consider whether the National Tally Room should be retained beyond the 2007 federal election.
- 1.9 The terms of reference² for the inquiry directed that much of the committee's emphasis be placed on the impacts of staffing arrangements for AEC divisional offices, with a particular focus on the adequacy of co-located divisional offices.
- 1.10 In its 2003 report on the conduct of the 2001 federal election, the committee's predecessor made a number of observations about the establishment of co-located divisional offices. The then JSCEM reported that:

While co-location of offices might deliver administrative efficiencies, the Committee is not satisfied that the AEC has addressed longstanding concerns about:

- a potential loss of local electoral knowledge, with possible effects on the accuracy of the rolls;
- a reduced service to electors, MPs and candidates;
- a diminished capacity to conduct electoral education and other such functions; and

2 For the complete Terms of Reference for the inquiry, see p. ix.

- a reduced number of permanent staff conducting elections.³

1.11 In its report the committee recommended that co-location of AEC divisional offices not proceed, and that the AEC receive funding to ensure a minimum of three full-time electoral staff in each Division. This recommendation was supported in principle in the Government's response, handed down in October 2003.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.12 The inquiry was advertised nationally on Wednesday 11 April 2007. The committee received 19 submissions, which are listed at Appendix A, and one exhibit, listed at Appendix B.

1.13 Two public hearings were held in Canberra, and one in Sydney. The witnesses from these hearings are listed at Appendix C.

1.14 The committee also made a site visit to the co-located AEC divisional office in Chatswood, Sydney, on 2 June 2007 as part of its inquiry. The committee appreciated the opportunity to speak candidly with AEC employees at this office, and is grateful to the State Manager for facilitating the visit, and to those staff who took time to speak with the committee.

Structure of the Report

1.15 The report is divided into four chapters including this introduction. Chapter two examines issues arising from the employment structure and staffing arrangements of AEC divisional offices. Chapter three addresses issues created by divisional offices with shared premises, while chapter four considers the future of the National Tally Room which is staged in Canberra on federal election nights.

³ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *The 2001 Federal Election: Report of the Inquiry into the conduct of the 2001 Federal Election, and matters related thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

Adequacy of divisional office employment structure

The dispersed nature of our organisation with its large divisional network, along with the cyclical nature of the AEC's business, means that some standard public sector models and approaches to fixing staffing levels and classifications would not work well in the AEC...The essential requirement for the AEC is the flexibility in determining business locations and staffing levels best suited for delivering effective electoral services and meeting client and stakeholder expectations in different metropolitan, regional and rural locations.¹

Introduction

- 2.1 The primary function of an Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) divisional office is to administer federal electoral events for that division and to carry out tasks between elections that support that function, such as ensuring that the electoral roll is accurately maintained. AEC State offices provide support to their divisions and coordinate this work across the state.
- 2.2 In this regard, the AEC is somewhat unique as an organisation, because its business cycle is influenced by the relatively unpredictable timing of key electoral events and federal elections which determine workload peaks and impact significantly on staffing requirements. The impacts of the

¹ Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 24-25.

election cycle are a key consideration for the AEC in determining the most appropriate staffing model for divisional offices:

The election cycle means a major organisational gearing up in terms of staffing for electoral events. A staffing model that was solely aimed at maximizing resources during an election period could result in excessive staff levels during non-election periods...We need to employ and manage large numbers of temporary staff for short or defined periods and then revert to being a smaller organisation after the electoral task they are employed for has been managed. Prior to a Federal election we need to substantially augment our on-going staff with temporary staff to assist managing the election.²

2.3 This chapter looks at a range of issues arising from the divisional office employment structure. These include:

- the current staffing model for AEC divisional offices;
- issues for the AEC as a consequence of the divisional office structure, including:
 - ⇒ career opportunities for staff;
 - ⇒ the appropriateness of staffing levels for the actual work of divisional offices;
 - ⇒ staff retention issues; and
- staffing requirements for habitation reviews.

Staffing configuration of AEC divisional offices

2.4 Currently, there are 150 AEC divisional offices in 135 locations across Australia. At 30 June 2006, 440 of the AEC's 794³ employees were employed in divisional offices.

2.5 The structure of a typical divisional office includes one APS6 (Divisional Returning Officer or DRO), one APS3 (Divisional Clerk) and an APS 2 (Divisional Assistant). Table 2.1 shows the classification and distribution of divisional office staff at 30 June 2006.

2 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 7.

3 The 794 figure includes 717 ongoing and 77 non-ongoing staff.

Table 2.1 Divisional office staff (ongoing & non ongoing) – head count at 30 June 2006 ⁽ⁱ⁾

State ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾	Number Divisions ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾	APS6	APS5	APS4	APS3	APS2	Total Staff
NSW/ACT	52	54	0	0	42	50	146
VIC	37	41	0	0	22	47	110
QLD	28	25	2	2	23	31	83
WA	15	13	4	1	11	20	49
SA	11	16	0	0	9	11	36
TAS	5	6	0	1	5	4	16
Total	148 ^(iv)	155	6	4	112	163	440

(i) The number of staff is a “head count” and so includes staff on leave.

(ii) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

(iii) Prior to redistribution in December 2006.

(iv) Excludes Lingiari and Solomon in the Northern Territory.

Source: *Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, pp. 13-14.*

2.6 In 2006-07 the AEC implemented a divisional office staffing profile of 3.2 full-time equivalent staff (FTE) which equates to 2.6 FTE for ongoing and non-ongoing staff, supplemented with a further 0.6 FTE for temporary employees.

2.7 To coincide with the 3.2 FTE staffing profile, the AEC introduced a process of “workload sharing” to combat the diversity of workload across its divisional offices, where some offices are tasked with processing up to three times the amount of enrolment transactions of others.⁴ Electoral Commissioner, Ian Campbell, explained the rationale behind the staffing profile:

If we allocated resources at a common level right across the country for our 150 divisional offices, we would have to have some sharing of work between divisions, otherwise we would have a great inequity in the agency where one division with 3.2 would be working flat out – head down, backside up, to use the colloquialism – whereas the people in the next division would not be working as hard because the flow of work was not there. So we agreed that we would fund all offices at roughly the same level, which is 3.2, as mentioned in our submission, but we would start a process of workload sharing. We are still in the process of unfolding that. That is then an issue of saying to staff: ‘You work for the AEC. Therefore if the AEC has a requirement, because the

4 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 7.

workload is really bursting at the seams somewhere else and this division has capacity, then we expect to have assistance.’⁵

- 2.8 Brian McKivat, who is employed as a DRO but gave evidence in a private capacity, explained how this process is being rolled out:

...generally speaking, the view of the current management of the AEC is that they would rather see workload being moved from one site to another site than see staffing levels increased at a particular site. For example, we were told that, if you had a workload that was estimated to be 3.8, you would have 0.6 of your work taken away from your office and transferred to another office which was rated as having a lower workload.⁶

- 2.9 The principles of workload sharing apply across both stand-alone divisional offices and co-located offices.
- 2.10 The AEC also emphasised that workload sharing is a completely different issue to the issue of co-located divisional offices (discussed in the following chapter), drawing attention to the fact that the two were introduced at different times.⁷

Criticisms of ‘workload sharing’

- 2.11 The AEC’s move to level the playing field so that the workload across divisional offices is evenly balanced appears to be based on sound reasoning, yet the scheme was criticised in submissions from a small number of AEC employees and also by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) whose membership comprises many AEC employees.
- 2.12 The CPSU believes that workload sharing has been introduced to accommodate gaps created by long-term vacancies. Evidence to the inquiry indicated that some divisional offices function for lengthy periods with vacant positions, which often remain unfilled in non-election years, or otherwise are filled by a mixture of part-time and casual staff.⁸ The committee was also told that the staffing configuration (the mix of permanent, temporary and casual staff) across each divisional office is inconsistent:

5 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 22.

6 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

7 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 24.

8 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

If you are lucky enough to have three permanent staff in your office, you will be given 0.2 casual. If you have two, you will be given 1.2 casual to bring you up to the 3.2 figure.⁹

- 2.13 It was put to the committee that this use of part time and temporary staff is creating confusion:

Now that many ongoing (permanent) positions are being shared by part-time and temporary staff there is now a requirement for temporary staff to perform the functions of a permanent staff member. New part-time APS2 staff are finding it difficult to learn all the duties of the position as they are only in the office 5 days per fortnight. There is now confusion over job ownership at the APS2 level and clearly the roles of an ongoing (permanent) staff and temporary staff have become unclear. In the past temporary staff were employed to assist the APS2 and worked under APS2 supervision.¹⁰

- 2.14 The CPSU argued that while the 3.2 FTE staffing profile may be adequate in theory, the reality is that when the formula is applied inconsistently across divisional offices it 'provides very different outcomes in terms of ability to complete work and staff morale.'¹¹

- 2.15 The CPSU also claimed that the current staffing arrangement can affect the capacity and stability of a divisional office.¹² CPSU National Secretary, Stephen Jones, told the committee:

...the commission has failed to properly and adequately fill vacancies as and when they arise, which means the work falls upon the remaining staff within those offices. Short-term acting and casual appointments are in no way a long-term basis on which to staff such an important function. We have a concern that the new electoral arrangements that will have effect at this election will exacerbate those issues. We have raised some concerns within our submission, and I have read some of the other submissions that have been put before you about the use of casuals for filling ongoing work requirements within the divisional offices. They are no basis on which to meet the baseload work requirements.¹³

9 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

10 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 3.

11 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

12 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

13 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 34.

Issues for the AEC

Career opportunities for divisional office staff

- 2.16 The committee was advised that career opportunities within the AEC for employees in a divisional office are limited.¹⁴ This is particularly the case for experienced Divisional Clerks (APS3 officers) who face a substantial rise to progress to an APS6 level position (DRO). This means that they are often passed over for promotion by more highly qualified applicants from other government agencies or from the private sector and can significantly affect the morale of those seeking advancement.
- 2.17 Furthermore, for many divisional office staff there are limited opportunities to seek employment outside the AEC in their localities, meaning they have little alternative but to remain in these positions for significant periods of time.¹⁵
- 2.18 The CPSU told the committee:
- At the APS3 level, to get on you have to leave the office or wait for the divisional returning officer to be promoted, to retire or to resign. Even in the event that a vacancy does become available at the divisional returning officer level, we are advised that those positions are filled more often than not by an outside applicant. So to get on you have to move.¹⁶
- 2.19 Opportunities for advancement have also been affected by the AEC having had a stable workforce of DROs over the last 20 years, contributing to the AEC's status as the oldest agency in the public service, based on the average age of its staff.¹⁷ The committee was advised that many DROs are now nearing retirement age and the AEC expects that the rate of turnover in staff anticipated will result in a number of people being appointed from outside the AEC.¹⁸
- 2.20 Table 2.2 below shows the average age of ongoing divisional office staff.

14 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 16.

15 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 16.

16 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 37.

17 As reported in the Australian Public Service Commission's 'State of the Service Report' 2005-06. See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 19.

18 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007.

Table 2.2 Divisional office ongoing staff age at 30 June 2006

State (i)	25 – 34	35 – 44	45 – 54	55+	Total Staff	Average Age
NSW/ACT	7	23	69	38	137	49.97
VIC	5	22	49	31	107	49.85
QLD	8	14	30	21	73	48.23
WA	1	13	21	8	43	48.51
SA	3	2	20	5	30	48.67
TAS	1	8	5	1	15	43.27
Total	25	82	194	104	405	48.08

(i) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, p. 15.

2.21 It was suggested that the AEC has in the past been highly supportive of those divisional office staff looking to further their careers within the organisation. According to Brian McKivat, staff at the APS2 and APS3 levels have often been given the opportunity to perform the duties of higher-level positions when these positions have become temporarily vacant. However, Mr McKivat explained that such opportunities have become less common under the new working arrangements:

Over the past few years there has been very little or in fact no funding provided for the backfilling of positions and staff at the APS2 and APS3 level now do not have the same opportunities to develop their skills and experience. As a consequence of this, staff at these levels are now finding it harder to compete for promotion.¹⁹

2.22 The CPSU's view is that where vacancies occur in divisional offices, selection processes should be undertaken as a matter of priority to fill the positions. During the selection process, the CPSU suggested that staff should be given the opportunity to temporarily perform higher duties, adding that 'it should not be a long term strategy to avoid filling positions in non-election years.'²⁰

2.23 The CPSU also strongly advocated promoting from within where appropriate, so that the AEC can capitalise on the 'enormous investment' it puts into staff training:

19 Mr B. McKivat, Submission no. 6, p. 3.

20 Community and Public Sector Union, Submission no. 11, p. 3.

...if you have a careful look at the duty statements for the divisional returning officer, the divisional clerk and the divisional assistant, you will see that there is a natural progression of experience, training and functionality between each of the three roles.

It is not our submission that we should redesign these offices to ensure maximum career opportunities for everybody...what we are certainly saying is that we can do it better than we are doing it right now. Where career opportunities should be available, and where that is consistent with the public interest, it should be done and it can be done.²¹

- 2.24 However, Brian Peisley cautioned that the jump from an APS3 to APS6 was not always a smooth transition, noting that in many cases, promoted employees 'struggle with the complexity of the duties and the management of the staff'.²²
- 2.25 Despite evidence alluding to a perception that the jump from an APS3 to an APS6 cannot be filled by internal recruitment, the AEC denied that there is any active policy to recruit externally and maintained that recruitment is conducted on the basis of merit.
- 2.26 In support of this, the AEC pointed out that 11 of the 51 new DROs appointed for the forthcoming election had come from within the agency.²³ The AEC also indicated that many of its staff at the APS2 and APS3 levels were content with their positions and did not seek career advancement, as evidenced by the fact that many employees do not apply for promotion when positions are advertised.²⁴

Appropriateness of staffing levels and APS classifications

- 2.27 It was evident from submissions and acknowledged by the AEC itself that there is no one-size-fits-all with regard to divisional offices due to the diversity of workloads and the diversity of regions across Australia in which divisional offices are located.²⁵
- 2.28 The workload of divisional offices has changed significantly and the volume of work has increased substantially, particularly in recent years.
-

21 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 39.

22 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, pp.8-9

23 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 18.

24 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, pp. 20-21.

25 See Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4, Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 4. See also *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 14.

- 2.29 The AEC partly attributed this increase in workload to technological change and changes to electoral legislation, which have added layers of complexity to enrolment processing, but acknowledged that it is also a reflection of the AEC's efforts to meet rising client and stakeholder expectations.²⁶
- 2.30 The increased demand has had an impact on staffing arrangements. However, it was reported that while staffing numbers at the national office have increased, the opposite is true for divisional offices. Mr McKivat stated:
- At the national office level there has been a large increase in staff and contractors due to these increased demands. The national office staffing levels has also increased where functions once carried out in the state offices have been transferred to the national office...Unfortunately at the divisional office level or the coal face of the AEC staffing levels have been reduced.²⁷
- 2.31 Mr McKivat argued that the number of staff and the APS staffing levels in divisional offices are issues which 'need to be addressed.'²⁸
- 2.32 The issue of divisional office workloads was described by the CPSU as 'an ongoing and underlying problem' and prompted calls for a review into the classifications currently applied to divisional office staff, particularly those working at the APS2 and APS3 levels. The CPSU stated:
- When you turn your mind to the duty statements that are now being published, against which persons are being employed, you will see that the responsibilities of those positions now exceed the responsibilities and work that was expected of those people when the positions were originally conceived. So we think there is an urgent need for a review to occur. We would not be surprised if the outcome of that review were to lead to a reclassification, at least, of the divisional clerk position and the divisional officer assistant position. We think that is in the interests of the persons filling those jobs and in the interests of staff retention and career opportunities within the divisional offices.²⁹
- 2.33 Brian McKivat also questioned the implementation of any staffing model in the absence of a thorough workload review across the divisional office network:

26 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp.5-6.

27 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 5.

28 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4.

29 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 35.

As far as I am aware no thorough workload review has ever been conducted for each divisional office and until such a review is completed it is very difficult to determine the correct number of staff and the structure of staff required in each divisional office.³⁰

- 2.34 Concerns were expressed about the movement of AEC employees to other organisations because of frustrations that their job classifications do not recognise their increased workload. It was argued by the CPSU that the community and the general public lose out when this happens.³¹

Retention issues

- 2.35 Almost half of the separations by ongoing divisional office staff in 2005-06 were by employees under the age of fifty (see Table 2.3). This was noted with some concern by the AEC as an indication that the organisation had some retention issues, which the AEC partly attributes to the limited opportunities for career advancement discussed earlier in this section.

Table 2.3 Divisional office ongoing staff separations – 2005-2006

State (i)	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	Total Staff	Total <50
NSW/ACT	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	1	7	5
VIC	0	0	3	0	1	1	8	1	0	14	5
QLD	0	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	0	6	4
WA	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	4	2
SA	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	2
TAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	0
Total	1	0	5	3	5	4	14	5	1	38	18

(i) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, p. 15.

- 2.36 The AEC recognises the increase in staff separations are also a reflection of the trend for the next generation of employees, who are displaying a greater interest in career mobility and are not necessarily content to remain in the one agency for an extended period.³²

30 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 5.

31 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 40.

32 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 15.

- 2.37 The AEC acknowledged that the increasingly short tenure of divisional office staff is likely to have significant impacts for the organisation, which has previously benefited from a stable workforce possessing a substantial corporate knowledge base.³³ The high rate of turnover will place an increased emphasis on the training and development of new staff.
- 2.38 This in itself poses problems for the AEC, which acknowledged that a three-person office makes it difficult to implement effective learning and development programs. In a three-person office there is usually only one person available to provide one-on-one training which can result in poor practices being passed on.³⁴ Divisional office employees already have limited opportunities to attend formal training programs because of the cost and time associated with travel to State Offices.³⁵
- 2.39 Retention of casual staff is also an issue for the AEC. Casual staff are usually provided with significant training but when casuals are not offered enough work, the committee was told that they tend to look for positions in other organisations, taking their corporate knowledge with them. Mr McKivat stated:
- Every time you bring in a casual, you have to train them. That involves a fairly long and lengthy training process. So we are losing money. We are losing value for money by using casual staff because much of the time is spent on training them up in the fairly complicated computerised enrolment environment that we work in.³⁶
- 2.40 Mr McKivat also noted that the AEC's reliance on casuals rather than employing more permanent staff did not appear to be 'an efficient way to operate'.³⁷

Committee conclusions

- 2.41 Effective electoral administration is a critical component of a healthy democracy, and it has been a timely exercise for the committee to review aspects of the administration of the AEC with a federal election approaching.

33 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 16-17.

34 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 17.

35 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 17.

36 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

37 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

- 2.42 Without an extensive body of evidence to draw on, it is difficult for the committee to ascertain whether the issues raised during the inquiry are symptomatic of widespread unrest, or whether they represent isolated cases of staff struggling to adjust to significant reform.
- 2.43 While the committee understands the need for the AEC to maintain flexibility in its staffing arrangements, it does appear that many of the administrative changes undertaken have been driven by the need or desire for cost savings. It is imperative that any cost saving measures are carefully considered so there is no adverse impact on the AEC's ability to continue to deliver its objectives and to maintain its accessibility to the public and community expectations.
- 2.44 The terms of reference required that the committee consider whether the current staffing arrangements of AEC divisional offices meet career expectations for employees. Again, it is difficult for the committee to draw comprehensive conclusions from the limited information available.
- 2.45 While there is limited opportunity for career progression for divisional office employees, it is the committee's view that this is an unfortunate by-product of the divisional office structure, which is necessary to provide the best level of service to AEC stakeholders.
- 2.46 Concerns have been raised about the recruitment of external applicants in favour of promoting from within, however there was no evidence to suggest a deliberate policy to recruit externally, with the AEC confirming that selection is based on merit.
- 2.47 Nonetheless, the committee acknowledges the suggestion that the recruitment of external candidates can have detrimental consequences for the morale and motivation of staff unsuccessful in seeking promotion. The committee was therefore concerned to learn that an effective avenue to bridging this divide, that is, the opportunity for staff to perform higher duties when temporary vacancies arise, has diminished under recent changes to working arrangements.
- 2.48 The committee encourages the AEC to adopt the practice, where appropriate, of filling temporary vacant positions in divisional offices by appointing suitable staff to perform higher duties until the position has been filled through a formal selection process, in line with APS guidelines.
- 2.49 It was suggested by the CPSU that the issue of whether APS staffing levels are appropriate for the work being carried out by divisional offices may be resolved through a classification review. The committee notes the AEC's

comment that certain standard public sector models and approaches to fixing staffing levels and classifications would not work well in the AEC.³⁸

- 2.50 The committee notes that the AEC's Corporate Plan for 2007-08 includes the development of a new workforce planning strategy and action plan as one of its business priorities. The intent behind the strategy and action plan is to 'improve the AEC's staff recruitment processes, retention strategies and learning and development programs to meet current and future business needs'.³⁹ The committee is encouraged that the AEC has identified staff recruitment and retention as issues which need to be addressed as a matter of priority.
- 2.51 However, the committee believes that concerns over the current staffing arrangements in divisional offices raised during the inquiry were sufficient to warrant further investigation. While the committee is not in a position to draw definitive conclusions on the basis of evidence it received, it believes that it is necessary for the Auditor-General to examine the issue of workforce planning in the AEC in further detail.

Recommendation 1

- 2.52 **The committee recommends that the Auditor-General conduct an audit of workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission, with a view to determining whether the Commission's workforce planning strategy is supporting effective practices in human resource management for divisional office staff and achieving efficient and effective outcomes.**

Staffing requirements for ongoing habitation reviews

- 2.53 The appropriateness and reliability of the system used by the AEC for managing the electoral roll and the validity and accuracy of the roll is an issue which is continuously raised in submissions to inquiries by this committee. The terms of reference for this inquiry required that the committee investigate what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews. Habitation reviews explains the process whereby AEC officers doorknock residences to confirm enrolments for

38 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 24-25.

39 Australian Electoral Commission, *Corporate Plan 2007-08*, p. 8.

those addresses and to identify where any amendments to information recorded on the electoral roll may be required. Mr Kirkpatrick stated that:

The electoral roll will continue to carry names and addresses of people who do not live at those addresses unless Habitation Reviews are carried out regularly and systematically...⁴⁰

- 2.54 It is important to note that the AEC no longer conducts biennial global habitation reviews. The AEC found that the costs of habitation reviews were escalating exponentially and also that the electoral roll became increasingly out-of-date in between reviews. Another major criticism of the habitation review in the past was that around 65 per cent of resources were expended during each review confirming enrolments that had not changed. Furthermore, since habitation reviews were timed to provide the most up-to-date roll for federal elections, this did not necessarily fit in with State and Territory election cycles and it was felt that a more continuous method of roll update was required.⁴¹ The AEC's alternative means of maintaining an up-to-date roll is the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program, which was introduced in 1999 primarily to address the shortcomings of the biennial habitation review.
- 2.55 The AEC believes the CRU program involves a more targeted approach, focusing on areas where there is evidence to suggest that electoral roll information is outdated or incorrect.⁴²
- 2.56 The major activity under CRU involves electoral roll data being matched against data obtained from other organisations and government agencies to identify specific addresses where people are moving either to or from, and to identify any anomalies in roll data.⁴³ Examples of data used in the data matching process are Australia Post Redirection Advices and Centrelink Change of Address Advices.
- 2.57 Fieldwork conducted under the CRU program is generally either non-response fieldwork or growth fieldwork. Non-response fieldwork involves a targeted doorknock whereby officers contact specifically identified addresses – such as those where persons have not responded to AEC correspondence – rather than all addresses within a specified area. Growth field work is similar to that conducted under the full habitation reviews, which targets all addresses within a selected area identified as an

40 Mr B. Kirkpatrick, *Submission no. 3*, p. 1.

41 Australian Electoral Commission website:
http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/About_Electoral_Roll/Roll_review.htm.

42 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. 1.

43 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. 1.

area of high growth or turnover, rather than specific addresses. Generally, this fieldwork is carried out by casual staff.

- 2.58 In its submission, the AEC advocated a multifaceted approach to roll review, drawing on the findings of a 2007 review of the CRU program which identified areas where performance might be improved.⁴⁴ The review identified that various aspects of the CRU regime appear to be a more cost effective arrangement in achieving enrolment updates than the habitation review, and that enrolment workloads are generally much more evenly spread over the year under CRU.⁴⁵
- 2.59 The AEC has been undertaking a target enrolment strategy since March 2007, which has involved officers going to more than one million addresses where the AEC knew there were residents who were not on the roll. The AEC advised that the hit rate across the country of actually receiving cards from targeted addresses was '31 or 32 per cent'.⁴⁶
- 2.60 According to the AEC, field staff have reported an increasing culture of resistance at the door, and the AEC considers that habitation reviews are not necessarily any more effective than other methods of attracting enrolment.⁴⁷ However, the AEC did indicate that a recent exercise revealed a possible correlation between the type of review officer recruited and their success rate in obtaining forms from residents:
- Certainly in our recent exercise in New South Wales in the division of Blaxland we found evidence of the commissioner's point about the type of review officers. A special effort was made to recruit review officers to go around and doorknock, reflecting the demographics of the particular division. Interestingly enough, we are finding that the return rate of the actual forms there is much higher. As of last week, it was in the order of 58 per cent for that division.⁴⁸
- 2.61 The AEC indicated that it would be further investigating the significance of this outcome, and acknowledged that it may result in a more focused effort on the review officers the AEC seeks to attract.⁴⁹
- 2.62 It was suggested during the inquiry that the current level of staffing for habitation reviews may be adequate for some divisions, but not for

44 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 10.

45 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. vii.

46 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 12.

47 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 12.

48 Ms B. Davis (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 13.

49 Ms B. Davis (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 13.

others.⁵⁰ The committee was told that the conduct of habitation reviews may be more effective if the AEC were to employ permanent officers to undertake this role, although it was acknowledged that temporary staff would still be required in non-metropolitan areas.⁵¹

2.63 The CPSU advised that its members considered the current staffing levels for habitation reviews to be adequate, provided that all positions are filled and an adequate pool of casual staff is available for conducting field work.

2.64 Mr Peisley suggested that the committee should consider the broader question of what methods the AEC should be employing to encourage people to enrol and to vote, on the basis that 'short, sharp review periods and sending letters to people we know are not on the roll, does not work effectively.'⁵² He added:

I sometimes wonder whether every time the electorate sees a letter coming from the Electoral Commissioner it is put straight into the bin. There will come a point when we will need to go back to doorknocking every house and saying, 'Who lives in this house?' To do that, maybe we need to be smarter. If we had a permanent doorknocker or someone who was employed to go out and do the whole of an electoral division over a 12-month period...they could slowly but surely work through an area. This is my belief; this is not the commission's belief. Maybe there are smarter ways.⁵³

Committee conclusions

2.65 While the CRU program has only been in place since 1999, it is clear that it presents a more cost-effective arrangement for the AEC than the more labour-intensive biennial habitation review. The question for the committee is whether the CRU is more effective in ensuring an electoral roll of the highest integrity and accuracy, bearing in mind the AEC's evidence that a 100 per cent accurate, up-to-date electoral roll is unattainable.⁵⁴

2.66 On evidence available to the committee, and by the AEC's own admission, there is plenty of scope for continuous improvement in CRU processes. It is encouraging that the AEC is continuously looking at ways to refine and enhance its CRU program.

50 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7.

51 See Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7, and Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4.

52 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7.

53 Mr B. Peisley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 10.

54 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 15.

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- 2.67 Nevertheless, it is important that the most effective means of ensuring an accurate roll are not compromised in the interests of producing efficiencies.
- 2.68 The committee notes there were some concerns that the move away from the global habitation review has further diminished the ability of the AEC to maintain an up-to-date electoral roll. There was insufficient evidence for the committee to conclude that there is a more reliable and accurate process of maintaining an up-to-date electoral roll than the CRU.
- 2.69 The committee anticipates that this issue will continue to be investigated following the next federal election when its successor undertakes its regular inquiry into the conduct of that election. It is expected that the committee will continue to assess whether the implementation of CRU is continuing to meet stakeholders' needs and expectations.

Divisional offices with shared premises

Introduction

- 3.1 The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has had divisional offices sharing premises since 1974. Currently there are 46 divisional offices out of 150 sharing premises across 18 different sites (see Table 3.1 on p. 24).
- 3.2 The AEC indicated that two further 'co-locations' were expected to take place in August 2007.
- 3.3 The committee's predecessor examined the issue of co-located offices in its report on the conduct of the 2001 federal election. Noting that co-locations could offer 'administrative efficiencies', the committee was not satisfied that the AEC had addressed 'longstanding concerns' about:¹
- potential loss of local knowledge;
 - reduced service to electors, MPs and candidates;
 - diminished capacity to conduct electoral education; and
 - reduced number of permanent staff conducting elections.
- 3.4 On this basis, the committee recommended that co-locations of AEC divisional offices 'not proceed'.²

1 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

2 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

Table 3.1 Divisional offices in shared premises

Offices	State	Location	Date
Canberra / Fraser	ACT	Canberra City	1996
Banks / Blaxland	NSW	Bankstown	2007 ⁽ⁱ⁾
Bennelong / Berowra / Bradfield / North Sydney	NSW	Chatswood	2003 ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
Fowler / Prospect	NSW	Fairfield	2007 ⁽ⁱ⁾
Hunter / Paterson	NSW	East Maitland	2004
Macarthur / Werriwa	NSW	Campbelltown	2000
NSW State Office / Grayndler / Sydney / Wentworth	NSW	Haymarket	2000 ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
NT Office / Lingiari / Solomon ^(iv)	NT	Darwin	2000 ^(v)
Blair / Oxley ^(vi)	QLD	Ipswich	1997
McPherson / Moncrieff ^(vi)	QLD	Southport	1988
QLD State Office / Bonner / Brisbane / Griffith / Lilley / Moreton / Ryan	QLD	Brisbane	2004 ^(vii)
Fadden / Forde / Rankin	QLD	Beenleigh	2003
Boothby / Hindmarsh / Kingston	SA	Oaklands Park	1996
SA State Office / Adelaide / Sturt	SA	Adelaide	2003 ^(viii)
Bass / Lyons	TAS	Launceston	1974
TAS State Office / Denison / Franklin ^(vi)	TAS	Hobart	1987
Casey / Chisholm / Deakin / Menzies	VIC	Ringwood	1998
VIC State Office / Melbourne / Melbourne Ports ^(ix)	VIC	Melbourne	1999
Hasluck / Pearce ^(vi)	WA	Midland	2001
WA State Office / Perth	WA	Perth	2002

⁽ⁱ⁾ Anticipated date of collocation.

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ Bradfield and North Sydney collocated in 1991. Bennelong joined collocation in 1999 and Berowra joined collocation in 2003.

⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ NSW State Office, Grayndler and Sydney collocated 1998. Wentworth joined collocation in 2000.

^(iv) Divisional offices and Northern Territory office are amalgamated.

^(v) Northern Territory Office has always shared premises with the divisional office(s) in Darwin.

^(vi) Divisional offices are amalgamated.

^(vii) QLD State Office and Brisbane collocated in 1996. Lilley and Moreton joined collocation in 2000, Bonner and Griffith in 2003 and Ryan in 2004.

^(viii) SA State Office and Adelaide collocated in 1997. Sturt joined the collocation in 2003. From 1989 to 1997, SA State Office and Adelaide were both located in the Commonwealth Centre, but on different floors.

^(ix) VIC State Office and the collocated divisions of Melbourne and Melbourne Ports are on different floors and do not have share features such as a common counter.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 4.

- 3.5 In mid-2002, following an AEC/ Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA) resourcing review of the Commission, and the expectation by DOFA that the AEC would explore all possible cost-saving measures, the AEC investigated the geographic rationalisation of a number of divisional offices.³
- 3.6 Eight clusters of offices were identified and recommended for amalgamation, however, according to the AEC, in 'practical terms', these were co-locations:
- ...the traditional divisional organisational silo would give way to work cells based [on] either AEC business functions, such as an enrolment cell and elections cell, or some other cross-divisional organisational arrangement. It was envisaged that cost savings would be achieved by creating staffing structures in these collocations that would achieve salary savings.⁴
- 3.7 Following amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* in 2006, a divisional office may now only be located outside its divisional boundaries with the written approval of the Special Minister of State.
- 3.8 The AEC noted that the diversity of electorates, cyclical nature of its work and unpredictability of election dates necessitated a flexible approach to structuring its workforce:
- The cyclical nature of our business necessitates a flexibility in management response, and human and financial resources need to be carefully positioned to enable the AEC, to deliver the electoral services required by our clients and stakeholders...it is axiomatic that a fully distributed network comprising an individual office with only three staff in each division may not always be the best solution.⁵
- 3.9 This need to maintain flexibility forms the basis for the Commission's current policy on co-locations, where they are considered appropriate.

'Co-located' versus 'amalgamated' divisional offices

- 3.10 There is a degree of disputation over the use of the terms 'co-located' and 'amalgamated' when referring to AEC divisional offices in shared premises. The AEC was at pains to point out that the two – albeit similar – terms describe different work structures, along the lines of their

3 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 27.

4 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 27.

5 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

respective dictionary definitions. That is, to 'place together' as opposed to 'form one structure.'⁶

- 3.11 In a **co-located** office, two or more divisional offices share the same accommodation, including computers, public areas and amenities.⁷ There is no change to the staffing arrangements of the divisional offices within the co-location – each has the same staffing profile as a stand-alone divisional office (an APS6, APS 3 and APS2) with combinations of ongoing, non-ongoing and temporary staff.
- 3.12 In addition, co-located offices often share some work. For example, a co-located office may have a single roll management team or at elections, one team may process all postal ballots for the divisions involved. However, there is a Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) designated for each of the separate divisions at all times.⁸
- 3.13 An **amalgamated** office involves two or more divisional offices sharing the same premises with a combined, single staffing structure. The number of staff is usually the same but the classification structure is not restricted to the standard divisional office set-up of an APS2, an APS3, and an APS6. There is a staff member on site with responsibility for the management of all the functions at the site, but during an election a DRO is appointed for each division within the amalgamated office. The AEC explained:
- It follows that, while all amalgamated offices must also be collocated, not all collocated offices are amalgamated, and in fact very few are.⁹
- 3.14 The AEC advised that its formal amalgamation program ended in 2004, but previously amalgamated offices are still in operation. As Mr Campbell told the committee:
- 'Amalgamated' is a dead word.¹⁰
- 3.15 The above are to be distinguished from the practice of **workload sharing** in which high volume or complex work (usually enrolment work) is shared across divisions, to ensure even workloads. Workload sharing does not signify amalgamation, and in theory, divisions do not need to be co-located for the practice to take place (although in reality, this is often

6 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 2.

7 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 2.

8 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 2.

9 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 3.

10 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 23.

the case). Workload sharing was introduced with the new 3.2 FTE staffing model (discussed in Chapter 2) over 2006-07.

Amalgamation by any other name: what does co-location really mean?

- 3.16 There is some scepticism, particularly amongst AEC employees, about the practical application of 'co-locations', particularly with the advent of workload sharing. Brian McKivat, an AEC employee and prior staff representative, noted:

I believe that the Committee must ask the AEC to clearly define the term "co-location" ... it now seems that the definition of "co-location" has changed quite significantly since the original advice to Members of Parliament. The staffing levels in a number of co-located offices have now been reduced and "new working arrangements" have been introduced. These new working arrangements, in some cases, now mean that divisional staff are no longer working in stand-alone divisions.¹¹

- 3.17 Mr McKivat noted that AEC staff were 'generally' supportive of the original principle of co-locations. However, he added:

But what has happened now... is that the AEC has decided to go a lot further than that. They have thought: 'Now we have six people working at one site why don't we try and pull down the barriers? Why don't we mix the two divisions in together?'¹²

- 3.18 Sue Michie, a former AEC employee, also voiced her confusion regarding AEC terminology:

I was always a little bit confused about the difference between workload sharing and amalgamation. I could not see very much difference between them. Basically, I always got the understanding that workload sharing would be: if one division is having trouble trying to complete something and you are in a co-located site then somebody else, maybe from another existing division at that location, will come in and give a hand – which I think is always what we were doing when we were all under one roof at Chatswood.¹³

11 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 2

12 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 46.

13 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 16.

3.19 Further muddying the waters, the AEC was at pains to explain that the Chatswood office is a co-located office, when the committee was also told that it was:

...more clearly and indisputably an amalgamation of these divisions and their functions.¹⁴

3.20 The Chatswood office was the source of much contention during the inquiry, and is discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

3.21 The committee, too, had difficulty understanding the practical differences between the various terminology, particularly as it appears that workload sharing implies a restructuring of staff into 'cells' rather than divisions.

3.22 The AEC argued that co-location was not the pivotal issue for the Commission, but rather, ensuring the AEC maintains the flexibility to continue to deliver effective electoral services and meet client and stakeholder expectations.¹⁵

3.23 The AEC noted that its stakeholders are a key consideration when new co-locations are investigated.¹⁶ This necessitates finding suitable accommodation in locations relevant to the public, easily accessible by public transport. Savings on property and technology are not reported to be significant, given the high rent in capital cities.¹⁷

3.24 Brian Peisley, an AEC employee of more than 20 years, appearing before the committee in a private capacity, questioned the public interest in site-selection in AEC offices:

When the divisions choose a site for co-location it is where they get the best rent; it is not where it is ideal to provide the majority of the services from.¹⁸

'Regionalisation'

3.25 Mr Peisley promoted a policy of 'regionalisation', rather than stand-alone offices or co-location, to better process enrolments and to provide a more professional service to regions. Mr Peisley stated:

My personal belief is that stand-alone and co-located divisions do not service the community. The office structure of those divisions

14 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, pp. 1-2.

15 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

16 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 23.

17 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 23.

18 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 8.

is such that, while they do basic work, the influx of work into those divisions is not meeting the organisation's requirements of processing the enrolment or the work that is going through at the time. We can only do bare basic work.¹⁹

3.26 The committee did not receive any additional evidence supporting this view. In contrast, a view was expressed that regionalisation would in fact *reduce* the quality of service to regional electors:

All any regionalisation would do would be to reduce the number of sites that we currently have. I cannot see that that would provide, particularly to country people, anything other than a service inferior to what we have at the moment. Most of the rural or regional divisions around Australia are based in the major towns within the divisional boundaries or in the towns that are more central or easier for the majority of people to visit in person if they need to.²⁰

3.27 The committee is of the view that regionalisation would reduce the ability of the AEC to fulfil its obligations. In evidence to the committee, the Electoral Commissioner made it clear that regionalisation was not AEC policy.²¹

Financial and social impacts of co-located offices

3.28 The AEC noted in its submission that there were cost savings where AEC offices shares premises. As at 30 June 2006, the annual costs of operating the AEC's 20 shared premises were:

- \$1.9 million for rent; and
- \$509,000 for voice and data communications connection costs.²²

3.29 To reverse this arrangement and locate all AEC offices back in their relevant divisions, the estimated revised cost would be:

- \$2.17 million for rent;
- \$1.3 million for voice and data communications connection costs; and

19 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 2.

20 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 48.

21 Mr I. Campbell, Australian Electoral Commission, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 26.

22 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

- \$8.4 million, as a one-off cost calculated at 30 June 2006, for the relocation to new premises.²³

3.30 Despite the savings outlined above and the cost-saving imperatives of the past, Mr Campbell told the committee that these are not the current purpose of or philosophy behind co-locations.

What is happening in Chatswood, Ringwood or anywhere else has nothing to do with cost savings.²⁴

3.31 Mr McKivat noted that there could be tangible benefits to co-locations 'as long as it is a co-location in the strict sense of the word.' That is, offices which tend to be inner-metropolitan and therefore geographically close to each other and the electorates they service:

There were comments to me from people who worked in a co-located site, when they were first co-located and were given good accommodation and full staffing resources and were able to operate as stand-alone divisions – in other words, the three staff belonging to division X worked for division X. The comments back were: 'It was good. It was healthy. It was nice to have six people in the office rather than three. We got good accommodation out of all of this. We got moved to a nicer area. We had better opportunities to work closely with our colleagues.' There really were positives.²⁵

3.32 Dianne Switzer, who has worked in the co-located Chatswood office, spoke of a starkly different scenario, where co-location led to unhappy workers, often due to confusion and frustration with shared work tasks:

The staff having previously worked well and happily together, have found they are under stress, quite often at loggerheads with one another, not exactly sure what they should be doing or accomplishing (whether it belongs to their cell or another cell)...²⁶

Opportunities for staff and corporate knowledge

3.33 The AEC asserted that some co-locations have improved the capacity of divisional offices to retain corporate knowledge and provide a wider range of tasks and opportunities for staff:

23 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

24 Mr I. Campbell, Australian Electoral Commission, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 25.

25 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 45.

26 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

[co-location has] undoubtedly contributed to the AEC's ability to improve recruitment and retention, knowledge management and succession planning, training and development, and people management at these sites.²⁷

- 3.34 Tom Rogers, AEC State Manager for NSW, told the committee that co-located offices increase the tasks available to staff, particularly more junior ones, enhancing their skills and development:

An APS2 in a stand-alone office would potentially be involved in a fairly limited range of tasks, but in a larger office they may get the scope to be involved in a larger range of tasks because of the workload sharing.²⁸

- 3.35 However, the committee also heard conflicting evidence that co-location hinders corporate knowledge and opportunities for staff. One employee compared the co-located Chatswood office to a 'repetitious factory floor.'²⁹ Sue Michie told the committee that in her experience in a co-located office, staff were often stuck doing repetition tasks. This led to poor morale, with a 'use it or lose it' effect with respect to skills.

I have been able to observe a number of changes in attitude of staff members and work place procedures. Firstly, nearly all staff have expressed a reluctance at having to do on-going repetitive tasks.

...Staff are concerned that they are losing previously acquired skills that no-longer are relevant to their immediate jobs...They are also concerned that come a federal election, they may be required to step into tasks that they have not experienced for months.³⁰

- 3.36 It was put to the committee that having staff focus on one area or cell, spread across multiple divisions, inhibits the ability of staff to build critical knowledge of their local area, with potential serious flow on effects for the integrity of the electoral roll. Mr Stephen Jones, national secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), noted:

The employees within [divisional offices] develop, over time, considerable local knowledge and corporate memory of demographics and affairs within their division, and we believe that is lost with the merger, amalgamation, collocation – however it is expressed – of the offices. Quite apart from the interests of our

27 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 18.

28 Mr T. Rogers (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 28.

29 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

30 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Submission no. 4*, p. 2.

employees, there is a public interest at stake, so we add our voice to those who have given evidence before the committee opposing that process.³¹

- 3.37 W. Kirkpatrick, member and past president of the H.S. Chapman Society, submitted that co-locations have had a particular impact at the DRO level:

Co locations have contributed to removing the community's awareness of the presence and importance of the local Divisional Returning Officer and his/her role. By increasing the extent of the roll in collocations, the DRO's previous valuable knowledge of the electorate which was and is an aid to better control of the detail in preparation for elections, has been dissipated.³²

Roll integrity

- 3.38 As noted above, the issue of roll integrity – and the maintenance thereof – was raised as a serious issue in co-located offices, where employees previously responsible for one division are now responsible for enrolment in two or more divisions. This disperses their local knowledge, and limits their capacity to double and triple check information and 'master' the area they are responsible for. Mrs Michie stated that:

Local knowledge is sort of frowned upon in the AEC these days, because not every division can have it.³³

- 3.39 Dr Amy McGrath OAM from the H.S. Chapman Society noted:

Divisional Returning Officers said they [amalgamations or co-locations] jeopardise the electoral system. Divisional staff lose contact with the physical nature of their electorate and electors. They have a reduced ability to detect enrolment fraud via roll reviews.³⁴

- 3.40 The Liberal Party of Australia reiterated its view from the 2004 federal election inquiry, in which it expressed concern:

...about any attempt by the AEC to pursue the co-location of AEC Divisional Offices. There is value in these Divisional offices being located within the electorate for which they are responsible.³⁵

31 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 34.

32 Mr B. Kirkpatrick, *Submission no. 3*, p. 2.

33 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 18.

34 H.S. Chapman Society, *Submission no. 2*, p. 5; See also Mr J. Snell, private capacity, *Submission no. 7*, p. 2.

35 The Liberal Party of Australia, *Submission no. 10*, p. 1.

Accessibility for clients

- 3.41 The reduced accessibility of co-located divisional offices was highlighted in a submission from Dr Craig Emerson MP, whose seat of Rankin's (Qld) divisional office was relocated to the neighbouring electorate of Forde as the result of a co-location.
- 3.42 Dr Emerson argued that his constituents have been inconvenienced by the decision, noting that 'very few' Rankin residents attend the co-located office (in Beenleigh), as it is not easily accessible:
- Prior to the relocation, the Rankin AEC was centrally located and attracted usage.³⁶
- 3.43 Furthermore, as the population of Rankin is 'highly transient' Dr Emerson believes many electors fail to register.³⁷
- 3.44 Given that the lease of the Beenleigh office is up for renewal in 2007, Dr Emerson suggested that the Rankin AEC office be once again located in the electorate of Rankin.
- 3.45 People With Disability Australia Inc. (PWD) also emphasised the need for divisional offices to be located in easy to reach places. PWD did not support co-locations if they forced the public to travel long distances.³⁸
- 3.46 Sue Michie reported that co-located offices made it more difficult to provide a good and accessible service to electors, particularly elderly ones:

One of the things I was taught when I first arrived in the AEC was be professional but be kind to electors as well. In Berowra division, for instance, in the census statistics in 2001, Hornsby was the oldest community in Australia. We had a lot of elderly people coming into our office. Those people do need special attention I just find that those things that were instilled into me, that kindness to electors, have been sort of thrown back in their faces in many ways, in moving out of the area.³⁹

36 Dr C. Emerson, MP, *Submission no. 1*, p. 1.

37 Dr C. Emerson, MP, *Submission no. 1*, p. 1.

38 People With Disability Australia Inc., *Submission no. 12*, p. 2.

39 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 24.

Office closures

- 3.47 The increased number of staff in a co-located office, as opposed to a stand-alone divisional office, means that offices are less likely to be shut during working hours due to staff absences.
- 3.48 Table 3.2 indicates the number of days for which divisional offices have had to close their doors to the public due to staff absences.

Table 3.2 Divisional closures – 2005-2006

State (i)	Number Divisions (ii)	Number of days
NSW/ACT	52	150
VIC	37	70
QLD	28	55
WA	15	0
SA	11	12
TAS	5	0
Total	148 (iii)	287

(i) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

(ii) At 30 June 2006 there were 50 divisions in NSW and 2 in the ACT.

(iii) Excludes Lingjari and Solomon in the Northern Territory.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 18.

- 3.49 The AEC explained that where divisional offices are reduced to one staff member, in many instances the office is closed due to safety reasons, particularly in those offices located in metropolitan areas.⁴⁰ The AEC stated:

This time two years ago in Victoria, we had a problem when the flu seemed to be endemic and we had periods of time when we had to close two or three offices a day ... the reality of life is that three person offices lead to problems about how you keep them open continuously.⁴¹

- 3.50 This is a source of frustration for staff, as Mr Peisley noted:

As a divisional returning officer, one of the biggest frustrations I had in the past was that, where you were the only staff member in the office in a stand-alone site, for safety reasons you would have to lock your door. There would be people knocking on the door

⁴⁰ Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 26.

⁴¹ Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 26.

wanting to come in, and you could not let them in because you were the only person in that office. When you go to bigger sites, if staff are away at least the other divisions are supporting the office opening rules.⁴²

Case study: Chatswood divisional office

- 3.51 Serious concerns about the operations at a co-located northern Sydney Divisional Office in Chatswood (comprising the metropolitan divisional offices of Bennelong, Berowra, Bradfield and North Sydney) were raised in evidence to the inquiry.
- 3.52 The Chatswood site has accommodated four divisional offices since 2003.⁴³
- 3.53 The vast majority of evidence the committee received from AEC employees was from either current or former Chatswood staff members.
- 3.54 One AEC employee held such serious reservations about the successful conduct of the next Federal election at the Chatswood site that she handed in her resignation, citing that she did 'not want to be involved in an election disaster'.⁴⁴ Another staff member described the Chatswood site as 'the unhappiest office I have ever set foot in during my working career'.⁴⁵
- 3.55 Following concerns raised in written submissions, the committee conducted a site visit of the Chatswood premises in July 2007.
- 3.56 Between August 2003 and August 2006, staff at Chatswood implemented various initiatives to utilise their co-location. This included sharing casual staff, responsibility for counter enquiries and mail workloads. At the 2004 federal election, major tasks were allocated to divisions.
- 3.57 Workload sharing was introduced to the office in February 2007, after an external DRO organised the office in line with NSW state office requirements.⁴⁶
- 3.58 The committee understands that following the introduction of workload-sharing the Chatswood office operates on a functional basis.

42 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 2.

43 As noted above, Bradfield and North Sydney co-located in 1991, Bennelong joined in 1999 and Berowra in 2003.

44 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 3.

45 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

46 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 1.

Under this structure, a DRO is given responsibility for managing a particular function across all four divisions within the co-located site, with the assistance of support staff – rather than overseeing an entire, discrete division.

3.59 The office has been split into three ‘cells’:

- enrolment;
- administrations; and
- elections and public awareness.

3.60 Therefore, one DRO oversees everything falling within the enrolment function for all four divisions. Another DRO oversees administration – which includes organising events such as habitation reviews, the selection and hiring of casual staff, dealing with customer enquiries and overseeing office equipment and supplies. Two further DROs manage the elections and public awareness function. At election time, the DRO’s temporarily switch back to taking care of the divisions to which they were originally allocated.

3.61 According to Frank Young, a former full-time and now casual employee of the AEC (who has worked in the Chatswood office), co-location has been misappropriated at the Chatswood site:

Procedures and practices being implemented at Chatswood ... have resulted in the 4 divisions concerned losing virtually all independence with functions being combined and grouped into the categories of Administration; Enrolment; and Elections & Public Awareness.... This model does not represent any generally accepted concept of co-location that I am familiar with, but is rather more clearly and indisputably an amalgamation of these divisions and their functions.⁴⁷

3.62 The committee heard evidence that workload sharing practices at the office meant employees had lost control of their work areas, leading to social tensions, hampering career aspirations and compromising Chatswood’s preparedness for the next federal election.

I think the AEC is a wonderful organisation However, I feel that the recent workload-sharing practices are putting those values and AEC standards under threat.⁴⁸

47 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, pp. 1-2.

48 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 14

- 3.63 Of particular concern to staff at the Chatswood site was the loss of personal oversight over work-areas. Mr McKivat noted:

There are real concerns from a number of staff who are being told, 'You're no longer the returning officer for division X; you're now the manager of the enrolment cell in this particular site.' That is a massive shift from what we have done in the past, and a lot of people have expressed concerns to me that they are worried that they will no longer be able to manage the roll or manage the election at a divisional level because they are not being asked to do it at a divisional level any more.⁴⁹

- 3.64 While no one single reason was given, it was reported to the committee that DROs from other divisions in NSW consider that Chatswood is 'a disaster waiting to happen.'⁵⁰

- 3.65 Sue Michie, who appeared before the committee in a private capacity, recently resigned from the AEC on account of her concerns about the Chatswood office's election performance and her ability to do a professional job under workload sharing arrangements:

A DRO needs to have full input into and control of their division in matters related to casual and support staffing; electoral roll and address register maintenance; polling booth and pre-polling locations; distribution and return of electoral materials, including ballot papers; and fresh scrutines carried on after election day. As a DRO in the new workload-sharing site, this would not be the case ... I would not want other managers making decisions that, in effect, put the outcome in my own division at risk.⁵¹

- 3.66 The committee heard evidence that Chatswood had experienced a comprehensive turnover of staff in recent times, suggesting that staff who were unhappy with the new working arrangements had either left of their own accord or been moved on:

I have been to the Chatswood a number of times and I have spoken to the staff there as a staff representative. All I can say to you, in all honesty, is that every staff member who was working at Chatswood has been moved out of the site.⁵²

49 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 47.

50 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 2.

51 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 14.

52 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 46.

- 3.67 It was noted that the AEC can not afford to lose so much of its corporate knowledge:

It does seem as if anyone likely to have a contrary opinion in relation to the model for Chatswood is being driven out. One thing I am absolutely certain of is that the AEC in Sydney does not have access to such a wealth of experienced personnel that they can afford to waste so much expertise.⁵³

The Ringwood 'Quad'

- 3.68 The 'Ringwood Quad', described as 'the Victorian equivalent to Chatswood' was cited as an example by the AEC where co-location has proven successful.⁵⁴
- 3.69 The site, comprising of four outer metropolitan electorates of Chisholm, Casey, Deakin and Menzies, has the same structure as Chatswood – with four APS6, four APS3, four APS2 and casuals. It was initiated by staff in 1997-1998. It operates along functional lines, with DROs performing the full range of functions come election time.
- 3.70 Ringwood has been used as the model for Chatswood and the Campbell Street co-location in Sydney, comprising of the busy metropolitan electorates of Wentworth, Sydney and Grayndler.

Committee conclusions

- 3.71 The AEC cautioned against drawing conclusions from the situation at Chatswood as evidence of an endemic problem across the agency, noting that no submissions were received from the 17 other co-located or amalgamated sites.⁵⁵ The AEC commented that workload sharing was only new to Chatswood and noted, 'we are still going through that change process.'⁵⁶

53 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, p. 2.

54 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 22.

55 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 25.

56 Mr T. Rogers (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 28.

- 3.72 There was also evidence describing examples of co-locations which have been implemented as originally intended and have been widely supported and successful.⁵⁷
- 3.73 However, the committee is mindful of the possibility that other staff are experiencing difficulties in co-located offices but may perhaps have preferred not to speak out publicly regarding their work environment – and that silence could just as likely be a sign of dysfunction as function.
- 3.74 The committee accepts the AEC's position that one office staffing structure cannot fit all divisional offices. Yet, the committee notes that despite differences in geography and demography, each electorate has exactly the same output: to maintain an accurate roll, provide a professional service to electors and candidates and to facilitate a fair election.
- 3.75 Some of the comments concerning the Chatswood site were concerning. Even if it does prove to be an isolated case, it nevertheless comprises four busy metropolitan electorates which are home to over 300,000 voters.⁵⁸ The committee encourages the AEC to immediately assess what additional resources, training or support the Chatswood site may require in the lead up to the election. The committee also strongly advises the AEC to monitor the Chatswood office's preparedness in the lead up to the 2007 federal election.
- 3.76 The committee reiterates its predecessor's concerns with co-locations, particularly with respect to the integrity of the electoral roll and the reduced interaction/ service to the public, MPs and candidates. The committee holds some concerns as to whether divisional offices engaged in workload sharing practices have the level of control and detailed local knowledge required to adequately maintain their respective electoral rolls.
- 3.77 Concerns were raised about the lack of clarity between the terminology from AEC head office with respect to 'co-location', 'amalgamation' and 'workload sharing'. While amalgamation may well be a 'dead word', it appears to the committee that the underlying principles of amalgamation have emerged once more through the introduction of workload sharing.
- 3.78 There are concerns that moving to an office organised into cells, rather than by electoral divisions, will mean data entry on enrolment is less

57 See, for example, Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, p. 1.

58 According to the Australian Electoral Commission website, as at August 2007, Bennelong had 86,220 enrolled voters; Berowra had 87,078; Bradfield had 90,021; and North Sydney had 89,083. Viewed 8 August 2007, <<http://www.aec.gov.au>>.

accurate and less based on local knowledge, which, over time will affect the accuracy of the electoral roll. These are concerns which cannot be ignored.

- 3.79 However, given evidence presented to the inquiry only focused on a small number of specific AEC divisional offices – some of which was contradictory – the committee is mindful about supporting any across-the-board changes without having further information at its disposal.

Recommendation 2

- 3.80 **The committee recommends that, as part of the audit on workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission proposed in Recommendation 1, the Auditor-General also examine the efficiency and effectiveness of working arrangements in co-located divisional offices.**

Recommendation 3

- 3.81 **The committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission includes an evaluation of the performance of all co-located divisional offices in the upcoming federal election in its submission to the JSCEM inquiry into the conduct of the 2007 federal election.**
- 3.82 While larger offices can provide better security/surety against office closures due to staff absences, the committee is sceptical of the high rate of office closures due to staff absences – given the large pool of casual staff at the AEC's disposal. It is understandable that unexpected absences may be difficult to cover in regional areas, but the impression from the AEC's evidence is that this is more of a problem in metropolitan regions. The committee encourages the AEC to make more effective use of this resource, noting that many other workplaces have successful models in place to combat such occurrences.

The future of the National Tally Room

The National Tally Room

- 4.1 The National Tally Room (NTR) in Canberra is organised by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to provide a central point for the display of election results on federal election night. It is one of Australia's largest media gatherings with representation from radio, print, online and television media. The NTR is the focus of the nation for approximately six hours on election night – from 6 pm to midnight – and has been a fixture of Australian federal elections for over 40 years.¹
- 4.2 In the 1950s, each state had its own separate tally room and there was no central or national tally room on election night. The impetus for the establishment of a national tally room came from newspaper chains – who had been organising their own national tally rooms – to analyse the election on more than a seat-by-seat basis. By the mid-1960s, results were released both in the states and centrally and by the late 1960s, the NTR was well established.²
- 4.3 At the 1974 election, results were transmitted by a national computer system for the first time, which has been updated several times since.³

1 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Election night', *Behind the Scenes* <<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/electionnight.htm>>, viewed 17 August 2007.

2 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 3.

3 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 5.

4.4 In March 2007, the AEC floated the idea of abolishing the NTR in favour of disseminating results entirely via electronic means. Following stakeholder consultation which yielded vastly differing views, the AEC announced that the NTR would continue to be staged for the 2007 federal election, which would 'enable broader consideration and assessment of the future of the NTR' for future elections.⁴

4.5 In its submission, the AEC noted that its decision to review whether to retain the NTR was prompted by:

...a realisation that if the AEC were tasked to re-design on a 'blank sheet', its processes for disseminating results to the community, it is by no means clear that an NTR in its traditional form would be, or form part of, the solution chosen in the light of modern technological opportunities.⁵

How the NTR works

4.6 Election figures for the House of Representatives are displayed on a manual tally board, approximately 35 metres x 7 metres, at the front of the room.

4.7 Election results for each polling place are telephoned through to the relevant AEC Divisional Office, where AEC officers enter the figures into the computerised Election Management System (ELMS). Results are then transmitted to the NTR from each divisional office around Australia via ELMS. The results are displayed on rows of computer terminals available to the media and members of registered political parties. The results are simultaneously fed to the television networks who present their election coverage from temporary sets constructed in the NTR.⁶

4.8 The main mechanism for providing access to the figures, both in the NTR and elsewhere, is the AEC's Virtual Tally Room (VTR) system:

- Terminals connected to the VTR are available to media in the NTR. A small number of terminals connected directly to ELMS are also used by AEC staff to monitor the operations of all the NTR systems;

4 Australian Electoral Commission, *AEC to stage Tally Room at 2007 Federal Election*, media release, 18 May 2007. Available online at: <http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Media_releases/05_18a.htm>, viewed 25 July 2007.

5 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14

6 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Election night', *Behind the Scenes*, <<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/electionnight.htm>>, viewed 17 August 2007.

- Hardcopy printouts of the latest House of Representatives figures for a division are printed from ELMS and hung on the tally board. Senate figures are not displayed on the tally board due to the substantial increase in Senate candidates and groups over the last 40 years; and
 - Raw election results data from ELMS is provided electronically (as a 'media feed') to some media organisations who provide their own coverage and analysis on election night and in the weeks following.
- 4.9 In the event of a major computer system failure, if possible, data entry will be redirected to functioning sites. In the event of a total computer system failure, progressive House of Representatives figures will be faxed from Divisional Offices directly to the NTR, and displayed manually on the tally board.⁷
- 4.10 Despite public misconceptions to the contrary, no vote counting takes place in the NTR – it only facilitates the display and analysis of results.⁸

The statutory obligations of the AEC.

- 4.11 In relation to a House of Representatives election, the Assistant Returning Officer at a polling place is required by paragraph 274(2)(f) and subsection 274(2B) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Act) to transmit results of counting 'in an expeditious manner' to the Divisional Returning Officer (DRO); a similar requirement is imposed in relation to Senate elections by paragraph 273(2)(f) of the Act.⁹
- 4.12 The Act does not impose any formal obligation on the DRO or the AEC to publish the results on election night.¹⁰
- 4.13 However, while the AEC has no legal requirement to disseminate the results, there is a public expectation that it will do so. As indicated in the JSCEM Report on *The 1990 Federal Election*, the AEC operates on the basis that there is a clear community expectation that it will do everything within its power to ensure that election results are known as early as possible.¹¹

7 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 2-3.

8 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 8.

9 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 12.

10 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 12.

11 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 13.

The continuing relevance of the national tally room – stakeholder expectations

- 4.14 The NTR is attended by a mix of media, politicians, political advisors, official guests and the public – each with differing expectations and needs.
- 4.15 At the 2004 election, the AEC estimated that 300 journalists and 400 network staff attended the NTR along with 100 party representatives, 100 AEC staff, 160 official guests and 50 service providers, such as ActewAGL, Optus and Telstra.¹²
- 4.16 On 5 March 2007, the Electoral Commissioner wrote to 29 key NTR stakeholders – including the National Secretary of the Australian Labor Party and Federal Director of the Liberal Party – informing them that the future of the NTR was under review and inviting them to respond.¹³
- 4.17 The AEC advised that it received ten responses with ‘few clear patterns emerging.’¹⁴

Members of parliament and candidates

- 4.18 The demands of campaigning mean that apart from candidates in the local Canberra area, the vast majority of candidates are based in their electorates on election night.
- 4.19 The ‘political talent’ (or politicians) present in the NTR are organised by television and radio to appear on their live commentary panels. For example, the ABC in the recent past has had Bob McMullan MP and Senator the Hon. Nick Minchin. As ABC election analyst, Mr Antony Green, appearing before the committee in a private capacity, noted:

Sometimes we will even pay them to come to the tally room, and they will tend to float as guest interviews between the different [television and radio] panels. I notice that there are people on radio who will occasionally end up on television, so there is a bit of sharing of talent. But, increasingly, the only people who are there are the people who have been arranged to be there.¹⁵

12 Australian Electoral Commission, *All Election Eyes on the National Tally Room and Virtual Tally Room*, media release, 7 October 2004. Available online at: http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/media_releases/2004/tally_room.htm, viewed 25 July 2007.

13 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 13-14.

14 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14.

15 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 59.

- 4.20 The committee notes that the last leader of the opposition and/or Prime Minister to attend the NTR was Bob Hawke in 1983, with political leaders preferring to make their base in their home city or electorate on election night. The only party leader to appear in the NTR on election night in 2004 was the then Australian Democrats leader, Senator Andrew Bartlett.¹⁶
- 4.21 Broadcast media are able to overcome these geographical differences with live crosses for updates and interviews – and by sending journalists to cover the election from key sites around the rest of Australia. However, central election venues are considered important for the media, as it is expensive to send crews all around Australia for just a few live crosses during the course of an election night.
- 4.22 The AEC told the committee that it does not keep data on the number of officials in the NTR. However, anecdotally the number of officials varies from year to year – the AEC provides political parties with space in the NTR should they require it, but notes that the parties also have official campaign headquarters elsewhere.¹⁷

Media

- 4.23 The relevance of the NTR to the media differs depending on the type of media and media organisation.
- 4.24 On election night in 2004, the ABC, Sky News and Nine Network were the only television studios to provide full coverage from the NTR. The other networks had a presence in the NTR, but only provided partial coverage.¹⁸
- 4.25 Free TV Australia, the industry body representing Australia's free-to-air television broadcasters strongly opposed the abolition of the NTR on the grounds that it provides a focus for election coverage, and 'symbolises the transparency of the election process'.¹⁹
- 4.26 Head of news and current affairs at Channel Nine, Mr Garry Linnell, appeared before the committee on behalf of Free TV Australia. He noted that the NTR is an integral component of the network's election night coverage:

The tally room serves as a focal point for our coverage. We have Ray Martin and Laurie Oakes down there. There is access not just

16 R. Peake, 'New closure threat to tally room,' *The Canberra Times*, 24 May 2007, p. 7.

17 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 2.

18 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission 16a*, p. 11.

19 Free TV Australia, *Submission no. 13*, p. 1.

to the public but also to a lot of political figures, party members and party officials who are there.²⁰

- 4.27 It was argued that the NTR also generates more interesting or 'warmer' television:²¹

Clearly, as far as the atmospherics go with television, it adds to the event. There is constant movement, a constant buzz and constant noise in the room.²²

Sometimes it does not create the best TV environment because someone will walk in left of centre and walk right in front of the camera. But to me that adds to your coverage: you are going live, you are flying by the seat of your pants sometimes, and it adds a lot more credibility to the whole process.²³

- 4.28 Mr Green similarly noted the atmosphere the tally room provides:

That is the biggest thing we would miss if there was not a tally room. Australians are used to having the buzz.²⁴

- 4.29 Despite its strong association with the tally room, the ABC chose not to make a submission to the inquiry. Mr Green noted that 'they had no particularly strong feeling either way.'²⁵

- 4.30 Speaking in a private capacity, Mr Green noted the sentimental value attached to the tally room: 'it would be sad to see it go; it is fun to be there'.²⁶ However, he also noted that unlike previous years, it is no longer necessary for media to be in the NTR, as they could now get the AEC results online.

- 4.31 No print or radio journalists provided direct evidence to the inquiry. According to the AEC, some Canberra Press Gallery journalists worked from their offices on election night 2004 – preferring the quieter environment. However, Mr Green noted that print media also benefit from the captive audience and contacts that the tally room provides.

The people who would miss the tally room in terms of information would be print media... Usually what happens is that most members of the media will sit there, look at it [the AEC web

20 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

21 Mr G. Linnell, *The National Interest – Radio National*, 26 July 2007.

22 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

23 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 52.

24 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 58.

25 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 57.

26 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 63

terminals] for from 15 minutes to half an hour, decide it is not telling them who is winning the election and will wander over and talk to the Labor Party and Liberal Party people on the far side. So, in a sense, the parties get a lot of assistance from the tally room because there is a captive room of journalists to talk to, and they are often very senior journalists who they can spin a message to...²⁷

- 4.32 Online journalists and bloggers – regardless of their credentials, will have access to the same information feeds as the mainstream media as of 2007.

General Public

- 4.33 The general public have access to the NTR via television and radio broadcasts or they can attend the tally room in person if they are in Canberra.
- 4.34 Channel Nine estimates that approximately two million people watched the ABC and Channel Nine coverage on election night 2004.²⁸
- 4.35 At the 2001 federal election, security recorded 1,522 people entering the public area of the NTR. While there is no official figure for the 2004 federal election, security estimated 4,000 members of the public attended – however, space and security considerations meant that only 300 members could be admitted at any one time. The space required by the media and AEC mean that 6.8 per cent of the floor space was available for the public – this has been slightly increased for the 2007 NTR.²⁹ The AEC told the inquiry that many people who attended the NTR were Canberra locals.³⁰
- 4.36 All four federal MPs and Senators based in Canberra publicly advocated continuing the tradition of the tally room in a bipartisan show of support.³¹

27 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 59.

28 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 52.

29 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 11.

30 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 4.

31 A. Fraser, 'Parties unite for tally room fight,' *The Canberra Times*, 4 April 2007.

Possible alternatives to the national tally room

Virtual Tally Room

- 4.37 Since 1998, the AEC has run an election night website known as the 'Virtual Tally Room' (VTR). The site is updated with results as votes are telephoned in from the polling place and entered into the AEC's election management system. It provides access to progressive House of Representative results for all divisions, state party summaries and national totals and early figures from the Senate count for all States and Territories.³²
- 4.38 The VTR application has been upgraded for the 2007 election (as it has for each election since 1998). It will contain approximately 300 types of results screens, produce approximately 1200 individual pages of results on election night and over 20 000 pages in the post election period. The results will be updated every 90 seconds during the evening and every 15 minutes in the post election period. On the basis of ABS Internet Usage Statistics the AEC predicts there will be 34 million hits on the system on election night, 22 million on the VTR website, and 12 million on the AEC website [reference].
- 4.39 This system is significantly quicker and more comprehensive than the manual tally board – where the display of House of Representatives results is often hours behind the count and the televised/ online reporting.
- 4.40 Free TV Australia told the committee that the benefits of the NTR could not be replicated:
- We do not think there is any way of substituting for the live and transparent nature of the national tally room through a virtual facility on the internet.³³
- 4.41 While the VTR is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, Mr Green explained that it is not a *replacement* for the television coverage:
- A virtual tally room is of little use to the television networks or to the radio, for the simple reason that it cannot drive computer graphics. It is not designed for quick operation, which they use in

32 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Electoral Newsfile, *Federal Election 2004 – Votes and the Count*, No. 120, September 2004. Available online at: http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/Newsfiles/2004/No_120.htm, viewed 17 July 2007.

33 Mrs P. Longstaff (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 51.

the radio, to hop from seat to seat. It is there as a backup, but we have our own system to do that, and we have our own analytical tools.³⁴

4.42 The AEC also acknowledged that the television computer systems are more complex than the VTR, given that the former is involved in predicting the outcome of the election, while the latter is concerned simply with the dissemination of accurate results.³⁵

4.43 Mr Green similarly noted:

The virtual tally room in that sense is not important to us [the ABC] because we do not really use it; we use their raw data. For us, it is important that two things occur: one, that they continue to get the results as they have always done in the past and, two, that they continue to make them easily available.³⁶

Media alternatives

4.44 If the NTR was abolished after the 2007 federal election, it is unlikely that the media would organise their own 'tally room' or centre per say. However, live television coverage of the election would continue, at least on the part of the ABC and Nine Network.

4.45 Mr Linnell told the inquiry of Channel 9's 'Plan B' had the NTR been cancelled for 2007:

We had a meeting about this not long after we received the original letter from the AEC in about March this year We thought, 'We may have to do it out of Sydney – have the anchors in Sydney and then do a lot more crosses around Australia to the relevant party rooms and electorate offices.' That was our backup plan.³⁷

4.46 Mr Green told the inquiry that without the NTR, networks could draw on party functions and technology to compensate for the lack of 'buzz':

If we did not have a tally room, it would change coverage in a big way ... What would be more likely to happen is that there would be a lot more push for the parties to make their leadership functions much larger ... You could make much more use of that as a live cross venue for what is going on. If you were doing it

34 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 57.

35 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 7.

36 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 58.

37 Mr G. Linnell (Free TV Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 56.

from a studio, you would start to make use of things you cannot really use in the tally room. You cannot use big video walls in the tally room because you have to be able to control the lighting to use them.³⁸

- 4.47 Mr Green cited the instance of the 1999 referendum as an example of how networks would compensate without the NTR:

We did that coverage with a very large round desk, which we talked across, and we did it with a big video wall out of which we did live crosses. Our people who normally sit around in jeans and T-shirts were dressed up properly and we stuck them behind computers on the set, much to their annoyance. They are the sorts of things you do to make it look live, so that people think the television is live and things are happening.³⁹

The logistics, risks and costs associated with the NTR

Logistics

- 4.48 The AEC considers the NTR is 'one of the more complex individual projects' it undertakes during the course of an election. It includes:
- rental of premises and furniture;
 - construction of the tally board and false flooring;
 - extensive IT and telecommunications wiring and computer system configuration;
 - liaison with media stakeholders;
 - recruitment of casual staff;
 - security;
 - catering;
 - a full dress rehearsal before polling day; and
 - a dismantling process undertaken under tight time constraints.⁴⁰

38 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 60.

39 Mr A. Green, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 67.

40 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, pp. 2-3.

- 4.49 The construction requires the use of many of the AEC's key communications and IT staff. The VTR exists independently and also requires support: 'the need to support both operations places an additional burden on those staff supporting the VTR system.'⁴¹

Risks

Security

- 4.50 Security concerns and efforts regarding the NTR have increased since 2001 – involving the requisite sweeps of the building before the coverage and security screening for members of the public. Mr Green noted:

Each election seems to produce a new level of security at the National Tally Room. In 2004, nearly four hours was lost on polling day as the Tally Room was locked down by security. In 2004, this security clamp down was expanded to include not just the Tally Room, but all the productions vans used by television networks. If the trend continues, 2007 may see the whole of Saturday afternoon lost to security checks.⁴²

System failure

- 4.51 The NTR has the advantage of providing 'near fail safe figures' for the dissemination of election results in the event of a 'total failure of the frontline computerised systems'.⁴³
- 4.52 Since the introduction of computerised tabulation of votes in 1974, there has been no system failure that required a complete reversion to the tally board to disseminate the result. There were some election-night computer problems in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which required cutover to the manual systems for part of the night.
- 4.53 The computerised systems now used by the AEC are stable, with a history going back 20 years. They are extensively tested which includes the conduct of trial elections – nevertheless some risk of system failure remains.
- 4.54 The AEC told the committee that in a worst-case scenario, if the NTR ceased to function, the Commission would rely on the paper trail from the

41 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

42 Mr A. Green, *Submission no. 14*, p. 2.

43 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 15.

polling places (the Assistant Returning Officers' returns). Results would then be phoned or faxed to another location in Canberra.⁴⁴

Costs

- 4.55 In 2004, the costs associated with the NTR were around \$880,000. Cost estimates for the 2007 NTR are still being finalised (as at August 2007, there were still tender processes in train), but are likely to be around \$1,060,000.⁴⁵
- 4.56 There are also indirect costs associated with the NTR in terms of skilled AEC IT staff, who would otherwise be utilised elsewhere over the election campaign. The AEC advised that it receives in excess of \$90 million in funding for a federal election.⁴⁶
- 4.57 These costs are separate from the costs of the VTR system and web hosting.
- 4.58 Costs are fully borne by taxpayers, as have been the development costs for the computer systems which underpin the NTR's operations.⁴⁷
- 4.59 Media organisations are not charged for using the NTR as a venue for election night coverage, however, they still incur the costs of transporting staff to Canberra and setting up equipment in the NTR. Mr Linnell noted that the outlays for networks in the NTR are 'considerable' but not unreasonable:
- Broadcasters do not regard the cost of setting up a temporary studio at the NTR as an 'unwarranted' expense. Rather, broadcasters believe the enhanced coverage they are able to provide to viewers via the NTR is a necessary and justified expense.⁴⁸
- 4.60 In its submission, the AEC suggested that the media might be asked to 'contribute to the cost of providing the centre' if the NTR was retained beyond the 2007 election.⁴⁹ Mr Linnell noted the Nine Network's willingness to discuss a cost-sharing option:

44 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 16.

45 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

46 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 10.

47 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 17.

48 Free TV Australia, *Submission no. 13*, p. 2.

49 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 18.

We would be more than willing to sit down with them, have a discussion about that and see what we could do.⁵⁰

- 4.61 The obvious risk in any cost-sharing arrangement is the likelihood that some organisations may decide against utilising the NTR if they are asked to contribute to the cost:

Part of the difficulty there would be that some would probably pay because, for some of the bigger agencies, it is probably still worth their while, but for some of the smaller ones, my guess is that, if they had a small charge – and this is a personal view – they might suddenly find that they could do everything that they were doing from the press gallery here or from their offices in a capital city.⁵¹

Committee conclusions

- 4.62 Given the evidence presented to the inquiry, it is clear that the role and structure of the NTR has changed and continues to change. It comes as no surprise that the manual tally board has given way to computer driven results systems generating huge flexibilities.
- 4.63 The committee has found it difficult to gauge community and industry opinion on the subject of the NTR. While good evidence was received from expert sources, it was not a particularly wide sample.
- 4.64 The committee supports the continuation of the NTR given its historical place in Australian politics and elections. Australia is one of the world's longest running democracies, and needs to value its history and traditions. Furthermore, the committee notes, there is a value – and logic – in having a central tally room in the national capital for the federal election. This value extends far beyond dollar or logistical considerations.
- 4.65 There is a view that, by providing a focal point for the display of results on election night, the NTR actually promotes a visible symbolism of transparency in the election process. As one of the AEC's stakeholders suggested, 'Democracy, like justice, needs not only to be done but be seen to be done.'⁵² The committee is of the view that the abolition of the NTR would have a negative impact on the perception of the transparency of elections.

50 Mr G. Linnell, Free TV Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 54

51 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 August 2007, p. 5.

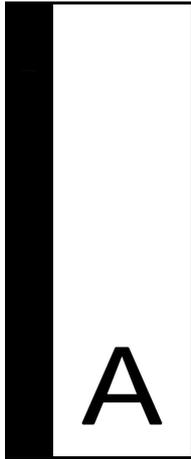
52 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 14.

- 4.66 While the committee notes that some parties may be willing to discuss possible cost-sharing arrangements, the committee notes the view of the Electoral Commissioner who suggested that if all users of the NTR were asked to contribute, some of the smaller media agencies may seek alternative means of providing election coverage. The committee also notes that the cost of the tally room represents less than one per cent of the AEC's total budget for the election.

Recommendation 4

- 4.67 **The committee recommends that the Australian Government ensures that the National Tally Room is retained for future federal elections.**

Sophie Mirabella MP
Chair
10 September 2007



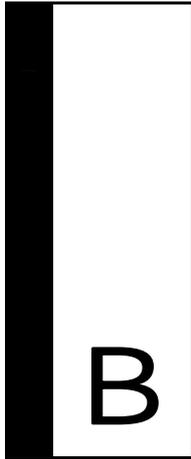
Appendix A

Submissions to the inquiry

No. Individual / Organisation

1. Dr Craig Emerson MP
2. H.S. Chapman Society
3. W. Bruce Kirkpatrick
4. Mrs Sue Michie
5. Mr Brian Peisley
6. Mr Brain McKivat
7. Mr John Snell
8. Mrs Dianne Switzer
9. Mr Frank Young
10. The Liberal Party of Australia
11. Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)
- 11a. Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)
(Supplementary to submission no. 11)
12. People with Disability Australia Inc.

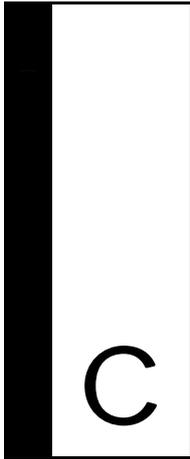
- 13. Free TV Australia
- 13a. Free TV Australia
(Supplementary to submission no. 13)
- 14. Mr Antony Green
- 15. Mr Ange Kenos JP
- 16. Australian Electoral Commission
- 16a. Australian Electoral Commission
(Supplementary to submission no. 16)



Appendix B

List of exhibits

1. Australian Electoral Commission, *Review of the Continuous Roll Update Program*, June 2007.



Appendix C

List of hearings and witnesses

Monday 2 July 2007 – Sydney

Individuals

Mr Brian Peisley

Mrs Sue Michie

Mrs Dianne Switzer

Mr Brian McKivat

Mr Antony Green

Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)

Mr Stephen Jones, National Secretary

Free TV Australia Ltd

Mrs Pamela Longstaff, Director, Legal and Broadcasting Policy

Mr Garry Linnell, Director, News and Current Affairs, Nine Network Ltd, Member of Free TV Australia Ltd

H.S. Chapman Society

Dr Amy McGrath OAM, Life Member and Former President

Tuesday 3 July 2007 – Canberra

Australian Electoral Commission

Mr Ian Campbell, Electoral Commissioner

Mr Paul Dacey, Deputy Electoral Commissioner

Mr Tim Pickering, First Assistant Commissioner, Electoral Operations

Ms Barbara Davis, First Assistant Commissioner, Business Support

Mr Tom Rogers, Australian Electoral Officer and State Manager, NSW

Mr Daryl Wight, Australian Electoral Officer and State Manager, VIC

Monday 13 August 2007 – Canberra

Australian Electoral Commission

Mr Ian Campbell, Electoral Commissioner

Mr Tim Pickering, First Assistant Commissioner, Electoral Operations

Ms Gail Urbanski, Assistant Commissioner, Communications and Information Strategies