

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Finance and Administration Portfolio

Australian Electoral Commission

February Additional Estimates Hearings 2003-04 – 17 February 2004

Question: F4

Outcome: Australian Electoral Commission

Topic: Indigenous voter registration and education programs

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Senator Jan McLucas asked:

In those Divisions that have high Indigenous populations [Kennedy, Leichhardt, Maranoa in Queensland; Grey in South Australia; Kalgoorlie in Western Australia; and the Northern Territory], what are the programs that are being operated to ensure people are enrolled and informed about their democratic rights?

Answer:

The answer provided to me by the Australian Electoral Commission is as follows;

The AEC's National Electoral Public Awareness Action Plan specifically addresses initiatives to promote public awareness of the rights and responsibilities of indigenous electors in the electoral system and to improve access to electoral information. It is expected to be finalised by May 2004.

The following activities were undertaken to ensure Indigenous people are enrolled and informed about their democratic rights in the Divisions identified.

Leichhardt:

The activities undertaken by the Division include: using a database of Queensland Indigenous organisations, writing annually to Indigenous organisations located within the Divisions advising them about electoral enrolment and the AEC's availability to conduct electoral education sessions; as part of the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program, conducting an annual Remote Area enrolment program which included a mailout of enrolment material, print and radio advertising and the employment of a CEIO on Thursday Island for 3 weeks to co-ordinate activities. This remote area enrolment strategy has resulted in significant roll updates and additions and enabled access to communities to provide electoral education (focussing on the Torres Strait during 2003, resulting in 690 enrolments in a six week period).

Kennedy

The activities undertaken by the Division include: using a database of Queensland Indigenous organisations, writing annually to Indigenous organisations located within the Divisions advising them about electoral enrolment and the AEC's availability to conduct electoral education sessions; as part of the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program, conducting an annual Remote Area enrolment program supplemented by visits as wet season conditions permitted, telephone contact, and interviews on Indigenous Community Radio; during 2002, two Community Electoral Information Officers were employed for a period of three months specifically to visit communities and provide enrolment and electoral information.

Maranoa

The activities undertaken by the Division include: using a database of Queensland Indigenous organisations, writing annually to Indigenous organisations located within the Divisions advising them about electoral enrolment and the AEC's availability to conduct electoral education sessions (during 2003, 12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations were visited); and as part of the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program, conducting an annual Remote Area enrolment program resulting in 144 enrolments.

All Queensland divisions:

The AEC Queensland Head Office maintains a database of Indigenous organisations in Queensland. Prior to an election, all the Indigenous organisations are provided with: information about the distribution of the booklet *Your Guide to the Federal Election* (containing information on the voting process including completing ballot papers and counting of votes); the election advertising campaign via Indigenous media – newspapers, publications and radio; the Community Electoral Information Officer (CEIO) program; the advertising of polling places in *The Courier Mail* on the Friday prior to polling day; and the AEC national 13 23 26 enquiry line.

Queensland has an extensive Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program. However, Australia Post does not deliver to street addresses in many remote area towns. For this reason, each division with remote areas is required to conduct an annual Remote Area enrolment program.

Grey

At the 2001 Federal Election, an Indigenous Community Electoral Information Officer was employed in the Division of Grey on a temporary contract to visit a number of Indigenous and remote communities and conduct enrolment and election information sessions.

During the ATSI 2002 Regional Council Election, three Community Electoral Information Officers were employed to promote the election process. This involved visits to each community to: meet with community elders and managers to promote enrolling and voting; and to identify new electors, duplicate electors, deceased electors and electors no longer resident in that community. AEC staff also promoted local aspects of the election using Umeewarra Media (an Indigenous community radio station based in Port Augusta) and PY Media (a community radio station in the AP Lands (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands)).

The Divisional Returning Officer for Grey visited the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands over the first two weeks of March 2004 to implement the Division's Remote Area Enrolment Program, training a Community Assistant in each of the 13 major communities in the remote regions of South Australia to manage the day to day enrolment matters of their community. It is intended that the program run for a 12-month period and each Community Assistant will be reimbursed for 3 hours work per month.

Kalgoorlie

As an ongoing program for Indigenous communities, the Division of Kalgoorlie conducts field visits to Aboriginal communities to increase electoral awareness through information sessions and improve access to electoral information. In 2003/04 so far, the staff from the Division have visited the Central Desert Communities twice, and the Kimberley, Laverton area, Pilbara, South Western, and Northern communities once. In total, these regions contain about 60 towns and communities.

In addition, prior to each electoral event, Community Electoral Information Officers are employed on temporary contracts to carry out field trips to Aboriginal communities and organisations throughout Western Australia to inform them about the importance of, and arrangements for, the electoral event, and to encourage and assist all eligible people to enrol and vote. During the 2001 Election, five Community Electoral Information Officers were engaged for this purpose.

Northern Territory

In 2002, the Northern Territory (NT) piloted a Remote Area Services Unit, which was staffed by two officers. The Unit concentrated on assessing the electoral needs and enrolment shortfalls of Indigenous communities across the NT, and developing ways of delivering electoral enrolment and awareness programs. The Unit established partnerships with some of the Indigenous Community Governments to enable reviews of enrolment. The process involved visits to train local Indigenous Community Government employees.

Also in 2002, the NT piloted a more concentrated enrolment and public awareness drive using the Wadeye ATSIC Further Election as a vehicle. It was estimated that there were about 280 eligible people not enrolled at Wadeye. The Division adopted a partnership approach to develop awareness of the electoral process and increased community participation in the electoral event. With the cooperation of community elders and local agencies and the assistance of five local women, the drive resulted in 218 new enrolments.

Current Indigenous enrolment and electoral education initiatives for 2003/04 have included: field visits to communities including: Mutitjulu, Areyonga, and the Nyirranggulung Mardruk Ngadberre Regional Council (East of Katherine); roll reviews in Utopia, Yuendumu, Timber Creek, Lajamanu, Imanpa, Ali-Curung, Santa Teresa, Haast Bluff, Papunya and Yulara; and education program presentations at a schools at Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Nyangatjatjara, Alice Springs, and at Batchelor College.

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