

# THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION IN 2020

**Government departments have a duty to investigate better ways of servicing Australian residents. People are becoming less tolerant of having to advise a myriad of Government departments and agencies of a change in circumstances such as a change of address or traipse from one government office to another to get information.**

This is a discussion paper taken from the perspective of an electoral officer. It is recognised that there is a need for change in the electoral administrative process. Could you envisage the Australian Electoral Commission being an integrated part of a Government revamp of its services where a *one stop shop* serviced the residents (including the electors) of Australia?

## **Background**

Medicare, Australia Post, vehicle registration, drivers licence, the electoral office, perhaps Centrelink are but a few of the government departments that insist you tell them when you move address in Australia.

If you want information about noise you have to go there, if you have a problem with a government benefit (which benefit) you do not want to have to go somewhere else.

Is it about time that the three levels of Government in Australia (State Federal and Local) were able to get together and provide a *one stop shop* to provide information and allow residents to update their information?

Gone would be the need to complete ten change of address forms when only one would do. Gone would be going from building to building trying to find assistance from the department that was responsible for sky hooks or left handed widgets. Rather than making residents sit by a phone pressing button after button, trying to get to a point where their query could be answered 'government' could provide a real service to the people.

For one of the tenets of the *one stop shop* should be – if we don't know we'll find out – of course considering that the request was reasonable.

For a number of years the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has been criticised as being a highly fragmented organisation that is expensive to operate.

So far the only answer has been the urging by some that the many offices be centralised. Instead of thinking outside the square, many of those critics recommended a change that kept the electoral office separated from other government departments. Why should centralisation be the answer instead of combining with other government departments to provide a more user friendly service centre for the Australian community.

## **The bigger picture**

Most senior officers from government organisations rightly need to see the big picture for the future of the department. If there was true 360 degree feedback the staff in that organisation has a right to receive the same consideration. The best way for that to occur is for senior management and staff to exchange ideas about where they think the organisation should be headed. This could be through consultative forums, departmental intranet sites or newsletters. Many ideas will fall beside the wayside, while others can be embraced or adapted.

If it came to be, it would be suggested that in the *one stop shop* staff would retain their areas of expertise. However, it would be incumbent on every person working in the shop to be acquainted with the duties of several other areas in particular, and all other areas in general.

An executive officer would have the responsibility of co-ordinating reporting by a responsible officer to the respective State Head Offices about the activities of each component area, and ensure that the level of knowledge and capability of staff in their area was maintained.

### **Will it happen overnight?**

Of course not. Apart from lengthy discussion there are logistical and practical barriers to a swift move. Lease agreements would have to be considered. The ability of one building or complex to contain all the function areas would be another.

Staff would need to be multi skilled – although much of this could be on the job training.

The dynamics of the *one stop shop* would have a life of its own as boundaries, security of information, demarcation, and conflict of interest issues were sorted out. An example could be where a candidate for an election and the returning officer were working in the same building.

It would not even be necessary for this to occur in one giant step as offices could be progressively amalgamated.

### **But we want to be the boss**

Should the initiative gain any momentum there will have to be a compromise between government departments. A new *one stop shop* ethos would have to be established.

Centrelink, Taxation, the Electoral Commission, the Municipal business office, Australia Post or Motor Registration would not be 'the boss'. Each has areas of expertise that should be utilised within the combine.

For instance, Australia Post, the Municipality and the Electoral Commission have expert knowledge of addressing which could be utilised by the other departments. Gone would be the situation where one household would have two or three different addresses.

### **Ending the duplication of services**

Without pointing out where this occurs now, the new approach to providing Government information at the one outlet will soon sort out where departmental services or publications overlap.

One of the tasks of the *one stop shop* manager (or executive officer) would be to advise those departments where this was occurring, and initiate steps to resolve the issue. The problem would hopefully be resolved before it reached parliamentary level.

Also done away with would be the silly situation where State and Federal Governments run their own elections using different offices and different staff.

### **How will Government staff react?**

Some people will never embrace change or will view any change cynically. They have that right. As indicated this cynicism is in part because many changes in the past have not been open for discussion - perhaps because those in power retentive positions feared their ideas might be tampered with.

It would be envisaged that staff in the *one stop shop* would be able to move between departments as their expertise or interest in other areas grew. There would be greater scope for promotion and the opportunity to gain experience in other areas of government. This must be good for the public service and public servants.

It is also recognised that some people work better with processing information rather than with working with people. These staff would be better catered for in a larger organisation. The larger, more diverse organisation could not only recognise, but utilise the different skills that different people have.

It would also overcome personality conflicts in small organisations where it is virtually impossible to create distance between people that just cannot get along with each other.

### **Will all offices be the same?**

No. There will be offices that have limited local government, taxation or motor registration representation.

But people in these smaller offices would have to be better multi skilled than those in larger centres. However, in this information friendly age staff that did not know the answer would know where to obtain it.

It would also be part of the initial teething process and be part of the training process for the office staff.

## **This is all back to the future**

Many people in the community can remember when Local Government areas were a lot smaller than now and the City or Shire office was not all that far away. They could go to the one counter for all their local government enquiries.

Similarly, where there were separate State offices and Commonwealth offices in many of the larger towns. Perhaps this could be described as a *three stop shop*.

With the Municipal amalgamations and the sale of State and Commonwealth offices the various departments went on their own ways to arrange accommodation.

Residents/citizens/electors/ratepayers were forced onto the merry go round of going from one place to another or waiting for interminable periods on telephones to get through to the correct department – or section of the department to give or obtain the information that was required.

However, there would be one major difference than in the past. The *one stop shop* would have the responsibility of giving the enquirer the answer or find out where to obtain it. This of course does not give the enquirer the right to demand the answer to some insoluble question, require the office to undertake a large task without proper resources, nor demand that a law or rule be altered without management or legislative support.

## **How will it impact on the electoral process?**

In the *one stop shop* there will be at least one and preferably more with the ability to conduct elections. Between elections they would also be responsible to public education, electoral boundary realignment support, non parliamentary elections and maintenance of electoral roll.

The data base, the civic or electoral roll would be part of an integrated register that would be used by various State, Federal and Local Government Departments. Access to the complete register would be restricted, but each area would be able to view their responsible area.

Perhaps the libertarians may cry foul, but to the vast majority of Australians having a simpler method of giving and receiving information would far outweigh this shortcoming.

One difficulty that would have to be addressed would be the public's right to view the roll to ensure that it was not being 'stacked'. This could be overcome by simply registering those people who had access to the roll. They would have to give a legitimate reason and would have to undergo appropriate checks before accessing the electoral roll component of the data base.