



*Report on international investigations into political donations and disclosure
and voter participation and informal voting*

Meeting report – VOTER PARTICIPATION
AND INFORMAL VOTING

As part of its international investigations into voter participation and informal voting the Committee held meetings in Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The Committee met with the following individuals and organisations and discussed a range of issues, including methods to promote electoral participation, electoral education, comparisons of enrolment systems, automatic enrolment, election day registration and youth participation.

CANADA

Monday 25 August 2008

Elections Canada (Mr Marc Mayrand, Chief Electoral Officer)

Elections Canada is an independent, non-partisan agency that reports directly to the Parliament of Canada. Amongst other duties it conducts federal elections, by-elections and referenda and administers the political financing provisions of the *Canada Elections Act*.

The Committee's meeting with Elections Canada took place at a time when there was strong speculation that a general election would be called in Canada. The Committee was grateful to Elections Canada and Mr Mayrand for dedicating time to meet with the Committee during this busy period.

At this meeting the Committee met with Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Marc Mayrand and several other representatives from Elections Canada. Discussion extended to a range of topics, including the financing of political parties, Canada's National Register of Electors, voting methods, campaigns to increase voter enrolment and strategies to engage disenfranchised groups in voting.

The Committee learnt about Canada's National Register of Electors. According to Elections Canada's website, the:

"National Register of Electors is a database of Canadians who are qualified to vote. It contains basic information about each person – name, address, sex and date of birth. Canadians may choose whether or not to have their names listed in the Register. The information in the National Register of Electors is used to produce the preliminary voters lists for federal elections, by-elections and referendums. It may also be used to produce voters lists for provinces, territories,

municipalities and school boards that have signed agreements with Elections Canada, as permitted by the *Canada Elections Act* and provincial and territorial statutes”.¹

Elections Canada’s website provides further information:

“About 17 percent of elector information changes every year. The National Register of Electors is updated with information (name, address, sex and date of birth) supplied by provincial, territorial and federal data sources between electoral events, and by electors themselves during federal electoral events. Elections Canada has signed agreements with data suppliers, including the Canada Revenue Agency, Canada Post Corporation, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, provincial and territorial registrars of motor vehicles and vital statistics, and provincial electoral agencies with permanent voters lists. Lists of electors from provincial and territorial elections are also used to update the Register. It is important to note that there is no database linkage between Elections Canada and these data suppliers”.²

The Committee heard that one of the challenges Elections Canada faces is trying to keep the National Register’s guiding database up to date. Although there is one register it is actually comprised of approximately 55,000 separate polling divisions and separate lists.

Registering to vote and voting is not compulsory in Canada. Requirements for both are that a person be 18 years of age or over, a Canadian citizen and can show proof of identity.

Voting methods were discussed. While the majority of people vote at polling booths on polling day the Committee was informed about other methods to vote in Canada. These include:

- a) Advance polls for voting on the tenth, ninth and eighth day before election day, which is always a Monday;
- b) Mobile voting stations and to institutions such as nursing homes and chronic care facilities; and
- c) Special voting rules, whereby voters who cannot get to a polling location, such as travellers, those with disabilities and those in isolated areas, can obtain a special envelope for postal voting. These votes must be received by 6 pm on polling day. Votes received after polling day are not included in the count.

Elections Canada provided the Committee with some very interesting evidence about methods used in Canada to promote and encourage voter participation. Ensuring that as many eligible Canadians as possible vote at election time is part of the Chief Electoral Officer’s mandate.

¹ Elections Canada. Retrieved 20 February 2008, from <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=ins&document=national&dir=nre&lang=e&textonly=false>

² Elections Canada. Retrieved 20 February 2008, from <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=ins&document=national&dir=nre&lang=e&textonly=false>

The Committee learnt that there has been a decline in voter turnout at Canadian elections in recent years. Participation in Canadian elections has declined from a post-war turnout figure of approximately 75 percent to around 60 percent in 2004. Reports indicate that turnout at the 40th Canadian general election, held in October 2008, was 59.4 percent, an historical low.

Due to this downward trend in participation and turnout, Elections Canada has placed a great deal of importance on electoral education programs.

Encouraging youth participation is seen as a major issue by Elections Canada due to research showing that 18-24 year olds are strongly represented in surveys of those not voting. Other communities with low voter turnout rates are aboriginal, First Nations, homeless people and people with special needs and disabilities.

Voter outreach programs directed at young people include “Leave Your Mark” reminder cards during an election period, and are sent to approximately 100,000 young people.

Outreach programs targeted at aboriginal and First Nations communities include the “Elder and Youth” program, which involves elders and young people working together at polling stations on election day, and the publication of election materials in community languages.

Elections Canada has a five-year strategic plan for voter participation, incorporating three objectives: trust, accessibility and engagement.

Tuesday 26 August 2008

Dr Lisa Young, Researcher and Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary

Dr Young’s interests include political parties, participation in politics, women’s participation in politics, interest groups and the development of social movements. She discussed a number of issues with the Committee relevant to voter participation and informal voting, including:

- a) **Youth participation.** Dr Young is the author of a number of studies about youth participation in Canada. She summarised the findings of research she completed analysing the membership of the five major Canadian political parties. Findings indicated that young people aged 18 to 24 were underrepresented as members of political parties, but were often members of university campus political organisations or youth groups which discussed political and social issues.
- b) **Profile of the Canadian political party membership.** Dr Young revealed that it was quite difficult to find reliable information about the membership of Canadian political parties. Membership tends to fluctuate with electoral activity; parties report an increase in membership applications at the time of key electoral events, such as a general election.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Wednesday 27 August 2008

United Nations, Electoral Assistance Division (EAD), Department of Political Affairs

The Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs is the United Nations (UN) focal point for electoral assistance activities, advising the Secretary-General on requests from Member States, and ensuring consistency in the delivery of electoral assistance by the United Nations.

The primary purpose of the EAD is to provide tactical support to those countries that request electoral support from the United Nations. Support can mean that the UN might send a volunteer or electoral expert to assist an electoral authority with a technical issue, or provide governance and administrative support, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the UN established a voter registration system.

The Committee was told of the EAD's approach to electoral support. As an international organisation the UN is conscious of its role as a "standard setting" institution. Nevertheless the EAD recognises that many UN member states have different cultural and social understandings of elections, and indeed contrasting experiences and histories of democracy. Given that the EAD works largely in post-conflict nations with developing institutional frameworks, much of the advice it provides is practical in nature.

During this meeting the Committee and EAD representatives discussed a range of issues relating to electoral participation. Members were particularly interested to learn more about the UN's work establishing a voter registration system in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Congo is a geographically large nation with a land mass roughly the size of Europe. This fact led the UN to devise an electronic national elector database. The Committee learnt that the system recorded 26 million people out of a potential 28 million.

Electronic voter registration methods used in Iraq were also outlined to the Committee. The system is based on an electronic food database, involving digital identification technology.

The Committee was informed that in some developing African nations over 50 percent of the population is under 15 years of age. The UN anticipates that youth participation as a political issue will increase in importance in coming years.

The EAD also discussed some of the difficulties it has experienced developing electoral materials for people with little or no literacy. The Committee was shown examples of ballot papers produced by the EAD which feature electoral information in a predominantly visual format, for instance, ballot papers using pictorial representations of animals, easily recognized symbols as a means of identifying candidates. Indeed, one of the more practical issues the EAD faces in this respect is that many people in developing countries have never used a pencil.

On this subject the EAD noted the work of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The UN regularly consults the AEC and has translated some AEC electoral materials into international languages, such as French and Spanish.

At the conclusion of the meeting Mr Craig Jenness, Director of EAD, told the Committee about a woman he had met in Cambodia while working as a human rights officer during the 1993 Cambodian elections.

“At the close of polling, an ... old woman, who was well over 80, came hobbling down the road. She was limping and [Mr Craig Jenness] said, “Why did you come to vote?” she said, “Well, I had two sons and they were both killed in the war or by the Khmer Rouge, and people tell me that if I vote, other mothers won’t lose their children”.

New York City Campaign Finance Board (NYCCFB)

The NYCCFB was created in 1988 following a series of political finance scandals in New York City. The Board is an independent, non-partisan agency that aims to increase public confidence in the electoral process through the regulation of election campaign finance. The Board is composed of five members: two are selected by the Speaker of the New York City Council, two by the Mayor and the fifth, a chairman, is appointed to the Board by the Mayor following consultation with the Speaker.

The NYCCFB conducts various voter education and information projects. It also publishes a well-regarded voter guide which provides information about candidates for City Council elections in several languages. A telephone survey of New York City residents conducted by the Board found that over 92 percent of respondents thought the guide was a good idea. Over 2.7 million guides are sent out at election time.

Wednesday 27 August 2008

DEMOS (Mr Miles Rapoport, President)

Mr Rapoport and the Committee considered a number of issues relating to voter participation in the United States and Australia.

Mr Rapoport suggested that some of the major factors influencing turnout rates at US elections were race, ethnicity, economic status and educational attainment.

DEMOS produces a wide range of literature about voter participation. Helping break down barriers to full and effective electoral participation is one of the organisation’s key mandates.

Mr Rapoport identified three areas of concern:

- a) **Registration restrictions.** Demos commended the practice of election day registration and the US states which permit voters to register on election day. In particular, Mr Rapoport noted Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Idaho, Wyoming, Iowa, Montana and North Carolina. According to Mr Rapoport, more states needed to embrace election day registration. Election day registration is a major topic of interest to the Committee. The Committee was interested to learn that

many states have different laws and regulations for voter identification in relation to election day registration and that this has been a source of confusion for many years in the United States.

b) Prisoner voting and disenfranchisement

The United States of America has one of the highest percentages of incarcerated citizens in the developed world. Strict control in some states of laws prohibiting convicted felons from voting has, in Mr Rapoport's view, affected election outcomes. In Florida at the time of the 2000 US presidential election, it is alleged that over 800,000 people were denied the right to vote due to Florida having a lifetime ban on voting for convicted felons.

c) Implementation of the National Voter Registration Act 1993

This Act, also known as the "motor voter" law, provides that eligible Americans must be offered a chance to register to vote when they apply or update their license details, and apply for certain social security benefits. The Committee was told that implementation and success rates amongst states have been mixed.

A general discussion of electoral administration in the United States also occurred. Mr Rapoport outlined the role of the Federal Election Commission (FEC), and offered some background information about the current legislative climate in the United States, and impetus for electoral reform.

UNITED KINGDOM

Monday 1 September 2008

The Hansard Society

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan political research and education charity. Amongst other activities, the Society is involved in political education and research, designing citizenship education for schools and administering a well-regarded internship program for university students. Representatives from the Society discussed the work of the charity's key programs and divisions. These were:

a) Citizenship Education Division

Mr Michael Raftery, Director, outlined the work of the division. The Committee learnt that the division had designed citizenship modules for public school curricula. Members were especially interested to learn of the division's 'Y Vote' mock elections program. Through this program, the Society provides schools in Britain with literature and guidelines to run mock elections at the same time as general or local government elections. A total of 500,000 students participated in the program at the time of the 2005 general election.

b) Parliament and Government division

The Parliament and Government division produces research on a range of subjects.

c) EDemocracy division

Ms Laura Miller, Director, outlined a program currently run by the division called Digital Dialogues. The program is looking at methods of improving the clarity and effectiveness of online political communication. Given the Committee's interest in new forms of electronic communication and the relationship of these technologies to politics, a number of topics were addressed:

- Further research was needed to assess the impact of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, on political activity;
- Political engagement in online environments such as Second Life was discussed. As this was a relatively new form of political expression, Ms Miller cautioned that this technology was new and still being understood; and
- The Committee and the Hansard Society discussed whether it was possible to use new 3G mobile phones to make contributions to parliamentary processes, such as parliamentary committees. Ms Miller noted that this was being investigated in the United Kingdom, and that the implications of this technology were far-reaching and required further investigation.

Youth participation and voter registration emerged as key issues during the Committee's inquiries into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election.

It was suggested that participation by young people aged 18 to 24 in United Kingdom general elections could be improved.

The complexity of various electorates throughout the United Kingdom was discussed. The Committee was told that London was a diverse community and that the Society suspected that as many as 1 million people in that city were not registered to vote.

Further discussion took place about the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, devolution in the United Kingdom and general points about voting systems used in the United Kingdom. The Committee informed the Hansard Society that the Victorian Electoral Commissioner, Mr Steve Tully, had visited Scotland during the 2007 Scottish parliamentary elections to view electronic vote scanning and counting technologies in use there.

United Kingdom Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission provided the Committee with a range of information about its voter registration and voter education programs.

Given that voting is not compulsory in the United Kingdom, ensuring full voter registration is one of the Electoral Commission's most important functions. 'Micro' advertising campaigns aimed at minority ethnic groups, people who have recently moved home, university students and young people are conducted on a regular basis. After the registration deadline has closed, the Commission also runs an electoral information campaign. The Committee was also told about the Commission's partnership grants program, which provides funding to charity organisations to provide voter outreach and education to groups that are difficult to reach through normal advertising methods.

Mr Younger, Chairman, suggested that current registration practice in the United Kingdom, requiring electors to register to vote as part of a household, was outdated. The Commission has made recommendations to the Parliament to introduce individual

voter registration. These recommendations were prompted by allegations of fraud arising from the household voter registration system.

Tuesday 2 September 2008

Unlock Democracy

Unlock Democracy was founded in November 2007 following the merger of Charter 88 and the New Politics Network. Unlock Democracy campaigns for democracy, rights and accountable government. The Committee and Unlock Democracy discussed several issues of relevance to the Committee's investigations into voter participation and informal voting.

The Committee was told that there is growing support throughout the United Kingdom for the harmonisation of electoral systems. A referendum on electoral reform was suggested as the most likely method of change.

Unlock Democracy has supervised hundreds of interns over the past decade and was well placed to discuss youth participation in electoral politics and political parties. Mr Peter Facey, Director, noted that while many of the interns were politically motivated and members of campus political clubs, it was rare to find an intern who was an active member of a political party. Mr Facey believed this pointed to a major problem with the party system, and problems with youth perceptions of politicians and the political process.

It was suggested that there was no 'quick fix' for youth participation. Expecting young people to embrace new technologies as a way to engage in politics was too simplistic an assumption.

Other issues discussed at the meeting included deliberative democratic processes in the United Kingdom, arguments for and against compulsory voting and observations about registration in the United Kingdom.

Electoral Reform Society

The Electoral Reform Society campaigns for voting system change in the United Kingdom. The Society supports this aim through a range of activities. While its activities have broadened somewhat over the years the Society is still primarily concerned bringing about change to voting practice in the United Kingdom.

Members were interested to discuss the Society's views about the rate of informal voting at the 2007 Scottish elections, having considered these issues during the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election. The Scottish system was classified as being close to what Australians would recognise as an optional preferential voting system. Informal voting rates at the 2007 Scottish elections were influenced by a range of factors, including ballot paper design.

On the subject of Scotland, the Committee was pleased that representatives from the Society were able to shed some light on the electronic voting trials that occurred during the 2007 Scottish elections. Verification emerged as a major issue from the election.

Discussing youth participation, the Society revealed that SMS voting had been trialed in the United Kingdom.

Agent General for Victoria, Mr David Buckingham

The Agent General for Victoria assists Victorian businesses, industry association and other interested agencies and individuals in establishing trade, economic, financial and commercial ties with Europe.

The Committee met with Mr Buckingham and discussed issues affecting Australians and Victorians living in London. Some issues addressed included:

- a) It was suggested that over 500,000 Australians live in London at any one time. Of this figure, approximately 70,000 to 80,000 are Victorian and eligible to vote;
- b) Arrangements and facilities provided by the Agent General for Victorians to vote;
- c) Mr Buckingham's experience and perceptions about trends in the number of Victorians living in London who voted at the time of the 2006 Victorian state election;
- d) Communication strategies. The Committee was told that the Agent General had informed several federal parliamentarians about the large number of eligible voters living in London who were, by all accounts, not participating in the electoral process. Strategies used by the Agent General to communicate with Victorians living in the United Kingdom were mentioned, such as newspaper advertisements, as well as advertisements in expatriate magazines such as TNT;
- e) The Agent General outlined his office's "Victorians Abroad" program, a network designed to capture and store the details of expatriate Victorians; and
- f) Postal voting procedures for Victorians in London.