

SUBMISSION on Electoral Reform Green Paper

I would like to compliment the Electoral Reform Secretariat on its extremely comprehensive enquiry into Electoral Reform. The manner in which the Green Paper has been organised, the points raised and the pros and cons that have been listed, make this a very valuable and important discussion paper.

I am only commenting on sections in which I had had experience and then I have only chosen a few points on which to comment.

Chapter 9: Education for electoral participation

I am a firm believer in the fact that teaching concepts should commence at an appropriate age and be followed up each year thereafter with added detail.

As a primary schoolteacher for a large number of years I did accompany year 5 and 6 students on several trips to Canberra from a country area for electoral education as well as other ACT places of interest. The presentations given then were very good and well pitched for the age of these students. These trips were stopped after a few years because of the cost to the students. (These students came from a disadvantaged school and funding support ceased. The losers were the students.)

9.33 page 135 has some very good suggestions for electoral education and should all be followed up and acted upon.

I think that in those years there was no extended detail follow up in the early years of secondary school and so the impetus gained and remembered from primary school did not eventuate and interest waned.

I would certainly support any funding or subsidies given for students to attend electoral education in Canberra from year 5 or 6 upwards. There is nothing like physically being in the real place and the experiences gained from this personal visit.

I support a full program of any sort whether it be included in a civics program or a stand alone program for the junior years of secondary school and even enrolment of 16 year olds (whether they are given the opportunity to vote at this age or simply are enrolled as provisional enrolments) as many students leave school this age, any further opportunity for electoral education and enthusiasm for these school leavers to enrol is lost. Students who stay on for years 11 and 12 can be involved in further detailed study and activities.

Chapter 4: The franchise Youth

4.44 quote ...the public does not support lowering the voting age.....

Does the public speak for the youth of today? The youth of today are far more sophisticated and worldly wise than many adults over the age of forty. Let's put some faith and trust in the youth of today!

I would support enrolment at 16 years and either voluntary or compulsory voting. Let's get the young people involved! Many will benefit from the responsibility. The ones who slip through the process probably always will no matter what is being done. **However, this does need to be qualified with my comments on Chapter 9 above – electoral education.**

Chapter 11: Polling

After I retired from teaching I spent many months over a few years working for the Australian Electoral Commission office in my local area. It was enjoyable, very interesting (I learned a lot about the electoral process for which at 55 years of age demonstrates how little electoral education was about while I was growing up and in my teaching years.) and some things frustrating.

I had experience in many aspects of preparing for an election, working during the election and after the election including checking the count and several office follow up procedures.

I shall only mention a couple of these procedures that I think could change. I have not been in the office since the last election so I am not sure if some of these may have undergone some sort of change already.

11.10 the implications of the rise in early voting

I have worked in prepoll shopfronts on a few occasions.

If the commission is going to rent a shopfront for prepolling then it must expect that casual passers by may try to vote at that moment or others seize the opportunity because it is easier for them to do so then rather than on polling day. Even though the potential voter must choose from many reasons on a sheet of paper, a quick thinker can easily point to one of these and get his/her vote. As I experienced, when at busiest times, we had voters standing 3 or 4 deep to get a prepoll vote, the ones behind soon realised that all they had to do was to choose a reason and they would be allowed a vote.

We were in no position to argue the toss and then again why should we? Enrolled people are entitled to their vote and if they are walking or driving past a shopfront with big signs declaring it be a prepoll venue and party representatives standing out the front giving out how to vote material, why should they not be tempted to vote there and then?

Lifestyles are changing and things should change appropriately to accommodate these changes. I think that anyone wanting to vote early should be allowed to do so, no reason needed. It may make staffing of polling day booths difficult but at least the voters are happy.

See also 11.33

11.15

If voters who use the prepoll venue are in their own electorate, then they should be issued with ordinary votes. This would save so much time with only printed rolls (or electronic ones) to be checked and voting papers issued and received back into a ballot box. The costs saved in printing special envelopes and the hours spent in checking these both at the polling booth and then back at the office would be great. Last election when I did this there were thousands to be checked. A better idea of the result of the election for the electorate would also be forthcoming on polling day evening.

One consequence of allowing anyone to prepoll is that the party campaign could be affected. Campaigns don't generally wind up until a few days before the election day. If people are going to be freely allowed to vote early then maybe the official date for the end of the campaign should be changed or parties will have to get their act together a lot earlier.

11.16 Postal voting

I also witnessed while working in the electoral office, certain problems with postal voting. Many have been outlined in the Green Paper. However, one point has not been addressed.

Postal applications are allowed up until one or two days before an election. This meant that many postal votes had to be sent out by Australia Post Express Mail so that the voting papers would arrive by the Friday before the election and voters had the opportunity to get them back in the mail on the same day. An enormous cost to the electoral commission and many did not get date stamped on the Friday, either because the voters did not get them or post them in time or there was no mail collection made that day. I worked in a country electorate that encompassed thousands of square kilometers and the late closing date for postal applications was a real disadvantage.

I would like to suggest that the closing date be at least a week before the elections with plenty of advertising about this. There would probably still be a few very isolated folk who may miss out if their postal application is made right at the end of the application period.

11.24

I would like to see parties banned from sending out postal vote application forms. I see this as the responsibility of the electoral commission. If the commission could widely advertise where or how postal applications forms can be obtained eg telephone for one to be posted, pick up points like post offices, print one from the internet and **even print application forms in newspapers**, I am sure this would keep the integrity of the system. This would probably gain an even wider audience than block posting by the parties. I do not like postal applications going through party offices if there is a possibility of those parties gaining any personal information or using the information for databases and other mail outs.

11.33

If it ever happened that most people could be encouraged to vote early over the two week period the prepoll centres are open, this may also assist in the use of electronic means of voting and if there was an electronic break down, people could still vote in the usual way on ballot papers. The pace of voting would be slower over this longer period allowed for voting and certainly give rise to the possibility of conducting electronic voting, identity checks, change of address information and new enrolments. If electronic voting was used it may also mean that voters from outside the electoral area would be able to vote as if it was their local area and their votes electronically recorded for the correct electorate. This would be another great saving in time and paper.

Eventually these prepoll centres may then become the hub of voting and not many polling booths (if any) would be needed on the actual electionday. More great savings in costs though an electorate would need several prepoll centres operating.

Conclusion

There are a great many sensible suggestions made by the Green Paper. However, there are also going to be some very difficult decisions which only experiences in future elections are going to confirm as workable or not.

Good luck.