



Submission on the Electoral Reform Green Paper – *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*

About Deaf Australia

Deaf Australia, established in 1986, is the national peak body managed by Deaf people that represents, promotes, preserves, and informs the development of, the Australian Deaf community, its language and cultural heritage. It provides an information and advocacy service for Deaf people who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

Deaf Australia is the Australian national member of the World Federation of the Deaf, is a founding member of Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), and works cooperatively with many organisations to achieve a better quality of life for Deaf people.

About Deaf people

For people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, the major issues are the right to use Auslan (Australian Sign Language), and access to information. The best way to provide access to information will vary depending on the person.

Deaf and hard of hearing people are not a homogenous group. They include:

- People whose primary language is Auslan. These people often are not fluent in English.
- People who are fluent in both English and Auslan.
- People who are fluent in English and who do not use Auslan.

For information to be accessible to all these groups, all of the following need to be provided:

- Written information needs to be available in easy to read English.
- Written information needs to be translated and made available in Auslan.
- Information presented in filmed format needs to be captioned, and also made available in an Auslan version.

The Green Paper

The Green Paper is extensive and we do not propose to comment on all aspects of it, only those of specific relevance to Deaf people.

We would like to comment on the following points:

- The Green Paper sets out a number of key principles of an Australian electoral system, including:
 - **Universality:**.....Appropriate processes and facilities should be devised to cater for electors whose specific needs would make ordinary voting unduly burdensome.
 - **Transparency in electoral administration:** Participants in electoral processes should have access to adequate information about the basis for decisions on the operation of the electoral machinery.

- **Civic culture:**....Voters....should be able to obtain accurate information....should be sufficiently informed about electoral process and systems.

Our comments:

All of these principles are of specific importance for Deaf and hard of hearing people. These principles all involve the Deaf or hard of hearing person's ability to access information and understand the electoral process.

- Chapter 3 of the Green Paper lists the following discussion point:
 - What is the best way to ensure that our electoral laws are easily understood by participants in the electoral process?

Our comments:

For Deaf and hard of hearing people, it is important to ensure that information is accessible and understandable. This means making it available in Auslan and in easy English and/or with captions as the case may be depending on its format.

- Chapter 4, states:
 - 4.1: *States must take effective measures to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right. Where registration of voters is required, it should be facilitated and obstacles to such registration should not be imposed.*
 - 4.21: *While it is difficult to quantify, it has been suggested that members of particular groups in the community may be less likely to exercise their franchise than others. For example.....a lack of proficiency in English has been identified as the major factor contributing to informal voting during recent federal elections.*

Our comments:

Many Deaf people are not fluent in English because the education system has failed to meet their needs. This makes it difficult for them to exercise their right to vote, including registering to vote – many need help to fill in forms.

One way to address the problem of informal voting for Deaf people could be to make DVDs with information in Auslan on how to vote and making these DVDs available to the community as well as playing them at polling booths.

- Chapter 6 states:
 - 6.5 The Electoral Act sets out the following functions for the AEC:
 - to educate and inform the community about participating in the electoral process/
 - to undertake research, provide information, publish material, and provide reports on electoral matters;
 - 6.14the structures and procedures of electoral commissions in other jurisdictions differ as a result of different electoral legislation, systems and traditions....

Our comments:

As outlined earlier all information made available by the AEC needs to be provided in easy English, with captions and in Auslan.

Having different structures and procedures in different jurisdictions adds to the confusion for Deaf people. It would be helpful to have more streamlined cross-jurisdictional procedures.

- Chapter 7 states:
 - 7.7 Enrolment forms consist of a four page document which must be completed and signed by hand.
 - 7.32 Another criticism of the current arrangements is that their relative complexity may disadvantage certain people who are otherwise entitled to vote. There are indications that particular groups in the community are less likely to enroll and maintain their enrolment than others, including ... those from non-English speaking backgrounds with low levels of English language proficiency...

Our comments:

Long forms to fill out disadvantages some Deaf people who are not fluent in English and would find such a long form daunting. Like people from a non-English speaking background, many Deaf people have low levels of English language proficiency and need information to be made available in Auslan.

- Chapter 7 Discussion point: Are there any changes that you think should be introduced to enrolment processes, such as:
 - Automatic enrolment
 - Automatic update of enrolment details

Our comments:

These two changes would be helpful for many Deaf people who find the process difficult to understand.

Chapter 9 states:

- 9.6 A national curriculum.....
- 9.12 Community cabinet meetings and the Australian Public Affairs Channel
- 9.17 ... the Internet and printed material will continue to provide alternative means of providing electoral education. The AEC is collaborating with DEEWR on strategies to ensure that its experience, and its high quality teaching and learning resources, are available to Australian schools in effective ways.
- 9.26 Suggestions for expanding electoral education activities.
- Chapter 9 Discussion points

Our comments:

Education is an enduring issue for Deaf people. Australia does not do education for Deaf people well. Deaf people need a bilingual (English/Auslan) education from the start – i.e. from the early intervention stage – and effective access to education at all levels. Auslan must play a part in all levels of education.

Auslan interpreters need to be available at community cabinet meetings.

Information broadcast on the Australian Public Affairs Channel needs to be both captioned and available in Auslan.

Resources available to the community, on the Internet and provided to schools need to be captioned and provided in Auslan as well.

DVDs with information in Auslan could be made available and played at polling booths to ensure Deaf people understand how to fill out the voting papers.

- Chapter 10 discusses:
 - Election advertising on television.
 - 10.25 Information on the Internet.
 - Discussion points....to what extent should the government seek to regulate the use of new media including the internet for campaign purposes

Our comments:

All election advertising should be captioned, and in Auslan.

Election information on the Internet should be captioned and available in Auslan.

There should be a requirement that all filmed material is captioned and all electoral material including campaign material is available in Auslan.

Conclusion

A democracy that aims to ensure all citizens are able to exercise their democratic right to vote needs to address the specific needs of people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Essentially this means making all information about the electoral process available to them in a format that they can access and understand. This means easy English, captioning and translating information and making it available in Auslan.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities very specifically states that Deaf people have the right to use sign language. The sign language used in Australia is Auslan. Australian governments need to ensure that their information is available in Auslan.

For further information please contact:

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