

Brian P. PEISLEY

The Secretary of the Committee

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Dear Committee Members,

**RE: INQUIRY INTO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF
THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

I refer to the above JSCEM Inquiry based upon the Terms of Reference, identified in this submission.

I would like the Committee Members to know that I make this submission as a private person and not in regard to my employment as a Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) in the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). I further wish to indicate that all views expressed by me, in this submission are mine and do not reflect on any policy or current direction that the AEC may or have chosen to follow.

Terms of Reference

The Special Minister of State requested that the committee inquire into and report on the following terms of reference on or before 17 September 2007:

- the adequacy of AEC co-location of divisional offices, including both financial and social consequences of co-locations;
- the number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices;
- whether the current arrangements meet career expectations for AEC officers;
- whether the current arrangements meet community expectations about the appropriate use of staffing resources;
- what any change to these arrangements would mean for the previous two points;
- what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews;
- whether the current APS staffing levels are appropriate for the actual work of divisional offices; and
- Any other issues relating to the staffing of divisional and central offices which may be raised in submission or by the committee.

Back ground Information on Brian Peisley:

- 52 years of age,
- Employed by the Australian Electoral Office 1975 to 1980;
- Employed by the Australian Electoral Commission 1988 to current date; mainly as a DRO, however have had long periods of acting as an Executive Level 1 officer in the AEC;
- I have worked on every Federal, State and Local Election since 1975 to current time;
- I have been to South Africa twice, to assist with their National and Provincial Elections in 1998 and 1999;
- I have a Masters degree in Public Administration, majoring in Electoral Governance;
- I managed from 2003 to 2006, the Gold Coast Area Office (the Divisions of Moncrieff and McPherson) and developed the amalgamated office plan that was used successfully in the 2004 Federal Election and is currently the approved plan being used for management of enrolment and election services on the Gold Coast;
- I assisted in the development of the shared working office plans for the Haymarket Site in NSW, which includes Divisions of Sydney, Wentworth and Grayndler; and
- I am currently working in the Chatswood Site, as the DRO for the Division of North Sydney, where I am managing the election preparation tasks for the Divisions of Berowra, Bennelong, Bradfield and North Sydney.

I base my submission on my working experiences:

- as a manager in the electoral process, both as a DRO (1988 to present) and as an acting Operation Manager (2000 to 2003);
- as I have also studied electoral governance processes;
- as a manager that has worked in stand-alone, co-located offices; and
- as the manager that developed the first truly amalgamated AEC Office on the Gold Coast.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

- ***the adequacy of AEC co-location of divisional offices, including both financial and social consequences of co-locations;***

There are only limited benefits in co-locating offices in the AEC, some of these benefits are:

- that it reduces the rent and some infrastructure costs that the AEC may have;

- that possibly the division office does not need to close as often where in the past stand-alone offices have had to close because the number of staff was reduced to a point that it was not safe in having the office open; and
- that the number of staff on the site has increased by the number of divisions located there, however this does not mean that staff provide a better service, in actual fact, my belief is that the service level is reduced by these co-locations.

The AEC does benefit from having co-located offices because of the reasons above.

The problems with co-locations are as follows:

- Two or more divisions combined together in an office layout that usually is just slightly larger than that of a stand-alone division;
- All equipment from the divisions are not shared but have been (multiplied by the number of divisions) eg 2 divisions = 2 photocopiers, etc,
- Storage of enrolment and election material is usually greatly reduced (sometimes this could be good);
- Client confusion when visiting a co-located site, as the first AEC staff member they have contact within the office, may have to get another officer from another division to handle the enquiry, this can also apply to telephone contacts;
- The different management styles of the various DRO's can cause conflict in one office, which can have an unstabling effect in the other division(s);
- The service provided in a co-located office in some cases is below service level because staff at these sites will not answer telephones or counter enquires when not rostered onto the counter;
- The financial saving of equipment is nil, as each co-located office has exactly the same equipment as a stand-alone division, this can in some cases greatly reduce the working space needed in the preparation of work;
- It is my opinion in regards to the social consequences, in the past the office was located where the best rent was to be achieved and little consideration was given to which division may have had the greatest need for the presence of an AEC office;
- If you examine the problems with a tri located office in Queensland, all three divisions appear to not have adequate space to perform their daily work, however the space required at election periods would create enormous problems in servicing the AEC clients at that time, this becomes a recipe for major problems, as was evident in the 2004 Federal Election; and
- Co-locations do not really provide much of financial or social structure to AEC cliental.

In stand-alone or regionalised offices, the counter and telephone inquiries are usually handled at the first point of contact in the office, which reduces client annoyance at being directed to another officer.

However if we talk about *REGIONALISATION* of AEC services, rather than having two or more offices with a dividing line separating them, being developed into a Regional Centre where, staff are working for common AEC purposes, then there comes numerous benefits for the AEC. Some of these benefits could be:

- depending on the model accepted the office structure is much easier to manage;
- services to clients is more streamlined and handled by the first point of contact;
- staff have more opportunity to work on varied tasks, rather than being allocated to one task as in most stand-alone or in co-located offices;
- knowledge of regional issues allows for a better working environment rather than knowledge at divisional level;
- state and local government contacts have only one point of contact in a regional office, where as in a stand-alone or co-located office, other government agencies need to contact each individual division, or get calls from every division;
- organisation of AEC requirements for major events is easier to manage at the regional level, and assist service organisations as they are dealing with one office rather than each divisional office;
- there are many other reasons why the AEC should be regionalised; some additional reasons will be covered in the last Term of Reference.

▪ ***the number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices;***

The old catch cry that one size fits all offices is ludicrous when used in the division structure of the AEC.

I accept what I write here is a generalisation and that the example does not necessarily fit all circumstances, but in general the following example is correct.

The AEC has roughly three permanent divisional staff in each stand-alone office. Some divisions have significantly high workloads; usually those in the CBD of each major city in Australia, these divisions usually work extremely long hours and only achieve basic services. However some divisions in the suburbs have reduced workloads, which means these divisions can get through their workloads, and process the work on a daily basis. In some cases in co-located offices, you can have an extremely busy division and some not as busy and because divisions in the past have not shared work in these sites, this has caused work related tension.

Country and regional divisions have other problems and depending on the location and in the period of the redistribution cycle, these offices may be under utilised or be over worked depending on their location.

The other issue here is that many divisional offices need more than the three staff identified and pay casual staff to come in and do the work, which cannot be completed by the permanent staff. However because the casual salary is taken out of a different financial vote, the work effort of those divisions is hidden because the casual salary is reported differently to that of the permanent officer. If the value of the casuals employed during the year was added to the permanent officer salary vote, the number of permanent staff could be raised from, as low as 0.5 FTE, up to a possible 2.0 FTE (each division would be different) in addition to the three full time staff divisions are supposed to have.

When I was an operational manager in NSW from 2000 to 2003, there were very few AEC offices in NSW that could work with less than three staff and those that had to, could only do restricted work, such as the basic enrolment and could not follow up on many enrolment programs. Again in many instances casuals may have been employed to assist, but in some cases this was not the case.

▪ ***whether the current arrangements meet career expectations for AEC officers;***

When I was managing a particular project in the AEC in Queensland, I was requested to use an organisation that looked at the duties of each divisional staff member and then gave them a rating as to what the future positions level should be in the new structure. The current structure of the AEC in Divisional Offices is a 1 x APS 2, 1 x APS 3 and 1 x DRO APS 6.

The result of the review was that the work at the APS 2 was really performing work at the APS 3 level and in the APS 3 case, was really performing work at the APS 4 level. I accept that these positions had been reviewed with new duties but the APS 2 positions had the same duties as those in stand-alone divisions. While I was able to make a case in regards to restructuring positions on the Gold Coast, I could not get management to budge on the reclassification of work of the APS 2 to APS 3 level. I assume that if the APS 2 had been upgraded to an APS 3 that the ramifications of this change would flow right across the AEC and that roughly, 150 divisional sites would have had major effects, yet if the APS 2 in the AEC is working at the APS 3 level as in other government departments, then why are not the APS 2 position upgraded, likewise, why are not the APS 3 upgrade to APS 4 positions.

What does this do to career expectations, it encourages an aged office where many APS 2 and APS 3 are mature in age, and work extremely well, but our structure does not give us leverage to encourage younger staff who are the future of the AEC into a career structure that would give

them better advancement, because of the entry at APS 2 for younger staff is too low and the work too boring.

- ***whether the current arrangements meet community expectations about the appropriate use of staffing resources;***

In my comments above in the point on 'the number of staff and the employment structure of staff in divisional offices', the community has no idea what the AEC does do between elections. We cause this problem ourselves; we do not promote our services in non-election periods other than an odd review of households every so often. We may write letters for enrolment purposes, but fail to follow up in many instances because our staffing level is low. We fail to provide in many divisions an adequate electoral education program, because of staffing resources and therefore our presence in the community is not seen as much as other government agencies such as Centrelink etc.

- ***what any change to these arrangements would mean for the previous two points;***

When I managed the development of the Gold Coast Area Office, what we were able to do, was provide a better service to the cliental of the Gold Coast from within this office. We got away from two groups of three staff separately providing services to roughly 90,000 electors in each division, to six staff providing services to 180,000 electors, which was more cost effective, provided a greater service, and all staff did not have a small area to look after they had a common office servicing electors from the whole of the Gold Coast.

A major benefit was that we restructured the duties of each staff member which meant that the office went from having 2 X APS 2, 2 X APS 3 and 2 X APS 6 to 2 X APS 2, 1 X APS 3, 1 X APS 4, 1 X APS 5 and 1 X APS 6 officers, so that the office had a career structure.

The office also combined like duties from the two divisional offices, these meant that staff could work on and answer questions on most tasks that the AEC was doing on the Gold Coast, rather than condensing work into small areas. We also were able to save time in the performing of the duties in these tasks; this meant that we could devote time to areas that we needed to, such as more investigations into enrolment issues or into development of suitable electoral education programs for AEC cliental on the Gold Coast.

Because the office was regional focused and not divisional focused it further meant that if staff were on leave, all staff could answer questions to and also provide a superior service to AEC clients.

There were fewer office closures and staff was able to expand on their knowledge of the AEC as they had the opportunity to do other tasks that cannot be done in stand-alone or co-located offices.

- ***what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews;***

Every Divisional Office in Australia has a list of staff that they have employed to do habitation reviews, but the question is being asked incorrectly (what you need to know is, are we);

- going to do habitation reviews as we have done in the past, i.e. knock on doors once every 18 months to 2 years?
- going to post letters encouraging people to get on the rolls as we currently do in Continuous Roll Reviews?
- going to do a continuous roll review where over 12 months every house is visited by a group of permanent review officers who may work two weeks out of every four?; or
- developing new and innovative ways of increase enrolment?

We need to look at new and better ways to encouraging people to enrol and to vote. Short, sharp review periods and sending letters to people we know are not on the roll, does not work effectively.

Successful reviews are a combination of Continuous Roll Reviews using letters as the first contacts and full habitation reviews with door knocking every residence in the whole division and both carried out over a long period of time covering the whole electorate where physically possible. This would give more permanent staff to divisions and would mean more enrolment.

The current level of staffing for reviews maybe adequate in some divisions and not so in others, however if the AEC employed permanent review officers, similar to what the Australian Bureau of Statistics does in the collection of the various household surveys, then we would not need to employ so many review officers at any one period, for a short period of time.

- ***whether the current APS staffing levels are appropriate for the actual work of divisional offices;***

I have already in the points above raised that the APS staffing levels in divisions are not, nor is the current APS structure level adequate.

Actual work in divisions in many cases is not being done and only essential work is being completed, i.e. basic enrolment.

The structure of divisional offices in the late 1970's was four person offices, and the roll reviews were managed through a habitation index system, and carried out over a longer period of time.

The current staffing level of three staff, during periods of busy activity, is not appropriate to each division. Some divisions can survive on that number, where other divisions have had to put work aside and only do the

basics because they either do not have the staff or they have too much basic work.

If the divisions were regionalised while the same number of enrolment or election work would still be coming in for the region, the output from staff increases because they manage the work better, more staff can be directed onto prioritised work than what can be done in a stand-alone or co-located office. Systems can be better utilised in a regional basis at a macro level, rather than at the divisional micro level.

- ***any other issues relating to the staffing of divisional and central offices which may be raised in submission or by the committee.***

The issue of each electoral division having stand-alone office sites must be addressed. The problem is that a number of politicians believe that they must have an AEC divisional office in their divisional boundaries based upon what is in the Commonwealth Electoral Act. Services to politicians from a regional site are more organised and better serviced than those from many of a divisional stand-alone sites. This was proved on the Gold Coast where services offered both to the members and candidates were far superior to those in stand-alone divisions.

Another problem is the location of offices. A member of parliament was insistent that as she had electorate offices in two of the major regional cities in the division she was representing, that she demanded that the AEC divisional office remain in a small community between the two major cities, because she felt that the AEC office gave her a presence in that location. The AEC is A-Political and is not to be used as a pawn by politicians to give exposure to themselves. The unfortunate story here is that the major community of nearly 50,000 and 25,000 respectively were not serviced by the AEC while a community of 5,000 was.

With regionalisation, clients would have to travel or use other means to communicate with the offices, in the city; this may not be a problem, while in the country it is. Yet in country areas, 99% of major locations in Australia are not serviced by an AEC Office, and those 1% of locations that do have an AEC presence, they do not have many cliental visiting the office.

Regionalisation would allow a more professional service to all clients in the region.

Another issue in stand-alone divisions is the office make up, three person offices do not work well. In a lot of times, personalities of two, affects the performance of the third member. In a regionalised office, where personalities can differ, the working environment is not put under the same strain as that of the three person office. If personalities are strained in regionalised offices, these can be managed in a much better manner.

A major problem in current stand-alone offices is when the APS 3 is promoted to the APS 6 position, this career jump can be handled by a few individuals,

but many staff that make this jump, struggle with the complexity of the duties and the management of the staff.

In a regionalised setting, the career structure would be more gradual allowing staff to be promoted to a level where they can manage for a period time more complex duties, but not to the same level of the jump from an APS 3 to APS 6.

Work in a regional office is more satisfying for AEC Staff, they are able to plan, manage and complete tasks and leave the office knowing that they have been able to achieve the tasks on hand, where as in a stand-alone divisions, many staff work extremely long unpaid hours and still do not achieve any degree of satisfaction because the work has not been completed to the level of satisfaction that they wanted.

In conclusion

I have worked in stand-alone, co-located and an amalgamated sites, by far my greatest sense of achievement and most satisfying working experience in the division structure was as the Manager of the Gold Coast Area Office, where we achieved a small regionalised office structure and satisfied the client of the Gold Coast by the work achieved by all from within that office.

I would like to state again, these views are mine, and are not those of the AEC.

Brian P. PEISLEY
2ndnd May 2007