

SUBMISSION NO. 28

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Secretary

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Dr Andrew Southcott
Federal Member for Boothby
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Dear Dr Southcott

POSTAL VOTES

Prior to the election I had the responsibility of explaining voting procedures to several first time voters. These voters were young people with disabilities living in community housing. They had postal votes. One would have been able to fill out his own ballot paper with some difficulty but told me his carer would do it and the other two would have relied on their carers to do it for them.

A number of problems surfaced and I would like to apprise you of them.

One of these young people can neither read nor write and, while he can sign his name, it is doubtful if he understood the voting process at all. His name was placed on the electoral roll by one of his carers.

All three young people advised me that they had been told they "must" vote for a particular candidate. When I informed them they had a choice their reaction was that they felt they had to do as their carers wanted. It was clear that they felt potentially open to abuse if they did not cooperate.

I sent an e-mail to the Australian Electoral Commission. I had two responses, both claiming that they took such problems seriously. The second e-mail, from the AEC office at Marion, advised me that they were sending some literature over for use with these young people. That literature never arrived and I collected some myself in Adelaide some days later.

I also assisted several elderly people with their postal vote applications. One did not receive her ballot papers. I made inquiries on her behalf and was informed that she was "not on the list". She then had to reapply. Another couple needed two sets of ballot papers and only one set was sent. We then had to arrange for the wife to use the papers and the husband to have some transport to a polling station with someone who has a vehicle with wheelchair access.

I am aware that there were some problems caused by an unusually large number of applications for postal votes at this election. However the problems relating to young people and others who need physical assistance to vote have been of concern in the past.

It is possible that the problem could be sufficiently widespread to influence the outcome in an individual electorate where the difference is a matter of several hundred votes.

The Australian Electoral Commission has been made aware of these problems at previous elections. Their response has always been that it is a matter of educating those concerned. As the problem persists this response would appear to be inadequate.

This matter was raised at the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act. Their final report included the results of some research which included comments from people with disabilities who felt that they had been disenfranchised. One possible solution suggested in the report would be to require persons who are unable to mark their own ballot papers to use only an AEC official rather than allow an apparent choice. This would naturally involve additional costs. Other potential courses

of actions also suggest themselves, including more aggressive education programmes by the AEC and additional non-partisan information about the electoral process being provided by advocacy organizations.

Given the nature of the result in several South Australian electorates it seemed advisable to raise these matters directly with you. Should you require further information about the research, which was done by the Communication Project Group, please let me know.

Yours sincerely

(Dr) Kathryn M Gunn
Deputy Director
Communication Project Group