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Sent: Thursday, 15 May 2008 1:46 AM  
To: Committee, EM (REPS)  
Cc: Ryan-Gordon.HEATH@ec.europa.eu  
Subject: Submission - election inquiry

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To: The Committee Secretary, JSCEM

Dear Sir,

Please accept this submission for the JSCEM's Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election.

My comments relate specifically to the participation and representation of overseas voters.

Other submission will deal with the need for expatriate representation in the Parliament etc. I wish to make only two points, one general, one logistical about the conduct of elections.

1. Expatriate communities are a vital economic and branding resource to the Australian domestic community and economy. In addition to any arguments about democracy, efforts to uphold the rights of expatriates and embrace them as part of the Australian citizenry are crucial to our future well-being. The starting principle for any revision of expatriate voting rules should be how to maximise participation and representation while not compromising electoral integrity. And any costs for such changes, need to be viewed in light of a broad cost-benefit analysis of the economic relationship Australian expatriates have with the rest of the economy.

2. The operation of voting overseas.

This is often tedious and made difficult by DFAT / Embassy staff. The conduct of voting is considered to be non-core work by many, or simply to be ignored by non-Australian staff involved in the process. This is something I have had personal experience of and it simply isn't good enough.

Staff involved in the election process need to be issued with instructions, and offered incentives, to ensure that they maximise turnout and make voting as simple as possible.

Queues etc, are of course inevitable. Three hour waits, being told to drive to the other end of the country, and rude staff are not inevitable. If addressing these problems (of which many anecdotes exist) requires extra financial investment then this is a necessary cost. It is also likely that in popular voting locations with substantial expatriate communities that temporary AEC staff can be recruited to assist the process in the same way as they are domestically.

These efforts need to be viewed not as a cost or a difficulty, but as an investment in Australia's community fabric. The costs, in any case, are minimal in overall terms set against the other costs of elections and maintaining our democratic institutions.

Ryan Heath