

TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into electronic voting

Melbourne — 24 August 2016

Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Mr Russell Northe

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

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Witnesses

Mr Warwick Gately, electoral commissioner,

Ms Liz Williams, deputy electoral commissioner,

Ms Glenda Frazer, election services manager, and

Mr Simon Hancock, information technology manager, Victorian Electoral Commission.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee

The CHAIR — We will start the second day of public hearings for the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into electronic voting with an apology to everyone for me starting a couple of minutes late. I am sure we will make up the time.

The committee members, Mr Gately, you are well aware of; I do not think you need me to introduce you to the committee members again seeing we have done this on umpteen occasions. Can I just please check with you — I know you are familiar with it — that you have read the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing pamphlet, so you are well aware of the issues of parliamentary privilege and the protection here.

Mr GATELY — I have.

The CHAIR — You are also well aware of the issue that Hansard will record this particular evidence. Could you please state your full name, your business address and advise the committee formally whether you are officially representing your organisation. Perhaps you might like to say a couple of words to your submission first, which I see has received coverage in today's *Herald Sun*, such was the significance of the submission, which is all good, and indeed is Australia Post's submission. It is on our website, so that is understandable. If I could hand over to you, thank you.

Mr GATELY — Chair, thank you. Warwick Gately, electoral commissioner, 530 Collins Street, Melbourne, representing the electoral commission.

I welcome this inquiry into electronic voting. In my report to Parliament on the 2014 state election I made a recommendation that a limited category of electors be allowed access to a remote voting system where their vote could be cast and transferred electronically. This is not the first consideration by the Electoral Matters Committee into electronic voting, nor is it only Victoria that is interested in the subject. You will know that the EMC inquired into the future of Victoria's electoral administration in early 2013. One of the discussion points covered the topic of electronic voting, and the VEC did contribute to that inquiry.

Also the joint standing committee on electoral matters considered electronic voting in November 2014 but were not supportive. However, that assessment by the Joint standing committee was made before the very successful second use of iVote in the New South Wales state election in March 2015 where over 280 000 votes were cast over the internet. Also, while I note that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition were supporting the consideration of an electronic voting system as a means of speeding up vote counting and reporting, this view unfortunately may now be coloured with the events surrounding the census.

Up to now Victoria has operated electronically assisted voting at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 state elections. The ACT has provided kiosk-style voting since 2001 at four elections. New South Wales has provided iVote now at two state elections and six by-elections. Western Australia has legislation in Parliament providing for the use of a form of electronic voting at the next state election in March 2017. In 2007 the commonwealth implemented a trial of remote electronic voting for defence force personnel. Also the examples of electronic voting overseas are extensive.

There are many advantages to be gained from electronic voting, and equally there are risks. I note already a lot of the discussion during this inquiry has centred on these risks and on the arguments around technology generally. That discussion needs to occur, but around that discussion we need to have formed a view on the Victorian voting system of the future, where every elector has equal access to voting services that are responsive, available, secure and able to be delivered in an efficient and cost-effective manner and that meet the expectations of the community and of Parliament.

Within the 14-year operation of the state's current Electoral Act, our social mode of life has changed dramatically. There is widespread internet and smart phone use, populations are very technology smart and dependent, and these same populations are mobile but also ageing and disabled. There are strong community expectations around access to services and access to information. We are experiencing digital substitution, with a declining print industry and mail house services, in turn resulting in declining postal services coupled with increasing costs, and our attitudes to trust and to risk are changing. Internet banking is an example of that.

As we look at Victorian voting behaviours and requirements we can observe there is an increasing desire by electors to vote early, particularly in person. Voting informality rates are increasing, perhaps being influenced by large candidate and party numbers. There is a slowly declining turnout nationally, although Victoria is steady. Electors expect immediate service at a time of their choosing, and many are no longer wedded to the idea of a single election day. Election services and relevant information should be online and election results quick and conclusive. Despite considerable investment, our present election services do not make voting easy or convenient for electors with disabilities and other needs, and they are not being taken up.

These factors lead me to the conclusion that Victoria's future voting system must contain a remote voting solution for a limited category of electors that operates alongside and does not replace our present early voting and election day voting arrangements and options. I will say that again: a remote voting solution for a limited category of electors that operates alongside and does not replace our present early voting and election day voting arrangements and options. I believe that such a system will strengthen the franchise of currently disadvantaged electors and present Victoria as a progressive and inclusive state operating an election system available to all, irrespective of their circumstances. It will also position Victoria to expand its electronic services at a time when traditional service delivery methods are no longer feasible, and our submission to this inquiry reflects that conclusion. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission, which was I think very helpful to all members of the committee, and thank you for that expansion. A lot of the submissions, as I am sure you would have seen, Mr Gately, looked at not just voting but the counting of votes and a whole range of processes, so could you, first up, tell the committee, because I think it would be helpful — and if you could perhaps start at the thing that I am familiar with, which is the electronic allocation of order on the ballot paper of candidates — if you could start at basically the beginning of the process and explain to the committee members and other interested parties which bits of the VEC operations are electronic now and which bits are not. So if you could go from lodgement of candidate things through to upper house counting so that we actually know what we are dealing with.

Mr GATELY — Chair, technology is across all our activities. What I will do is ask Liz and perhaps Glenda as well to just explain how much it pervades what we do.

The CHAIR — Terrific. Thank you.

Ms WILLIAMS — We will start from the beginning of the process. As Warwick said, many of our back-end processes are already automated, and that has been developed over many, many years. So if we start with the nomination process, for example, while candidates still need to present, or party representatives still need to lodge paper forms, we have developed back-end facilities where they can complete their forms online, and then when they bring them to the office it can be scanned and directly loaded into our election management system, which is a system that we have developed over many years. So the nomination process is partly automated in that regard.

When we get to close off nominations, for example, we have now automated the ballot draw so it is an electronic random ballot draw, and that enables that to take place without any transactions externally. It minimises the risk and also enables us to proceed to ballot paper production very, very quickly.

We move then into postal voting. I will ask Glenda to carry on from there. We will move through the processes as the election goes through.

Ms FRAZER — We do have a limited electronic postal vote process, which is for people who are overseas who cannot get to the mail regularly. We do have an emailed postal voting process where a person can apply for a postal vote. We will email them their ballot material securely with password protection under a separate email, which allows them to actually print out their ballot material at the point of wherever they are overseas. It just means that they are not actually putting things in the mail more than once. What they do is download that. Everything is A4 size; they print it to A4. They have to make a little

macramé envelope, and then they can fill it all out. It has got all the requirements of the law on it, and they put it in the mail back to us, so it saves us time and effort in mailing.

This council election we will have an online postal vote application process where you actually would fill out the form online and submit it online. It will electronically go to the relevant returning office. That is a process that we also have.

We work off scanned images for all of our postal voting through the state. So we scan all of our postal vote applications, and they are processed through the system. So when you get to the election office after the election, the actual signature checking is automated. So we look online. We are looking at images, not pieces of paper, so we have reduced the amount of paper there.

Ms WILLIAMS — We also have electronic roll marking — all of our early voting centres for the last state election were equipped with netbooks — so then when voters attend to vote, the marking of the roll is automated, which saves the scanning process post-election. It also gives us a central live roll that we are using for the election, so you can see if anyone has already applied for a postal vote et cetera. All of our early voting centres in Victoria were equipped with those. We also rolled out around 600 netbooks to election day voting centres — to about 106 election day voting centres. We targeted those to those venues that traditionally took high numbers of absent votes so that it streamlined the voting process in those centres.

The CHAIR — So that means an electronic roll mark-off for those absentee voters? And that is 106?

Ms WILLIAMS — That is right.

The CHAIR — And that is 106.

Ms WILLIAMS — Across the entire election, and given the high numbers of early voters, we actually marked around 30 per cent — one-third of voters — off the roll electronically at the 2014 state election.

Ms PATTEN — Was that reconciled before election day — so if someone had pre-pollled prior to election day, if they forgot and went to vote on election day?

Ms WILLIAMS — No, it is not. Then obviously we move into computer counting. We do this for council elections. For proportional representation counts we do data entry of the preferences on ballot papers, and the count is conducted electronically. Similarly we do that for the upper house. I guess it remains to be seen where we are looking at perhaps being able to do that for a rechecking process for lower house ballot papers as well, so we could replace the rechecking and preference distributions for the lower house electronically as well. We are not at that point just yet.

The CHAIR — So every single upper house ballot paper is data entered?

Ms WILLIAMS — Not every single one. All of the ones marked below the line, but what we enter into the system is the manual count of above the line ballot papers that then picks up the ticket allocation. So what else have I missed there, Glenda — online enrolments?

Ms FRAZER — Yes, online enrolment on our website. We also have automated all our ballot material production. We no longer use Word templates to create ballot papers. We have a process now where we actually press a button and within normally about an hour to about an hour and a half all of our ballot papers are in print-ready form for QA-ing. It has reduced our ballot paper production by upwards of 12 hours, so that has really been a really good initiative. Our new payroll system and online recruitment —

Ms WILLIAMS — All our election officials now can register online, and we can send offers directly to them online, so it actually reduces that turnaround time that we have had in the past when we have got to engage high numbers of staff in a very short time line. There have been some terrific savings there.

Ms FRAZER — And the paper.

Ms WILLIAMS — And we have moved a number of our training products for our officials online as well.

Ms FRAZER — We are actually on the cusp of investigating new processes to expand our online space. In regard to party registration, we are looking at how we might be able to streamline that to open up a party portal. Because we communicate so much through state elections, it would be great to have that. I think we have mentioned the other lower house.

Ms WILLIAMS — Yes, the lower house as well. What remains unautomated? I guess, that all of those back-end processes have got a degree of automation in them. The ones that remain are the voting process that the voters actually participate in in the voting centre. Declaration voting; anything that goes into an envelope has got a high level of manual processing associated with it, moving it to where it needs to go, checking it off the roll, opening the envelope, extracting the ballot papers et cetera.

Voting centre paperwork still is very manual. They will either call results through to the election office where they are put into our election management system, or the paperwork comes back and it is data entered into the system, but we are looking at how we might be able to remove that double handling there as well. I think that is about all that remains at that high level.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I just think it is very important, because obviously AEC has different processes to you, and people have their own experience of election days. Can I just ask as a follow-up to that: having been a candidate, and a candidate for many, many years, I do remember the Tattsлото-style ballot draw in the old days, and now of course there is a button pressed on a computer. There are many parallels with the candidate random draw, I think, and electronic voting, because what happens on every draw that I go to is the candidate who gets top of the ballot is very pleased about that and has ultimate, as I did, confidence in the system — I think it went my way twice — and then everyone else complains: ‘How do I know that’s random?’. I have often thought at this moment that I feel sorry for the electoral official trying to deal with what is a technical question. So is there any follow-up of these complaints, that I see on candidate random ballot draws every time that you do them, with you? Could you explain why you are competent in that technology to allocate that?

Mr GATELY — Chair, I will start. Having only done the 2014 state election here, I did not receive a complaint about the nature of the candidate allocation draw.

The CHAIR — It is just a spontaneous complaint.

Mr GATELY — Perhaps on Friday it is a matter we could show you as well when you come down for the demonstration.

The CHAIR — Yes, that would be good.

Mr GATELY — But I would ask Simon, because there have been measures taken, to provide assurance about that process.

Mr HANCOCK — The random ballot draw has been part of our software since 1999, and we have since redeveloped that component. There are two things. What we have always done is have it independently audited by a company called BMM Testlabs, which specialises in understanding and looking at software and auditing software to ensure it is compliant first with the law and to our requirements. We do that every time we change those critical components of our software.

In particular they look at the randomised function within our software to ensure that it is random. We also put up on our website the piece of code that actually generates a random number, and also the results of their audit report. If we were ever to change that random component, it would be re-audited. We ask BMM Testlabs to look for malicious code — code that might say, ‘Favour one party over another’. They look at our testing regime. They look at our code for what they would expect to see as professional code and to ensure that it accords, especially to the random component, with what they would consider sufficient to generate a random number.

Ms SPENCE — I have a question in regard to vote formality. We have had some evidence provided to us that any electronic voting system considered should include allowing intentional informal votes. I wonder if you could talk to us a bit about what effect electronic voting would have on unintentional informal votes in light of the high percentage in the recent state election.

Mr GATELY — I think with respect to that question the electronic voting process should replicate what is available to the individual. So if an individual chooses to vote informally, either consciously or unconsciously, or do whatever they choose to do with that ballot paper, that should be reflected in the electronic voting arrangement as well. One advantage certainly is that it could alert the elector to the fact that they are about to cast an informal vote. Now if it is unconscious to them, then that might force them to correct that. So you could possibly argue that it could influence that number of informal votes — it could reduce the number of them. But you should be able to replicate the same process.

Ms SPENCE — So what was the rate of unintentional informal votes from your report on the last state election?

Mr GATELY — I do not have that figure immediately to hand, but I am very happy to come back with that. We have done some work on that, and it is probably in our report to Parliament with respect to that, but I cannot immediately recall it.

Ms WILLIAMS — No, I cannot recall a figure, but it is significant.

Mr DIXON — Warwick, you mentioned that you are looking at or you are recommending expansion of the electronic voting into other categories, so could you just detail what further categories you are looking at there?

Mr GATELY — The submission really just reflects the current categories of electors that have access to electronically assisted voting, so it is no different to that, other than we could formalise, I think, that group of electors that are overseas. We have done some work in relation to the numbers about that. That is a significant number of electors that have difficulty, we believe, in accessing a voting arrangement because they are travelling and it was significant in November. So we take the current cohort of electors as described in the Electoral Act and we give them that same access but to a remote electronic voting system. And we include potentially — and it would be a matter for Parliament — interstate and overseas as well; formally including them in that.

Glenda might very quickly give some numbers for who we feel are overseas in November in an election year.

The CHAIR — That would be very helpful.

Ms FRAZER — Okay. Thank you. Looking at the number of short-term — so people who just go for a holiday and come back, the research I have looked into looks like there are about 25 per cent of Victorians out of the country short term. In November there are about 7 per cent of those people overseas. I just did a rough calculation, and looking at it — we are only concentrating obviously on those who are on the roll — it looks like there are potentially about 108 600 people out of the country during November who are Victorians who are eligible voters. At the moment we are managing to capture an audience of about 9.2 per cent of those, which has sat pretty steady for the last three elections — around 10 000 people voting overseas at the 34 venues we establish at various high commissions et cetera and embassies.

The CHAIR — What is the cost, and you can take this on notice, of those overseas votes?

Ms FRAZER — We would have to come back to you. They are quite substantial because we have to ship obviously everything from Victoria overseas. We did at the last state election, to try and fast-track some of the voting facilities, print ballot papers in England and we shipped them to Canada and the US because it was quicker to get them through customs that way. But there is definitely quite a large cost on couriers alone to ship the resources necessary to the various embassies et cetera, and the fact that we actually pay for their staff. They do not do it free; they quite often bring extra staff in that we cover the

costs for, extra computers that we have to hire et cetera for the people to vote, to be able to get to the roll et cetera. So there is quite a cost. But we can come back to you definitely with figures.

The CHAIR — If you could — and it does not have to be on Friday — because I think that is probably a pivotal piece of information that we need to have.

Mr NORTHE — Similarly to Martin's question, in terms of the remote voting system for those who might be eligible — in your submission you talk about people who are blind, low-visioned, motor impaired, have insufficient language or literacy skills and those who might be interstate or overseas — was there any consideration of Victorians who might live a certain distance from voting centres that this might also apply to?

Mr GATELY — We did have a very quick look at that from a GIS perspective, and I think Simon you quoted figures the other day.

Mr HANCOCK — When we first looked at this, we have a GIS system, and we asked our GIS team to plot those electors.

Ms PATTEN — What is GIS?

Mr HANCOCK — It is the geographical information system. It is a way of using mapping. We have a team who specialise in this, primarily for electoral boundaries. They plotted those Victorians who live more than 20 kilometres from a voting centre, just by the flight of a crow.

Mr NORTHE — Simon, that is the same as what applies in New South Wales; is that right?

Mr HANCOCK — Yes, and there are about 1500 voters who would fall into that category, so it is a very, very small number — basically because of the smaller geographical size of Victoria.

Ms PATTEN — Just keeping on the overseas voters for a minute, you spoke about the email system so people could print their own ballots and use that. Did many people pick that up? There are 10 000 people overseas — well, you are capturing 10 000 overseas votes. Was there much of a pick-up of the email postal option?

Ms FRAZER — Yes, there was. We introduced it in 2010 first. We had about 1000 people take that up, and that rose by over 100 per cent. We actually did about 2200 at the 2014. We did make it only for those people in remote areas. It was buried more on the overseas pages of our website, and they actually had a flag where they said, 'I'm in a remote location'. So we did have — —

Ms PATTEN — Right. But it would not be in London?

Ms FRAZER — If you were available in London to go to Victoria House, you voted at Victoria House.

Ms BLANDTHORN — You are obviously recommending moving to some kind of system similar to what New South Wales has. We have heard a bit of evidence so far in terms of end-to-end verification not really being possible under that system and also some questions raised about the security of that system. What would you say to those types of concerns?

Mr GATELY — I think the advantage of looking closely at the New South Wales system is that it has been tested. Obviously the New South Wales Parliament have confidence in that system, given it has been through two state elections and six by-elections. Verification is difficult, but if you take the New South Wales model and their investment in that, and then Victoria, for example, contributed further to the verification component and other elements of it, we are building a system that potentially has capacity nationwide. They have put their investment into it. Let us draw on that investment, let us improve that incrementally and work with New South Wales. Perhaps Western Australia would come on board as well and perhaps other jurisdictions also, and we start to build a capability.

If there are — I would not use the word ‘flaws’ — weaknesses in that system, let us take those weaknesses, identify them and build upon it. That is the attraction in looking closely at the New South Wales model. It has been tested, and Parliament has some confidence in it, notwithstanding there might have been some negative commentary about it. Obviously New South Wales have confidence and the public as well in New South Wales. That is the attraction of that. I am not saying verification is easy. Technology generally is not easy, and we accept that fact. Let us get the best of industry to look at this and improve on that system. That would be my approach.

The CHAIR — That is a wonderful approach to federalism. I think we could all learn from that.

Ms PATTEN — Following on from that, I note you make some analogies, I guess, with postal voting and the limits on verifying postal votes. I was rather struck by the fact that a postal vote may go through 20 hands going through the postal system. I was quite struck by that. Simon, you would have seen a lot of the criticism of iVote, and we have certainly heard evidence that there is no way that you can make it 100 per cent safe. There is no way that you can stop it being possibly manipulated by a third party. While you might be able to manipulate a postal vote, the ability to manipulate a lot of postal votes is not simple. When you have looked at iVote — and recommending that Victoria look at this — have you got any of those same concerns?

Mr HANCOCK — One of the things we have learnt is that electronic voting is the most complex and the most difficult technical challenge not only that the commission would take on but I suspect at the moment in the software world. That in itself should not stop us considering it. I think that security and verification are two different things. I think security is what we all face. So right now I know that our website is continually probed; I suspect the parliamentary website is being probed right now. So I think the security and the component of the system that ensures that you are 100 per cent confident that what you have committed from the voter is correct are two different things. I think the security you can work on, because all systems have to be secure — the banks have to secure it, the tax office has to secure it, we have to secure it. That is one component. The real difficulty that clearly we are being faced with is this thing that you are confident in the system that what the voter has committed is what is actually counted.

I do understand the concerns raised by iVote, but I also understand that there is a degree of trust, and the New South Wales Parliament trusts what is happening. So it is difficult to actually say how we would get there, but I believe that using iVote and getting a collective input into iVote at the moment is where we as a commission should go when you consider that what we are trying to provide is a voting system for people who are struggling to go to a voting centre in the first place.

Mr SOMYUREK — Just a question with respect to the degree of expertise or capability you have in-house in the ICT space, if you could comment on that: do you outsource most of your ICT work, or do you have in-house experts?

Mr HANCOCK — We have a combination, but basically I have a development team that we run internally. Those developers come from a number of companies, but we build our software. I will put aside vVote for the time being, but the software that we use is developed in-house and we build that around a small number of very dedicated and talented developers, project managers and testers.

When you look at vVote, as I said before, it is complex; it is extremely difficult. We engaged the University of Surrey, and that dedicated team put together the world’s first fully verifiable voting system, built-house. When I look at the two different pieces of software, vVote has in it some very, very complex mathematics — mathematics that is only probably understood by PhDs in mathematics. When I look at the software I developed and delivered for the commission, it is not the same; it has complexities, and I have talented people and people who understand counting algorithms and the difficulties around that. I am left with a piece of software that is extremely difficult in vVote, for all its virtues.

For me, when I look at that in my job, that is an unsustainable way of maintaining a technology base; I cannot be reliant on a minute number, and this is, I think, reflected across Australia. It is such a difficult issue and there are so few people who can actually deliver this that it makes no sense for each commission

to attempt to do it themselves. There just is not the — talent is the wrong word — market to go out. You cannot go to Click and say, 'Give me somebody who can write an electronic voting system'. We have to aggregate our demand, we have to aggregate our talent and that is why we are proposing iVote.

Mr SOMYUREK — Is the lack of talent, as you have put it, due to — —

Mr HANCOCK — Capability.

Mr SOMYUREK — Capability, let us say. Is the lack of capability due to the fact that you have got to be both an ICT expert and almost a psephologist as well? Is that what you are looking for?

Mr HANCOCK — In vVote or any electronic voting system at its very core is very complex PhD-level cryptography. That is based on mathematics, and it is an extremely difficult area. When you look at normal software or normal business-grade software, there are complexities in it, but I can get talented developers who will take that on. Sure, there are issues around electronic voting such that you have to fundamentally understand the process of voting and elections, but at its heart there are components which are really difficult to understand. You need highly talented, for want of a better word, people to maintain that and make it work.

The other thing is that when you go live you still need these people to make it work. As I said, it is an unsustainable model from a development point of view. We have to aggregate our talent, aggregate our competency. In the end you would expect to see electronic voting competency within Australia.

Mr SOMYUREK — So would you have the various electoral commissions getting together and having an ICT sort of team?

Mr HANCOCK — Yes.

Mr SOMYUREK — It will be very costly and very specialised as well.

Mr HANCOCK — It is highly specialised, and at the heart of the proposal is that we as commissions come together. We have New South Wales, Victoria, potentially Western Australia and potentially Queensland. The other thing we have to understand — and the software that we develop faces the same issue — is that software really has to go through what is called a maturity cycle. You have to continually use it to find the problems in order to resolve them. I am not going to comment on what caused the ABS issue. I have a huge amount of sympathy for them. Once every five years you expect them to deliver a piece of software that tens of millions of people are expected to use on one night, and you expect it to work flawlessly. That is a huge undertaking. From the experience we have, when we press the button for the upper house calculation, we have done it 8 times or 16 times. That is not an awful lot of use for software. Software has to go through a maturity cycle. You have to use it and continually find the problems and continually build on it.

The CHAIR — One last follow-up. The deputy chair has been waiting.

Mr SOMYUREK — One last one. It is going to be quick. Ms Asher and I are former ministers for innovation. You had innovation too?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr SOMYUREK — One thing we learnt in that portfolio is that quite often it is better to buy technology off the shelf rather than reinventing it. What is your view on that? We saw that myki was not such a success when we sort of tried to do it all ourselves when we could have gone off the shelf. What is your view? Have you guys been looking around, or is it so unique that you have to develop your own?

Ms PATTEN — Well, there is iVote.

Mr HANCOCK — If we looked at electoral management systems, it is a pretty small market, but as we have gone through our redevelopment process we do go through a decision process as it were — buy

before build, re-use before build — so redeveloping your software is at the bottom of the decision tree because that is the most expensive. I look at what we have done. Previously we had our personnel system. It was a bespoke system. This is where you employ people; we actually developed that. This time around we have actually looked at the module and gone to the market and purchased the system. So we do go through that decision tree. Regarding iVote, or electronic voting, I am aware that companies provide solutions, and they are tackling the same mathematics, so it makes sense to have a look at those from a market point of view. I do understand that iVote has components from a company called Scytl. It is not the only component, but certainly the bits that can be purchased should be purchased.

Ms SPENCE — On a different matter from technology, the cost of local government elections at the end of this year are going to be markedly increased on anything previously. We know that New Zealand came close to having a trial in a couple of their local government elections. What are your views of electronic voting in that local government context?

Mr GATELY — I am very pleased you have raised that, because it has not come up in the discussion at all, local government. In October this year, as you know, 72 of 78 councils are conducting their elections by post; the other six are attendance. Over 4 million postal vote packages will be sent out in October this year. Where are we going to be in four years time, given the continuing withdrawal of postal services and also the rising cost as well? So I am quite glad you have raised that. I do not know where we will be, as I said, in 2020, because that is a real issue. As much as we have tried to keep the costs to the minimum — those service costs, particularly Australia Post, and material costs as well, with transport costs all on the increase as well — that is quite a relevant question. So if 72 of 78 will be going via post, what is going to happen in four years time?

Ms SPENCE — Do you see that as being a space where electronic voting could play an important role?

Mr GATELY — It could well be. If you introduce an electronic system in a limited capacity — and we do that now — then we are in a position to expand that as we see fit in the future, and local government could well be an avenue for that.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you. That was on my mind while I was reading your submission. What attracts me to this is the postal vote analogy there. If we were to recommend changes to the legislation and the government was quick to pick them up and introduce them before the end of this term — I am always optimistic in these areas — how soon do you think a trial rollout of — —

If, for example, we were to say, ‘Let’s pick three local government jurisdictions and trial electronic voting’, as was suggested in New Zealand, do you think there would be enough time to do that by the 2020 local government elections?

Mr GATELY — Probably more of a challenge than 2020 is the state election of 2018. The committee does not report till April 2017, so that does not leave a lot of time for Parliament’s consideration.

Ms PATTEN — That is right.

Mr GATELY — That of itself does make the New South Wales iVote model more attractive, because it does operate, and then there might be some incremental changes that we would choose to make to that if Parliament was to go down that path. Let us say we have some legislative change in 2017, and even for local government there could well be a possibility we could achieve something in 2020 for local government, I would have thought, if we can take a system that is already tested. That would be my argument.

The CHAIR — We have gone over time, but obviously it is a critical discussion to have. Can I ask you: for me one of the most important features of the democratic system is the scrutineers. Of course the general public would not have a clue about scrutineers, but it gives people a lot of comfort about veracity. In your experience with vVote, what is the role for scrutineers?

Mr GATELY — Given the very limited take-up of vVote, as we saw no more than 1000 electors, I do not know that there was very little scrutineering of that system at all and the votes that were cast on the day. On election night when the ballot papers ultimately were printed — because as a requirement of vVote we had to print off the 1000 ballot papers and then insert them into envelopes and then send them out to the various districts — I cannot recall what the scrutineering practice was there. Certainly the vVote team had specialists there observing it, but as for party scrutineers or candidate scrutineers, I do not think they were there at that part of the process.

Ms WILLIAMS — They were invited, but as far as I recall, at the opening of the electronic ballot box for 2014, I do not think any scrutineers attended.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Can I just pick up on the point just made? This is probably technical ignorance, but the way you described the opening of the electronic ballot box, what does that mean in layman's terms and what would people have gotten to see if they had been there to see it?

Ms WILLIAMS — I will let Simon and others jump in, but there are board members, if you like — an electronic board — that oversee the arrangements. They all have their own individual and private part of a key that comes together. Then they come together on the night, so no one person can open the electronic ballot box on their own. They have all of their bits that come together and then it is opened and then the votes were printed. So that is what they would see — that the individuals would come together.

Ms PATTEN — The opening ceremony.

The CHAIR — Mr Gately and team, thank you so much for the effort that you have put into your submission and for coming along today. We look forward to meeting further on Friday to run us through various things. You know this process; you will get your Hansard transcript in about two weeks, and you are free to make any corrections of actuality rather than make any alterations of transcript. Thank you very much and thank you for staying the extra time.

Mr GATELY — Chair, can I just leave you with one comment, if I can?

The CHAIR — Yes, you may.

Mr GATELY — I think there is an opportunity now for the committee and Parliament to look at what they want of their voting system going forward, because things are changing; we are seeing that in the service delivery context. There is a model out there with the potential to work in Victoria, and we should look closely at that and how we can incrementally improve that in a national context. I will leave you with that thought.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.