

WITNESSES

Ms Wil Stracke, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council.

The CHAIR: To the Committee I would like to welcome Wil Stracke, the Assistant Secretary of Victorian Trades Hall Council.

Before we begin I would like to note that there were a number of submissions to this Inquiry that were related to upper house voting and group voting. The Committee has decided that they will take evidence on that issue at a later date rather than today.

Also all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so you are protected against any action for what you might say here today, but after you leave, anything that you repeat, be it on social media or outside, may not be protected by that privilege.

All of the evidence that is given is recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof of the transcript for you to check over as soon as it is available, which will then be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

With those few introductory remarks, welcome, and I invite you to make a short presentation to the Committee, after which we will ask some questions.

Ms STRACKE: Thank you. Yes, my name is Wil Stracke. I am here representing the Victorian Trades Hall Council, which is located at 54 Victoria Street in Carlton. I am an elected Assistant Secretary. We have actively participated as a third-party campaigner in the lead-up to and during the election period of the most recent state election.

I will just very briefly go through the dot points of our submission. The first is that we think the VEC does a terrific job in what can be a highly charged and contested environment. Our priority is to ensure that voting is accessible and straightforward and that voters have the optimal opportunity to participate in the democratic process. For us that means that the VEC has sufficient resourcing. We think that it might be appropriate to increase the resourcing so as to allow for more staff to be there to reduce the lines during peak periods. We think we should aim to have polling stations that are accessible, particularly to people who may have mobility issues. We think that there should be an aim to have VEC staff with language skills that are appropriate to the demographic for the location of each booth.

We would ideally hope that we could release details about both pre-poll and election-day polling stations as early as possible. We think it is critical to ensure that the pre-poll period is sufficient to allow for workers who do, for instance, fly-in fly-out arrangements, who are casual, who work seven-day rostering arrangements or who, for instance, have two jobs or other non-standard shift hours and arrangements to be able to participate in the democratic process. For us we think two weeks is a good period of time, and that allows those workers to balance this out along with their work as well as family, caring and other commitments in their community. That is the summary.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will open it up to questions from the Committee.

Dr READ: We have been talking about different models of the early voting period. One suggestion has been to extend the hours to later in the evening or possibly earlier in the morning for some of the days at least. What would you feel about that? Secondly, if that was done, how would you feel if the two-week period was shortened to perhaps one week or a week and a bit prior to polling day?

Ms STRACKE: I suppose our concern about shortening to a week is that there are workers who do seven-day rostering arrangements. They have to balance out their work commitments as well as getting the kids to school, picking the kids up and participating where they can in family and other community activities. They have to find the time to then also vote within that. So our view is seven days is not enough. I think the two-week period is a good period of time to allow for people who work those non-standard working arrangements, shift workers and others to get down to a polling station and participate in pre-poll.

An extension of the hours—I think from memory there were already a couple of days during the pre-poll where hours were already extended. The Thursday night before, from memory, runs through till 8 o'clock. I do know that that 5 'til 8 period is very popular, so an extension of hours might be an appropriate thing to do. I think pre-poll is only going to increase. I mean, it had a huge increase this last election, and I think we are seeing an upward trend for that. I think that is a good thing. But a reduction in the number of days—there are workers, for instance, who sit at the end of their phone each morning waiting to find out whether they are going to be working that day. They have to be available because if they are not available they probably will not get the call the following day for work. So for those people who do not control their working hours, shifts et cetera it can be a challenge to find the hour that is required to go and participate in the democratic process.

Mrs McARTHUR: Given the knowledge that their work may be irregular, wouldn't they be better to apply for a postal vote from day one?

Ms STRACKE: I think the postal voting system is not familiar to many people. Lots of these workers, for instance—English is a second language for them, so there are migrant workers et cetera. They have become Australian citizens; they can vote, but actually having the forethought to apply for a postal vote, I think, is a potential hurdle for them in that process.

Mrs McARTHUR: Also, if I could, you refer to the problems with deliberately scaring voters, but you would have to admit some of your material left a bit to be desired in that area as well because it did set out to deliberately scare voters. So is it right that everybody should be subject to the same regulations?

Ms STRACKE: I would deny that our material did that and that it mischaracterised in any way what our positions were or what the positions of the respective parties were on the various issues that we say are important to working people in this state.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. You can deny it; we saw it.

Ms BLANDTHORN: I just had a question, which we discussed with the political parties this morning, about the accessibility of voting centres generally but early voting centres in particular and them being accessible not just for people voting but also for people campaigning and candidates, and suitable for the VEC staff obviously. The number one, I guess, objective is that all voters can access the booths, but the staff and the campaigners obviously are crucial to the process as well. From your perspective as campaigners, how did you feel the early voting centres in particular but voting centres generally—their levels of accessibility et cetera?

Ms STRACKE: We had no issues at any of the polling stations with being able to have our campaigners out there and handing out how-to-votes to people who wanted them. The one thing I would say is that there were occasions where our volunteers assisted people who had accessibility issues and mobility issues into some polling stations where it was not necessarily easy to navigate that process, but apart from that I do not think we had any major problems there.

Ms BLANDTHORN: When you say, 'not easy to navigate', because they were overcrowded or—

Ms STRACKE: Sometimes, but mainly it was things like stairs or accessibility or being able to get up where they needed to go.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Wil, for appearing today. Your submission is very strong on issues around deceptive conduct. The second-last paragraph of your submission states that the Victorian Trades Hall Council:

... recommends that Victoria take whatever steps necessary to clarify the legislation prohibiting deceptive electoral materials of this kind.

It refers to a particular incident there. Can you expand on what those 'whatever steps' might be? Do you have some ideas to share with us on what you feel those steps could be?

Ms STRACKE: I think at a basic level it should be that we do not have materials on polling stations that look like they are VEC or AEC materials, so the colouring and the print and the font. I think that is one thing. It is not in our submission, but I think there are always questions about authorisation lines. They are very, very small on the materials that we have. So it is not necessarily always clear who is authorised and if they are

authorised. We always have in our materials that it is authorised by Luke Hilakari and that is the Victorian Trades Hall Council, to make that really clear. I am not sure that everyone always has—if they are affiliated with a particular party or a third-party campaigning group, it is not necessarily always clear that that is who they are from. So a requirement that any third-party campaigner list where they are from, if it is an organisation or it is a campaigning group, I think is helpful.

The CHAIR: Wil, just a question about one of your points in the submission about the VEC training recognising that unions, non-government organisations and other campaign groups are an essential part of the democratic process: would you be able to elaborate upon what type of training it should encompass more?

Ms STRACKE: I think sometimes our experience is that VEC officials are not always aware that third-party campaigners are permitted at polling booths and/or that we can hand out how to votes et cetera. So questions sometimes arise about the materials, which are always preregistered—about that. There are occasionally situations where VEC officials need to get guidance from their head office around whether or not we are actually permitted to be there. So I think it would be helpful to make clear to all staff who participate on election day at pre-poll that third-party campaigners are a legitimate part of the process and are authorised to be there, as long as what they handing out is preregistered in accordance with the legislation.

Ms BLANDTHORN: Just following on from that, are there other areas where you think the VEC staff could benefit from some training about the processes?

Ms STRACKE: Generally our experience is that certainly the ongoing VEC staff are very clear about how things operate, and they have always been incredibly helpful about resolving issues that might come up at particular polling booths where the local staff are asked a question about something and then do not necessarily know how to respond to that. So the ongoing staff are fantastic to deal with. Sometimes I think local staff—I think everyone was a little unclear, for instance, this election about the signage requirements. Because they were new I do not think everybody automatically understood what having a certain number of corflutes et cetera was about, and so there was occasionally a little lack of clarity around that. So some clear training around who is going to be likely to be out there, the role that everybody has and the requirements around how you canvass for votes effectively there would be helpful.

Ms HALL: I am really pleased to see you have noted concerns around people who have English as a second language and improving not just turnout but formal voting; and you have recommended in there that we have the VEC place staff who can speak different languages at different booths. Beyond that, do you have any sort of context or anecdotal information you can provide around this recommendation, and are there any other thoughts beyond having bilingual staff at polling booths?

Ms STRACKE: I think materials is always helpful; having materials on hand in language is useful. I can only say that the people that we represent, so the trade union members around the state, come from very diverse places and spaces and their capacity in English language is not always—it is sometimes a struggle for them to understand forms and processes. And I think that it is helpful to have people on hand in language so that they can navigate that process well, particularly recently arrived migrants who have become Australian citizens, for whom this might be their first election. I know the VEC does some work around that, and that is fantastic. The more of that that can be done the better, we think.

Mrs McARTHUR: Given that you have got some difficulties with third parties' campaign material on election pre-poll and polling booths, why should any third parties be able to distribute material or hand out how-to-vote cards at pre-poll or polling booths? If you eliminated all third parties and only the registered candidates' volunteers were able to hand out material, wouldn't that make sure there was no untoward activity from anybody?

Ms STRACKE: I think that would definitively allow for the political parties to express their chosen positions around things. I would also think it was fundamentally anti-democratic. I would have thought maximum participation in the democratic process, particularly when there are safeguards like the preregistration of how-to-vote cards, which ensure that they meet requirements, we would be encouraging; we would want people to know that they get a full diversity of views through the democratic process, and eliminating third-

party campaigners who have views about what should or should not happen in particular areas, I would say, is a regressive step.

Dr READ: Some submissions have commented on bullying and intimidation outside polling places. Did you hear anything about that, or did your people report any of that sort of behaviour?

Ms STRACKE: Election booths and pre-poll booths are always highly charged. We did not have any specific issues come up with our volunteers. Generally we encourage them, if something comes up that they are not sure of, to give us a call, and our approach is to say, 'Your job is to focus on talking to people who are coming in to vote where you can if they are interested in finding out what we believe is important and what are the issues of importance in the election', and not to worry too much about what other people are doing or what may be happening.

Dr READ: We have also been reading suggestions for campaign spending caps as a way of limiting political spending. Does THC have a view on that?

Ms STRACKE: The legislation is what the legislation is, and we will work inside what the requirements are there. I think it is a balance between ensuring that the democratic process is allowed to function without money coming from places and spaces that we do not know about. I think the legislation finds a good balance around that, around making sure that it is clear where the money is coming from, and it does place caps around donations to political parties and therefore increases the finding that you get from the taxpayer, effectively. Do I have a particular view around it? I think my simple, off-the-cuff view would be: let us make it as uncomplicated as we can in terms of the administrative burden that might flow from potentially any other changes, given the changes have already been fairly substantial.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for the submission from the Victorian Trades Hall Council, and thank you also for coming in and providing evidence to the hearing today. As mentioned, you will get a proof of the Hansard transcript to have a look over as soon as that is available.

Ms STRACKE: Thank you so much.

Witness withdrew.