

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration

Melbourne — 12 March 2013

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Mr N. Caswell, president, People with Multiple Sclerosis - Victoria.

The CHAIR — Mr Caswell, thank you very much for your time today. Welcome to the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration and matters related thereto. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise you that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Could I also ask if you have read the *Guide to Giving Evidence at a Public Hearing* pamphlet that the committee has provided?

Mr CASWELL — I have.

The CHAIR — Marvellous. I now ask you to state your full name and business address, and if you are attending representing yourself or an organisation and, if so, which organisation and what position you hold.

Mr CASWELL — Nigel Phillip Caswell. I am president of People with Multiple Sclerosis — Victoria. My address is 7 Lansell Road, Brighton East.

The CHAIR — I ask you to give a verbal submission, keeping in mind that your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course, but if you could now give a verbal submission and we will open the matter to questions at the conclusion of your submission.

Mr CASWELL — Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to come and speak, and thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in the first place. I commented in my submission on all of the points that were set out in the question there, but I feel particularly strongly about electronic voting and technology and what I see as the benefits that they offer to quite a significant proportion of the community, so I am going to focus my comments on that aspect point.

I first became involved in electoral issues, as distinct from voting, after the 2010 Victorian state election when I was really quite horrified by what I saw as a failure to provide adequate opportunity for people with disabilities to access polling booths. At the time I lived in Sandringham, and I was disappointed to find that there were many districts in the metropolitan Melbourne area without a single fully accessible polling booth. There were quite a few with one or two partial accessible booths, but it seemed to me a severe criticism of the system that it was not able to ensure that there was a minimum percentage of fully accessible polling booths at all venues. I recognise that there are other options available for people to vote, but I feel very strongly that if people want to be involved in the voting process and be part of the event on the day of the election, then they should have the opportunity to go to the vote and register in person. Therefore I thought that was something that seriously needed to be addressed.

I see in the issues that are raised in the inquiry and in particular the question about electronic voting another solution to that same problem. Perhaps just by way of background, I will comment on the way the population in Victoria and Australia generally is changing. It is an ageing population with an increasing component of people with disabilities. Briefly, in 2009 there were a little over 2 million Australians, 15 per cent of people in the 15 to 64-year-old group, that were disabled. The likelihood of living with a disability increases as people get older, so as the population average age gets older that will increase. The disability rate in 45 to 54-year-olds was 18 per cent. It is difficult to find a figure for older Victorians, but the UK figure for 2000–11 showed it rising as high as 45 per cent of adults over the age of 65. Of the main disability groups, the most common one in 2009 was physical disability, which by far outnumbered on a percentage basis those that suffered from sensory or speech disability or psychological disability.

Looking at the pattern of use of electronic media in the older population, because one might assume that a significant proportion of the population who are disabled are going to be older and therefore one might assume they are not going to be capable of using electronic technology either for receiving information or taking part in the election process, I think there is evidence to suggest that is not the case. In 2006, 49 per cent of Australians over the age of 55 had access to the internet, and in 2010 a survey of people aged 50 years and older by Ewing and Thomas found that older people were most likely to use the internet for

what you might call practical purposes; so checking emails, browsing, using banking online services and things of that nature rather than social media purposes. I think there is an assumption that because older members of the community are not as involved in the social media as younger members of the community, therefore they are not involved in the internet at all. I believe this suggests that is not the case. I acknowledge and my own experience as president of People with Multiple Sclerosis — Victoria is that not everybody is going to want to make the change to electronic systems, so more traditional systems need to continue to be placed. But my view is that physical access to polling booths will become an increasing problem. Since I initially became involved I have been part of an advisory group with the Victorian Electoral Commission, and I am well aware of the practical difficulties involved in making all polling booths fully accessible. That does not mean to say I resile from my earlier comments that at least a percentage ought to be required to be fully accessible, but access to polling groups will continue to be a problem. Willingness to use electronic media for useful purposes is already significant in all age groups and will grow. There will be a likelihood, however, of a significant minority who will continue to want to use traditional methods; there is no question about it.

It is my view that the use of social media as a political campaign tool is inevitable. It is already happening — unofficially if not officially — and it is my view therefore that Parliament and the electoral commission should be working on ways to utilise and manage it. I am not saying I know what those methods are, but I believe the first step to establishing it is to have a strategic decision that it is going to be addressed. In my view social media campaign material should be subject to the same controls as other campaign material. Again, I recognise that there are technical difficulties but unless steps are made to begin to embrace it, those technical difficulties will not be addressed.

In summary, I believe it is essential that all electoral districts have an acceptable percentage of accessible booths. As an aside, I think all elections, including local government elections, should be required to offer postal voting as an option which I believe is not the case at the moment with local government elections. I am not sure about that; I may be wrong. I think electoral processes should be moving into the digital age and preparing to offer online voting as an alternative option. I will finish there.

Mrs VICTORIA — Can I just ask you if you have had an opportunity to look at other jurisdictions and their forms of electronic voting and obviously the verifiability of them, if you like, and whether there has been anything that has stood out as something we should look to?

Mr CASWELL — I have not, unfortunately, had that opportunity, but I suppose I would look at processes which are used by other sectors of the community, not necessarily for voting. In other words, if I was going to look at somewhere where there are verification processes in force, I would look at something like online payments for buying goods or online banking services where a combination of passwords, time-specific entries and things of that nature are available. I would not necessarily think the only way to go is to look at other electoral systems. I think one should look at those parts of the business world that are most effectively using electronic systems now and their security systems.

Ms RYALL — You refer to the percentage of accessible booths, and I cannot recall off the top of my head the last statistic that we had on the number of accessible booths from the VEC — —

The CHAIR — They are working on it. They have given us a commitment that they are working on it.

Mr CASWELL — And I am part of the group that is working on it, yes.

Ms RYALL — I wondered whether in your view all booths should be accessible or whether it might be more appropriate to have a X number of booths within a particular district being accessible.

Mr CASWELL — It would be nice if all were accessible, but I think in most districts they are small enough that it is possible to have a proportion of them being accessible providing that information is readily available. Certainly the newspapers publish materials about where the electoral booths are and whether or not they are accessible, and that is really what impressed me in the first place. When I went through the information that was available in the Melbourne media on the day of the 2010 election, it was

set out very clearly and it was quite easy therefore for me to say, 'Here is a polling district that doesn't have any fully accessible booths'.

The other thing that I think ought to be recognised is it is possible to have two definitions of 'partially accessible': one can be accessible with assistance and the other can be that not all of the polling booth is fully accessible. In fact I voted in the federal election in Broome where that was exactly the situation. The hall was quite big with a large number of cabinets, but there were two cabinets in an area that was fully accessible, so it was possible for anybody who did not have the full ability to access the whole of the floor to access this part of the building and cast their vote there. If it is not necessary for the whole of the venue to be fully accessible, it is possible to make part of the venue fully accessible.

Mrs VICTORIA — I speak to members of my community about various things and invariably, just before or after an election, the issue of accessibility comes up. I have spoken to four, maybe five, people who have all said they prefer not to vote on polling day because it is far too busy and they also do not want to run the gauntlet. However, they do appreciate the fact that there are early polling centres, certainly in my district, that were fully accessible. I do not know what it is like across the board, but I know that a great effort is made so that people who do not want to be there, come rain, hail or shine, standing or sitting in a queue can do so. I guess my question is: are we making too much of a fuss about being able to vote on one particular day when our electoral system allows us to vote in the weeks prior to it? Obviously, as you said, there is also postal voting and if people want to actually attend, that is fine, but we do facilitate that by having early polling centres.

Mr CASWELL — I think that is a very valid question and it is one of the issues that I struggled with in making decisions about the submission that I made. Part of the issue that this inquiry is addressing is how to maintain involvement and participation by people in the electoral process, their interest in government, et cetera. I have said in my submission that I think some of the disinterest is due to what the community sees as poor performance by some politicians, but I also think being involved on polling day has some element of excitement and extra interest. It is an event; it is an occasion; and attending and being part of that process is an important part of the democratic process. I agree that we should do as much as we can to facilitate it, but I think it is very important, as a matter of principle, that we try to make it possible for those people who actually want to get to the centre and be part of the event on the day to get there and vote.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much your time. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight, and if you would be kind enough to check that for any typing errors, that would be marvellous. You cannot make any changes to substance — not that you would want to do that anyway, I am sure. Thank you very much indeed for your time today.

Mr CASWELL — Thank you for the opportunity. It is much appreciated.

Witness withdrew.