

TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into electronic voting

Melbourne — 5 December 2016

Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Mr Russell Northe

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Fiona Patten

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Adem Somyurek

Mr Martin Dixon

Staff

Executive officer: Mr Mark Roberts

Witnesses

Mr Tim Adamson, state director, Victorian state and local government, and

Mr Andrew Walduck, executive general manager, Trusted eCommerce Solutions, Australia Post.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — I welcome everyone here today for this public hearing with Australia Post. You are our last official presenters in our public hearings, so welcome. I draw your attention to the fact that you were given a little pamphlet, I believe, explaining what parliamentary privilege is, and I would urge you to avail yourself of parliamentary privilege and not say something slanderous outside, as there are hordes of media waiting for us to finish this hearing.

I advise you that Hansard is here to record your evidence, and you will get a transcript within a certain amount of time, unspecified. You are free to make factual corrections but not free to change it because you did not express it as beautifully as you may have liked.

Can I ask you please to state your full name and your business address and to clarify whether you are attending on behalf of your organisation or in a personal capacity, and to briefly speak to your submission? Then the committee will ask questions.

Mr WALDUCK — Certainly. I am Andrew Walduck. I am the executive general manager of the Trusted eCommerce Solutions business at Australia Post. Our address is 111 Bourke Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000. I am here representing our organisation. You will want an introduction from Tim as well.

Mr ADAMSON — Thank you. I am Tim Adamson. I am the state director of sales for Victorian state and local government, representing Australia Post today, also residing at 111 Bourke Street here in Melbourne.

Mr WALDUCK — Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee for this opportunity to be able to share and talk with you today. This work that is being investigated by the committee is certainly important, and we are keen as Australia Post to be able to share our viewpoint on this matter based upon work that we have been doing.

For more than 200 years our organisation has played an integral role in helping to connect people, businesses and governments to each other and to the world. We are trusted by Australians to deliver essential services on behalf of governments through our post office network and increasingly through digital channels. Today, for example, we verify the identity of a quarter of the Australian population as they look to do very important things inside of our network and perform very important services that occur. We also have a long and proud history of supporting the electoral system in Australia, and we support the VEC and the AEC and various state and territory-based electoral bodies in their role as custodians of the electoral process, and this includes providing the all-important enrolment forms in post offices nationally and delivering enrolment campaign mail to over 11.5 million households in the lead-up to elections.

But importantly, though, as our world changes and responds to what is being enabled by technology, many government and private sector organisations are digitising their services. We have looked to do some recent research into this and to better understand the level of digital literacy that exists in our nation and its relative willingness to receive services like this, and we found some interesting things. Ninety-three per cent of Australians have internet access at their home or via mobile, 84 per cent use the internet daily or several times a day, the mobile phone penetration is the highest or one of the highest that exists in the world, but importantly, though, 5 per cent of Australians do not have access to the internet and 9 per cent have never used the internet.

With that context in mind we asked a number of people how they would like to access government services, and 94 per cent of people said that they wanted government services to be available online, but 70 per cent said that they wanted the choice of an in-person experience, which only left 30 per cent saying they wanted a pure digital experience. As we applied this thinking to voting, our preliminary research told us that 47 per cent of eligible voters were surprised that electronic voting is not already available and one-quarter of eligible voters expected electronic voting will be available by the next federal election that is scheduled to be 2019.

As digital proponents for advocates for the community, we believe that Australians are ready for electronic voting and that electronic voting should be included as part of a multichannel voting strategy that includes traditional methods of in-person and postal voting. There are a number of opportunities and benefits that e-voting provides, including quicker and potentially more accurate results, cost savings, reduced environmental impact and, importantly, increased convenience and accessibility for voters, especially for people with a disability or mobility impairment and those in regional and remote communities. Various forms of electronic voting are already available in the ACT and New South Wales today, and here it is used to provide increased convenience and accessibility for voters, especially for people with a disability or mobility impairment and

those, again, in regional and remote areas. Internet voting has also been available in the country of Estonia since 2005 and has been embraced by voters in that particular country. Nearly one-third of all votes in the 2015 parliamentary election were submitted via the internet.

For e-voting to be a reality, though, there are a number of important factors that need to be catered for so that e-voting can become one of the ways that Victorians choose to vote. Based on our preliminary research, security, privacy, anonymity and electoral integrity are some of the factors that are critical to get right in bringing a system like this to life. The confidence and trust that people have in an e-voting system is critical. Strong community engagement and communication of how a system should work and how it would address key concerns, whilst enabling the positive outcomes that could be achieved, is critical. As Australia Post, we have played an integral role in the community for years and are trusted by government to provide services on their behalf through our post office network, and we already manage sensitive private and citizen information.

In concluding, we believe Victorians are ready for electronic voting and we envisage a world where people have choice, where votes can be cast by traditional methods but also electronically. The proposed solution: we need strong community engagement and communication, with important trusted organisations helping to ensure the ongoing integrity of the voting system. Thank you for your time and this opportunity. We would like to pause and are happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I have a question. In fact, one of the drivers of electronic voting is the fact that Australia Post does not deliver its letters as fast as it did in the past. Indeed one of the former electoral commissioners in Australia advised us that he did not think — it was just his opinion — the postal voting system would last beyond about 2018, I think was the year he gave us. So it is very interesting that you are talking about this. Can you give us your perspective on how your postal services have in fact driven a lot of the debate in the direction of electronic voting?

Mr WALDUCK — Yes. We take our services very seriously. The postal voting service that we provide is one that is important, in terms of the priority we place on ensuring that it meets its delivery standards is critical, and we have worked to go and do that consistently in each of the elections that we have provided it. And yes, there have been changes to the number of days by which we deliver some of our standard services, and then priority can of course be given to the postal services and the things that can be given for the voting system as well.

The CHAIR — I think the Electoral Commissioner's view is that, being funded by government, they are not in the position to pay for the priority services. It bears out your point on electronic voting that a postal vote is a very expensive way of delivering a service. I think that was also part of the thinking, not just the time.

Ms PATTEN — I have a couple of questions. I was interested in your consumer research; it was really interesting to see that. I think this is the first research that has been asking these questions. In looking at the results, I was wondering: did you differentiate between local electronic voting and remote electronic voting? The responses seem to be a combination of both. Was there any separation?

Mr WALDUCK — We tried to take a representative sample of people that we use to be able to help compile those results. It was preliminary research that we did, but we did try and make sure that there was a group of people that existed that then provided a cross-section view that gave us an ability to be able to quote those figures.

Ms PATTEN — You say that almost half were surprised that electronic voting was not already available. Does that mean electronic voting in its whole — so remote and at the polling booth?

Mr WALDUCK — Excuse me for a moment while I just confer.

The CHAIR — By all means.

Mr WALDUCK — So with the work that we did, it did discriminate and ask deliberately about the differences. It was talking more about electronic voting as a means of casting your vote via digital means. So that could be via a device — —

Ms PATTEN — At a polling place.

Mr DIXON — Or online.

Mr WALDUCK — Or online, yes.

Mr DIXON — Why is Australia Post interested in the possibility of internet voting, whether it be at a polling place or not? With the work you have done over a long while, is it a space you can move into? What is — —

Mr WALDUCK — What is the interest?

Mr DIXON — Yes.

Mr WALDUCK — A very good question, thank you. We have had a well-charted evolution of our organisation. We provide over 200 government services to date, which we do through our network. It is something that we are proud of and we look to do. We are also investing in capability that includes digital identity, which gives people the ability to be able to identify themselves to do very important things. We believe that associated with that is an opportunity to use that identity to apply it when somebody chooses to vote, which is something that is incredibly important and we need to ensure that people can get it right.

So we see this as a natural evolution of the services that we provide now, and as governments as well as other private sector organisations are digitising, we see this as a natural and relevant part of how we are evolving our offer to be relevant to organisations as they are making changes in their services.

Mr DIXON — The immediate services that you are talking about as far as your organisation is concerned are when people go to the counter and do a whole range of services at the post office. Is that what you mean?

Mr WALDUCK — In terms of those 200 services — —

Mr DIXON — Two hundred are there?

Mr WALDUCK — Yes. The majority of them are the ability to go to a post office and then complete a service. That can be anything from applying for a passport, a tax file number, very important forms of identity — —

The CHAIR — Paying tax.

Mr WALDUCK — Paying tax, yes. More recently, though, a number of those services we are actually digitising for some of our government customers. So they are a digital service where someone can access that service online. They can complete it fully digitally and that provides choice and an opportunity for our customers to also look to do that, because we also have a large customer base that are digitally literate. They buy lots of things online and so that is another part of our organisation — how we are evolving those services together.

Ms SPENCE — My question goes to that digital identity. You spoke earlier about identity verifiability, and I just wonder if you can talk to us a bit more about that. Are you already involved in that digital identity space, or is that something that you are working towards?

Mr WALDUCK — Today, with the quote I gave earlier, we verify the identity of a quarter of the Australian population every year. That service is a service that is performed over the counter, but we also have electronic verification services that enable organisations to be able to verify that somebody is holding an official form of identity, and that is used to support an organisation that might be wanting to digitise a police check or digitise a working with children check. They are examples of how we have used some of those. Currently we have work in development for our next platform, which is the digital identity platform, that then enables you to be able to prove that you are who you say you are to do something really important online.

So the best way to try to answer the question is that we have a number of services in existence now. Customers trust that they can look to Australia Post to verify and prove their identity, and that trust is really important to us. We have applied that to the first form of electronic verification, which is used in some services now, but we see it as an opportunity to go further than that with the opportunity right now with digital identity.

Mr NORTHE — Andrew, I suppose just the next steps from an Australia Post perspective. If you were involved in electronic voting, would you see local government, state government or federal government as working with that, and would you identify a particular locality rather than doing the whole electronic voting cycle at one election?

Mr WALDUCK — Yes, that is a great question. We would like to have an opportunity to work as a cooperative organisation that would then enable the electoral commission to achieve what its objectives were. We would see it would be a joint process of working to design what a proposed solution could be for electronic voting, but then deliberately targeting it towards a pilot of that capability to give it an opportunity to be able to learn and to test what the community response would be and what people's feedback was to a proposed solution. That could be done in a contained way within a local government context, or even a smaller community context, to be able to then facilitate the trialling of a solution like that. From that you could then look to expand it from there.

Mr NORTHE — So you have not thought further who, how, what on that point? Or is it something that you are discussing still with the VEC?

Mr WALDUCK — Based upon work that we have done for some of our other services, we generally find that it is the process of starting to engage and getting closer together — that you then go and identify it. But no, there has not been further discussions about the exact details of that.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask you, from your own personal knowledge and expertise, about the security of these systems? Because a lot of people have provided submissions to the committee basically telling us 'Don't do it' because of the risks of catapulting an entire election. Are you able to give us an insight into the sorts of security that you would have to have if you were going to have electronic voting on a wider scale than we currently do?

Mr WALDUCK — The security capabilities that need to be included inside a platform like this are critical. For ourselves there is an investment in security capability that we have had over a number of years now as part of the changing part of our organisation. A large part of our e-commerce business runs through digital systems now that provide the type of security that is needed to support the millions of transactions that happen every year today.

We certainly believe there is an ability to provide a system and a capability that can provide the level of security assurance that is needed to support a system like this. Providing something that is open and that you can see and ensure the integrity of that system so that it is auditable and you can understand that are some of the factors that are critical as you look to open that up.

Our other perspective is that in the approach to go and build something like this, it would be certainly appropriate to bring in an independent third party to also help to assure those services as they are being brought to life and so that they can be truly tested, and that independence also helps to ensure confidence in the solution that is being built.

Ms SPENCE — You mentioned previously that there are current opportunities for electronic voting in the ACT and New South Wales. Just thinking about New South Wales for a moment, how would what you are proposing differ from or even improve upon the system that is currently available there?

Mr WALDUCK — The proposal that we are providing is that within the infrastructure that exists inside of the digital identity platform, people would enrol for that particular platform and that would be a platform that is used for a number of different purposes, including a number of different government services. When it would be time then to ensure the voting system, there would be an opportunity to then interact with the voting platform to ensure that that could then help ensure and manage the integrity of the voting that would then be performed.

For the individuals that have been identified, you then have them interact with that voting platform to ensure that they can only vote once. It is managing integrity of the vote that is performed and so on. But in this case, it would then be enabled via the technology that exists today, which could be via a smart phone, a tablet or an internet browser that would then exist as well.

Mr DIXON — Identification of customer is an integral part. We were in Estonia, and everyone has got a credit card basically which is their digital signature which they put in all their computers. That is how they access all their services, so it was an easy step for them to move into voting, because that is the system they were used to. Do you sense with the preliminary work that you have done that there is probably a more open mind in the Australian community? We had the Australia Card 20 years ago or whenever it was — a long while ago — where people said, ‘We can’t have that’. Do you think there is a difference in attitude now in a digital age with the Australian population?

Mr WALDUCK — That is a great question. Australians are a bit different to Estonians in that regard. The notion of a single identity is certainly a challenge. The nature of the service that we are building is not a single identity; it is the individual’s identity. They are identified using a number of different methods. That can be a licence, it can be a passport, it can be a birth certificate. These are all verifiable things. Those things can be linked with biometric information if a person chooses so that they can then have a level of security and assurance that is needed.

The design of the service that we are building is one that is built around the empowerment of the individual of how they want to use their identity in really important transactions and give them the ability to have consent and control. Our research has shown that those latter factors are the things that are critical and that were not perhaps present in some of those other earlier platforms that came through. Consent, control, empowerment, visibility and transparency of how my important information is used is the bit that is important, and that is the basis of the design in this platform.

Mr DIXON — So it is a whole different approach.

Ms PATTEN — I do quite like the idea of an ID ecosystem, as I think you call it in some of your documents, that enables me to work online but only provide that ID to one person. When do you think you will have this ecosystem or this system off the ground?

Mr WALDUCK — For the digital identity ecosystem?

Ms PATTEN — Yes.

Mr WALDUCK — That will be introduced in 2017, so we are in active discussions now with organisations looking to pilot this capability to be able to bring those types of things to life. That will certainly become a reality at that point in time.

Ms PATTEN — One of the great stumbling blocks we have met or had to consider is the anonymity of voting. It is all very well for people to say, ‘You bank online’ or, ‘You do your tax online’, but there is no anonymity there. Voting requires that identification followed by a service that is anonymous so the vote cannot be matched. Are you talking to any other organisations or any other systems that require that twofold — the identification plus the anonymity of a transaction?

Mr WALDUCK — With the work that we have been doing we are certainly looking at the systems that would be needed to both make sure that somebody is identified and that they are eligible to vote and it satisfies the criteria, but when they do vote, when they cast their vote, that personal information is not recorded with that vote so they can have the anonymity that is expected, but you also can ensure that you have integrity in the voting system to ensure that just the right people have voted at the same time.

Ms PATTEN — Are there any other services or organisations that are looking for something similar from you?

Mr WALDUCK — There are different use cases in different areas. You can see a need in shareholder voting, which is one really interesting area where there is demand certainly that we are seeing, and there is other voting in other community groups and things that we see as opportunity, in universities as well. There is opportunity to also start to prove the capability and to bring to life the potential of what is possible with this too.

Mr DIXON — Just building on from that, one of the key issues is I think people are keen to be able to verify, so they have sort of got to go backwards — ‘How can I check that my vote was recorded and was the vote that I recorded?’. That is another step again. I think most people are probably just quite happy to take the systems that have got some verification. Very few people bother; they just trust the system that their vote has

gone through. Is that extra step something that is in your mind as well, where people can check back that their vote has been recorded?

Mr WALDUCK — The ability to be able to facilitate something like that would be based on the design that you would look to agree. What we do see is that there is a digital identity platform that would help to confirm you are who you say you are, but then when you cast your vote there is an ability to be able to ensure that that vote is cast in a way that it does not have identifiable information with it. If it was required as part of the design that that needed to be facilitated, our system would enable that.

Mr DIXON — So you think that is doable.

The CHAIR — Likewise on the question of doable, a worst case scenario is that there is Court of Disputed Returns to look at perhaps a seat that has been contested. How would a system with an electronic vote in it be able to be tested by the Court of Disputed Returns?

Mr WALDUCK — That is a really good question. We might have to take that one on notice.

The CHAIR — That was the first time you told me that was a good question.

Ms PATTEN — There you go — a gold star then, Chair.

Mr WALDUCK — Chair, we will have to take that question on notice to make sure that we can do that one fair justice.

Ms PATTEN — I think that just follows on from the Chair's question. I noted in one of your submissions you did say that there are three: the voter, the candidates and then the electoral commission.

Mr WALDUCK — Yes, the organisations.

Ms PATTEN — There are three relationships in anything needs to be developed. A lot of our questions have been obviously, not surprisingly, self-interested about the candidate and how we would be able to scrutinise the vote or how we would be able to know that the system was not corrupted, that we got every vote that we were supposed to get. Do you have any thoughts on that relationship?

Mr WALDUCK — As we have been looking at this particular problem and the opportunity that exists inside of it, we know that identification of the individual is very important in that process. I have spoken about digital identity and what its role would then play in helping to prove that someone is who they say they are. The relationship then of what would happen with the candidates, there would need to be an appropriate interface or design that groups would then feel is appropriate to then enable that vote to be cast. Currently that is a paper-based system, so as that gets digitised it would need to be done in a way that candidates felt was appropriate for them, that enabled them to have voting to be cast for them on the basis that they feel is acceptable.

For the organisations then to work with — the electoral commission and so on, of the organisations that would bring this to life — that is probably where the bulk of the work would then occur in the design of a system that then would ensure that it would meet the integrity requirements, that the processes that would be needed to then occur and facilitate the activity on the day and that a system like this could operationally run effectively and be trusted in a way, but it could be/would be where the bulk of the work we see would be.

Ms PATTEN — Yes. I think what keeps the electoral commission happy does not necessarily keep the candidates happy.

The CHAIR — Or the party scrutineers. Any further questions? Thank you very much for your submission and for your willingness to participate in these hearings. I am sorry it has taken a while to make all this happen, but thank you so much for that. As I said, you will receive a transcript of the hearing in due season. You will be able to make corrections, not change the evidence. Thank you so much. I declare this public hearing completed.

Mr WALDUCK — Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee. They were excellent questions.

Committee adjourned.