

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto

Melbourne—29 August 2007

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Ms C. Basterfield, Speech Pathology Consultant,
Communication Resource Centre, Scope Victoria Ltd.

The CHAIR—Welcome to the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and 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 witnesses that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You have received the Guide to Giving Evidence at Public Hearings. For the benefit of Hansard can you please state your full name and address.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Catherine Basterfield, 31 Avenza Street, Mentone.

The CHAIR—Can you also please state if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation; if you are representing an organisation, your position in that organisation.

Ms BASTERFIELD—I am representing Scope and I am a consultant speech pathologist in the division called Communication Resource Centre.

The CHAIR—Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I now invite you to make a verbal submission. At the end of your submission the committee will ask questions.

Ms BASTERFIELD—I did prepare a PowerPoint, thinking that at the end of two days of hearings the last thing you want is a great lot of verbal information. It is a bit pictorial as well. To put this submission into context, we have been really aware of the inclusive social agenda that has been generated through the work of the parliament at the moment in how to include and increase people's ability to be included in society.

Overheads shown.

Ms BASTERFIELD—The first slide talks about building an inclusive community which is certainly part of the Victorian disability state plan. When you look at the disability state plan and you think about the written materials that are out there, you really need to think how we do present things to people so they are able to understand, to read and then also act on the information that is there. There are three quite distinct skills that people need to be able to have. It is not enough to read; it is not enough to understand; it is also being able to interpret that information so that they can make a meaningful choice.

The second slide looks at some statistics. This has come through some statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. These statistics are also quoted on the Australian Council of Adult Literacy's website. It is also on the website for the Radio for the Print Handicapped. If you look at the table, it is looking at five levels of literacy. They surveyed 9,000 people. Level 5 is the highest level of literacy that people have. You are thinking of people who can read complex legal documents and can interpret and infer numerous pieces of information from it. As you can see, it is very few people in our widely diverse community. Going down the level that you can see, the second one is a number four level which is people who are perhaps university trained, have completed their higher education and can read reasonably complex documents, may be able to make one or two inferences, but it would not be someone who can generally read complex legal information.

The next level, which is the highest one at about 35 per cent, is people who have attained about a curriculum standard level of year 8. It is plain language. Someone might be able to read a reasonably simple document, be able to pick out a paragraph and make some general inferences about a simple paragraph of information—not complex information, very simple. It

then goes down into level 4. Level 4, the person might be able to read a simple sentence in a document or a paragraph. Level 1 is someone who has been given assistance and might be able to pick out a key word in it. There are lots of people that cannot access the information that we all put out because of their limited literacy skills.

Ms CAMPBELL—Could you run through level 1 again.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Sure. It is people who, if you gave them a paragraph or a sentence, they might be able to pick out a key word that they are familiar with. It also includes people who could not complete any tasks. The survey did not include people from rural indigenous communities and there is also some suggestion that people in institutional care were also removed from the statistical group. It is fairly swayed up the levels, rather than down the levels.

The CHAIR—Are we speaking of specific learning difficulties here?

Ms BASTERFIELD—No. This was a general group of people who were asked to complete tasks. The next slide is relevant to English as a second language. The first part of the graph talks about English as a first language. Because the numbers are small, levels 4 and 5 were combined together. In both those groups there, 4 and 5 are listed as a double entity. If you look at English as a second language, level 1 is that high one at 47, 48 per cent of people. 48 per cent of the population with English as a second language find it very difficult to pick out more than key words.

When we then put that in an international context, you go down to the next slide, it is a slide that has come from a study that was done across 20 countries. Australia is the one right in the middle with the little circle on it. The black line is also significant because that is the line of plain language which, when you put things on the website, that is what people talk about. You have to write in plain language. When you write in plain language, you do meet lots of people's needs, but there are lots of other people's needs that you do not really meet. I do not know about you, but I often find it very hard to find things on the internet when I go looking for things, and I would class myself as maybe a level 4-level 5 reader, and yet I still find it hard to look for and locate information on the web. How does it then translate for people who have limited literacy skills? How do they get hold of information? Lots of government departments, lots of big corporations like to use their websites as a first point of call for lots of people.

What I have then for you is a lot of different examples that have been put into Easy English for you to get a bit of an idea of what that really means. The first one at the end of the first page is the document we did in partnership with the Victorian Electoral Commission. It was originally a document that included information on the federal government, the state government and local government. In developing it and getting feedback from consumers, we realised that they could not distinguish between the subtleties in the different levels of government. What we did was create a simple document that was about the state government. What we are hoping to look at is maybe something for the local government for when local governments come around, knowing that people do not need local government information when the state government election is on; conversely with the federal. But I know that the federal government is not under the jurisdiction of the Victorian Electoral Commission, but that is another part of it.

That is one document. It was also the most widely requested specific document that was asked for in the lead-up to the election, which suggested it perhaps, was meeting a need more broad than what the original outline was. The original outline was to meet people's needs through intellectual disability, but the VEC discovered there were lots of other people that it did meet needs for, including people with acquired disabilities, had had a stroke, a car

accident, school leavers working and studying in special schools, even younger children who are learning about the election at the higher primary end, and the elderly. We have also had some work around looking at the indigenous population. There are lots of applications for it.

On the second page is the other document that we did originally for the Victorian Electoral Commission which was for the local government. You might recognise it as being one of the documents that goes into the newspaper. It was written thinking we were going to put it into the newspaper, that is why it is in black and white. When it was developed it was realised that it perhaps had broader application and it should be out on the web as well. There were lots of hits on the web; I could not give you the exact details for that though. Some other examples there: one that has recently come out is about the Disability Act which came into effect on 1 July this year. It is an Easy English version of what the new Disability Act is. It is about a 25-page document in Easy English for people to read. *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity: Your Right To A Fair Go*. There is also a new one about to come out on the Victorian Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. Then there are other things like reports; lots of reports have been written in Easy English. You have one that has been done by Scope.

The next one is an example that information sharing is a critical part of being able to make decisions. There are lots of examples available—this is a UK based one but, there are lots of things that we can be thinking about around giving out information. Then there are websites. Websites are—I am not sure if you have spoken to people about developing websites, they are quite complex. What we really are interested in is the readability and the usability of it: how easy is it for the person to read the information, and then how can they—not the accessibility which is a different part, but how do they use it; how do they navigate around it. There has been some research in Canada that talks about the limited number of people with poor literacy skills who do access the internet. You ask yourself why? Is it because they cannot find it, or is it that they cannot read it. There are lots of reasons for it. There are a couple of examples there.

Consent forms is another big issue that people, particularly who have limited literacy, are really concerned about. 'Have I given appropriate consent to that?' and does that person understand what consent is. The last pictorial slide is another example of something that we have used in the organisation, looking at people's wages. If you all get your pay slip and go, 'What do all these bits mean?' and you go to your pay office and ask. This is a simple way of presenting information about people's pay rises. The last slide is some other ideas on information that we have been working towards and that might be applicable for the sorts of information that you are looking at for the Victorian Electoral Commission or the Victorian election.

The CHAIR—Thank you. Questions.

Ms CAMPBELL—Yes. The first one I would like to ask is, on each ballot paper there are various instructions on what to do. Can you remember what they were?

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes.

Ms CAMPBELL—Were you involved in the formulation of it?

Ms BASTERFIELD—No.

Ms CAMPBELL—Would you say that was too complex for 50 per cent of the population?

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes.

Ms CAMPBELL—So would I. Thank you.

Ms BASTERFIELD—I also have concern about the watermark behind it. I know it requires a piece of legislation because that is the government signature and it has been explained to me, but a watermark is one of those things that make it much harder for people to read the information.

Ms CAMPBELL—I do not think legally it has to be where it was located.

Ms BASTERFIELD—I do not know. It was explained to me—

Ms CAMPBELL—We can check that.

Ms BASTERFIELD—that it was something to look at. The other thing that I became aware of when I started to work with the Victorian Electoral Commission is the use of photos that people have on their cards that go out, but on the election form or ballot form it does not have it. I know that someone did suggest in the training session I ran for the Electoral Commission that—I think it is the Northern Territory may have that, as you have a photo of each of the candidates.

Ms CAMPBELL—By way of information, given the VEC is here, and jotting down copious notes, it might be informative to know that when the State Disability Plan—the draft plan—was drawn up and MPs were provided with a copy of the full plan and the Easy English plan, almost exclusively they put the plan aside and read the Easy English. It is not insulting to put Easy English in important documents because people understand them. To make a comment on why you wondered why your document was so popular, I think it is probably because it easily understood and where people's time is short we want readily understandable information.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. Absolutely. It certainly has been our anecdotal—and the basis of all the information that we have collected from people, is saying exactly the same thing, that they would much prefer an Easy English version. When we get inundated with so much information that we have to read and plough through, all of us will pick up the one that is easier to read and we will pick it up much faster.

Ms CAMPBELL—Another thought I have had while listening to you was the Electoral Commission has its own wording and the political parties have their own wording on the how-to-vote cards and they do not necessarily match. If we had a plain English version that was signed-off by somebody competent, it would be helpful in that the same message is reinforced.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. Any consistency around those sort of issues I think would make it easier for more people to be more meaningfully involved in the process.

The CHAIR—In terms of the deficits at play here, are we dealing with auditory processing deficits as well?

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. Anyone who has difficulty processing language in any way.

The CHAIR—Also specific learning difficulties, dyslexia and all that type of thing.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes.

The CHAIR—I disagree a little bit in terms of the website because there are software

programs, such as Dragon, that people can read. That is why I asked about the auditory processing difficulties.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Right.

The CHAIR—You can get that read to you on your own without another person, but then how you process that information is another story.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. There are lots of people who, although they can hear language even when it is presented to them by those screen readers—the Dragon is one example of—is that the complexity of the language is often still too high for them.

The CHAIR—So it is a deficiency in vocabulary as well.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes.

The CHAIR—Right. It is not just auditory processing.

Ms BASTERFIELD—No.

The CHAIR—It is also deficiency in vocabulary you are talking about.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. Their experience of the vocabulary and their life experiences. What I like to suggest to people in training—I have come from a training session this morning—is put it into Easy English and then add on your auditory information onto your screen readers; look at maybe another language at that point because you are often getting much more concrete language for people as well; simplifying it before you do that. As Christine said, the simpler it is the more likely it is that most people will pick it up.

The CHAIR—People are visual as well, so pictures.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. I had a look at your list of all the different people that you have had in here and there are a number of people who perhaps have very specific groups that they are talking about. We are looking at now the whole—all those people's needs, not an individual group: your ethnic communities, your indigenous communities, your vision impairment, then you have your learning disabilities, intellectual disability, acquired disability, plus us, and the elderly.

Ms CAMPBELL—That is 50 per cent.

Ms BASTERFIELD—That is right. Yes.

The CHAIR—I read somewhere about the fine motor skill difficulties as well. That was not you?

Ms BASTERFIELD—No.

The CHAIR—That was an assumption, sorry.

Mr SCOTT—Taking a step back—your presentation has made me think a little bit about the voting process. There was an increase in informal votes at this election and the anecdotal view seems to be that that is because there was a change to the electoral system and people were required often to perform different tasks and different aspects of the voting process. I would not mind your opinion on whether we have unrealistic expectations of a lot of members of the community to deal with a series of complex, differing tasks in the one

voting process and how able a lot of members of the community are to navigate their way through that with the instructions that are given and the complexity of the tasks that confront them within the voting booth in a short period of time as they are hustled in and out to vote.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. I know when I worked on the local government one where we were doing postal voting, and they are very step-by-step instructions, it became really clear that that made it easier. The feedback I had from the staff was that was the easiest way to process the information. If that step-by-step process of exactly what you needed to do was more ably available in your booths, I think that might help more people. You have lots of people on your Senate ticket. It is a really complex system at the moment. I think it does challenge lots of people. When you look at the statistics, more than half of them cannot really understand what it is that you have asked them to do in the first place.

Mr SCOTT—I will take that further. Do you think it would be useful to try and simplify voting processes and that would probably decrease the informality, taking that to its logical conclusion?

Ms BASTERFIELD—It would, but I do not know anything about that part of the process.

Mr SCOTT—But conceptually, if the process was simplified, that would make it easier for people to navigate as a simple, logical proposition.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. The fact that the Senate election was—the way you had to vote was different, although it seemed to be simpler to do because you only had to do 1 to 5, there were three different choices to make. I know in the booklet that that is something I would like to see refined a bit more. It was not as clear in the book as I would have liked to have seen it as an end product in terms of how it was all—it looked too similar.

Mr SCOTT—If you look at the statistic, to follow-up again, there seemed to be a problem with the lower house where there was informality where people were placing a '1' because they could do that in the upper house ballot as one of their choices.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Right.

Mr SCOTT—I think that was certainly creating some confusion between them. From your experience, that having two complex tasks that interrelate but are different in what is allowed in one or another would in your experience create those sort of difficulties where people get confused between the two?

Ms BASTERFIELD—The more consistency you can get the easier it is going to be for people. The other thing if that has to be like it is, maybe looking at colour-coding and instruction sheet in the same colour as your lower house would give people a bit more of a clue. 'This is the yellow sheet for the yellow instructions, this is the pink sheet for the pink instructions.'

The CHAIR—Some of our pamphlets, the major political parties' pamphlets are pretty basic, a lot of pictures and dot point forms.

Ms BASTERFIELD—There is lots of variation too, yes.

The CHAIR—They probably meet the standard, do they?

Ms BASTERFIELD—Some of them perhaps would be more plain language. I have not seen anything that I would term Easy English amongst any of the pamphlets that have

come out, in my particular area.

Mr HALL—Cathy, do you have a view about who is best placed to deliver the plain English education required to assist voters in their understanding and their choice? Is it the role of the Electoral Commission or is it organisations like Scope, Vision Australia, the Ethnic Communities Council, we have heard from today. Each of them has expertise in their own particular area. Are you best placed to deliver education to your clients?

Ms BASTERFIELD—We certainly take that role on, yes. The partnership we have developed with Victorian Electoral Commission has been valuable, certainly from our perspective. I feel like the communications team has gained a broad understanding of what is required in getting Easy English out to the population and that in time there would be enough of a skill base in their organisation that they would use us as a consultancy—as in us writing all the documents—

Mr HALL—It is feasible that you would be contracted by the Electoral Commission to deliver that service.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes. That is what happened with this particular document, they asked us to become involved. The way that we run our organisation is to skill up the organisation that has approached us, because the reality is that if the Electoral Commission turned to us and said, 'Can you write everything that we produce in Easy English,' that would be more than 12 months worth of work for our organisation. We could not take anyone else on. What we are trying to do, with the limited resources that we have, is to skill more people up, partner with them and provide a consultancy to them to give them feedback on what they have developed in-house. We do that through training, through peer support.

Mr HALL—Another topic—a very general question—the clients of Scope, are they more likely to present on election day or are they likely to take the opportunity of early voting centres or registered postal voting?

Ms BASTERFIELD—I could not comment on it, except that lots of Scope clients are wheelchair bound and they find it very difficult to all go out to the same place at the same time unless they are bussed anywhere. There are limited taxis to take them to places but I could not comment on what their preference would be. I am sure you would get a range of people that do different things. Once again it would be more, are they aware of the process and how knowledgeable are they about making decisions.

Mr HALL—Yes.

Mr THOMPSON—How does a person who is in a wheelchair and does not have strong mobility—they might be able to work a pointer machine—cast their vote?

Ms BASTERFIELD—My understanding is Vision Australia have done some work on some particular documents, like some particular technology. That is another area of need to explore. Nothing that I am aware of. Really what we have been looking at is the language that is presented to people. If there are issues about people accessing and being able to write that is then another—either getting people included and involved in the process. Is it possible that they can have a support person with them to make that mark on the paper for them?

Mr THOMPSON—For Scope clients, say, at Chelsea, would they be voting members of the community?

Ms BASTERFIELD—I do not know.

Mr THOMPSON—Would it be possible to find that out in general terms?

Ms BASTERFIELD—Yes, sure.

Ms CAMPBELL—Can I say thanks, because looking at those figures the advice you have given today will assist. If we can implement it, it will assist particularly this area of the community, if not all.

Ms BASTERFIELD—All of us. We all get inundated with so much information at that time of year.

Mr SCOTT—A further question: can I request that this be provided, the original PowerPoint presentation be provided to the committee. It is quite difficult to read because of the colour-coding on this document, but it would be useful to—

Ms BASTERFIELD—Absolutely.

Mr SCOTT—My eyes are starting to decline—

Ms BASTERFIELD—I did try and send it through email and it was too big a version. I usually say at the beginning of a presentation, 'If anyone has a difficulty with this size handout, we can make a bigger one,' because that is one of the big issues when you go into meetings is the size of the document, the size of the print. I made some assumptions about this group before I came in and I apologise if that missed—

Mr SCOTT—Yes, and two further questions. Firstly, in terms of informality and people failing to complete a ballot paper successfully the statistics at a council level seem to indicate that postal voting has a lower informality. Would you expect that is because there is no time constraint and people can work their way through a process rather than being—

Ms BASTERFIELD—Possibly.

Mr SCOTT—The second issue was, the electronic voting is a mechanism to resolve issues with auditory as well as text based—an instruction process has been mentioned as a means of dealing with people with literacy problems and coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds, potentially in their own native language because, of course, people are sometimes illiterate in their own language.

Ms BASTERFIELD—That is right, yes.

Mr SCOTT—Particularly people who have come from areas where schooling has been interrupted by war or other issues. Would you regard that as a potential means of addressing some of these issues?

Ms BASTERFIELD—It is possible. One of the things you would need to think about is how people access the screen, and a touch screen is one option; keyboard is another. But there are clients who would be able to do neither of those things. You would have to be making sure that you are not excluding some people from that process if that was the only option you had available to them. That is where you—is it possible that some people may need a support person to help put their mark? I do not know what the legislation says about all those things. That is your part.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much. The transcripts will be sent to you. Any typing errors you can send back to us but matters of substance, they stand.

Ms BASTERFIELD—Thank you for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.

Hearing suspended.