

# CORRECTED EVIDENCE

## ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election

Melbourne — 14 September 2015

#### 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

Research officer: Mr Nathaniel Reader

#### Witness

Mr Me'ad Assan, policy officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for the submission the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria has made for this committee. We are investigating the last state election, as you are aware, because that is why you have written the submission. Your evidence today is covered by privilege, which means you have certain protections. But if you go out the door and say the same thing, you do not have the same protections. I suspect the content of your submission is probably not going to require privilege, but you are covered by privilege.

Hansard is recording your presentation, as they have done for all of the witnesses. You will receive a transcript from Hansard in about two weeks. If there are factual errors — they do not make errors often, let me tell you — you can make those amendments and send that back. Can I ask you initially to state your full name and your business address, and if you could clarify if you are appearing on your own behalf or whether you are representing your organisation, then you may wish to address your written submission.

**Mr ASSAN** — Absolutely, my name is Me'ad Assan. I represent the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, and I am speaking in my role as a policy officer. The address is 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton, Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, you might like to expand on or add to some of the items you have raised in your submission.

**Mr ASSAN** — Firstly, thank you very much for the opportunity to allow us to come here and share our views and concerns in relation to people from CALD backgrounds engagement with the electoral system, and also to clarify that we could not actually comment on the conduct of the election, because we did not have enough information. What we did is submit some of the recommendations we made in 2013 as part of the local government electoral review. I just wanted to clarify that.

As you are aware the ECCV is the peak multicultural body, so we advocate for and represent multicultural communities and speak on their behalf on various issues. The information I am going to provide you is sort of based on feedback we have received from our members and also through interactions, so it is not based on documents or reports. We actually need to have major research, or comprehensive research documents on this issue. We are noticing that some of the community members are still not engaging with the electoral system and particularly those of refugee backgrounds, young people from new and emerging communities, people from culturally diverse backgrounds with low levels of English language and low literacy, and senior citizens who are still either not engaging or finding the system rather too complicated to understand.

There are a number of reasons and we have already shared these views and reasons with the committee through our submission, but there are two main ones we can think of. The first one is pressures associated with migration and settlement that do not allow people to engage actively with the electoral system. Some of the challenges those communities face are difficulty accessing stable and long-term accommodation, language barriers, and difficulty gaining employment and financial resources. There are a whole lot of issues. The other area we keep coming across is some of the international events are influencing our communities, particularly what is happening in Iraq or Libya. Every time we have a conversation on democracy we keep seeing people that tend to associate democracy with chaos, and they do not think that democracy brings stability, and particularly with what is happening after the fallout of Gadhafi or Saddam Hussein, so there is really a lot of cynicism. We really worry about that, because we see more and more community members adopting cynical views when it comes to democracy.

There is no magic bullet to improve the situation. All we can do is to try a number of measures. One of the areas we suggested was to have more than one player providing education and civic engagement, and I do actually commend the VEC.

The VEC has done wonderful work. They have put a great deal of resources into making sure that the information is accessible to the community, but the VEC is a very small organisation with very limited capacity. We have a state of 5 million-plus with a significant proportion of people from CALD backgrounds, so this is where we are thinking of having local government play a role in educating people about how to vote. This is really important, and the reason we suggest that is because of the relationship that already exists between people who work in local government and communities. A lot of community groups do access social programs delivered by local governments, and because of that relationship it is much easier to engage with people on these issues. We thought having more than one player providing electoral education is very important.

The other suggestion we made is, because we have seen over the last few years that the profile of elections is not very high, particularly when it comes to local government elections it is not very high — we do not talk about them much, we just know there is an election — we thought of the idea of having a Democracy Week. Hopefully if it coincides with an election year that would probably increase the profile of some elections, particularly when it comes to local government elections.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for the submission. As I understand it, you have attached the local government electoral review submission to the end, but you have made a recommendation on page 4 of that. Recommendation 1.2 says you are in favour of optional preferential voting. Does that apply to state elections as well?

**Mr ASSAN** — Absolutely, because we will be seeing more and more candidates. What will happen is a lot of people will probably just feel intimidated by the significant numbers of candidates, so to make them easier and to ensure their vote is valid that is an important area that we need to address. That is why we suggested the idea of making that option available to the community.

**Mr DIXON** — How does the VEC now educate voters? You said they are doing as good a job as they can with the resources they have, so how do they reach out to your communities?

**Mr ASSAN** — My understanding is that it is on request but they have also got very active community engagement programs. My understanding is they have got someone who is specifically in charge of engagement with people from CALD backgrounds, who basically may go to community groups and engage. That is my understanding.

**Mr DIXON** — They go along to meetings and gatherings and educate people?

**Mr ASSAN** — Yes, and they are really putting in a lot of effort and I think we should commend it. We do have a close relationship with the VEC, and they are really doing a great deal of good work. I just look at the reports on the 2014 election and when I look particularly at the CALD sections the VEC conducted close to 151 information sessions, which is quite a significant number in terms of sessions; but in terms of participants it is really not — it is only 3000. It is important — 3000 is not a small number — but we could reach more people by having more players providing information on elections and also on how to vote.

**Mr DIXON** — Do you find therefore a lot of your community members are fined for not voting? Do you get that feedback?

**Mr ASSAN** — The only reason they are voting, I mean I think the main reason is just not to be fined. That is what keeps coming up.

**Mr DIXON** — They know that bit, do they?

**Mr ASSAN** — Yes. It is just so they will not be fined. They are always concerned about not wanting to be fined, but there is really not that urgent interest in being part of the democratic process. Also, it is really quite challenging for a lot of community members to establish and have a life in Australia. We could do better I suppose.

**Ms PATTEN** — We have been talking with the previous witnesses about iVoting and about online voting, and New South Wales has run a program doing that. Do you think a service like that that could provide information in all the languages at the time of people voting and so it could provide very specific instructions, would that be helpful?

**Mr ASSAN** — Some members of the community may find it useful, particularly among the youth, or young people. Yes, it would help, but I am not really sure how much of a difference it would make.

**Ms PATTEN** — It is more just the engagement?

**Mr ASSAN** — Yes, absolutely.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — In reference to your point about optional preferential voting, there is an argument that operational preferential voting disenfranchises people because their vote is exhausted potentially before it actually counts towards the election of a particular candidate. One of the other factors we have seen in terms of non-English speaking communities and the way they exercise their vote is that their vote becomes informal for reasons other than just not numbering all of the boxes in terms of how they might choose to number a box or where on the ballot paper they make their marking or whatnot. Do you think instead there is perhaps an argument for better education about how to cast a valid vote at all, rather than changing the way in which we vote?

**Mr ASSAN** — That is really important, but there is also a limit. If you have a receipt for the Senate and you vote below the line when you have got 40 people and you are required to number them all, that really becomes quite problematic particularly for a lot of community members. That is why we suggested maybe having — —

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — In the state election, just to clarify, you can vote just once above the line in one box to vote for one party, so you only do need to number one box. Then for the Assembly you need to number all of the boxes, and for the Assembly it is usually 2, 3 or might be 10 candidates; but it is not the same sized ballot paper as in the upper house.

**Mr ASSAN** — In relation to local government, we have seen in some local councils probably 10 or 12 candidates. That is where we thought maybe if we could allow people to express their preferences up to four or five, or even three; but what happens is most of the time they do not put all of the numbers, so that is kind of — —

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — So, 3 or 5, rather than 10?

**Mr ASSAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — It is like the upper house, where you have a 1 to 5 or whatever. Again, thank you very much for your willingness to participate in our inquiry, to make these recommendations and to appear before us today.

**Mr ASSAN** — Thank you very much.

**Committee adjourned.**