

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election

Melbourne — 11 August 2015

Members

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Mr Russell Northe

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

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Witness

Mr Colin Watson, president, Geelong and Districts Branch of Blind Citizens Australia (*via teleconference*).

The CHAIR — In terms of formalities, I will let you know that you have the cover of parliamentary privilege for the evidence you give to the committee, but obviously anything said outside this evidence is not covered by parliamentary privilege. I am going to ask you now to state your full name and business address, if you have one, and to indicate to us whether you are representing an organisation or whether you are putting your submission forward in a private capacity. Then perhaps you might like to run the committee members through some of your main points, and then we will ask some questions. Are you comfortable with that?

Mr WATSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — Terrific, so if you could just state your full name, a business address if you have one, indicate whether you are representing your organisation officially or not, and then address your major issues.

Mr WATSON — My name is Colin John Watson. My mailing address is post office box 1037, Barwon Heads, 3227, Victoria. I am president of and representing the Geelong and Districts branch of Blind Citizens Australia.

The submission that we have put in covers everything that we would like to have considered, but the basic premise is that we believe blind and vision-impaired people do not have access to a secret ballot in the same way that other Victorians have. We would like action taken to do something about this. In the past, voting centres have been set up for people with disabilities for pre-poll voting. These have not been very accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired. They are somewhat accessible, but even when physically accessible, when we get there we find that there are no how-to-vote cards or any other paraphernalia letting us know in accessible formats for whom we could be voting. As a consequence, we would like pre-poll stations to have access in accessible formats to all the how-to-vote cards and other paraphernalia that the political parties put out by making this available in time for the pre-poll stations and not just for the polling day itself.

One thing that the submission probably did not go into in great detail is the accessibility of computers. Blind and vision-impaired people have great accessibility to modern computers in a number of ways with screen enlargement software, and with text-to-speech voice output from the computer and also to braille reading devices. If polling were done by computers and they were available in polling sessions, we would have virtually the same access to a secret ballot as all other Victorians.

In the past apparently the availability of pre-polls has not been taken up to a large extent by blind and vision-impaired people. This has to be a historical thing. Most of us tend to go with our spouses and friends on polling day, and they help us vote. This is good and well, and in my case that is not a real problem because my wife's politics and my own are identical. But that is not always the case, and they should not be relying on that. In this day and age we could have completely independent access to a secret ballot, and the fact that few people have taken up the opportunity in the past is based in history. They have not had the opportunity, so they have made other arrangements. We would like arrangements to be made whereby people who are blind and vision impaired can over time become used to voting independently by this independent voting being made available, preferably at polling stations on polling day, as well as at pre-poll centres, and that this accessible voting be as uniform as possible throughout Victoria and Australia. The use of braille is contained in that document. In the meantime I am prepared to answer any questions you have.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that. It was a very good submission, I might say. Mr Adem Somyurek has now joined us, so we have one male voice to add to yours.

Mr SOMYUREK — A bit of gender balance.

The CHAIR — I call for any questions.

Ms BLANDTHORN — In relation to your point about computerised voting and your suggesting that computers being available at a polling station would give you the same access as any other voter, does that

mean that you would be happy with that as an outcome rather than computerised voting being available in other forms — on iPhones or on home computers or whatnot? Is what you would be looking for a computerised polling station?

Mr WATSON — Yes, in one sense. In 12 months time the commonwealth census will be coming about and online completion of that census is now a reality. The vast majority of blind and vision-impaired people will independently fill out that census online. That would be the ideal way for us to be able to vote — on our smart phones or on our computers at home. However, that is not the case at the moment. If that technology were made available and every polling station had laptops for the polling staff to use, in essence it could just be done on that. That would be satisfactory for the present for someone to register an independent and secret ballot.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you for your submission. It seems like a very simple solution, doesn't it, just having computers at the polling booths? I was interested in particular in your saying quite rightly that we need to look at a universally accessible voting system. We do not want to be doing something here, and then New South Wales does something and then the feds do something different altogether. In the federal election, what was available for those who are blind or vision impaired?

Mr WATSON — It was similar to what was at the last state election, but it was not quite as good. What they had set and ready to go was for someone to ring in to a polling centre and someone at the electoral commission actually helped fill your vote out for you at the other end. Presumably they did not know who they were talking to. It was not all that good; it is a bit shonky, if you ask me. It does not give you nearly the same independent access to a secret ballot that you would get as a sighted person.

Ms PATTEN — No.

The CHAIR — May I ask a question please as Chair? You set out in your submission that you are reasonably pleased with the accessibility of the individual polling places, but there were problems with the polling places in relation to methods of transport to get to the polling centre, and you also talked about TGSIs — tactile ground surface indicators — which was something new for me but obviously critical for those who are either blind or vision impaired. What level of consultation would you be seeking from the VEC to have input into those types of considerations for the 2018 election?

Mr WATSON — As I understand it, the VEC did consult with Vision Australia, and Vision Australia gave the tick of approval to the voting centre in Geelong, but I do not know why. I live in Barwon Heads. I do not know whether you know the geography of this region, but I am 20 kilometres south-west of Geelong on the coast. If I want to vote I have to travel into Geelong, then from Geelong out to the North Geelong polling centre, an area that I am totally unfamiliar with, and if I could get orientation and mobility training for this one trip, then I am travelling at least 25 or 28 kilometres to vote. Then when I get there, I have got no idea who I am voting for, in the sense that there are a bunch of names on the computer screen but it is not telling me whether they are Liberal, Labor, Nationals, Greens or Callithumpians.

The CHAIR — So it does not have it on the screen?

Mr WATSON — It did not, no.

The CHAIR — So the screen does not replicate the ballot paper?

Mr WATSON — No.

The CHAIR — Can I just go back to my question? Does that mean that Vision Australia did not properly consult with its constituent groups over a tick off on polling places?

Mr WATSON — That is our feeling, yes.

The CHAIR — I do not know whether this committee is in a position to do a lot about that, but are you in a position to take that up with Vision Australia?

Mr WATSON — We have, indeed. It has certainly been mentioned in the submission that there are actual physical disabilities — holes in footpaths and overhanging trees — that any cursory physical examination of accessibility would have picked up in its sight. It is not just blind people; any person coming in a wheelchair would have had Buckley's hope of getting to that polling station from the bus.

Having got there, when you come out there is a six-lane highway you have got to cross to go back to Geelong, so you have got to go back to the same bus stop and travel a kilometre or so down the road until there is a set of traffic lights where you can cross the road and wait for a bus to come along the other way.

The CHAIR — You have made your point very well — your assertion, I might add.

Ms PATTEN — I was interested in your recommendation that we establish adequate time periods between the publication of the how-to-vote cards and the opening of early voting centres, but what I was particularly interested in is how are you able to access the how-to-vote cards now? Does the VEC do that?

Mr WATSON — Yes, they do send. If we register they will send it out on a CD in speech format. Another thing with accessibility is that anything that is printed I can scan on my scanner, and my computer will read it out to me, so I can access it. What I was saying in answering the last question, I cannot recall whether the political parties' names did appear on the ballot paper or not. They may well have, but the thing we were worried about is we did not know how the party we wanted to vote for wanted their preferences to go, and that is where the how-to-vote cards come in.

Ms PATTEN — Mr Watson, just to follow up on that, all how-to-vote cards are registered with the VEC. Would it be of assistance to you if the VEC were to have all of those how-to-vote cards up on their website? Would that make them accessible to you?

Mr WATSON — Yes, it would. Our problem with the how-to-vote cards was that parties, as I understand it, did not choose their how-to-vote card until, say, a day or so before the pre-poll stations opened. So by the time they got them printed they had them there on the second day of the pre-poll, but not in a format accessible to blind or vision impaired. If they could go straight up onto the VEC website, that would get us one way of accessing them.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you.

The CHAIR — You had a very comprehensive submission, so there were not a lot of questions to follow on because it was so clear and detailed, so thank you so much.

Mr WATSON — I would like to point out that that was not my work, that submission, entirely; it came from a very, very active Blind Citizens Australia group in Geelong.

The CHAIR — That is very generous of you, to acknowledge them. Thank you for that.

Ms PATTEN — The electronic voting that was available at pre-polling, was that adequate? I understand from the submission that, for some reason, that same system was not available on polling day, only at pre-polling.

Mr WATSON — Yes. It was only at the super poll stations and there were 24 of them, I think, Victoria-wide and 1 in London. The main problem we had was physically getting there and not having access to the how-to-vote cards once we were there. We are not poor, helpless people the blind people. We can get around pretty well. I retired a couple of years ago after commuting from Barwon Heads to various places around St Kilda Road after working for 30 years at the Department of Defence. I can get there and do it, but why I chose to do this interview today on the phone is because it would have been difficult for me to find my way to where you are for a one-off. Whereas if someone had offered me a job there for the next five years, I would get orientation mobility, find my way there and with the aid of my trusty guide dog it would not be a problem. Because polling day is once every couple of years for state or federal — and indeed there is no saying if for the next state election the pre-poll centre will all be in the same place — it makes it very difficult for totally blind people to find their way to and from a one-off situation.

Ms PATTEN — So if you could register for online voting in the same way you could register for postal voting?

Mr WATSON — Yes.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your comprehensive submission, albeit written in collaboration. I indicate to you that you will receive a copy of the Hansard transcript of this. I think Hansard might have to work out what is an accessible form. Perhaps those discussions have taken place already, but they will need to take place.

Mr WATSON — They could email them if that is the usual format. Is it?

The CHAIR — Yes. It will be emailed to you either directly or indirectly.

Mr WATSON — Email is fine. That is completely accessible.

The CHAIR — Okay. You then have capacity to correct any errors of fact that you think may have occurred. I have to say in fairness to Hansard — I have been told to say this to everyone — Hansard is extraordinarily good at what they do and there are very rarely errors of fact, but if you could do that, that would be terrific. It would then go up on the official site. Thank you so much not only for your willingness to make a submission to the committee but also for your availability today.

Mr WATSON — Thank you very much for hearing us.

Witness withdrew.