

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election

Melbourne — 14 September 2015

Members

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Mr Martin Dixon

Staff

Executive officer: Mr Mark Roberts

Research officer: Mr Nathaniel Reader

Witnesses

Ms Maryanne Diamond, AO, general manager, advocacy and engagement;

Ms Julie McKay, government relations advisor, advocacy and engagement; and

Ms Karen Taranto, advocacy advisor, advocacy and engagement, Vision Australia.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along. I welcome you to the Electoral Matters Committee hearing. This is a formal hearing. It is part of our inquiry into the last state election. All the evidence you give is protected by parliamentary privilege, which is a good thing, but I would urge you, although it is not the nature of your evidence, just to be careful about repeating it outside. I ask you first of all to state your full names and your business address, if you have one, and could you let us know whether you are attending in a private capacity or whether you are representing an organisation. Hansard are recording the evidence given today. You will be given a proof version of the transcript in a couple of weeks. If there are errors of fact in that, you can make the corrections as you see fit.

Could I ask each of you to state your name and your business address, if you have one. I do not need to know your personal address, none of us do.

Ms McKAY — I am Julie McKay. The business address is 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong, and I am here representing Vision Australia.

Ms DIAMOND — I am Maryanne Diamond. My business address is 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong, and I am representing Vision Australia.

Ms TARANTO — I am Karen Taranto. My business address is 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong, and I am representing Vision Australia.

The CHAIR — Terrific. Perhaps you would like to speak to your submission first.

Ms DIAMOND — Thank you. I will speak on behalf of us. Thanks the opportunity to present to you today. As you have seen from our written submission, the conduct of the 2014 state election highlighted many issues of great importance to electors who are blind or have low vision. Sadly, the Victorian electoral system has not kept up with areas of advancement for blind and low vision people and is now one of the worst in the country. Some members may not be familiar with Vision Australia's long-term advocacy in relation to accessible voting in both state and federal elections.

For those who are not familiar with Vision Australia, we are the country's largest provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision, providing services to more than 33 000 Australians each year. We are a national, not-for-profit organisation with 27 offices nationally, including our headquarters and 11 offices here in Victoria. We estimate that there are approximately 90 000 Victorians who are blind or have low vision. These Victorians, who we represent today, continue to experience unnecessary discrimination when it comes to voting, despite having both the constitutional and human rights to cast a secret and independent vote in a manner comparable to our sighted peers in all Australian federal elections and referendums.

Today I want to focus on the three key issues: choice in voting options, electronically assisted voting and accessible voting in Victoria relative to other jurisdictions. Victorian electors who are blind or have low vision had less choice in how, where and when they were able to vote in the 2014 state election compared to 2010. Options are important because people who are blind or have low vision are not a homogenous group. We have different needs and preferences. For example, in New South Wales people who are blind or have low vision can vote online, independent via the telephone or via a call centre.

While the VEC has provided some aids in support of electors who are blind or have low vision to cast a secret and independent vote, it remains that the voting methods available to electors who are blind or have low vision is not comparable to those available to our sighted peers. Despite this, we understand that the VEC plans to review their delivery of some of the accessible voting methods, such as braille ballot packs, which have not been utilised. We believe that low patronage of such methods is due more to the quality and methods rather than the lack of need for this option. As such the VEC should invest in and improve these options so the electors have choice in how they may vote in a state election.

A new electronically assisted voting method, EAV, was trialled for the first time in the 2014 state election. Disappointingly only 200 electors who are blind or have low vision took up this method. Similar to braille ballot packs, we understand that EAV is under review due to its low take-up. However, this should not be

perceived as a lack of need and/or demand for an easily accessible, genuinely confidential and secure vote by technological means. Rather it highlights the issues that delivery of this system raises for people who may have otherwise chosen to use EAV. This includes the very limited availability of EAV in only a few locations during the pre-polling period and, incredibly, not on polling day; lack of familiarity of and opportunity to test this new system prior to voting; and that it was not yet well understood as a new voting method. Nor has it been consistently used in different sectors.

Finally we would like to draw to your attention the performance of Victoria relative to other states with regard to accessible voting. The elections in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland have led us to believe Victoria is falling further behind in the delivery of secret and independent voting in all state elections. In particular we know that 5296 people who are blind or have low vision used the accessible voting option delivered by iVote in the New South Wales state election compared to only 200 using the EAV in Victoria. This of course is a massive difference. We understand that this may be a consequence of service delivery, and we recommend that the VEC invest in and improve this and other accessible voting services so that they meet the needs of the electors who are blind or have low vision. We also understand that the Victorian Electoral Act may not allow for the VEC to provide a range of voting options by technological means, and we implore this committee to consider legislative change, if it is necessary, to eliminate this barrier to accessible voting.

To conclude, secret and independent voting at Victorian state elections remains out of reach for many electors who are blind or have low vision. The committee must ensure that the VEC continue to improve and invest in a range of accessible voting options so that electors may be able to exercise their right and participate in the democratic process of voting, like our peers in other states. My colleagues and I are happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for a very comprehensive submission, particularly with those comparisons between New South Wales and Victoria which I think we will all find very useful.

Mr DIXON — Just on EAV, has it got the potential to work? If you were given better opportunity for more accessibility, has it got that potential?

Ms DIAMOND — I think the people who had used it found it quite okay, so I suppose in that way you would probably say yes. I think the message that I would leave is: consistency is the key. We see New South Wales iVote as being the kind of model to stand by. We have talked to people in all states. If we could have one system that worked in all jurisdictions, that would be better, because then we could skill people up and inform them, whereas we are doing all different things in different states and in Victoria we have done different things in different elections.

Ms TARANTO — Just to add to that, there are two issues that have emerged from the delivery of electronically assisted voting, one of them around service delivery and one of them about the technological platform. We understand that the feedback from people who used the technological platform was that it was a very good system in terms of the ease of its use, familiarity with the way that you use it compared to other smart phone devices, but the issue is with the service delivery in that we said that it was only available during the pre-polling time, it was only a computer-based technology, there was not the option for a telephone voting and it was not available on polling day.

Ms PATTEN — With regard to that, obviously with the New South Wales system, it is available for you to vote from home. Is that something that you see as a benefit of the New South Wales system or was that not so important as just having it available on more days over the polling period?

Ms DIAMOND — There was certainly a benefit, and it was open to others, not just to blind and low-vision people, as far as I understand. One of the advantages is people can vote with their family. There were a number of options you could do online. You could do call centre, you could do telephone voting, and you could do it at the same time other people do it, which is part of that whole election thing.

Ms McKAY — It is about the familiarity as well and being a consistent system. They had offered it and built on it for two years running. You could choose to do it in the comfort of your own home and as

Maryanne has already said, there were three different versions. Those people who felt less comfortable with technology still had an operator-assisted option if they preferred that. There was also the ability to test the system ahead of voting on the day, so you could do a test drive on both the electronic platform online or you could do it via telephone.

Ms PATTEN — Right.

Mr NORTHE — I hope you have all had the opportunity to read the national submission, which very strongly talked about improvements for vision-impaired people around accessibility. I have to get that on the record. Karen was talking about and I know the submission as well talked about maybe extending the period in which people who might be vision impaired can vote. Is there any idea around the time lines? I know you have talked about different options, but are you suggesting a four-week period or a longer period in which people can vote?

Ms TARANTO — In terms of the period, I think the main issue was that some of the various voting options were not available on polling day, in particular electronically assisted voting. We understand that some people might choose to vote from home, but I think that a lot of people also choose to be part of polling day because it is a big part of our democracy. In terms of the voting period, that is the main point that we wanted to make about that rather than a longer period and ensuring that all of the services available, particularly for people who are blind or have low vision, like braille ballot packs, magnifiers, CCTV, electronically assisted voting, any other means that are specifically for that cohort, should be available any time that any other voting options are available.

The CHAIR — Again, it was a very comprehensive submission and we are very grateful for the work that you have put in. Hopefully we can take up some — —

Ms PATTEN — Sorry, Chair. I just want to follow up on the how-to-vote cards from political parties. Would you envisage this is something that the VEC would provide?

Ms TARANTO — Yes.

Ms PATTEN — Yes, so that would be the simplest way, if it was centralised through VEC rather than each political party somehow — —

Ms TARANTO — We understand that the role of the VEC is not actually to provide that communication, and the VEC has been very candid with us about their role. So not necessarily, in answer to that question. But if there was a way to have more influence over the political parties with the delivery of that sort of communication, we would welcome it.

Ms PATTEN — And you would be able to provide all of the parties with advice as to how to make that material accessible online.

Ms TARANTO — Yes, and we can provide that to the VEC, who could also encourage the parties to do that as well.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Again, thank you very much for your submission. It is greatly appreciated.

Ms DIAMOND — Thank you for your time.

The CHAIR — Thank you for yours.

Witnesses withdrew.