

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

#### Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

#### Witnesses

Mr Warwick Gately, AM, Electoral Commissioner,

Ms Liz Williams, deputy electoral commissioner,

Ms Alex Markham, manager, education and inclusion, and

Ms Michelle Templeton, manager, election staff capability, Victorian Electoral Commission.

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

**The CHAIR** — We will move on now to the Victorian Electoral Commission. Again, thank you for the comprehensive material that you have provided to the committee. You know the procedure and obviously you know the members of the committee because you have dealt with us on many occasions. This would appear to be our last reference in this term of Parliament, so hopefully we can go out with a bang. You obviously are familiar with the issue of privilege attached to your presentations, but it does not apply outside.

**Mr GATELY** — Indeed.

**The CHAIR** — If you could please tell us your name and business address, formally advise the committee of whether you are appearing on behalf of your organisation and then perhaps speak to your submission.

**Mr GATELY** — Warwick Gately, Electoral Commissioner; Collins Street, Melbourne. The Victorian Electoral Commission is pleased to respond to this inquiry as it offers the opportunity to showcase the multitude of best practice evidence-based activities it provides to Victorian electors in the area of civics education and inclusion and participation. The VEC uses both international and its own research to underpin a theory-driven approach to program design and results evaluation. Despite a compulsory voting environment, the VEC recognises, through electoral data, qualitative research and anecdotal evidence, that electoral participation is not equal across all Victorians who are eligible to vote.

The majority of electors just want to know when and where to vote. This need is addressed through comprehensive public awareness programs at election time. However, there is a significant proportion of electors, referred to as priority communities within our submission, who face various barriers in terms of participation. The VEC's approach is to understand the barriers and consider what it may do to remove or negate them via the construct of its community education and electoral inclusion strategy. The strategy is based on a best practice, public participation approach. It links the real world to electoral participation through a civics education lens, and it is supported by audience-relevant information resources and targeted communication. The delivery of the strategy is based on an election cycle implementation. Year-round the VEC conducts deep engagement via civics education and community capacity building. Come election time the approach is on delivery of electoral information through face-to-face outreach, supported by targeted, accessible and culturally responsive resources.

Election time is also when the results of the VEC's commitment to a diverse, well-trained and supported workforce bears fruit. Consideration has been given to various techniques to attract and facilitate the employment of up to 20 000 election day and casual staff. The training provided must be appropriate for the role, particularly given that the vast majority of the 20 000 are only employed for a single day. Each and every person the VEC employs is expected to understand and demonstrate the values needed to deliver high-quality, accessible electoral services. This has been and will continue to be an area of focus for the organisation.

It is perhaps a watershed time within the electoral industry: the rate of technological change is enabling electoral commissions to respond to ever-increasing societal expectations with regard to access, convenience, security and opportunities to participate. Recruitment and training practices are also being modernised in terms of content and delivery as a result of technology change. The VEC is excited by these opportunities and the road ahead. However, true progress with regard to electoral inclusion and participation requires a number of players moving in concert. Electoral commissions must take the initiative, and enabling technologies may need appropriate supporting legislation. Yet the work of the VEC cannot be considered in isolation. Political parties, elected members, interest groups and the media link electors to the formal institution of government, and as such, also have a crucial role in the informed participation of Victorian electors. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Could I perhaps ask something? I want to pick up a submission from the Youth Affairs Council, which makes the point that we have not seen any information about how many schools have used the Passport to Democracy resource. In your submission, on page 7, you have advised us that there are 185 separate education providers obtaining these resources. Are you in a position to advise the committee how many schools have actually used the resource?

**Mr GATELY** — Chair, what I will do is I will pass that immediately to Alex, who is very involved in the Passport program.

**Ms MARKHAM** — My name is Alex Markham. I am the manager of the education and inclusion team at the Victorian Electoral Commission. In our submission we talk about 185 separate education providers from last

year. That is a combination of the number of schools that have downloaded the resource, and then we actually provide education outreach sessions and professional development in schools. So of that number, I will need to take that on notice and get back to you and let you know exactly how many schools out of that 185 we have delivered a mock election to. What we find is that schools will download the resource, and it is used in different ways. As we know, civics education is delivered in very different ways in schools. Some schools will deliver it over a whole term, other schools will deliver it over a number of weeks, and some schools might do it in one day at the end of term 3. I can get back to the committee if that is okay.

**The CHAIR** — That would be terrific. Thank you very much. We would appreciate that.

**Ms SPENCE** — The view of the 2014 election showed an incredibly high informal rate for the Northern Metropolitan Region, and one of the recommendations that we made, coming out of that, was that the VEC do more of that targeted engagement, which we discussed at the time. I was wondering if you could let us know what initiatives have been taken, particularly in that area, to address that very high informal vote that we saw at the last election.

**Mr GATELY** — When we look very quickly at the 2014 election, I think there were 21 registered political parties active in that election, which was incredible — almost a doubling on the previous state election. So perhaps that was a factor as well, and also, of course, that increased the number of candidates that were actively engaged in district elections and the region elections as well. That may well have been a factor. We do look very carefully at the informal figures. In 2014 you would be aware that we looked at all 88 districts. Now, prior to that we had done a sample. We are now starting to develop a better feel for each district and for the informality rates and the participation rates in those districts as well. Having taken that step, we can identify the districts where our particular targeted programs go. Again, I might ask Alex to expand a little on that. We are still developing our plans for 2018 as well.

**Ms SPENCE** — Perhaps I should clarify my question a bit. I was speaking specifically in regard to the Northern Metropolitan Region — not a district. That had the highest level of informal votes, also the highest level of non-English speaking voters, but it also had an incredibly high number of people voting ‘1’ below the line and not continuing the numbering. That has been identified by the VEC as an issue, so what has the response to that identified issue been?

**Ms MARKHAM** — I am not sure if you are aware that in 2014 we ran a pilot Democracy Ambassador program, where we trained people from Horn of Africa communities to go out and provide face-to-face electoral education to community groups. What we know is that face-to-face provision of electoral information is very important and very effective at teaching people how to vote correctly. So we provide information on our website and in written formats, but actually having someone in the community providing that face-to-face information is very, very effective.

We are looking in 2018 to build on the knowledge that we developed in 2014 and roll out our Democracy Ambassador program on a statewide level across all of our priority communities, and one of the strategies within that Democracy Ambassador program is to match the areas with low English proficiency and high informality and really target those areas, working in partnership with community groups and community organisations to make sure that we have people delivering face-to-face information on the ground.

**Ms SPENCE** — So that is not happening now?

**Ms MARKHAM** — That is not happening currently. It is going to happen in the lead-up to the 2018 state election.

**Ms SPENCE** — When do you consider that to be?

**Ms MARKHAM** — We are just finalising our project planning around that. We will be recruiting community educators or democracy ambassadors in the first half of next year with a view to rolling out and delivering information from about July next year.

**Ms BATH** — I am following up from when we had Vision Australia. So two lovely ladies, Kate Begley and Amanda Acutt, were on speakerphone today and talking about iVote as a mechanism for really empowering

people with vision impediments. I am just wondering if you have done any homework on that in the past, if you have evaluated New South Wales or Western Australia, and what VEC's thoughts are on that.

**The CHAIR** — Can I just perhaps intercede at this juncture and say that Ms Bath is a new member of the committee and did not have the benefit obviously of participating in the previous inquiry.

**Ms BATH** — You have done a massive amount of work.

**The CHAIR** — So you might want to bear that in mind when you answer the question.

**Ms BATH** — Thanks, Chair.

**Mr GATELY** — Chair, if I can, with the inquiry into electronic voting, VEC made a recommendation that if there was to be electronic voting introduced into Victoria, then the circumstances are that we should take the New South Wales iVote model. It has done a number of state elections and a number of by-elections as well. We are working closely with New South Wales in relation to that, should government make a decision to go down the electronic voting path, and we are familiar with the product. It would need some adjustment to suit our election system, particularly in the upper house arrangement, but that discussion is ongoing and we are just waiting on a government decision. So again if there was to be electronic voting, my recommendation remains that we take the New South Wales iVote model.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — Two questions: one, can I just follow up on Ros's question in terms of that follow-up work and when you identify the ambassadors; how will you identify them? You obviously piloted it with Horn of Africa communities. Have you identified which communities you think you will expand it to?

**Ms MARKHAM** — So we currently have a number of partnerships with organisations like the Centre for Multicultural Youth, AMES and a number of different community organisations. Primarily we would be leveraging off the existing partnerships that we have, and we are also at the moment undertaking a mapping exercise — so identifying those areas with low English proficiency and high informality and then looking at what ethnospecific organisations there are within those areas that we can then reach out to and work in partnership with. What we have found, and we mentioned this in our submission, is that an agency approach is one of the more effective ways to go, where we work in partnership with community groups who have existing structures and existing networks within their local communities. They are the ones who understand their communities and who are able to access community members.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — So given it has already been identified that northern metropolitan was a particular issue, will there be particular work done to follow up with the communities within northern metropolitan?

**Ms MARKHAM** — Absolutely.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — And just to go to my other question, we heard from the ethnic communities council before that there should be a greater emphasis in relation to the employment of casual staff and ensuring that those staff reflect the diversity of the community et cetera. I have noted in your submission that your policies already say that. Certainly coming from the Northern Metropolitan Region, where those types of ethnic communities are represented, I do not think we saw the diversity that represents the community in the people that were working on the election. How does that policy actually come into play, and how do you ensure that you do get that diversity in the people you employ?

**Mr GATELY** — I will pass that one over to the deputy, Liz, and perhaps Michelle as well.

**Ms WILLIAMS** — Sure, and Michelle can jump in. Certainly you are correct: we do have a policy that we want our election staff to reflect the diversity within particular communities, and we train our election managers to consider the various needs of the communities that they are working in when they are appointing staff. We have our online registration system where people identify that they can speak additional languages, and then our election managers are encouraged to appoint, from within that, all the relevant languages that apply to those areas. I am not sure if there is more you want to add, Michelle.

**Ms TEMPLETON** — Yes. I guess there is a twofold approach to that. The first part is actually having those people registered, and that is where the inclusion team do a lot of work before the election time to make sure we

have got the right people registered. That is a bit of a barrier, so if we do not have people registered, we cannot actually employ them. The second part is encouraging our election managers to use them. One of —

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — So you feel that is working well now?

**Ms TEMPLETON** — It is working reasonably well and it is an area for improvement and it is an area that we have a particular focus on each time. One of the problems that we do have is that we cannot measure within our system what offers have been made; we can only say, ‘Okay, these are the people that we’ve employed’. So there is a lot of work that actually goes on to offer positions to people. They may not want to take them up for various reasons and we cannot measure that at the moment, and ideally we would be able to measure that. It is an area that we continue to focus on, and we do have from our election managers fairly strong reporting back that where they do have staff that reflect the communities, it makes their job so much easier and it makes the election run so much more smoothly. People are wanting to do that, but it is an area of ongoing focus.

**The CHAIR** — Could I ask you a question in relation to young people, because obviously there is a participation problem from our perspective with young people. I do note that in your submission, on page 24, you talked about a slight increase from 2010 to 2014, but the Trades Hall Council, in their submission and in our discussion with them, suggested the possibility of mobile booths in schools for those first-time voters. That is just an idea that they put forward. It would be operating similarly to perhaps a hospital or an old persons home and so on. Do you have a preliminary comment on that and whether you think, A, it is feasible for you to do it, and, B, do you think that would make any inroads to the problem of young people’s participation, which is not at the high level of others?

**Mr GATELY** — It is in the report as well and you mentioned that. In the 18 to 25-year-old category we are getting an 89 per cent turnout rate for that group, which on a national basis is quite exceptional. It does not mean to say that we are complacent about that and that we are not focusing on that area. Whether mobile polling is in schools, we have not given that any consideration whatsoever. I am interested to hear that raised. There would be some operational challenges around that given that mobile polling at the moment is focused particularly on aged-care facilities, hospitals et cetera, where you have got that static group who are desperate for that service. But I am not sure about —

**Ms WILLIAMS** — I saw that in the submission, and it crossed my mind, but the timing of the elections would be important as well in that they are in November, and the 18-year-olds will have gone from those particular venues. From a practical point of view it would be I think difficult.

**Mr DIXON** — New South Wales had a few by-elections recently. Are there any interesting trends that you observed, especially in terms of early voting and iVote? Any observations?

**Mr GATELY** — I have not seen or observed anything. I have not seen any commentary coming out of New South Wales in relation to that. I would expect their early voting numbers reflect what we are seeing across Australia and what we are seeing in New Zealand as of a couple of weeks ago as well. No doubt they are continuing to increase. But I have seen nothing particular out of New South Wales about the use of iVote and/or about those by-elections at all, no.

**Ms PATTEN** — Just following up from Vision Australia, they are a lot happier with the website now that it has got that much better disability access compatibility, although they still note that things like group voting tickets and how-to-vote cards are particularly difficult. I appreciate that that is because we do them as a PDF effectively. Has there been any consideration of changing that? I do not know what format political parties could provide the how-to-vote cards in in particular, because from speaking to Kate, while she is trying to vote she is also trying to look at seven how-to-vote cards on paper. If that was accessible on the VEC site, given that particularly with Victorian elections they are all approved documents, she would then be able to use your website while filling in her ballot.

**Mr GATELY** — No doubt there is a PDF issue there, but the whole registration process with how-to-vote cards is very complex. It is very resource and time-consuming to get them registered and to get them uploaded as well as quickly as we can so that they are available now. Liz, any other —

**Ms WILLIAMS** — I am not sure what format change would be necessary, but the timing, from a practical perspective, from the point a card is lodged, a decision has to be made within 24 hours in terms of registration.

Then there is a 24-hour period — I think it is 24 hours — within the legislation that someone has to appeal the registration of that card to VCAT. So we need to make a decision, register and publish very, very quickly so that there is time for people to view that card in the event that they want to make a challenge to VCAT, so it is very condensed in terms of the timing and the legislation, and we do nothing other than take the registered PDF that we get from the party or the group or candidate and publish it. We do not have time to do anything else.

**Mr GATELY** — I would make the point that when we meet with the registered political parties in advance of the state election, we make the point to them that there is this whole issue of accessibility of information and that there is some obligation on them to do that with their material for the community — it is not necessarily an obligation on us — to have their how-to-vote information, that candidate information et cetera, provided in a format that these disadvantaged groups can access. We make that point to them.

**Ms PATTEN** — Just touching on the multicultural employment side, which we were just talking about earlier, getting that information out to those communities, they felt, was lacking. While the ambassador program was good and certainly there was a lot of support for expanding the program, they did not feel that there was much information going out there about the fact that there were vacancies with the VEC. You were suggesting that that information was going out with the ambassador program. Is it?

**Ms TEMPLETON** — I might hand over to Alex. In terms of that messaging, I will let you answer that one, Alex.

**Ms MARKHAM** — In 2014 the ambassador program was a smaller pilot, so the number of sessions that were delivered were in the hundreds. What we hope for 2018 is that we expand it quite a bit more and support that through a targeted marketing strategy as well, like a below-the-line marketing strategy, so it is not just about the above-the-line campaign. But we want to get into all of the community newsletters, those grassroots community networks where we are offering employment as an option for particular ethnic community groups.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — I guess just to follow that up, are there things that can be done better in terms of advertising positions and whatnot within multicultural communities? Are there new ways to perhaps appeal to a more diverse workforce?

**Ms TEMPLETON** — I think there probably are, and I think there are probably two ways we do it. There is the work that Alex's team does. That is a small team, and they are going to a certain number of organisations. At the point where we have got election offices operating right across Victoria, they have then got information about what their local communities are and where the language barriers might be. They have the opportunity to connect with what is local in their community, and we provide them with flyers and with information so that a lot of that grassroots thing happens in possibly the six to eight weeks before the election. It happens in quite a diverse way, depending on the electorate, because each electorate is different.

But certainly in terms of that messaging, yes, there is an onus on us to provide that so that they can do that in each area. It happens much more successfully in some areas than others. Some areas have more take-up than others, and some people do a better job than others of doing it.

**Mr DIXON** — The ethnic community council said to us that there is a difference and that the long-established migrant groups are probably more conservative. You reach them in a different way to the newer groups, which tend to use social media more, so there is even a difference in that, which I found very interesting.

**Ms TEMPLETON** — Yes.

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — And not just language — cultural understanding as well as language barriers.

**Ms BATH** — I have one more question. You have a great amount of educational material for primary schools and secondary schools. We heard from Monash University in terms of teacher education — so that is post secondary. Does the VEC have interaction with that on a tertiary level — that is, a conversation about what has been taught to our future teachers?

**Ms MARKHAM** — Yes, so in terms of preservice teachers?

**Ms BATH** — Yes.

**Ms MARKHAM** — Yes, we work with the AEC. We go out and run sessions with preservice teachers. We may not get to all preservice teachers. We are very pleased to have James Fiford as our education officer. He has just come on board in the last couple of months. He used to be the executive officer at Social Education Victoria, which is the humanities subject association, and he has excellent links with all the universities that are conducting teacher training. He has been working very closely with Monash, with Melbourne and with all the service providers in that area. We are hoping that we will be able to ramp up that work as well. But it is very difficult to get to every single teacher who is coming through, so probably we need to look at it more on a systemic level. Rather than us and the AEC just going out and delivering sessions, we need to actually be looking at, as you said, what is in the curriculum for the teachers.

**Ms BATH** — Teach the teachers who will teach.

**Ms MARKHAM** — Yes. We do need to look at it at a more systemic level.

**The CHAIR** — In an ideal world what would be the best form of civics education you could have at schools? A bit of you and a bit of AEC and their program? In an ideal world, and unhampered by resources, how would you see the best possible civics program for Victoria?

**Mr GATELY** — I think the passport program is very effective. It puts the onus on the receiver of the information — the school — to deliver it in the format they want, as Alex explained. We resource it as best we can. For the moment I cannot think of much more. We only have six staff doing educational inclusion.

**Ms PATTEN** — If that was not an issue.

**Mr GATELY** — You then require a willingness on behalf of the schools as well and other organisations that I do not have control over to participate in it.

**Ms PATTEN** — Because we keep hearing that the curriculum is so full that to lay more on the schools to add in is possibly unrealistic. We might need to be providing added assistance in that.

**Mr GATELY** — I will come back to that. You quoted that figure, Chair, as well. With 18 to 25-year-olds we have got an 89 per cent turnout. Victoria has got a 93 per cent turnout across the electorate. That is the only jurisdiction where the numbers are actually on the increase. Other jurisdictions are declining slowly. I think we can be encouraged by that. That means that some of the programs we are doing here are quite effective in getting that message out and that the community are engaged on the whole, given the fact that they are turning out in those numbers.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you so much for coming out. You have copped most of the questions. We appreciate having a full range of staff here to answer. Of course you are familiar with the process, Mr Gately, whereby you will receive a transcript from Hansard in about two weeks, and you will be free to make amendments but obviously not to alter the substance of the remarks that you have made. Thank you once again.

**Mr GATELY** — Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee as well.

**Committee adjourned.**