

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

Ms Amanda Acutt, advocacy adviser (*via teleconference*), and

Ms Kate Begley, government relations and policy adviser, Vision Australia.

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

The CHAIR — We will move on to the next couple of witnesses from Vision Australia. Kate Begley is present at the committee hearing and Amanda Acutt is on the telephone, as we have just seen. Can I remind you that you are covered by parliamentary privilege for this committee hearing but not for anything said outside this room. Could I ask both of you if you could state your full name and business address and indicate to the committee whether you are attending in a private capacity or whether you are actually representing your organisation, Vision Australia.

Ms BEGLEY — I am Kate Miranda Begley, and I am here representing Vision Australia, 600 Oxley Road, Hawthorn.

Ms ACUTT — I am Amanda Kym Acutt. I represent Vision Australia, 373 Old Cleveland Road, Coorparoo, Queensland.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. To our witnesses, perhaps you might like to speak to your submission more generally first, and then the committee will ask some questions.

Ms BEGLEY — Thank you very much. Yes, we will do an opening statement first. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present to you today. I am here representing Vision Australia with my colleague Amanda, who is via teleconference. Before I start I will let you all know that I am legally blind, so referring to my notes, even in very large print, can be difficult. Excuse me in advance for any pauses.

The CHAIR — Don't worry about it.

Ms BEGLEY — Vision Australia — I will just speak a little bit about what we do. We are the country's largest provider of services to people who are blind or who have low vision. We are a national not-for-profit organisation, with 30 offices working with 27 500 members of the blindness and low vision community each year. Today we would like to speak to you about why it is vital for people who are blind or who have low vision to have access to casting a secret, independent and verifiable vote in all Victorian elections.

I will talk a little bit about my own experience voting as someone who is legally blind. As I mentioned before, I am legally blind. I have got around 15 per cent usable vision. What that means in practice is that I cannot drive a car, I have trouble recognising faces, I cannot read body language and I cannot effectively use print material. When I am at work I have screen reading and magnification software. I have headphones on all day, which read my documents to me and my emails to me. If I want to read my text messages, I have a very strong handheld glass magnifier, which I use for reading my smartphone.

When I voted at the last Victorian election I voted at the primary school on election day, along with everyone else in my area. I referred to the 'How to vote' flyer and a paper ballot and I used my handheld magnifier to vote. It was a very confusing process because it is such a strong magnifier, the depth of field is extremely shallow and I was constantly back and forth between the how-to-vote card and the ballot and refocusing all the time. I noticed that I was taking a lot longer than everyone else, and looking around me people had come and gone. I started to think, 'Oh, I should rush this a little bit. I'm taking forever'. Then I started to think, 'I wonder what people think of this woman bent over with her magnifier, taking forever to vote?'. Eventually I finished voting and I had successfully voted in secret and independently, but it was by no means a dignified or pleasant experience.

I am aware that Victoria offers electronic voting machines at kiosks at six locations prior to election day, but the thing that is not appealing to me about those machines is that the screen is heavily magnified and it is not a secret vote. Anyone standing nearby can see what you are voting. If iVote was available to me, I could have used my PC at home, my mobile phone, my iPad. I could have used my screen reading software, my magnification software, and taken my time without that sense of rush. That is my experience of the last time I voted. I will pass over to Amanda.

Ms ACUTT — Thanks, Kate. Hi, I am Amanda and I am totally blind. I rely on screen reading software and braille to read emails and documents et cetera. When people ask me about kiosk-style voting I always reply that I would choose to ask my husband to assist me to vote, preferring to put my trust in him

rather than a system which reveals my voting preferences to others in the community without my consent. In the absence of a trusted family member or friend, I probably would not vote at all and risk the consequent penalty.

To briefly reiterate our submission to this committee, the voting options available to people who are blind or have low vision in the 2014 election severely compromised the right to a secret, independent and verifiable vote for our community, and represent a fundamental failure to provide a service equivalent to that enjoyed by sighted people. For Vision Australia, the New South Wales iVote system is current best practice in accessible voting. iVote enables people who are blind or who have low vision to vote independently online via the telephone or through an operator-assisted call centre service.

Not only does iVote provide a range of voting options to meet the varying needs of the blind and low vision community, it also provides an opportunity for users to do a test run of the system, to save their ballot and to return to it at a later time to verify the recorded vote. These functions allow people to build confidence in iVote. Therefore we urge this committee to recommend to the Victorian Electoral Commission that a model of accessible voting in line with the iVote system be implemented in time for the next state election to achieve a truly secret, independent and verifiable vote for people who are blind or who have low vision.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that evidence that you both have given.

Ms PATTEN — Hear, hear! I would just like to start off. I know you recognise that the Victorian Electoral Commission's website has improved in its ability for people with disabilities and vision to access it, but you noted that the group voting tickets were still just done in PDFs and were inaccessible. It just leads me to you trying to look at a how-to-vote card and trying to look at a ballot. We submit our how-to-vote cards to the VEC. Are you aware whether they are accessible to you from their website?

Ms BEGLEY — No, I am not aware. I can certainly take that on notice and get back to you.

Ms PATTEN — We can ask the VEC.

Ms BEGLEY — You can ask the VEC. I do not think that they are. Amanda, are you?

Ms ACUTT — Not about the VEC specifically, no, being from Queensland. Sorry.

The CHAIR — I think it is picked up on page 4 of your submission, where you have the complaint about an image-only PDF file related to the last federal election, but you were a bit uncertain about the Victorian election. We will ask the VEC on that rather than you following that up. We can just ask the VEC when they come before us. We have a large session.

Ms PATTEN — Would it assist in some way if the VEC's site made access to the how-to vote cards easier?

Ms BEGLEY — Yes, definitely, because you can do some research in advance and try and remember what you wanted to vote, so that there is not the cross-reference that you are talking about, which makes it even more difficult if you have a handheld magnifier, for example.

Ms PATTEN — Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR — Can I go to the issue of staff training, because we are also looking at the issue of staff. You have made a reference in your submission to how difficult it is to provide reasonable assistance. You recommend:

That all polling booth staff be required to demonstrate appropriate understanding of the reasonable assistance that they must provide for people who are blind or have low vision.

Could you perhaps flesh that out as to why it is not occurring now? Perhaps give us a couple of examples where the VEC needs to improve.

Ms BEGLEY — Anecdotally I have heard in response to ‘I have got low vision’, staff saying, ‘Put your glasses on dear’ — things like that. It is just a misunderstanding of what low vision is. It is uncorrectable vision. And people being treated as a bit of a parcel, or a bit of an annoyance — sort of like, ‘Okay, so what do we do with this person?’. So a need for some simple disability conference training. Some simple things about what low vision is: that it is uncorrectable vision, that glasses are not the option, that something else needs to be offered.

Greeting and guiding are good simple things to learn, and it can be added to training procedures. Vision Australia have face-to-face sessions that we provide for employers, and we would certainly be able to do that for staff. Train the trainer, for example, for VEC staff, for all the new employees for the next coming election. That will be able to teach people about basic guiding of someone who is blind, which is to not grab them and pull them around, but to have them take your elbow and be guided by your body and the way you move. How to greet someone who is blind or has low vision, and just be knowledgeable of what is available for someone who is blind or who has low vision. As I understand it, with some of the people who go to vote, the staff do not actually know that there are magnifiers, CCTVs, kiosks — various things available to people who are blind or have low vision.

Ms ACUTT — That is certainly my experience too. I have found that when I have gone to vote, there is not really any protocol. People do not know what to expect when a blind person turns up and wants to vote. I had to kind of explain myself and then get assistance.

The CHAIR — Thank you for adding that.

Mr DIXON — Kate, with young people who are visually impaired, do they see that as another sort of blockage for them to be part of the democratic processes at all? Is that just a bridge too far sometimes for them?

Ms BEGLEY — No. The young people I have spoken to do vote and want to vote. The young people I have spoken to get their parents to do it, so they get the human-assist option. They will get mum or dad to come with them. One young guy I spoke to said he tried to use the EVM — the electronic voting machine — and it malfunctioned, and then the man said, ‘Tell me your vote and I’ll vote’, and he said, ‘Well, I’m here to vote independently and secretly’. A couple of people I know have tried alternative options, but the young people I know want to vote, and vote with mum and dad generally.

Mr DIXON — And they would be, I think, very good adaptors to iVote and anything that is technologically based, would they not?

Ms BEGLEY — Yes, that is exactly right. The young people I know who are blind or have low vision, a lot of them use their smartphones — you know, the GPS to get around, and to read their text messages to them — and they are up and running.

Ms BATH — In relation to iVote, what has been the anecdotal evidence or otherwise feedback of the positivity of that? How many people with low vision or who are legally blind would be taking that as an option rather than assist and go in?

Ms ACUTT — We undertook some consultation a few years ago, and by ‘we’ I mean Vision Australia, with New South Wales blind and low vision electors, and the feedback overall was very positive with iVote and they really appreciated the range of options that were available. Importantly between 2011 and 2015 the number of blind or low vision electors in New South Wales actually increased almost eightfold, and that was a great result. We hope the New South Wales Electoral Commission will continue to implement iVote, along with Western Australia, who recently implemented iVote for their state election. Obviously we are very keen for iVote and systems like iVote to be consistently available across Australia.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for coming along to the committee and being able to give evidence to the committee in your case, Ms Amanda Acutt. Thank you so much for coming along. This will be a challenge for Hansard. You will be provided with a transcript, but any further assistance you need, you will have to ask us for that. You both have a right to make alterations if there are errors relating

to what you actually said, but obviously you cannot change the substance of your evidence before the committee. It is greatly appreciated that you took the time to come and provide very clear information for the committee. Thank you very much.

Ms BEGLEY — Thank you.

Ms ACUTT — Thanks very much.

Witnesses withdrew.