

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA (VICTORIA-TASMANIA) INC.



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Mr Lee Tarlamis MLC
Chair, Electoral Matters Committee

Dear Mr Tarlamis,

Preliminary submission on *Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration* by the Electoral Matters Committee, Parliament of Victoria

The Victoria-Tasmania Branch of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia is pleased to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration*, and thanks the Committee for the invitation to do so.

The Inquiry has sought input in particular on five points, as follows:

- i. How are candidates, political parties and others using social media and online advertising in Victorian elections?
- ii. How is social media changing elections?
- iii. What problems have you seen with social media and online advertising around elections?
- iv. Should the government introduce more regulation in this area? Are there other things the government should be doing?
- v. How could the Victorian Electoral Commission and Parliament better use social media regarding electoral processes?

Social media are certainly changing the way that elections work. The ability to spread information and ideas through social media, without the ‘mediation’ of the traditional media, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, printed newspapers, radio, television etc, can be seen as a democratizing process. Every person has a chance to express their opinions, and to be heard, and on face value that is a very positive move.

However, as has been seen in recent months in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media have also allowed for the rapid spread of:

- rumours,
- inaccurate information,
- information purporting to be scientific, but in fact often alarmist misinformation, and
- conspiracy theories, such as the now infamous QAnon conspiracy

Responsible users of social media can discuss and debate the merits of arguments, and that is happening across the different platforms on social media. But at the same time there is an irresponsible spreading of simplistic claims that can be made in a few words, but are not so easily ‘disarmed’.

For example, the oft-repeated claims on social media in recent weeks that COVID-19 is a ‘plandemic’ and a ‘fraud’, or that it is ‘no more than a simple flu’, or that it has a ‘99.97% survival rate’, are all examples of serious misinformation, but those are not easily argued against. For instance, an argument against the last claim (99.97% survival rate) might point to the Johns Hopkins University worldwide figures that show a death rate of around 3.45%, but such rational argumentation requires more than the 3-5 word statements that the spreaders of misinformation can use. (It appears, incidentally, that the

99.97% figure may come from a basic mathematical error, in claiming that 3 in 100 is 0.03%, when it is in fact 3%).

In light of this, all members of the civil society that value good democracy based on reasoned debate need to be concerned about the ill effects of social media. There seems also to be some evidence of organized campaigns to destabilize successful liberal democracies by advancing simplistic and inaccurate information along the lines of the examples given above. Another feature of the current discussions on COVID-19 is the offensive nature of some postings, and in particular accusations of criminal activity such as those emanating from 'QAnon', which are being spread by some people on Australian social media platforms.

Social media are here to stay and, as a place to engage in debate, they could have many advantages.

The main thrust of PRSAV-T's submission relates to Point (v) above, namely "How could the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) and Parliament better use social media regarding electoral processes?"

PRSAV-T submits that:

- The VEC should have an active social media presence promoting the electoral systems in Victoria through means of well-composed and interactive videos, and links to online tools explaining the way that Victoria's elections work
- In light of this, recent changes to the VEC website that make it much more difficult to interpret election results are highly to be regretted. For example, in a single-member district the preferential voting system can sometimes mean that a candidate placed 3rd in first preferences nevertheless wins the seat, as was the case with the District of Prahran in 2014 (and again in 2018). However looking at the VEC website for the preferential count for Prahran (<https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/results/state-election-results/2014-state-election>), by clicking on 'Prahran' and then 'distributions', one gets a very difficult-to-interpret document, a section of which is shown below. The earlier version of the VEC website had much easier-to-interpret data, but only a very experienced psephologist could possibly work out how the Prahran result led to the election of Mr Hibbins from the way the website is currently set up.

Distribution of preference votes

	HIBBINS, Sam	WALKER, Alan	PHARAOH, Neil	GOLDSMITH, Jason Simon	STEFANOPO Steve
Total first preference votes recorded for each candidate	9160	282	9586	247	227
Transfer of 82 ballot papers of MENADUE, Alan Maxwell (1st excluded candidate)	8	1	7	16	14
Progressive Total	9171	283	9593	263	241

- An example of the kind of thing the VEC could do is a small draft video that PRSAV-T has created at <https://youtu.be/VdG7-olID50>. This video could certainly be made more 'snappy' and 'professional', but it is at least interpretable, unlike parts of the VEC's current website.
- A second example would be short videos explaining the way that Upper House elections work; for example pointing out how voters can choose to fill just five squares below-the-line, or a larger number of preferences, the latter of which gives an individual ballot potentially more power.
- The VEC can also have a role in urging moderate debate online. In particular, personal abuse, slander, and deliberate misinformation does not have a place in a good democracy, but particularly in recent times there has been a considerable amount of very abusive commentary on, for example, Facebook.

Yours Sincerely

Stephen Morey
President
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.