



**EMC Inquiry into the Functions and Administration of Voting Centres - by
Vision Australia**

Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira to: Mark.roberts@parliament.vic.g
ov.au

28/05/2010 04:42 PM

Cc: Michael Simpson

Dear Mr Roberts,

Please find attached Vision Australia's submission to the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the Functions and Administration of Voting Centres. Please confirm receipt of this submission via return email.

Yours faithfully,

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Policy Officer

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blindness and low vision services

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28 May 2010

Victorian PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE FUNCTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION OF VOTING CENTRES

By Vision Australia

Submission to: Victorian Parliament - Electoral Matters
Committee

Response Submitted by: Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira

1. About Vision Australia

1.1 Background

Vision Australia is the largest provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision in Australia. It has been formed through the merger of a number of Australia's oldest, most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies.

Our goal is that people who are blind, Deafblind, or have low vision, will increasingly have the choice to participate fully in every aspect of life in the community. To help realise this goal, we are committed to providing high-quality services to our clients and their families. We also work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers people who are blind or have low vision face in accessing the community or in exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

1.2 Our Client Group

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are approximately 300,000 people in Australia who are blind, Deafblind, or have low vision. Some predictions suggest that this number will almost double over the next two decades. Vision loss is, by and large, a disability that is age-related, and the ageing of the population is thus a primary factor in this trend.

People who are blind, people who are Deafblind, and people who have low vision, have the same expectations for life in the community as others. Governments, business and the broader community therefore, must consider their needs and perspectives when developing policy, delivering services, and operating and interacting more generally in the public sphere.

2. Introduction

Vision Australia is committed to working towards a truly democratic society in Australia: one that actively upholds the values of equality for all electors, including citizens who are blind or who have low vision. Despite the fact that it was 1926 when Victoria first enacted legislation to make voting compulsory for Victorian electors, it has taken a further 80 years for Victorians who are blind or who have low vision to truly be counted as equal citizens. The accessible voting at selected polling centres at the 2006 State election meant that many enjoyed their right and upheld their civic duty, to cast a secret, verifiable and independent ballot for the first time. We believe that this right is essential in a free and democratic society, and that all eligible electors, ought to be afforded this right as a minimum.

With this end in mind, Vision Australia first and foremost, applauds the Brumby government, the Victorian parliament, and the Victorian Electoral Commission, for their considerable attention to further extending measures to provide a secret and independent vote for Victorians who are blind or who have low vision. As part of the process for working towards this goal, we welcome the opportunity to comment to the Electoral Matters Committee (the Committee), on the functions and administration of voting centres, for the 2010 Victorian state election. We do so broadly addressing the four key areas of the terms of reference as they apply to our stakeholder group: location; accessibility; participation; and transparency.

3. Opening comment

Access. Access. Access.

Whilst accessibility is but one of the four parts to the terms of reference, Vision Australia is of the view that “access” aligns itself to each aspect of the Committee’s inquiry. We believe that “accessibility” must be the lens in which all matters related to the functions and administration of the election ought to be viewed. In leading into our specific comments to the Committee, Vision Australia believes that the principles

that enliven accessibility, ought to be articulated in order for the following comments to be communicated clearly.

Accessibility relates to the interaction between people and things. It covers physical access to buildings and spaces, it speaks to the communication of information whether that be inter-personal, digital, hard copy print or otherwise, and it informs a need to maintain and develop policy that promotes inclusion across all spheres of civil, political, economic, social and cultural life.

Such principles are not ethereal concepts, but are both positively and negatively engaged under a range of State, Commonwealth and international law. Most prominently with regard to democratic participation, the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and responsibilities 2006 (the Charter), enshrines the principle of non-discrimination under the right to recognition and equality before the law (S.8) and the right to take part in public life (S.18). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention) to which Australia is also bound, further sets out accessibility as a human right in detailed fashion under Article 9, the right to participate in political and public life under Article 29, and the positive mechanisms to promote and activate these rights under the general obligations of Article 4.

With this understanding as the context for our response to the Committee, the terms of reference in turn are addressed herewith.

4. Location

Physical access to polling centres is crucial to ensuring that electors are afforded equitable access to the voting process. This includes not only access to the centre itself, but also access to the site or the location of the polling centre.

Physical access to the centre itself, requires signage of Building Code standard size and colour contrast, wayfinding mechanisms which include tactile ground surface indicators and navigational cues for passage from the centre gates to the administration desk etc. all centres need to be within easy walking distance from

public transport and the passage from the transport exit point to the polling site, should have fully functioning audio tactile pedestrian crossings across busy roads and adequate street crossing mechanisms for suburban streets. As Vision Australia is aware of the practical and logistical task of upgrading physical infrastructure in time for the election, stop-gap measures of adequate personnel to offer sighted-guide assistance should be deployed, both during the pre-poll period and on election day.

The combination of these measures will ensure that attendance at all sites by electors, are safe and non-intimidating. As the sites for the November election have not as yet been released by the VEC, Vision Australia would urge the committee to reiterate the message of physical access and/or stop-gap measures to the VEC, as they work towards finalising sites and the administration and husbandry of the event.

As in 2006, some Vision Australia premises will be used as pre-polling stations and polling centres on the day during the November election, and we make every effort to ensure that the above assertions are adhered to to a high standard as a matter of general practice. We understand that familiarity for our client group is important for safety and general amenity and convenience, and take this opportunity to recommend that Vision Australia sites be a permanent fixture on the VEC's polling centre locality plan.

Vision Australia also suggests to the Committee that as Victoria has a fixed term election cycle, the designation of polling centres could be planned well in advance of election time. Designating polling centres well in advance, will do well to ensure that safe and convenient access for all electors, including those who are blind or who have low vision, will be optimum. It will also enable capital works planning and maintenance programs, to prioritise funding and planning cycles well in advance in order to cement Victoria's position as both a National and international leader in democratic practice.

5. Accessibility

As we have developed an understanding of accessibility as the centre of our response in our opening statement, we will not re-address this element here.

6. Participation

As stated in our introduction, Vision Australia is of the view that the increased accessibility measures for the upcoming election building upon the 2006 experience, is a commendable step forward for participation in the democratic process for our client group. The exponential increase of electronically assisted voting units (EAV) and pre-polling sites, the introduction of mobile units equipped with EAVs, the provision of magnifiers and CCTV units, and the opt in Braille ballots, will undoubtedly be welcome to electors who are blind or who have low vision in Victoria.

Vision Australia would however, caution any pre-determined notions of user uptake figures and cost-benefit as primary indicators of success. This year's election will be showcasing new interface technology that was not previously used in 2006, and the increased access to the technology, means that they will be available to some for the first time. Although the EAV systems may by and large contain the same back end technology, the introduction of stand-alone telephone keypads, is a development which was not previously available, and thus may be perceived as new and different. We know that new technologies and systems, do take time to be embraced by any community. The experience of the Federal trial in 2007 and the subsequent discontinuation of the 2007 system explained as "cost prohibitive", is an experience that many of our client group, fear being the response to new initiatives. Culture change takes time to take hold in any context, and shifting to EAV systems is no different nor should it be expected to be.

Vision Australia believes that the work undertaken by the VEC to develop the accessible systems for the upcoming election has been inclusive and consultative of user groups. We do however know that information about what will be on offer at the election is still far from being clearly communicated to potential users.

The VEC, Vision Australia, Blind Citizens Australia and other consumer groups and individuals, are currently working on communications strategies to inform electors of what is happening. The effectiveness of these strategies is largely a matter for the post-election analysis, however we do suggest to the Committee that that the VEC embark on a wide reaching campaign to inform the public of their options. Such a campaign ought to include: television and radio announcements; other public media such as news papers, community newsletter; mail outs, up-to-date information on the website; community networks which include consumer organisations and groups, residential facilities etc. all communications strategies undertaken by the VEC, need to include various alternate formats, such as Braille, large print, electronic and audio formats, verbalisation of all key onscreen visual information of TV advertising, and online content that is of World Wide Web Consortium WCAG 2.0 standard.

In addition to participation in the process of voting itself, Vision Australia also takes this opportunity to continue the campaign for accessible party and candidate information. Whilst the pinnacle barrier to an equitable ballot, is the ability to lawfully indicate ones preferences in a secret, verifiable and independent manor and for the ballot to be counted, the right to be informed of candidate and party options, what they mean, what the candidates stand for and the consequences of preferential voting, is also crucial to full and equitable participation.

Electors who are blind or who have low vision, must have access to information produced by parties and candidates, such as policy documents, information on TV advertisements, how-to-vote cards and information about preferences, in order for them to make an informed decision and to indicate their vote in the manor in which they intended. This information needs to be available both in advance, but ought to also be provided at the same time as other electors, that is at the time of the advertisement airing or at the time of attending a polling centre.

Vision Australia therefore, strongly urges members of the Committee, to take the right of electors to be informed about the candidates before them, with the utmost of integrity and lobby their own parties and/or campaign teams, to pay due diligence to accessible information for all electors. This right is not only enshrined in the

instruments outlined above, but ought to be viewed with the attention squarely on the importance of the information itself. Candidates and parties consider their information to be important, their policies to be of the right substance and balance for the betterment of Victoria and Victorians, and they believe that their information is important as it communicates their vision and the way in which electors can engage with this vision via the ballot. Vision Australia also believes that this information is important, and strongly urges candidates and parties to also place a premium on their own information, making it available to all electors.

7. Transparency

As stated above, Vision Australia believes that the process to date has been adequately transparent, in that relevant stakeholders have been engaged in the progress of accessible voting consistently over the past four years. We know that the VEC has sort the views of stakeholders in the analysis of the 2006 election, the development of the EAVs, potential polling sites and will be further engaging stakeholders moving forward to the election in November. We are also aware that the VEC has developed a disability action plan valid for the four years ending 2012, which includes proactive measures moving forward.

Vision Australia does however believe that some administrative processes need to be addressed for accessibility with some urgency with a view to the November election. These measures whilst not necessarily directly related to polling centres, do by extension, relate to the participation and access of the election. Some of these measures include:

- Conducting an accessibility audit of their website and actions to bring the site up to WCAG 2.0 standard;
- Ensuring that online VEC forms are provided in accessible electronic format and for forms and documents to not be in PDF as the sole format;
- Information on the website to be up to date.

These measures will ensure maximum transparency of information dissemination and increase the level of public awareness.

8. Additional comments

Vision Australia would also like to take this opportunity to flag to the Committee, that during the post-election analysis and reporting stage, that we will be very interested to work closely with the VEC, the Brumby government and the Committee, to provide an accurate analysis of the election as it proceeded, from the perspective of our stakeholder group. An accurate user analysis of the accessibility of the election in its broadest sense will be crucial to moving forward and we welcome an ongoing relationship with the relevant institutions to assist in this task.

9. Conclusion

Vision Australia believes that the State's move to enhance access to the democratic process for electors who are blind or who have low vision, ought to be applauded and recognised as an Australian leader. We have articulated a view of accessibility that flows through each dimension of the Committees terms of reference and speaks to the heart of reviewing and assessing equal participation in democracy for Victoria.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to comment on this matter and welcome further dialogue should it be required.

Yours faithfully,

Brandon Ah Tong-Pereira

Policy Officer

On behalf of the General Manager Policy and Advocacy