

**INQUIRY INTO ADMINISTRATION OF THE 2007 NSW  
ELECTION AND RELATED MATTERS**

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27 February, 2008

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000

By email: [ElectoralMatters.committee@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ElectoralMatters.committee@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: REVIEW OF CONDUCT OF NSW 2007 ELECTION

Enclosed please find Vision Australia's submission to the Parliament Of New South Wales Joint Standing Committee On Electoral Matters, Inquiry Into The Administration Of The 2007 NSW Election And Related Matters

Yours faithfully

Susan Thompson  
Advocacy Officer

**VISION AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION  
TO  
PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS  
INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE 2007 NSW  
ELECTION AND RELATED MATTERS**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into The Administration Of The 2007 NSW Election And Related Matters.

Vision Australia was formed in 2004 through the merger of several leading Australian agencies that provided services to people who are blind or have low vision. We are now Australia's largest blindness and low vision agency, with a long history of professional service delivery. Our organisation's purpose is to provide assistance to people who are blind or have low vision so that they can access, and fully participate in, all facets of life. Vision Australia promotes awareness to government, government departments, community services and the general public about the barriers faced by people, who are blind or have low vision in a predominantly sight orientated society.

**2. RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP**

Vision Australia asserts that its clients who are blind or have low vision, should have the same rights and responsibilities applicable to all Australian Citizens. This includes the responsibility to cast a vote, and the right to do so in secret.

For a person who is blind or has low vision, in order to cast a truly secret vote, they must be able to complete the ballot independently, and be able to independently verify their choices.

**3. ACCESSIBLE VOTING FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND, OR HAVE LOW VISION**

Vision Australia was very pleased to have participated in facilitating greater access to the voting process for those with low vision in the 2007 elections. We made our premises at Enfield available to the NSW Electoral Commission to serve as a polling place equipped with Closed Circuit TV magnification equipment available for those with low vision to enable them to magnify the ballot papers and their ballot markings.

In this regard, the 2007 NSW election saw an improvement in voting accessibility for those with low vision to be able to independently complete and verify their voting choices.

Disappointingly, the NSW 2007 election saw no progress towards affording a secret independent and verifiable vote (the right for all Australian citizens) to those who are blind or who have vision too low to be assisted by magnification.

Steps towards accessible voting, such as the use of audio electronically assisted voting systems, for both those who are blind and who have low vision are being taken around the world in electoral environments far more complicated than those existing in NSW. Further, around Australia we are seeing a range of initiatives which have the potential to increase access to voting not only for those with low vision, but also for those who are blind.

These initiatives include:

- ACT – 2008 will have seen 3 successive elections providing electronic voting with audio output;
- Victoria – 2006 state election - trial of electronic voting with audio output;
- Tasmania – May 2007 legislative council - trial of electronic voting with audio output and enlarged fonts with mouse click completion
- WA – 2007 trial internet voting with some levels of WC3 Accessibility compliance for Docker Football Club elections; and
- Federal - November 2007 federal election trial of electronic voting with audio output and screen enlargement.

As demonstrated by these examples, there have already been considerable financial and creative resources expended around Australia, to begin to allow those who are blind or have low vision, a secret and independent vote. It would seem that there should therefore be scope for The New South Wales Electoral Commission to benefit from these efforts, by working with other electoral commissions to utilize the E-voting technologies which have already proved successful.

Further, this could filter through all levels of government including elections for upcoming and future local government elections.

Given the progress in other elections around the country, it is untenable that New South Wales, as the largest state in Australia, has made no progress towards accessible voting for those who are blind or whose low vision means they are unable to complete a paper ballot secretly and independently.

Vision Australia strongly urges the New South Wales government to introduce a fully accessible voting mechanism for the 2011 state election.

#### **4. ACCESSIBLE ELECTION INFORMATION**

Vision Australia is pleased to have seen the availability of some of the Key election information available in alternative formats such as Braille and audio, for the 2007 election.

It is frequently noted, however, by our clients, that they feel very disempowered by their lack of access to the how to vote cards distributed in printed form by electoral candidates. This is for many voters an important element in the decision making process, and people who are unable to read print are denied this information.

While we recognize that this information is provided by parties and candidates themselves, it is nevertheless information available to others to assist in their voting choice. It is our understanding that the "Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act 1912" Section 151F sets out requirements regarding certain aspects of the 'how to vote' cards. It would surely not be much of an extension to expand these requirements for them to be made accessible to those with print disabilities. The 'how to vote' card information could be made available in an audio and large print format as a part of future accessible voting systems; and it could be made available on a web page linked to from the Electoral Commission web site in HTML for reading online or in text or RTF format for downloading.

Vision Australia notes the tendency of electoral commission staff in various states and territories, to claim that for an electoral commission to facilitate access to this information would compromise their neutrality in the fair conduct of elections. On the contrary, it could be equally argued that the Commission's failure to ensure that parties and candidates provide this information in an accessible manner to voters who are blind or have low vision is compromising this neutrality by not taking action to facilitate an informed electorate within this segment of the community.

#### **5. ELECTION RELATED ADVERTISING**

The Electoral Commissioner's report on the conduct and administration of the NSW 2007 election, reports that election related advertising is accompanied by Captioning to assist people who are deaf or hearing impaired. Audio description (which provides verbal description of key visual information presented on screen), is gaining world wide acceptance as providing access to visual media for people who are blind or have low vision.

All too often, government and community service information fails to provide access to on-screen only information. In the context of election related advertising provided by the Electoral Commission, it is equally as important that voters who are blind or have low vision be provided audio access to key information conveyed in a visual manner such as telephone numbers and other important information.

## **6. WEBSITE AND DOCUMENT ACCESSIBILITY**

It was disappointing to find, when attempting to download the report on the 2007 election that the document seemed to be only available for download in PDF format. It should be noted that PDF files are not universally accessible. PDF files are somewhat accessible (when comprised of text rather than image based text), however effective access is limited by the currency of an individual's screen reader, and the ability of specialized portable devices to read PDF.

Vision Australia is therefore strongly of the view that PDF alone is not an appropriate format for web based information. Furthermore, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) guidelines state that PDF is not considered to be an accessible format.

## **7. ENROLMENT PROCESS**

In relation to enrolment we note that this process is still essentially a paper based process.

Many vision Australia clients who are blind or have low vision, do not necessarily have access to reliable assistance to complete forms and other paperwork.

For one group of our clients (those able to access computers and the internet), for the enrolment forms, and thus the enrolment process to be truly accessible, they need to be able to complete the enrolment form on their computer using their screen reading or screen magnification software. The electronic forms need to be designed and formatted to facilitate this.

Two possible ways in which this could be achieved are

- a web page designed to enable completion of the form online for either submitting with an electronic signature, or printing out and signing; or
- a downloadable appropriately designed document for completion on a computer using screen reading and screen magnification software for printing out and signing.

The other group of our clients (those unable to access computers and the internet), may require the assistance of Electoral Commission staff to complete the form.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Vision Australia hopes that the comments we have submitted on the conduct of the New South Wales 2007 election, will lead to the necessary administrative or legislative changes to enable an accessible electoral process for all New South Wales voters in the future, including those who are blind or have low vision.

Vision Australia would be happy to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission, and we look forward to being able to work with the Electoral Commission to improve the accessibility of future elections.

Susan Thompson  
Advocacy Officer

27 February 2008