

INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Blue Mountains Greens
Name: Ms Christine Laurence
Position: Official Agent for the September 2008 Local Government Election
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Dear NSW Electoral Commissioner,

I write to express our concerns regarding the conduct of the Local Government election in the Blue Mountains on Saturday 13th September, 2008.

Incorrect information provided to voters by Booth workers

A Ellison Rd Polling Place in Ward 3, Blue Mountains Local Government Area, the Polling Booth Manager was incorrectly advising voters that 'if you want to preference a party, you need to do it below the line, you cannot preference parties above, you can only put one above the line'.

It was not until after 12pm at least that this situation was rectified, and even then, we have concerns that incorrect information was still handed out.

We have reports that this occurred at other Blue Mountains booths too.

Running out of ballot papers

At the Blaxland pre-polling place one afternoon, voting was suspended for approximately 45 minutes whilst more ballot papers were sought from another pre-poll booth. I was present whilst this occurred and noted a number of people who were invited to sign a book indicating that they were unable to vote due to absence of ballot paper. These people were disenfranchised.

Long queues at pre-poll booths

The booths that were set up to facilitate pre-poll voting were inadequately staffed. There were very long queues at times, placing some elderly people under considerable strain. It is likely that some people were unable to vote due to the long queues.

Independent scrutineer turned away from Ellison Rd Polling Booth

When Independent candidate Lyn Trindall's scrutineer Kassandel Toohey handed in her scrutineers form at Ellison Rd polling booth, she was told by the Polling Booth manager that the booth had been closed even though the door was open and people were still voting. The time was before 6pm. She was turned away and went home.



Inadequate information provided regarding complaints process

Processes for handling complaints are grossly inadequate. There is no written information on the Electoral Commission's website outlining a complaints process. Our Official Agent waited on the phone for 30 minutes to speak to someone at the Electoral Commission on Monday 15th September.

The Returning Officer's role in the complaints process is crucial. On Election Day, the Returning Officer was flustered and cantankerous when notified of the Polling Booth Manager's handing out incorrect information. A calm, matter of fact approach would have assist complainants to better understand his point of view.

After the election, I sent an email to the Electoral Commissioner outlining the concerns above and seeking his advice on appropriate action to take. I did not receive a response to that email.

Conclusion

We believe that it is fundamental to a healthy democracy that voters are well informed about the correct voting procedure to follow, that Polling Officials understand their duties and that the process is adequately funded and resourced. The conduct of the September 2008 Local Government election undermined the Blue Mountains Greens confidence in the operation of democracy in this State.

Improvements to the process

We insist that that the NSW Electoral Commission improve its election processes. Our experience of this election has severely dented our confidence in the electoral process. The following issues must be addressed:

- Polling booth officials must know the rules. Surely this is fundamental!
- The complaints process of the NSW Electoral Commission must be improved and all Officers trained in handling complaints.
- Adequate funding and resources must be provided to ensure that enough ballot papers and staff are available at pre-polling booths.
- The NSW Electoral Commission must vigorously point out the harmful implications of three different voting systems for Local Government, State and Federal elections and strive to convince the appropriate bodies of the value of similar voting processes.

Yours sincerely,
Christine Laurence

Christine Laurence
Official Agent for the September 2008 Local Government Election
Blue Mountains Greens