

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

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Cherie Burton MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House,
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Sydney NSW 2000

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Dear Ms Burton,

The National Party of Australia – NSW is pleased to make the following observations and recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry regarding the NSW State Election held on 24 March 2007.

1. POSTAL VOTING

Based on voting trends over recent state elections, the number of postal votes is increasing as constituents in a more mobile society find that they are unable to attend voting centres on election day. There have been on-going deficiencies in the timing, processing, and receiving of postal votes for people living in rural and remote NSW.

The National Party advises that:-

- a) Constituents in some remote electorates receive their mail only once per week. If the Electoral Commission or a Candidate/Party letter enclosing a postal voting form misses the mailing day, then a whole week transpires before the Postal Voting forms are received via the next mail. Timing is therefore crucial if remote voters are not to be disenfranchised. Additionally the timing of the Electoral Commission responding to postal vote requests in remote areas is critical. If there is any delay, (even by a day or two), and the Electoral Commission misses the weekly mail delivery, the voting papers will arrive one week late. Remote voters are in this scenario, disadvantaged. Therefore:-

- The National party recommends that the Electoral Commission examine the timing within the election time-table to address the problems highlighted above.
- The National Party recommends the closing date for the receiving of postal votes be put back until 6pm on the Friday before election day (the day before election day, compared with the present Wednesday).

- The National Party recommends a new initiative of On-line Voting for remote communities, explained below.

2. ON-LINE VOTING

The Electoral Commissioner has previously discussed the possibility of a trial of on-line voting for remote electors, possibly in conjunction with the 2008 local government elections. Such a trial has not yet been conducted

With on-line secure banking services now an established part of society, steps should be taken to test this possibility for NSW elections at least in remote areas. This relatively straight forward transfer of technology would solve the continual problems of distance to travel to a booth, and timing involved in receiving Postal voting forms, and arriving at the Electoral Commission by the due date. With subsidies available for all remote communities to receive the internet via satellite, The Nationals are of the view that most of the problems of access and equity for voters in regional, rural and remote communities could be solved by implementing on-line voting.

- The National Party recommends that the NSW Electoral Commission examines the Federal Government's initiative in providing on-line voting for Australian troops serving overseas, with a view of replicating this in the first instance to remote NSW residents, where exactly the same issues prevail of distance and access.

3. PRE-POLL BOOTHS

Again, based on state-wide voting trends over recent state elections, the number of people voting at Pre-Poll centres is on the increase. Pre-polling centres will come under increasing pressure to extend hours, increase centres, or increase the number of weeks for pre-polling.

Those pressures above could be alleviated if on-line voting is implemented. However, the National Party contends that pre-polling should only occur within the two weeks preceding any election, whether state or federal.

Additionally, there are simply not enough Pre-poll booths to satisfactorily service remote NSW voters who have to travel long distances – hundreds of kilometres, to attend a pre-polling centre.

- The National Party recommends that Pre-Poll Centres remain open for a two week period only before election day.
- The National party recommends that the Electoral Commission provide for more Pre-poll booths in regional and remote electorates.
- The National party also recommends that Pre-poll booths be located, as much as is possible, in the centre of regional towns/cities.

4. REGISTERING OF HOW-TO-VOTE MATERIAL + COMMISSION WEB SITE

The recent amendments to the Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act, many of which were recommended by the Joint Standing Committee, have improved the State's electoral processes.

In addition, the improved Commission website was of assistance to candidates, campaign teams and Parties. It is noted, though, that following the election, result summaries were only available in each electorate, rather than a more comprehensive state-wide and party result reporting as on the AEC website for the Federal election.

With reference to the provisions for the registration of election material, The Nationals believe that they should again be reviewed. The Nationals support registration of election-day material but, perhaps, the registration process can be streamlined.

- The National Party recommends that there be a review of the registration requirements for polling day election material.
- The National Party recommends that the Electoral Commission website of results includes state and party summaries as listed on the AEC website.

5. PROMISE OF AN ELECTION REVIEW

The Nationals express appreciation to the Commission and to Mr Barry for the extensive briefings provided to registered Parties in late 2007 on election plans and procedures.

It is noted that Parties were advised there would be a post-election review involving registered Parties and that would have been useful in planning for the 2011 election. (The Australian Electoral Commission has conducted such reviews, eg, on close seats management, in the past).

Now, with the election 11 months behind us, the issues that were relevant, have been left too long to address, and some issues have gone cold.

- The National Party suggests that an NSW Electoral Commission review / evaluation meeting of all Candidates, Campaign Directors or organisers from all registered political parties be held within two months of any state election.

6. LOCATION OF RETURNING OFFICES

It is appreciated that the location and rental of District Returning Offices is partly dependent upon conditions in the local rental market. However, there were instances, eg, Tamworth, where the DRO was located on the edge of the city, in a new, largely unoccupied shopping centre the name and existence of which was unfamiliar to most electors in the district.

- The National Party recommends that better forward planning should be implemented to secure Returning Office space in the centre of regional cities/towns, whenever possible.

7. TRAINING OF RETURNING OFFICERS

Whilst most DROs, in The Nationals experience, were helpful and cooperative, there were occasions when electors were, it seems, unnecessarily subjected to queues before being able to cast a pre-poll vote and were treated abruptly by the DRO. Again, Tamworth District is an example. Elderly people were at a particular disadvantage as they stood, waiting to vote.

8. ELECTION FUNDING + DISCLOSURE - ADMINISTRATION

The Nationals have made a submission to the Select Committee on Electoral and Political Party Funding which is conducting a simultaneous Inquiry to that of the Joint Standing Committee. The Nationals have suggested to that Committee that some of the administrative arrangements pertaining to the processing of disclosure paperwork be reviewed with a view to making the tasks less onerous for the volunteers who support Parties and candidates.

It is noted that the Electoral Commissioner has submitted to the Select Committee that there be consideration of on-line declarations of contributions. The Nationals support the investigation of such an initiative. Any such proposals should, however, take into account that many political fund-raising events in country and coastal NSW are organised and conducted by volunteers (supporting various Parties and candidates) and such functions are not just the preserve of professional fund-raisers. It would be to the detriment of the political process if every day volunteer supporters of political parties and candidates were cut out of grass roots local political activities as a result of implementing (needed) reforms of the State's election funding regime.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission from the NSW Nationals.

Yours sincerely,

Christine Ferguson
State Chairman
National Party of Australia - NSW