



people with disability

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People with Disability Australia Incorporated

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Ms Stephanie Hesford
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

7 July 2006

Dear Ms Hesford

Inquiry into voter enrolment

People with Disability Australia Incorporated (PWD) is a national disability rights and advocacy organisation. Our primary membership is made up of people with disability and organisations mainly constituted by people with disability. PWD also has a large associate membership of other individuals and organisations committed to the disability rights movement. PWD has a cross-disability focus – we represent the interests of people with all types of disability.

We welcome the opportunity to provide input to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into voter enrolment. We confine our comments to term of reference 1 (a) *the current level of voter enrolment in New South Wales, particularly among young people and any other groups with special needs in relation to voter enrolment.*

For a number of years PWD has communicated with the NSW State Electoral Office (SEO) and other electoral authorities regarding the lack of access for people with disability to the electoral system, including enrolling to vote. PWD has raised concern that electoral authorities, including the NSW SEO, deny the civil rights of people with disability through their failure to act on specific access needs. We believe that the SEO *Equal Access to Democracy Plan* released in June 2006 goes some way to addressing our concerns.

For many years people with disability have been largely excluded from the electoral system. One of the primary reasons for this has been the failure to provide information about electoral processes and arrangements in easy read, pictorial or similar formats to assist people with cognitive disability to understand the election process. All of these make engagement in the electoral process difficult for people with disability. We believe that it is imperative that the SEO initiate a program to design all of its electoral material in formats to assist people with cognitive disability to understand the electoral system, including enrolment.

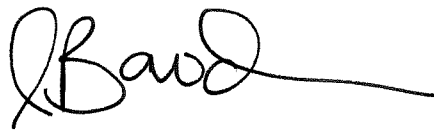
Many people with disability continue to reside in large residential centres or privately owned and managed licensed residential centres (boarding houses). In these premises the rights of people with disability are ignored.

As with most institutional living individual needs are suppressed to ensure the 'smooth running' of the institution. In such an environment the right to participate in the electoral process is often denied. Contact with the world outside the institution is often actively discouraged, and individuals are repeatedly advised that they are not capable of contact and interaction with normal everyday societal and civic occurrences. This is an opinion with which PWD disagrees. We believe that participation in the electoral process is a fundamental civic and human right.

Many of the individuals PWD meet and work with in these centres are capable of understanding and participating in the electoral process. PWD believes that the continued policy of institutional living being supported and funded by the NSW State Government prohibits many people with disability from being given the opportunity from participating in the electoral system.

For further information please contact Digby Hughes, Senior Advocate, on 9370 3100 or digbyh@pwd.org.au

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Bowden', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

MATTHEW BOWDEN
Deputy Director, Advocacy