

# Community Relations Commission

For a multicultural NSW

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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament of NSW  
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Dear Ms Saliba

I write in response to your letter dated 8 June 2006, seeking submissions for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into voter enrolment. The Commission welcomes the opportunity to comment on this issue.

The right to vote is at the very heart of our democratic political process. It is essential that all Australian citizens are provided with the opportunity to exercise this right, regardless of their cultural background or their level of English language proficiency.

## New identification requirements for enrolment and change of enrolment

The Community Relations Commission understands that under the Commonwealth reforms, new enrolments or people wishing to change their enrolment details will be required to produce a driver's licence. If an elector does not have a licence, then their application will have to be countersigned by two electors who know the applicant.

The CRC has not been able to identify any evidence of substantial electoral enrolment fraud that would warrant the tightening of proof of identity measures. Evidence suggests that Australian voters have a high level of integrity. The CRC understands that out of approximately 66 million votes cast for the House of Representatives since 1990, only 71 incidents of multiple voting have been identified.

Many people from non-English backgrounds already experience difficulty understanding the requirements and processes for enrolling on the electoral roll. Any increase in the complexity for proof of identity requirements could deter some eligible voters from non-English speaking backgrounds from enrolling, or if enrolled from changing their enrolment details.

## Period of grace between issuing of election writ and closure of the electoral roll.

The CRC understands that under the new Commonwealth legislation, the electoral role will close at 8pm on the day an electoral writ is issued. No new enrolments will be issued after this date, with the exception of people turning 18 before the election day and people granted citizenship before the election day.



The CRC believes that the integrity of the electoral roll is best maintained by having a longer grace period, such as seven days.

Advice from the Australian Electoral Commission's indicates that the early closure of the electoral roll has the possibility to disenfranchise tens of thousands of Australian citizens. In the 2004 federal election, 78,000 first time voters enrolled and 345,000 people updated their details in the seven day grace period.

The CRC believes that closing new enrolments on the day that an election writ is issued could particularly disadvantage new Australian citizens who are first time voters. This group typically enrolls in greater numbers during the grace period of seven days after the issuing of the election writ. This is also likely to affect young people who also tended to register as electors in the seven day period after an election is called.

#### International Covenants on Human Rights

The Commission is also concerned to note that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, holds the view that the Commonwealth restrictions on the of the right of prisoners to vote and the early closure of the electoral roll may contravene Australia's obligations under the International Covenant on the Elimination of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

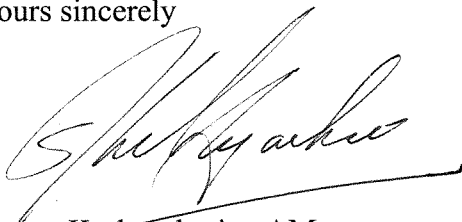
#### Community information strategies.

It is important that a number of community information strategies are implemented to ensure that Australian citizens who speak a language other than English understand how to join the electoral roll and maintain their details up to date, such as:

- placing advertisements and information on how to join the electoral roll in community language press, radio and television;
- producing multilingual information in both electronic and printed formats and distributing this information to migrant resource centres and ethnic community organisations;
- establishing a multilingual call centre for a set period of time, combined with an advertising campaign targeting electors of language backgrounds other than English.
- ensuring that interpreters are available to assist people who are not able to communicate in the English language.

I trust this information will assist the Committee in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely



Stepan Kerkyasharian AM  
**Chairperson**