

**Submission  
No 2**

**ADMINISTRATION OF THE 2023 NSW STATE ELECTION AND OTHER  
MATTERS**

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Chris Dahlitz



## 2023 State Election Review

- submission by Chris Dahlitz – Labor for Cootamundra

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

My name is Chris Dahlitz and I was the endorsed Labor candidate for the seat of Cootamundra at the 2023 State Election.

I am only a recent member of the NSW Labor Party, although I have a long-time interest in politics and was involved with the Union movement for most of my 44 year working life as a public servant in the NSW Electricity Supply Industry.

This was my first experience in running for public office.

Upon being confirmed as the candidate, I expected significant support from the local Labor branches (Young and Cootamundra) and the general membership across the electorate.

When I received the membership list, I was surprised how few Labor members there were across the electorate. Furthermore, I subsequently learnt that most of these members were over 65 years old, some confined to mobility scooters and unable to drive a car. Those members that were still working were busy people – and primarily only able to commit to Election Day assistance. Consequently it was IMPOSSIBLE to find sufficient volunteers to distribute HTV's at the seven (7) early voting centres, let alone the forty seven (47) polling places on election day spread across ten(10) Local Government areas and an electorate almost the size of Switzerland.

With regard to a 'campaign team' I was initially expecting the 'party machine' to provide me with a campaign manager, a PR manager, a finance manager, a social media manager, and a booth roster manager – so that I (as the candidate) could concentrate on being 'out and about' in the electorate. The reality was that **ALL** the above roles were ultimately performed by myself (with the exception of a Labor member from outside my electorate who ran the Social Media sites for myself and some other rural Labor candidates). Consequently, a lot of my time and effort went into these 'organising' roles (including delivering election materials) rather than public exposure time. My first media release went out on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, with the election on 26<sup>th</sup> March – a seven week campaign.

I am grateful for the support and assistance I did receive from members, to the extent they were able to. We were able to man **some** of the early polling places for **some** of the time, and the larger polling places on election day.

My experience of running as a candidate for a major party gave me an appreciation of the difficulties faced by the smaller parties (Greens and SFF) or an independent candidate, when they are challenging an incumbent member. This calls into question the effectiveness of our Electoral System in maintaining a fair and robust democracy, and hence this submission to the Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

## **2.0 DIFFICULTY BEING SEEN ACROSS THE ELECTORATE**

I recognised that particularly a large seat like Cootamundra, requires a candidate to get 'out and about' to events, gatherings, meetings and recording interviews. There were three (3) public 'meet the candidate' forums organised by community groups, and I attended all three, but the audiences were small (20 to 40). I organised a 'meet and greet' at the CWA Hall in Harden-Murrumburrah – and one person came. I organised sites at three (3) local Agricultural Shows (Gundagai, Boorowa and Koorawatha) that were held during the campaign period – but these were small centres compared to the major towns in the electorate.

I would like to relate two particular occurrences that illustrate the difficulty a candidate has in being seen. I attended a Seniors Expo wearing a small name tag with 'Labor for Cootamundra' on it, and was asked to leave because I was "politicising" their event. I approached a Lions branch who organise a Community Market about having a stall – and was similarly excluded.

As a result of the above experiences, I therefore attended subsequent community events wearing a name tag for one of my other groups I am involved with – so at least people saw the name and could make their own connections.

The **CONCLUSION** for future elections is that any Candidate for a rural electorate must be chosen early, and start getting 'out and about' well ahead of the election – 6 to 9 months. This would also capture the 'spring' Agricultural Shows across the electorate. (see next section).

## **3.0 CHOOSING A PARTY CANDIDATE OR BEING AN INDEPENDANT**

The seat of Cootamundra now encompasses ten (10) Local Government areas with the demerger of Cootamundra/Gundagai. Articulating a local councillor to State Candidate will therefore mean that person is only known to that LGA. Ideally a candidate will have a profile across the electorate – through whatever groups they may be associated with (eg Sport – although sportsman don't have a good record as aspiring politicians). In my own case – my background in engineering, electric vehicles and mental health reform – only captured some 'niche' groups of voters.

**CONCLUSION** - choosing or nominating as a candidate early will help them to build a profile across the electorate, not only as a Labor candidate – but in their other interest areas – putting out Press Releases so that their name is recognised closer to the election. There would be more time for “meet the candidate” forums. However, many of the Electoral Commission deadlines are very close to the election – and some parties ‘hold off’ their registrations/nominations until the ‘last minute’ (eg Sustainable Australia Party) who ‘parachuted in’ an out-of-electorate candidate at the last minute. To ensure a fairer and robust democracy, deadlines need to further (earlier) from the actual election day.

#### **4.0 ELECTION MATERIALS – CORFLUTES, FLYERS, HTV’s**

When preparing my initial flyer (who is Chris Dahlitz) head office wanted to include a photo of “Chris meeting Voters”. Despite having signed photo release forms, when the final brochure was ready for distribution, those in the photo did not want to ‘labelled’ as Labor supporters in the township where they reside. Hence, 10,000 flyers had to be ‘binned’ and did not get to letterboxes.

In a similar vein, when the Corflutes were ready, some members were not comfortable to put them in their front yards – as they would be ‘labelled’ as Labor people in their small communities. Some of our members who were in rented accommodation were happy to display a corflute – but their Landlord made them remove it.

I made the decision (with the support of local members) NOT to put corflutes on Trees – and even put out a Press Release to that effect. This did not stop the National Party saturating regional roads with their corflutes on trees.

**CONCLUSIONS** – for Rural seats, use professional actors or party officials in any ‘people’ photos for flyers etc. Lobby to have Electoral Laws changed to **PROHIBIT** the attachment of election material to trees (living or dead). All election materials (including corflutes) should all be ‘environmentally friendly’.

#### **5.0 NATIONAL PARTY SIGNAGE – JUST VOTE 1**

The following corflute was widely used across the Cootamundra electorate – and I believe other rural seats the Nationals were contesting.



I raised my concerns about this corflute with my Head Office Labor organiser at the start of the pre-poll period, having read about some similar concerns in Sydney with a similar poster. The response from Head Office was that it was 'authorised' – and not to bother about it. In hindsight, I should have been more insistent. My wife raised her own concerns (as a voter) with a Booth Official later in the pre-poll period. Since the election, both my wife and I have written to the NSW Electoral Commission (again as voters) expressing our belief that this poster is a CLEAR BREACH of electoral law in that it is contrary to the Optional Preferential system used in State Elections. To support our argument, the Liberal Party version of this poster is "You Can Just Vote 1" – the inclusion of the word "can" being the important difference. I know both the SFF and the Greens candidates for Cootamundra expressed their concerns to the NSW Electoral Commission about this poster.

**CONCLUSION** – I urge the Committee to refer this Poster to the NSW Electoral Commission, that it was a clear breach of Electoral Laws, and that as minimum – a substantive fine be levied against the National Party – or alternatively – that the election result for Cootamundra (and possibly other seats) was 'corrupted' by this poster – and that fresh election(s) be held.

## **6.0 NATIONAL PARTY TACTICS AT POLLING BOOTHS**

The seat of Cootamundra is one of the "safest" National Party seats in NSW – so I did not have high expectations. I did expect a "courteous" campaign by the Nationals however – but was shocked by some of the tactics of staff and volunteers. I had no difficulties with Steph Cooke herself. Here are some of the tactics observed.

- Saturation of footpath and fences at polling places with National Party corflutes.
- Complaints to booth officials by Nationals volunteers about other candidates corflutes.
- Physically 'blocking' voters as they approached a booth in order to hand them a HTV – then 'shepherding' the voter through the gate/entrance so other candidates volunteers could not deliver their HTV.
- Encroachments of the six metre exclusion zone.

## **CONCLUSION**

The National Party supporters, staff and volunteers have a sense of 'entitlement' – that they 'own' the seat of Cootamundra, and that anyone that challenges them is an 'interloper'. Polling Place rules apply to those 'interlopers' -but not the Nationals as they are the incumbent party. I suggest for future elections that all Party's HTV's are simply placed on a table (in a weatherproof box) outside Polling places for voters to collect (if they wish). Some voters 'jump fences' and use side entrances to polling places to avoid being 'accosted' by volunteers distributing HTV's. Simply having HTV's on a table would be 'fairer' system for the smaller parties and independent candidates who cannot man all polling places.

## **7.0 VILIFICATION OF CANDIDATES WIFE BY NATIONAL PARTY STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS**

Certainly the most disappointing aspect of running as a candidate for Labor was the targeting of my wife by National Party Staff and Volunteers. As mentioned earlier, there was a shortage of Labor helpers – particularly here in Narrandera – so my wife offered to assist me. I wish to emphasise that my wife is **NOT** a Labor Party member (or any other party) **NOR** an official Labor Party volunteer.

From the early stages of my campaign my wife was 'targeted' by National Party staff and Volunteers as follows:

- Sitting alongside her at the Public Forums to 'sus-out' who she was.
- Not offering to 'watch' her materials at a polling place whilst she went to the toilet
- Comments to my wife by a National Party staff member about the colour of her clothing (green and gold).
- Comments by a National Party Volunteer that my wife was 'breaking with tradition' at the polling place.

**CONCLUSION** – I recommend that any Candidate running in the seat of Cootamundra in the future ensure that their partner is not involved in any 'public' activities where they may be targeted, vilified or otherwise insulted by the National Party (or voters generally).

**NOTE** – There was no difficulty with any of the other Party's or Candidates and my wife and I became quite friendly with the Greens, SFF and Independent candidate Brian Fisher.

## **8.0 VERBAL ABUSE OF WIFE BY VOTERS**

On two occasions, my wife was publicly verbally abused by voters – associating her with the Labor Party.

## **9.0 NO RESPONSES FROM THE NSW ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

During the pre-poll period, and after election day, my wife wrote four(4) letters of complaint to the NSW Electoral Commission about various matters and anomalies she had observed (many of which I have outlined above). It was only when I emailed a complaint about the 'Just Vote 1' poster that any sort of response was received from the NSW Electoral Commission, and there was still no recognition of my wife or the various matters she had raised. Furthermore, the NSW Electoral Commission advised in an email that they will NOT confirm if they are investigating any matter – nor the outcome of any investigation.

My wife eventually received a letter from the NSW Electoral Commission four week after the Election advising her to seek mental health counselling or to go to the NSW Police to make any complaints. This useless information was an insult to my wife'

**CONCLUSION** – The NSW Electoral Commission should acknowledge all complaints, and provide some assurance that any breaches will be investigated.

## **10.0 CONDUCT OF THE BALLOT DRAW**

Both my wife and I were shocked by the 'mechanics' of the ballot draw, in that it was not fully mechanised (ie no human factors). Whilst we do not allege any interference – in this modern age a simple machine (like a lotto machine) would seem obvious and essential.

**CONCLUSION** – A machine is required to conduct the Ballot Draw that eliminates any human intervention.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

Chris Dahlitz

Labor for Cootamundra