

# TRANSCRIPT

## ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into electronic voting

Melbourne — 24 August 2016

#### Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Mr Russell Northe

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

#### Staff

Executive officer: Mr Mark Roberts

Research officer: Mr Nathaniel Reader

#### Witnesses

Dr Irene Bouzo, executive director,

Mr Carl Gopalkrishnan, senior policy officer, and

Mr Robert Gruhn, policy officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your submission to the committee on electronic voting, and thank you for appearing before us today, which is our second day of hearings. The committee has been given a reference by the government to look into electronic voting. Can I please check with you that you have read the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing pamphlet which has been provided to you?

**Mr GRUHN** — Yes, we have.

**The CHAIR** — Obviously you have some protection in this room for what you say, but no protection outside. Again, Hansard will take down your evidence. I think you are aware of that; you have done this all before, but I just wanted to emphasise that point. Could you please state your full name and your business address and indicate to the committee whether you are attending in a private capacity or whether you are officially representing your organisation and perhaps make a couple of additional comments to your submission.

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — Thank you. My name is Carl Gopalkrishnan. I am the senior policy officer at the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. Our address is 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton. I am here in an official capacity to talk about our submission. We have prepared a little bit of information and then we will be happy to have some questions after.

**The CHAIR** — Please proceed. Thank you very much.

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak at this Electoral Matters Committee inquiry hearing into electronic voting on behalf of Victorians from culturally diverse communities. As I said, my name is Carl Gopalkrishnan from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria as the senior policy officer at ECCV. I am here with my colleague Dr Irene Bouzo, our executive director, and Robert Gruhn, our policy officer.

Just for people who are not aware, ECCV is a statewide peak advocacy member-based organisation that represents ethnic and multicultural organisations and people from culturally diverse backgrounds. These are some of the impacts of electronic voting on culturally diverse communities.

As a first point, ECCV welcomes the use of technology to further alternative voting options for the Victorian community where it is secure, affordable and accessible. However, as we are sure the committee is aware, there are a number of issues that concern the public about electronic voting. These include privacy and security concerns, compromises due to error rates or the time required to roll out a new voting system. No doubt these general issues need to be explored and managed. As we note, they would apply equally to culturally diverse communities.

However, as the peak advocacy body for ethnic and multicultural organisations across Victoria, we would like to focus on the impact of electronic voting on culturally diverse communities. While we are encouraged by the VEC's efforts to engage with culturally diverse communities, we note there is still limited knowledge about what these communities think and know about electronic voting. We are not aware of any specific consultations on this issue in our sector.

Our past consultations on digital access to government services on Consumer Affairs Victoria's online portal, myCAV, to register new incorporated associations show that many ethnic community members are challenged by recent moves to digitise government services. Encouragingly, a recent study by the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia, FECCA, found that multicultural communities are interested in receiving training to access government services digitally. To address this knowledge gap, ECCV is planning to conduct consultations to better understand this issue to support greater participation in future elections.

These are some of the challenges facing culturally diverse communities. We would like the committee to note that, based on what we do know, any efforts to expand the electronic voting options would need to address the following challenges people from non-English-speaking backgrounds face. These include, firstly, a lack of knowledge about electronic voting: previous research shows that many culturally diverse community members have never heard of electronic voting and lack knowledge about enrolment, voting

and the Australian electoral system more generally; secondly, English language literacy: a significant number of culturally diverse community members have limited English proficiency, so any digital service options have to take this into account; and thirdly, digital literacy: studies have also confirmed that culturally diverse community members have limited digital literacy. For example, one study found seniors still do not own computers, do not have email addresses and find certain technology, like tablets, difficult to navigate.

**The CHAIR** — We do.

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — There are some opportunities to enhance access to electronic voting for culturally diverse communities. ECCV believes there are a number of specific opportunities for VEC to help transition culturally diverse communities successfully to electronic voting. Our recommendations to the inquiry include: funding targeted at understanding the needs of culturally diverse communities — that is, committing resources to hear directly from ethnic communities about what they need to help them to exercise their voting right through technology; to improve culturally appropriate educational resources — that is, culturally appropriate educational resources on electronic voting issues that need to be available in a number of community languages, in print, online and audiovisual; and finally, partnership models to raise awareness and train VEC staff.

Given the lack of training noted by the Auditor-General review, ECCV notes the opportunity for ethnospecific organisations to be engaged to train VEC staff and to conduct direct outreach to hard-to-reach communities given their unique position. Multicultural bodies like ECCV could also add to policy development — for example, through VEC's CALD advisory group.

On behalf of ECCV I thank you for opportunity to present here today. My colleagues and I welcome your questions.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Any questions?

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — Some of the evidence that we have already heard has gone to one of the benefits of electronic voting being the capacity perhaps to ensure that people have the opportunity to be notified if they are not going to submit a formal vote through the system. Do you think that would be something that would be beneficial to the community that you represent?

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — If they are not going to submit?

**Ms BLANDTHORN** — Yes. So some of the systems could tell somebody that the vote they have cast electronically is an invalid vote and do they want to submit it or would they like to correct it. Given that a high incidence of informal voting exists in non-English-speaking communities, do you think that that is something that would assist your communities in the voting process?

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — I think it is a good idea. Robert, do you have any comments on that or —

**Mr GRUHN** — I would just say shortly that the degree or number of unintentional informal votes would definitely be an outcome. When looking at developing electronic voting systems further, we would promote voting or e-voting at polling places. So I am very much in support of being aware that people from non-English-speaking backgrounds have higher rates of unintentional voting errors.

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — I wonder with that, I assume that would bring in the issue of the identification of a person. I know there is always that tension between security and, I think, privacy and being able to resolve issues such as you have just brought up.

**Mr DIXON** — Following the recent census exercise did your organisation get much feedback from your communities as to the electronic nature of it and the issues they had with filling out the census, putting aside the issues that happened — just as a concept?

**Dr BOUZO** — Yes, sure. Look, digital exclusion, digital literacy, is a big issue for the culturally diverse community in Victoria. Twenty-five per cent of the population are from a culturally diverse community. About 40 per cent of people over 65 are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and we had a lot of feedback leading up to the census that people were quite distressed and unable to handle digital literacy, digital access. A lot of seniors from migrant backgrounds are not literate in their first language or in English, especially those that arrived in the 1950s and 1960s. So there is quite a bit of frustration, confusion and even some distress in the multicultural sector.

**Ms PATTEN** — You mentioned in your submission and you touched on vVote and how it was not used particularly widely. Were there any comments from your organisation, because obviously vVote was an attempt to provide a solution to people with some language barriers? Were there any comments from any of your members around the reason why people did not use the vVote system? Was it availability or — —

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — I am not aware, because we have not formally consulted. It is something that we want to do. Robert?

**Mr GRUHN** — We know generally that transport is an issue, and since electronic voting was only given as an option at a few polling places pre-election time, not on election day, we know that many migrants in more remote and rural areas in Victoria have definitely had an issue with accessing those polling places. That would definitely be one of the issues, and the time required, even taking into account issues of cost to be able to cast their votes. I think we have some information around that, but those are some of the common issues people talked about generally when voting in this pre-election time.

**Mr NORTHE** — Congratulations on your submission. In your submission you talked about how there are two newly funded positions to assist with electronic voting should it come to pass. Can you just describe in a practical sense how that might work? Is it that it should be targeted at a particular community? Is it that you might try to improve the take-up of voting in those communities, or how would it work in a practical sense?

**Dr BOUZO** — We have got a little bit of experience in other areas, for example, elder abuse prevention programs, seniors rights — that sort of thing — and we find that having a dedicated multicultural officer enables consultation with grassroots communities to find out what their concerns are and also to customise information for specific language groups and ethnic groups. That approach has been quite successful in terms of awareness raising, information provision and that kind of thing. That was a suggestion for a solution. Robert, did you want to add anything to that?

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — Can I, because we talked about that? It is just that we appreciate the government does consult when it is designing programs. This would include to reach out to culturally diverse voters. But what we have seen in the other topics, because we advocate across all government portfolios, is that sometimes short consultations that government do, or focus groups, do not always capture the information that communities hold back, because they are quite reticent to talk. That is what our core business is — consultation. We have a high level of trust. In a way we perform that in-between bridge role, between government and ethnic communities.

But when you are talking about developing programs that are practical and functional, that idea of having someone in government and someone in the community actually working together but the person in the community not having to break that contact and therefore being able to take the information that comes out more slowly or in a more culturally appropriate way in the community's time.

**Mr GRUHN** — And we know that the VEC already has a community educator program. In fact those few funded positions could also work together with those community educators to spread the impact, looking at a few additional funded positions — one or two in government as well — with the multicultural organisations but then also having the organisations and infrastructure that are already established to reach particular communities. They could be from new and emerging communities, from some of those communities identified as needing more information and education programs to make electronic voting

part of a more general, broader program that continues to educate multicultural communities. I think that would be a good solution, to not just narrow it down to talking about electronic voting as one option.

**Mr GOPALKRISHNAN** — And as we have seen there is a lot of testing in these systems. It can be a very technical thing, and people forget that. The whole conversation around electronic voting, you find when you get out there in the research, it is very technical and it is very difficult for communities to understand. So that link between humanising a system electronically does require constant liaison with those communities, especially when English is not your first language. And it saves money; it will save money for the government to get it right from the beginning.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your submission and for coming along today to answer our questions and expand a bit further. You will receive your copy of the Hansard transcript in about two weeks time. You are free to make factual amendments but not obviously to change testimony in the transcript. Again, thank you very much for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**