

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2022 Victorian State Election

Melbourne – Thursday 10 August 2023

MEMBERS

Will Fowles – Chair

Evan Mulholland – Deputy Chair

Brad Battin

David Ettershank

Sam Hibbins

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Lee Tarlamis

Emma Vulin

WITNESS

Matthew Harris, State Director, the Nationals Victoria.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2022 Victorian State Election. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands on which each of us are gathered here today and pay my respect to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders and community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Evan Mulholland, Deputy Chair of the committee and Member for Northern Metropolitan. I might ask everyone to say their name and electorate, from the end.

Emma VULIN: Hi, I am Emma Vulin. I am the Member for Pakenham.

Nathan LAMBERT: Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston.

Lee TARLAMIS: Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sam HIBBINS: Sam Hibbins, Member for Prahran.

Emma KEALY: Emma Kealy, Member for Lowan. You may have met me before.

David ETTERS HANK: David Ettershank, Member for Western Metropolitan Region.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I welcome Matthew Harris to the Electoral Matters Committee.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say today, but if you do go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to have given false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence today is being recorded by Hansard. It is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome any media covering the hearing today, and we remind you of the following guidelines: cameras must remain focused only on the people speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately following completion of the hearing. Broadcasting or recording of this hearing by anyone other than accredited media is not permitted.

I invite you to proceed with a brief 5-minute opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Matthew HARRIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all members for giving me the opportunity to present to you today and to expand on our party's submission. When I opened my remarks before this committee during the last Parliament, I expressed our gratitude to the electoral commission for the work it had done during the 2018 election. I wish I was in the position to say the same thing today, but as you would have read in our submission, we believe the commission failed in its role of supporting all Victorians to exercise their democratic right to vote in the 2022 election.

I vividly remember the first time I was old enough to vote – the feeling of excitement at being able to participate in democracy and the gratitude of living in a country, albeit the UK at the time, where we were able to have our say in free and fair elections. That multiple polling centres across regional Victoria ran out of ballot papers at the last election, meaning electors arrived to vote on election day and then were unable to vote, is a disgrace. There are thousands of hardworking staff at the commission during an election period, and the entire

Victorian community should be thankful for their hard work and diligence. But those hardworking staff should be embarrassed and ashamed by the commission's flippant disregard for this issue during testimony to this committee previously. I urge the committee to require the commission to undertake a full review of what can only be described as a scandal. Despite the astronomical debt that this current government has bestowed on our state, the commission is well resourced, and there is no excuse for a repeat of this issue in 2026.

Serious consideration needs to be given by the commission to its priorities. I note that the 'What we stand for' section of their website refers to seven things: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living with disabilities, multicultural communities, people experiencing homelessness, young people, the environment and child safety. All of these are completely worthy areas of attention, and the Nationals support efforts to increase democratic engagement across our community. But nowhere does it state that they stand for making sure that all eligible Victorians are able to vote.

Perhaps they think this is implied, but I get the sense the commission's priorities could be wrong. By way of example, just yesterday the commission's Twitter account posted five tweets. Four of them related to national Homelessness Week and the work they are doing to support homeless people to engage in elections. This is clearly an important issue, and there is no doubt that as a society we should be doing everything we can to support them to participate in our community. Just coming here today, I am sure committee members would appreciate how much of a problem this is and how much worse it has got in the last eight years or so. But given the commission failed to run the 2022 election properly, ensuring that there were enough ballot papers at each polling centre, perhaps they should be focusing on that issue first.

I mentioned the commission did five tweets yesterday. I will read the other one out:

Our boss once asked us to stop making so many cat memes so we don't exclude the dog owners. We tried our best over the years, but we can't help ourselves – cats just go so well with democracy.

Happy International Cat Day to all the fab cats that own a human!

I know my colleagues from the Animal Justice Party are appearing before you next and may wish otherwise, but as far as I am aware, cats do not have a role in Victoria's electoral process.

The *Electoral Act* clearly states at section 8(1):

The Commission is responsible for the administration of the enrolment process and the conduct of parliamentary elections and referendums in Victoria.

The communications team at the commission needs to take a long hard look at itself and reflect on whether tweeting about cats is delivering their legislated role. There are a number of other issues raised in our submission that I expect we may cover later; however, I will restate our support for reform of the Legislative Council voting system. A move towards a Senate-style system where voters choose their preferences and not party operatives, like me, or preference whisperers allocating them is something the committee should consider in its deliberations.

I also want to remind the committee of the current problem in the drafting of the *Electoral Act* in regard to public funding of elections. It is an issue that was discussed in the inquiry into the 2018 election. The committee may be aware that the 2018 changes to the Act gave rise to the commission paying funds in respect of our joint Legislative Council ticket directly to our Liberal Party partners and would not allow funds to be split between the two parties as had been done in the past. It is disappointing that it took a Supreme Court decision to force the commission to allow the Liberals to subsequently transfer our share of the funds to us. Both parties have raised this issue with the current independent review of Victoria's electoral and political donations system, but we would be grateful for the committee's support and recommendation to make the small change that would resolve this issue in the future.

Finally, despite my earlier commentary, I do wish to thank the officers of the commission for their compassion and understanding when we had to inform them of the unexpected death of our candidate for Narracan. It was a challenging time for all involved, and the officers concerned were professional and handled the situation with grace. With that I will leave it there, Chair, and I am happy to answer questions.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Harris – appreciate you coming in today. I wanted to elaborate on your view on group voting tickets. It has been highlighted a lot more in the general public's mind with regard to scandals around preference whispering, particularly with what we saw in Northern Victoria. Do you have a

firm view on this? How do you think we could go about reform to make sure that we still have a good amount of regional representation?

Matthew HARRIS: Okay, there are probably two parts to that question.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Probably.

Matthew HARRIS: One is the broader group voting ticket issue.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes.

Matthew HARRIS: And the regional representation perhaps is a slightly separate issue. I think we have been clear for a long time that we think the current group voting ticket system is failing the community. There is no way on earth that an average voter has any idea where their preferences are flowing based on the group voting tickets. As we put in our submission, in Northern Victoria the Animal Justice Party have got an MP with a pretty minimal primary vote, so to say that the will of the voters is being delivered by group voting tickets I think is a stretch. We have suggested repeatedly that copying a system similar to the new Senate system, where electors nominate six preferences, is probably the sensible way forward. Certainly having a similar system at a federal and a state level would reduce the risk of people misunderstanding the process, and hopefully that would reduce the amount of informal ballots that are cast. So we would strongly urge the committee to look at the example of the reforms in the Senate, and then perhaps replicate a similar system at the Victorian level.

I assume your question about regional representation goes to the discussion you were having with my colleagues from the Labor Party previously and removing the upper house regions and having one region effectively across the whole of the state. We have not put a formal view forward on this, but I think it would be fair to say that we strongly disagree with that proposition. Certainly as an example in New South Wales, where our National Party colleagues face a situation where it is one large electorate across the state, they have a strong view that that is disenfranchising regional voters. The reality is then all the offices are in Melbourne, so that is less opportunity for regional people, with greater distances to travel potentially, to be able to meet their local MP. I am not sure having an upper house elected of people who have no link to particular communities is a reasonable way forward. In years gone past the regions were much smaller – the provinces were much smaller – in the upper house, and people knew who their upper house member was. Now they are obviously much larger, and we have got eight regions. People still know – in many cases they want to speak to one of their members of Parliament, and they know that there is a local person in the upper house to represent their views in Parliament, regardless of which party they are from. To abolish the regions and have one region I think would lose that connection between voters and their local representative.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I just want to touch on your point about cat memes coming out of the VEC. It might surprise you to learn that at the current by-election that is going on in the seat of Warrandyte – I know you are not contesting it, but there has been no mail distribution to any voter in Warrandyte alerting them to the fact that there is a by-election, by the VEC. In fact all they have done is spend \$500 on Facebook for 18- to 24-year-olds, telling them about the election. Do you think the prioritisation of resources at the VEC is right, and given the Nationals may face a by-election sometime – or from time to time do face by-elections or supplementary elections – do you think it is concerning that the VEC is not informing voters by mail that there is a by-election occurring?

Matthew HARRIS: Frankly, yes. I did not realise that was the case in Warrandyte, but my first reaction is I am surprised that that has not happened. I suppose it is probably a bit too late for it to happen now, so it does shock me, particularly in the context of my remarks yesterday. They are happy to be tweeting memes about International Cat Day. If they are not informing voters that an election is taking place, I think we have got a problem. I guess that was the point I was trying to get across in my opening remarks. There is frankly one job for the electoral commission and it is to run elections and make sure everybody can vote. We are fully supportive of the efforts to engage with disengaged parts of our community, whether it is homeless people, younger people or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That is a very worthy exercise, but the fact is there were hundreds of people across Victoria in November last year who went to vote on election day and there were no ballot papers there. There is a fixed date in the diary. They knew four years out when election day was, and the fact that they could supply ballot papers to polling centres is a disgrace.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Excellent. I have done my 5 minutes, so I might pass on to Mr Tarlamis.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you. And thank you, Mr Harris, for your submission and supplementary comments today. In your submission and today you have focused – and rightfully so – on the issue around ballot papers on the day. In the ALP submission they have proposed a complete review of all the time lines from the ground up of how things occur, including a week gap between the closing of nominations and the first day of voting. Do you think that that is something that would assist with the issue around ballot papers? Obviously other things would need to be kind of sorted through if there were other issues that led to that as well, but additional time there for printing of ballot papers and distribution of the appropriate number of ballot papers to voting locations – do you think that is something that would be worthwhile?

Matthew HARRIS: It is certainly possible, and I suppose it is really a question for the commission. My understanding – and I may have misinterpreted their remarks – was that they had made calculations by polling booth about how many people they expected to vote at each booth, and clearly they got it very, very wrong in a number of circumstances. Having an extra week to do that I do not think would have made any difference, frankly. That was a calculation I would imagine they did maybe a year before the polling day itself. So I am not sure changing the time lines is something that is going to directly address that problem. It was clearly a complete miscalculation of how many people lived in a certain location and voting patterns. Then, I do not know, maybe it was an attempt to save money by not printing so many ballot papers, but not having an appropriate buffer of ballot papers or having the capacity to print them, as they do in some circumstances, has led to the problems we have had. I think we made enough of a point in our submission that there were some seats that came down to a few hundred votes and more than a few hundred people did not get to vote in those seats. Who knows – there could well have been a different outcome. But we will never know. So I am not sure just having more time in the process is going to address that particular issue.

Lee TARLAMIS: Okay. No worries. The reason I raise that is because obviously, as political parties would be aware, with the nominations closing on the Friday and to get how-to-votes printed and distributed as well, there is that kind of distribution delay, so that is I expect one element. But as you rightfully say, predictions about who is voting and where are a significant issue.

As we have heard in some of the submissions today but also in the previously provided submissions, there is reference to a lot of discrepancies or differences between the AEC and the VEC. Do you think there are any particular areas where we could correct those or have synergy between the two systems, whether it be the how-to-votes or other things?

Matthew HARRIS: I had not put my mind to specific examples. I was here for the end of the previous deliberations of the committee with my Labor colleague, so I heard the conversation about registration of how-to-vote cards. That is a good example I think. There is no federal requirement to register how-to-vote cards, and the costs and the time taken for the process here in Victoria I am not sure are a benefit to the state. I am not sure what policy issue we are trying to fix by having registered how-to-vote cards, frankly. I do not think there are any issues that have been experienced at a federal level that suggest they want to move into that direction, so I am not sure what problem we are trying to fix at a state level by having a registration process for how-to-vote cards, particularly, as it was referred to earlier, when we do not even need to have them registered for the pre-poll, the early voting time, so half of the voters have voted with an unregistered how-to-vote card in their hand anyway. Some consistency there would make sense I think. We can probably have a broader conversation about the registration process itself if that is what the committee wishes to talk about, but in terms of other synergies between the AEC and the VEC, I had not put my mind to it, to be honest.

Lee TARLAMIS: There have been other submissions around having formal codes of conduct around behaviour at polling places. Would that be something that you would support?

Matthew HARRIS: In terms of party volunteers and members, primarily candidates for that matter, I do not have a strong – we have not made a formal submission on that particular issue, but I think there is merit in the committee considering something along those lines. It would be useful if there was, from my perspective, a very high-level statement of expectations about conduct which could be posted somewhere near the polling place itself but also something that could be in a format that could be distributed to volunteers and party members. The reality is, as again I think my Labor colleague said earlier, most – I should not say most – many of our volunteers at pre-poll are not party members and may just be a friend of someone who has turned up for an hour or two to help out. I would be concerned if the committee recommended that there was some formal process where we had to ensure that all people handing out how-to-vote cards had seen and agreed to a code of

conduct, because I do not think it would be practically possible. But it is certainly something that could be displayed close to the polling booth and distributed as well as possible to party volunteers. I think that would be something that was very much worth considering.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I might move on to Mr Hibbins.

Sam HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Just to clarify your position on group voting tickets, you are supportive of abolishing group voting tickets by the next election without any changes to upper house composition?

Matthew HARRIS: Yes.

Sam HIBBINS: Okay. Do you have any concern around the upper house composition – for example, regional seats encroaching on metropolitan Melbourne – or are you satisfied with the current arrangements?

Matthew HARRIS: I mean, the reality is the state is divided into eight. If there is a population change, inevitably some of those regional regions are getting closer to Melbourne. I expect, given everything that has happened over the last few years, the population projections are slightly different going forward. Perhaps that trend may slow down somewhat, given that people are, as Emma has demonstrated today, able to participate in these things and work from home remotely. I think that trend may change slightly. I am not sure – again, this is not a formal position and I have not done any calculations – if it was a trend that was to continue, there would be an argument to make to have more than eight regions so you did actually have representation of similar communities of interest, but I think the current set-up is acceptable in the current environment.

Sam HIBBINS: Thank you. You raised in your submission the length of early voting. Do you have a preferred length of early voting, both by the dates and the times of the booths?

Matthew HARRIS: We would argue a week is more than enough for an early voting period, certainly now we have seen the large increase in postal votes too. The original intent of the early voting was for people who could not vote on election day itself. We have drifted away from that to make it more straightforward for people to vote, and vote when it is convenient to them, as opposed to having to turn up on the Saturday itself. With the growth in postal votes I think there is ample opportunity for people who know they cannot vote in that week before the election or on election day to do a postal vote. A week allows people if, particularly in regional communities, they are in town for the day. They come into their local large town. That is enough time for them to be able to plan to go and vote. I think having to have it open for two weeks or more as we have had in the past is an incredible cost to Victorians in a time when we do not have a lot of money, and I am not sure what the benefit is. A week is perfectly reasonable, and I think we put in our submission if there was some consideration to maybe a couple of days where it was a bit later, but there needs to be some thought around where you are doing that and why, because certainly we experienced that a number of the early voting centres, particularly in the smaller regional communities, there was nobody there after six. People do their shopping during the day, come in to vote if that is what they were doing. Having an early voting centre open until 8 pm in a small regional community where everything else is closed around it is probably a waste of everybody's time and resources, frankly. I am not saying we should have a fixed, mandated rule across the state. I think there should be consideration to having some flexibility, and instead of our colleagues at the VEC in Collins Street deciding, perhaps there should be some flexibility for regional VEC managers to make some sensible decisions about what is appropriate.

Sam HIBBINS: Yes. Also in your submission I believe you raised the issue of concern about using commercial premises for early voting as opposed to community centres.

Matthew HARRIS: Yes.

Sam HIBBINS: Now, the VEC in their submission, and I will just read it verbatim, recommended amending:

... the Electoral Act to include an appropriate mechanism to require suitable publicly-funded venues to be available for use as EVCs, such as community facilities owned and operated by local councils.

Would you be supportive of a recommendation like that?

Matthew HARRIS: The point of our submission was to make sure we were using appropriate venues, I suppose, and the trend to use vacant commercial premises in a main street of a town ends up with logistical problems for the other tenants in the same location. That was where we were coming from with that, and using community centres – they tend to have a bit more space around them for volunteers, parking and all the other things that happen at a polling centre. I had not given specific thought to the VEC’s recommendation there.

Sam HIBBINS: You can take it on notice.

Matthew HARRIS: Yes, I think I will.

Sam HIBBINS: All right, no worries. Thanks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thanks, Sam. I might go to Mr Lambert.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. I am not sure if you caught the start of the Australian Labor Party officials, but the Chair asked some very direct questions about Labor Party candidates, which I am not going to repeat because I do not think we get a lot of value out of that, but certainly it is worth asking questions that go to the general policy matters that are the remit of this committee. In that regard, did you have any difficult situations of Nationals candidates or volunteers, without going certainly to names but difficult situations you did have to resolve during the campaign?

Matthew HARRIS: I think there is at least one submission that refers to one particular instance. These things happen. It is unfortunate when it does. You know, there are thousands of volunteers for all the parties and candidates across the state, and to expect everyone to behave perfectly appropriately at all times is probably wishful thinking, frankly. Politics is a robust business, and people are very passionate about the things they stand for, and we should be proud of the fact that we have a democracy that allows people to stand there and share their views and participate in the electoral process. Yes, so we did have certainly one, on the public record, issue with a volunteer for the National Party, and I think it was dealt with appropriately. It is part and parcel of the exercise, unfortunately.

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes. I am just interested in thinking about how these matters are dealt with internally within parties – do you have a code of conduct people have to sign or some sort of internal formal procedure for how you deal with these things?

Matthew HARRIS: Without wanting to get into the internal machinations of the National Party, yes, there are various ways we deal with these things. But as I said in response to a previous question, in many cases the people supporting us on election day or early voting are not members of the party, they are friends or family of the candidate perhaps or connections. A party member may just rope in a few friends to help out for an hour or two. So in some cases it is not necessarily something that the party can deal with as an internal matter if they are not a member of the party.

Nathan LAMBERT: And on that – and I do agree; the Chair sort of raised some of the issues we saw in the north and the west of Melbourne where I suppose you have got a particular political environment reflecting the particular nature of those communities – do you think that if we go particularly to smaller regional centres it is different? Is it better? Are there different types of behavioural issues that we are facing?

Matthew HARRIS: From my experience having been on voting centres across regional Victoria and supporting our colleagues in Melbourne at times, I would suggest that there is a bit of a difference primarily because in a regional community often everybody knows each other, so it does change the dynamic slightly.

Nathan LAMBERT: Not always for the better.

Matthew HARRIS: It is a bit different, and definitely, I would say – I have no quantitative evidence, but I think it would be fairly clear – you get less of the situation where volunteers from organisations are being moved around and being sent to a particular polling centre, somewhere in metropolitan Melbourne where they are not actually from, purely because that is a contested seat or a booth that people think is going to be tight for whatever reason. So there is a slightly different dynamic, but at the end of the day this comes down to particular individuals’ behaviour, and it is very hard for any party to probably address directly.

Nathan LAMBERT: A very genuine question on this, because we ought to think about it – there are some jurisdictions that have solved this problem by simply banning people being anywhere near the booth, and voters walk in with no political party-aligned personnel at all. But I think we are all conscious that you lose something with that, and I was just wondering, in your experience, what do you see as the positives? What are the reasons that we allow people to stand outside of a voting centre?

Matthew HARRIS: That is a good question. Having grown up in the UK where there is nobody accosting you or very few people accosting you as you go into the polling booth, it was a change when I moved here. I think people expressing their democratic view is something we should be very proud of, and if people want to come out and support a candidate in an election, I think that is something they should be allowed to do, frankly. You know, expressing your support for somebody is part of democracy, and if we were having laws that were in place that would restrict people's abilities to do that, I think that would be a retrograde step. I will probably leave that there.

Nathan LAMBERT: Perhaps if we have got time, you made a reference very early on in your remarks to the public funding issue with the joint tickets. Forgive me if this was in your submission – you referenced a simple change that you would like to see happen; I was not actually sure what that simple change was.

Matthew HARRIS: Yes. I am happy to write to the committee with the specific change. Mr Tarlamis, we have discussed this over the years. I will write the exact words and send it through to the committee, but basically the commission interpreted the changes to the Act in such a way that they thought they could only provide the funding to the party of the person who is number one on a joint ticket, so they transferred the money to the Liberal Party, the Liberal Party then wanted to give us our share of the money, and the commission's view was that was over the \$4100 limit, or whatever it was at the time. We then went through some legal discussions, shall we say, and ended up with a ruling where they were allowed to give us the money. The same thing is now happening post the 2022 election. A very straightforward change to the appropriate clause in the Act that gives the commission the flexibility to allocate the money to the person at the top of the ticket or as otherwise requested by the parties on a joint ticket – it is a simple, one-line change that needs to go in there.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I am conscious of time, so I will move on to Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS SHANK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your contribution. Looking at the group voting tickets and moving back to that issue, I get your point about the similarity to the Senate voting – the one to six may have some benefits. I would like to drill down a little bit on what your concerns are, though, with the current system. Is that primarily, from your point of view, a concern with the group voting tickets about transparency of the preferencing?

Matthew HARRIS: I think that is a fair way to put it. There could be 100 candidates in a particular region, and there is a potentially very complicated group voting ticket that is put forward by a particular party. Someone voting for party A, shall we say – unless they go onto the commission's website, download the group voting ticket and study it – would have no idea that their vote is likely to end up with party Z. It is hard enough for political professionals like me and others to try and unravel what may or may not happen if someone votes for a certain party under a group voting ticket system. For an ordinary voter who does not spend their time looking at this stuff, there is basically no way they really know where their vote is going to end up. If someone is voting for – I will use real examples here. If someone is voting for Labor and their vote gets transferred somewhere, I think a voter would understand clearly that if their vote was not counted, it would get transferred to someone who had a similar view of the world to Labor. Likewise if you are voting for the National Party or the Liberal Party – they would expect that our preferences would flow to somewhere that had a similar view to us about how the state should be governed and run.

Under the group voting ticket system there are certainly examples where people have would have voted for a particular party and then that vote would have ended up, after preference transfers, with another party that I think the original voter would have, if they had known that was happening, been concerned about how their vote had ended up. That probably did not make complete sense, but it is so opaque I am not sure people really understand what they are doing when they are going in to vote. But if you move to something similar to the Senate system, you get six numbers. You know you are voting for the National Party first, the Liberal Party second perhaps and then some other parties that share your values and your beliefs. That is quite clear, it is your

choice and you are making that intention known to the commission when they are counting the votes. Under the group voting ticket system, your vote could end up anywhere, frankly.

David ETTERS HANK: But it is also quite possible, isn't it, in a number of the states that do not have this structure that you can quite often see a vote not exhausted until it has been through many, many layers of candidates? How is that different?

Matthew HARRIS: The difference with a one-to-six, above-the-line Senate-style system is that you are choosing the people that align with your views. You are picking your first preference and then you are going to pick five other people that you would rather have before anybody else. That is the point of a preference voting system. Under a group voting ticket system, unless you spend an inordinate matter of time studying the group voting tickets – and not just the person you are voting for but also the other group voting tickets of people who may well be in the group voting ticket of the person you want to give first preference to – there is no way you can possibly work out where your vote is likely to end up before it exhausts. I have tried to do it. There was media coverage last year of someone who does this for a professional living, and he has a system that can somehow track how someone's vote goes through the entire system and what spins out of it at the end. It is incredibly complicated, so how can we expect any voter to understand it is, frankly, beyond me.

David ETTERS HANK: If a how-to-vote ticket was to show both an above-the-line and below-the-line vote – in other words, it showed the distribution of preferences to the voter prior to them entering the voting booth – would that address that concern?

Matthew HARRIS: Well, it would partially address the concern, but I think in practice it would be impossible to do. I mean, in some regions there are 100 candidates, and if you wanted to include that on a how-to-vote card, I am not sure anyone would be able to decipher it or understand it or have any other information on the how-to-vote card at all. To require how-to-vote cards to effectively have a copy of the group voting ticket on the back – that is what I think you are suggesting – I do not think anyone would understand, and they would get incredibly confused.

David ETTERS HANK: No, no, I am not necessarily proposing it or opposing it. I am trying to understand exactly where you are going.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We have just run out of time, and I am conscious other people have not asked questions. Thank you, Mr Ettershank. I will move on to Ms Kealy.

Emma KEALY: Thank you very much, Matthew. You offered earlier to go into some of the inconsistencies around the VEC's decision-making. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Matthew HARRIS: Thanks, Emma. I think the best example – and I am sure my colleagues from all the other parties concur with my view on this – is the how-to-vote registration process. In all the things that go on during an election, there is lots of work to do. But the process to upload copies of how-to-vote cards, also print them out, take them to the commission's office, have somebody then approve or not approve them and then have to go through the whole process again is one of the most cumbersome exercises that I have ever been through. Again, I am not quite sure what the policy imperative is for that process. But part of the issue with that is that you may well be talking to a different official from the commission every time you go there with your how-to-vote. You come in and say, 'Here we go. Here's my how-to-vote card.' And they go, 'That's rejected because the spacing between these two sentences is incorrect.' So off you go back and fix it up.

Certainly my Labor and Liberal friends and others – the Greens probably run in every single seat, I think – would have hundreds of these things to do. We have a bit less because we only run in regional communities. You make all the changes and then go back the next day, after you have booked an appointment with them on an online system which does not always work, and it is a different person and they find a different mistake, and you go round and round in circles. My poor colleagues who were doing this were just traipsing backwards and forwards to the electoral commission's offices for a week trying to get this resolved. I cannot see what the benefit to the community was in any of this because every single pick-up was something that, frankly, was insubstantial in the grand scheme of things in an election.

Emma KEALY: Matthew, in your opening statement today you spoke about the VEC having a dual role – the administration of elections but also conduct between parliamentary elections. You referenced earlier that the

VEC are busy putting out cat memes at the moment rather than notifying electors in the district of Warrandyte they having an election imminently. Do you believe that there should be any changes to the Act or otherwise that separates the VEC's role of administration of elections versus the oversight role that they have, so that they are held to account for some of these inconsistencies and perhaps a shift of focus that they have at this point in time?

Matthew HARRIS: As a party we have not come to a formal position on whether the commission should be split into two. I would just say that my understanding is that most similar jurisdictions around the world have a fairly similar set-up to Victoria where it is an electoral commission – there are not two entities. I am not sure the issue is in how the commission is legislated or formed; I think the issue is the choices that are being made within the commission about what to focus on and what to expend their resources on.

Emma KEALY: Thank you. We have spoken about upper house reform and group voting tickets. I realise we are nearly out of time. You have spoken about abolishing group voting tickets. Can I ask you to reiterate your views on a statewide district for Victoria. What impact would that have on regional voters in terms of the structure of the upper house changing?

Matthew HARRIS: Yes. Thanks, Emma. If there were no regions and it was just a statewide region, I think that would diminish the opportunity for regional voters to be able to identify who their local representatives are, which I think is a detriment to democracy, frankly. It is important there is a direct connection between voters and their members of Parliament, whether they are members of the lower house or members of the upper house. By having regions it allows people to understand and be able to identify who their local representatives are. If you had one statewide region, I think the voices of regional communities or, frankly, the communities of the western part of Melbourne compared to the south-eastern part of Melbourne or the northern part of Melbourne, to the Chair's part of the state – they are very different communities with very different needs. To have a swathe of people who could potentially all be from the same street in the same town, in Prahran perhaps, I am not sure that is – it might be good for me as one of your constituents and the community of Prahran but –

Sam HIBBINS: We are all from the community of Prahan. Everyone has moved in.

Matthew HARRIS: is not necessarily going to represent the views of the state in a fair way. I think that is the real issue. Certainly, as I said, our New South Wales colleagues face this on a daily basis where they only have an office in Melbourne even though they are trying to represent parts of New South Wales which are hundreds and hundreds of kilometres, if not more, away from Sydney. They do a very good job of standing up for their communities, but the reality is the system is designed in such a way that their voice gets diminished.

Emma KEALY: Thanks, Matthew. Thanks, Evan.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I might go to Emma Vulin.

Emma VULIN: Before I start, I just wanted to say that I pass on my condolences for the loss of your candidate in Narracan. It is my neighbouring electorate, so it was a tough time for my community as well. Your submission talks about election day voting centres. In your opinion, what would you say is the preferred method of voting by regional voters? Is it early voting or postal voting or election day voting?

Matthew HARRIS: That is a good question. I do not have the statistics in front of me. I can certainly take it on notice and crunch the numbers if the committee wishes me to. Certainly less people overall now vote on election day. It would be less than half the electors vote on voting day itself. Off the top of my head, I cannot remember the split between postal voting and early voting, and it obviously depends on the type of regional community we are talking about. Certainly in the more remote communities, perhaps say in Emma's part of the state, there would be much more postal voting because it is a more dispersed population than perhaps in Bendigo, for example, where it is a smaller geographical area. But there absolutely is a trend for people to vote earlier and increasingly postally.

Emma VULIN: I am conscious of time. I can either finish or ask one more quick question.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: You can ask one more.

Emma VULIN: Okay. I was just going to say, can you provide a clearer perspective on what your candidates experienced at voting centres in regional areas? The Member for Lowan has given us a bit of an idea of what she experienced, but did you have issues like that from other candidates, or other issues?

Matthew HARRIS: I am not sure what Emma's specific example was, so apologies. Certainly I understand the challenge the commission have in finding appropriate centres. It is not easy. I think I referred to this, or the party did, in its previous submissions to previous inquiries. A lot of thought has been put into understanding the needs not just of the staff of the VEC but the hundreds and thousands of volunteers and candidates around the state. I think I referred to it four years ago. I do not think it is in this submission. Often there are no bathrooms for volunteers, and particularly in regional communities these voting centres could be a long way away from anywhere else. It could be – I am not exaggerating – a kilometre-plus walk to go to the bathroom and people are standing there all day in the pouring rain, so there is just a lot of work. I think there would be merit in the commission undertaking a consultation process in the next short period of time before they are getting deep into the preparations for 2026, just to understand the issues. An inquiry in its own right by the commission, I think, would be a useful use of their time to understand the kind of problems and challenges that people face around state.

Emma VULIN: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Emma. And thank you, Mr Harris, for appearing before us today. I will close the meeting for a 15-minute break.

Witness withdrew.