

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025 Prahran and Werribee By-elections

Melbourne – Friday 20 June 2025

MEMBERS

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Sarah Mansfield

Evan Mulholland

Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Paul Hopper, and

Dr Joe Garra, West Party.

The CHAIR: I declare open this public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into the 2025 Prahran and Werribee By-elections. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands on which we are gathered today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or 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 Dylan Wight, the Member for Tarneit. With me I have got Deputy Chair Christopher Crewther, the Member for Mornington; Evan Mulholland, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region; and online we have got Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, the Member for Preston; Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria; and Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

I would like to welcome Paul Hopper and Joe Garra – Paul obviously having been an independent candidate in the Werribee by-election.

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

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I might invite you to give a brief opening statement and an overview of your submission, and then we will ask some questions.

Paul HOPPER: No worries. Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts and recollections around the by-election. Thanks, Chair and committee members, and those online.

Firstly, just by way of context, and I am sure it was touched on in the previous hearing, but being a by-election, and I am fairly new to the whole campaign scene, and running as an independent I do not have the experience base behind me with a party machine and so on, but obviously a by-election on short notice, short lead time, so I have some understanding around that to the VEC processes, staff and selection of sites and so on, but there were some clear deficiencies in what we saw. We can share what we thought and put that into the melting pot of what the brains trust comes up with and hopefully that can go into some substantial improvements for both full elections and by-elections moving forward.

I will not read, unless required, our submission in detail. There are two main focal points, which I am sure have already been touched on. Our greatest concern was around the voters, the people coming into vote, how they felt, their access to and getting in and the amount of harassment by some of the volunteers, especially in pre-poll – on voting day as well, but in the pre-poll it was especially noticeable, we felt.

A couple of things we thought could be considered to assist the voters coming in and having a more unimpeded opportunity to get to the voting stations and engage with any of the volunteers that they may like to, but not be harassed, would be creating clear lines of delineation, which I think was touched on in the previous hearing, that the volunteers must stay behind and also having a rule where the volunteer, once they engage with a voter, cannot walk with them. We think that is a really important one, because that was probably, from what we observed, the main point of frustration for the voters: coming in and being swarmed in some cases – starting to

be spoken to 100 metres out from where they were trying to get in to vote and then just being followed and shadowed all the way in. We saw clear examples of people being distressed, quite annoyed and even angry at that, and people swearing at some of those volunteers et cetera, so we think some firm rules around that are absolutely required, and further to that that the VEC staff have the authority and power and backup – be that of VicPol or whatever is required – to actually enforce. If they find a volunteer to be repeatedly breaching rules on volunteer behaviour, one of our suggestions that you will see in there is perhaps a yellow card/red card type system or something of that nature, to use soccer theming.

The CHAIR: We might go into some questions till roughly 10 o'clock. I might fire away first, given that I think I am the only western suburbs MP here. You touched briefly then on two things. One was specifically – and there is a particular outfit that do it – the volunteers walking with voters. In your view, how can you actually police that? I understand the intent of what you are saying, but fundamentally how do you police that? I think that would be messy, so I am just interested in your views on that. Secondly – it is in two parts, and for the record, I was lovely to every voter in Werribee when I was on pre-poll, but I understand what you are saying – pre-polls in particular are getting incredibly crowded. You have spoken about a delineation line, which would be interesting in itself, I think. Do you think we are just getting to a point where there is a limit on the amount of volunteers each candidate can have?

Joe GARRA: Our suggestion is to limit it to three at the polling booth – not counting the candidate, because the candidate often comes and goes, but our suggestion in our submission is to limit it to three. You do not need more than three people. There were instances at pre-polling where parties had six volunteers lined up holding hands, basically – what are they all doing there? They do not need to all be there, and people feel intimidated. They do. People say to us, 'Look, I hate going in there,' and often we were motioning to people, 'Look, if you want to miss everyone, just go around this way. You'll miss everyone.' So one of our other ideas was to have a path so that if someone does not want to talk to a volunteer, they can just walk through a protected zone so they do not have to talk to anyone.

As to how to police the first one, we said: engage. What we meant by that was once you start talking to someone, you have to stop and you cannot keep walking with them. There were instances of volunteers getting yelled at by the public and I am surprised that no-one got hit by members of the public, because often they would not stop; they just kept walking and walking with them. It can be policed, because it is up to the volunteers there to report it to the VEC, who then would come out and take action. It might be the idea of the yellow card when it is more than once – 'Next time you do that, you're out of here, and you can't be replaced.' If you limit the number of volunteers and you say that everyone who gets kicked off cannot be replaced, I think everyone would start behaving, because they would say, 'We're running out of volunteers here now. We're down to one volunteer, and there are three entry points, and we're not getting to anyone.' One of the worst things we saw was that behaviour. I have been involved in three elections now and I think it is getting worse.

The CHAIR: I have no doubt about that.

Joe GARRA: The weather did not help. It was often hot, and people were getting hot and flustered, but it was definitely worse than it was in 2018.

Paul HOPPER: I think coming up with a full election next year it is probably only going to be worse, because I think in the by-election we did not have the full suite of upper house parties there as well with their little army of volunteers. So I think it could be worse if you take Joe's point of, in some cases, six volunteers per party, and if you were to multiply that out and then add the upper house specific parties, then it could be just an out-of-control mall of the people and then be really difficult for the public. So I think the time is now to put some rules in place.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Chris?

Chris CREWITHER: Firstly, thank you for your evidence and submission. On the topic of eliminating the walking and talking strategy, can you identify a particular party's volunteers who were in particular guilty of this strategy?

Joe GARRA: Look, I think we are all aware that it was obviously a tactic by the socialists to actually station people, often hundreds of metres away, to engage with someone and follow them all the way in. I understand the purpose of the tactic is to stop any other volunteer getting to that one voter. But it seems to be a lot of effort

to get one voter to vote for you, because if you are walking and talking with someone, that is all you are doing – you are only engaging with one voter – and whether they actually are listening to you is another issue. Someone is going to get hurt. I mean, there were instances of voters getting really angry with some of the volunteers, and I am surprised no-one got hit by the public.

Chris CREWTHER: Do you think that strategy, in particular via the Victorian Socialists, which is also what I saw myself, contributed to more people also being at the voting booths? Needing that constant engagement, it resulted in more campaigners, say, for the Victorian Socialists, being out there at the booths, which contributed to that?

Joe GARRA: I do not think they particularly had more volunteers than everyone else. They were more spread out. They would have their volunteers sort of around the corner. I think the major parties often had more volunteers than the socialists, actually.

The CHAIR: There were 15 Liberals at one booth at one point.

Joe GARRA: But they were all huddled together, which to me made no sense. I do not think they actually had more volunteers. They just seemed to be scattered more and engaging voters much earlier than everyone else was.

Chris CREWTHER: Yes. Did you have any concerns, like in Prahran, around the voter turnout issue? And what is your view in terms of what the VEC could do better there?

Paul HOPPER: Yes. I think the communication. Again, there are short timeframes obviously, but it needs to hit their letterbox or digital as well, if possible, from the voter records. There was also confusion in the Werribee by-election. We had a lot of people come in – you would have seen it, Dylan – wanting to vote, and they would go in and find out: ‘Oh, no, I’m not allowed to vote.’ They just were not sure, because some of the street delineations of who was in, who was out were really unclear.

The CHAIR: Werribee South.

Joe GARRA: Werribee South.

The CHAIR: And Tarneit.

Paul HOPPER: Yes, that is right. Hoppers Crossing, Tarneit, where it crossed over, yes, is pretty hard for us to even keep track of, let alone the voters. So there clearly needs to be some work done in how to communicate that, and that is a by-election thing as opposed to a full election thing.

Joe GARRA: I had lots of people I would recognise, and I would say, ‘What are you doing here? You don’t have to vote.’ They would go, ‘Oh, don’t I?’ ‘No, you live in Werribee South. Go back home.’ So I think it was messy. And again, the communication – that is why I think mailing out something to every voter is still old-fashioned but works.

Chris CREWTHER: That is all for now, Chair.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. I might go online. Nathan Lambert, did you have a question?

Nathan LAMBERT: If anyone else has got one, I am happy, Chair, for them to jump in first.

The CHAIR: Just you had not asked one yet. Either you or Sarah?

Sarah MANSFIELD: I am happy to ask a couple of questions. Just in terms of registering things like how-to-votes – I cannot remember if you had a how-to-vote card – how did you find the timeframes? I know that there had been some feedback that it was very tight for the Werribee by-election, just getting some of that organised prior to pre-poll.

Joe GARRA: It is always tight, Sarah. Look, I have run in two elections myself, and yes, you get the ballot paper a day before you have got to have a how-to-vote card. So you are racing off to a local printer, saying, ‘Quick, you’ve got to print some of these off for me.’ So that is one of the issues: you are struggling to get a

how-to-vote card out. Registering it – I think you have got a few days to actually register the official one, but just getting something printed for pre-polling is always a big rush. I do not know why it has to be such a tight timeline, why we only get like one day to print stuff.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. So a bit more time is something that you would be in favour of?

Joe GARRA: I think so. I do not know why it has to close. Voting started I think on the Monday, and the nominations closed on the Friday. I am thinking, ‘Ballot draw’s Friday and voting starts Monday, so we’ve got a weekend.’ You cannot really expect the printer to open his shop on a weekend to print stuff for you. That could be pushed back a couple of days, like to a Wednesday or something; that gives you least two working days to get stuff organised.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Just on accessibility of venues, what would you like to see around accessibility when they are selecting venues?

Joe GARRA: I think one of the venues, the Scout hall at Werribee, had no shelter, so that was not good for a hot summer’s day. And the other one was on the main street, which was not good either, for traffic flow. Both venues had issues, which I am sure the VEC will raise. You have got to be able to get to it. One you had to actually get to by car; it was actually not walking distance for many people, the main one in Werribee. It was in a very bad location, and you had cars coming in to park, to vote, and people walking and –

The CHAIR: This is on the Princes Highway?

Joe GARRA: The Princes Highway one. The traffic control were very busy there making sure that no-one was getting hit by a car. And they had the empty lot next door, which for some reason halfway through pre-polling people were not allowed to park there anymore, so that created issues as well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: For people with disabilities, like voters getting into the venues, were there any issues that you observed?

Paul HOPPER: As a volunteer cohort and candidate cohort I think we found ways to manage the accessibility requirements of people. I think that all the volunteers were pretty eyes up, heads up, when they saw someone coming in on a mobility scooter or a wheelchair, to accommodate their needs. The VEC staff were very good as well. At the Scout hall in Wyndham Vale they were very, very good if they saw someone coming in. Well, actually it was a traffic management staff in that case who were directing people with disability signs on their vehicles to go to the designated car park and then have a better way for them to get in. I think that was managed quite well with a good bunch of people.

My point around the choice of the location – obviously, being a by-election, it is short notice and all that sort of stuff. I do not know who chooses the locations – is it the VEC? – and what that process is. But in the case of the Werribee one, the only one I can speak for, if the VEC had engaged with the local members – in this case like you, Dylan – and maybe the Liberal Party branch people or some of the other people that have local knowledge and can deal with some of the understanding of traffic movements and some of the idiosyncrasies around our little pocket out there, a better location probably could have been found. So that would be my suggestion – for VEC management who select these locations to actually engage quickly with the local people to consider those needs.

Joe GARRA: The other thing, Sarah, is I do not think the public were aware that the VEC will come out to a car to allow you to vote. We were often saying to people, ‘Just stay in your car. We’ll go and find someone to come out and help you vote rather than struggling to get into the centre and out of the centre.’ I think that is something else that needs more education to the public – that if you have mobility issues, just stay in your car and they will come out to you.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The Werribee electorate obviously is quite culturally diverse now, and we have spoken about voter turnout and how the VEC did it, educating and notifying voters that there was a by-election. How do you think they did in terms of having that material in different languages to cater for how diverse that electorate is now?

Paul HOPPER: I am not sure, Dylan.

The CHAIR: Did you see any of it?

Joe GARRA: No, not really. I mean, the timing was bad too, as I think we have mentioned before. The timing of the election was a bad time for a by-election after the January holidays and expecting people to suddenly go vote.

Paul HOPPER: I mean, we did make a comment in our submission around the lack of awareness of the low-sensory voting station and accessibility. We did attend that and go to some effort to just promote it on our socials for those with low-sensory needs. I happen to have a sister who has got a substantial amount of experience in that space, and she was able to provide some suggestions of different community groups that would know that cohort of people and just let them know. Pretty much everyone we spoke to in those groups was unaware. For the sensory needs of people out there in the community, I think the VEC could develop an understanding of who the community groups, the government groups and the not-for-profit groups are that deal in the low-sensory space, create a database and notify them. Obviously the NDIA is a federal thing, but it has records of all that sort of stuff. Anyway, I will leave it to smarter people to work out how to do that.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Can I go, or is it Nathan?

The CHAIR: Yes, yes. Fire away.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thanks, guys. I spent a lot of time out there during this by-election. It was good interacting with you both, and I completely agree on the heat. The VEC have recommended in the past the ability to basically co-opt certain council buildings for the use of pre-poll and elections. Do you think that is a good idea?

Joe GARRA: I think so. Normally they have got plenty of car parking as well at council buildings, so it would be a good idea doing that. If we had been allowed to park next door, I think that would have worked much better, with the main one on Princes Highway there.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes.

The CHAIR: On the grass paddock.

Joe GARRA: Yes. But then I think the owner cracked it and said no more cars there.

The CHAIR: Lease his paddock off him for two weeks.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I think this by-election in particular illuminated what people like Nathan and I and Dylan already know about that one particular party, being the Victorian Socialists, and how they behave. It sort of illuminated that to the rest of the community. I want to add on to what Dylan was saying about your walking and talking idea: I saw in Broadmeadows at the last election elderly women turn around because they were so frightened by two or three people following them from their car. How do you think that would work in reality, and what do you think the mechanisms are for the VEC to intervene?

Paul HOPPER: Perhaps they need to have more roving VEC staff outside of the actual voting centre. I think that would be the only way you could do it. It is like policing any rule. I mean, the rule is there, but it is only as good as how it is policed. I think it is going to require more boots on the ground from VEC staff, so therefore more allocation of staff, budget, whatever is required.

Joe GARRA: What I noticed was that, at one of the pre-polls, often it was the migrant women that were being targeted. I am not sure whether that was intentional or unintentional, but it just looked bad. You have got someone with limited English being harangued by a volunteer walking with them, and often it was women, because they probably realised, 'If we pick on a big bloke, he might clock us one'. But yes, it was bizarre – it was very bizarre behaviour.

The CHAIR: I think it is more around a particular policy issue than it is to do with –

Chris CREWITHER: Or do you think it is because they deem them as potentially more susceptible to being influenced, particularly as perhaps newer voters?

Joe GARRA: Possibly. We do not know what their tactics are, and –

Evan MULHOLLAND: Their tactics on occasion have been to racially profile people and say different things depending on who is coming in. I think it is a new beast for many people and something that this committee will have to look into.

Joe GARRA: Yes. And some of the attacks where I got a little bit upset were personal attacks against Paul by their volunteers, who have probably never met Paul and do not know anything of what he stands for. They just decided, ‘We’re not going to like this white capitalist’, I suppose is what they would refer to Paul as. So that was very disappointing, the personal attacks. I know that is part and parcel of politics and probably you cannot put rules around that, but that was really disappointing, some of their stuff.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes.

The CHAIR: I am going to go to Nathan Lambert online for what I reckon will probably be our last question.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. I will just pick up from where Evan was just asking his questions. Yes, I agree. Obviously it is a particular challenge with the Victorian Socialists and I think were they here – were Corey Oakley or any of their people here – they would be very straight-up that it is of course an intentional strategy and even the component of it that they know annoys some voters is also intentional. They are well aware of that and ultimately, for their own electoral reasons, have decided that they can bear the cost of annoying some voters if it means they win primary votes off other voters. So it is here to stay.

I appreciated your submission and your central idea you have just been outlining – that is, to have more VEC staff enforcing these things – but I put it to you as a proposition that that would be very, very hard to do and expensive to start with. You have to pay for more staff, but then also the job you are asking people to do is quite difficult: to make quite subtle rulings about quite aggressive people. It is akin to sort of a council compliance officer job. It is quite hard. You need training. You cannot just send the average person out to do that, so the expense and the time involved would be huge. I put it to you that practically – and we have talked about registering voters, we have talked about limiting numbers; all of those things have run into real implementation problems that major parties and other parties oppose – if we came down to a choice between banning all campaigners handing out, as they do in the ACT, or the current system which would you choose – out of the ACT system with no-one handing out how to votes within 100 metres of a polling booth or the current status quo?

Joe GARRA: I would almost go for banning all volunteers. I mean, if we are saying we cannot limit volunteers, we cannot monitor their behaviour, we are basically saying it is a free-for-all out there, and that is terrible. I mean, it is disappointing that as a society we are saying, ‘We can’t fix this. All we can do is either have no-one there or do whatever you want out there.’ Now, surely there has got to be somewhere in the middle where we can say, ‘Hey, let’s limit the numbers – three.’ If you limit it to three volunteers, that would actually stop a lot of the walking and talking, because you have not got enough people to actually waste on one voter, have you – if you have only got three volunteers there and you have got people coming from, say, three directions at you?

Nathan LAMBERT: Victorian Socialists are not the only people who have done this. I have been involved in campaigns doing this myself. You only need a couple of you who are persuasive and you can monopolise a voter’s time if you are prepared to be assertive enough about it. I take your point. It would be great to have a midway solution, but I just thought I would ask you which you would choose if we agreed there was not a midway solution.

Paul HOPPER: I would probably go the other way to Joe.

Joe GARRA: It is a problem for all of us.

Paul HOPPER: Our party we are setting up is going to be a democratic party, that is for sure, and we will have a few disagreements. But no, I think, especially as a minor party or an independent, you need the opportunity to get your brand out there – to talk to people to, to sow in that face-name recognition. For me, I felt it really did work, so – just me personally – I would still want to see the opportunity to at least be there, smile, shake someone’s hand and give them the opportunity to engage with me, which is more my style as opposed to the Socialist Party’s style. As I said, it did work for me, but I think something does need to be done. I think the VEC staff just need to have the clear guidelines mandate to enforce – and then: How do they enforce it? How many – numbers? Do they have support with some sort of security? I am not sure. You do not want a too militant-style sort of enforcement or anything of that nature. I mean, overall the Socialist Party are the ones that probably create a little bit of the angst out there. Generally speaking, though – and it is the second campaign I have worked on – the volunteers, the voter mall and all that is normally pretty good, in my experience. People across parties enjoy a bit of banter, a bit of discussion and are really fair-minded with the voters coming in, so personally I would not want to see the current system thrown out just because of the problems deriving out of one party in particular.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Nathan. We are going to have to leave it there, just looking at the time. Thank you so much for coming, thanks for your submission and thanks for giving evidence.

Witnesses withdrew.