30 October 2020

Mr Lee Tarlamis MLC
Chair
Parliamentary Electoral Matters Committee - Inquiry into the Impact of Social
Media on Elections and Electoral Administration

Dear Chair and Committee members,

On behalf of the women candidates and voters among 1200 members of the
More Women for Local Government (MWLG) Facebook Group, we welcome
the opportunity to contribute to this timely Inquiry.

Victorian Local Government elections and community campaigning were
occurring at the height of COVID19 over the entire 7 months of the crisis. The
decision by the Government to proceed with the elections and the special
measures required, have amplified the impacts of social media in local elections
in both positive and negative ways.

Currently, counting of election votes is underway in 290 separate ward and
unsubdivided elections across 76 Victorian Local Governments. Early counts are
causing serious concern about the implications for gender equality, and the
Victorian Government's own goal of 50:50 women and men councillors by 2025.

Many campaigns of women candidates have been forced to rely almost
exclusively on use of social media due to the significant impact of Victorian
COVID19 restrictions on traditional campaigning strategies. We predict that,
based on early and ongoing counts, this will advantage candidates who have
large campaign budgets (e.g. for numerous well placed designed corflutes,
posters and other displays, multiple mail outs to all voters, paid ads, etc); wide
name recognition due to current incumbency; and are working, openly or
secretly, as campaign teams with political party expert networks at their
disposal. Women are not equally represented among these cohorts. It is well
known that many women candidates are stronger in traditional low cost
campaigning with face to face voter connection. The final results will be
confirmed by the VEC on Friday November 13. MWLG will be able to provide
more information after this date, should the Committee have any follow up
questions.

The following submission has been prepared by the three group moderators –
Linda Bennett, Antonella Celi and Ruth McGowan - at short notice. If the
Committee has any questions or would like more details about the experiences of
our members, please contact Linda Bennett ██ ████████████████
███████████

Yours respectfully,

Linda Bennett (on behalf of MWLG Facebook Group and moderators)

The impacts of social media in the 2020 Victorian Local Government Elections – a submission from moderators of the More Women for Local Government (MWLG) Facebook Group

> "We expect our opponents and their support teams to critique our capacity, policies, positions and past performance. We expect campaign 'hijinks' like removal of election signage. What we don't expect (or deserve) is to be personally attacked on social media, harassed with anonymous phone calls or emails and be outright slandered with vicious lies about our character spread around our communities."
>
> Candidate 2020 – member of MWLG

Background

Who we are

The More Women for Local Government (MWLG) Facebook Group supports women candidates standing for Victorian Local Government elections. It is a private community online forum for women local government candidates, potential candidates and their supporters, and elected women councillors.

The Facebook Group has 1200 members and growing, from 100 in the 2012 elections. It is administered by three community-minded volunteer women moderators who are passionate about encouraging women in local government and cover a broad range and depth of local government expertise including participation in various roles in every local government elections since 2001 - Ruth McGowan, Antonella Celi and Linda Bennett.

Our goals

- We exist to support an increase in the numbers and diversity of women in local governments.
- We support the goal of achieving gender equality, 50:50 women and men, in local government by 2025.
- We align with the Victorian Local Government Women's Charter principles of gender equity, diversity and active citizenship.

1. The context

1.1.   At its worst, Australian politics can tend to be abusive and at times a bullying communication style is accepted e.g. "the bear pit" of parliament. It has included behaviour reflecting misogyny in all modern elections. There is evidence of absolutely unacceptable behaviour, often of a sexualised and racist nature, and it exists in all environments where women stand for and enter formal politics at Federal, State and Local governments. It is exhibited in many ways through all media platforms

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2

including most recently social media, and in person in many formal and community environments. While social media's unrestricted 'free for all' provides the benefits of a public voice, at the same time it provides a new and easy vehicle for 'fake' information and discriminative bullying.

The submission below does not single out local government as a special case. Many of the issues and suggestions below have already been well canvassed in past elections in all spheres of government and reported widely to authorities responsible for conduct of elections. It is shocking that despite this, the structural and organisational responses to the issues continue to lag far behind what the community expects. It is hoped that this Inquiry results in long awaited action and leadership by responsible authorities.

1.2.   The Victorian Gender Equality Act 2020 and the role of the Victorian e-safety Commissioner are directly relevant to the policy and practical concerns about impacts of social media on the local government elections expressed here.

1.3.   The VEC estimated in July 2020 that running elections for 76 local governments involved 290 individual elections. The later decision of the Victorian Government to proceed with elections in the midst of COVID19 crisis have magnified social media campaigning issues for good and bad. Authorities in general were not prepared to address all the anticipated problems, despite knowing of these emerging and current issues since social media first appeared in a noticeable way in the 2012, 2016 and now 2020 elections.
file:///Users/linda/Downloads/2020%20Local%20Government%20Elections%20Final%20Service%20Plan-1.pdf - P7

1.4.   Campaigning via social media is now an essential tool for the serious candidate. However an Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media should be considering social media's complimentary role as part of an integrated package of election strategies rather than the almost exclusive role it played in Victoria's 2020 Local Government elections. The 2020 COVID19 crisis meant that the majority of women candidates (i.e. in metro Melbourne and to a lesser extent regional Victoria) had to rely almost exclusively on social media. This created serious disadvantage for many women candidates on a steep learning curve for the necessary Internet knowledge, skills and support. Time and budget constraints were more complicated for many due to COVID19 impacts. Of course, other women already familiar with the online world used social media in creative and effective ways. However, the urgent issues of how to protect privacy, safety and manage unwanted abuse e.g. trolling, have been an ongoing disincentive to public participation for both experienced and inexperienced "onliners". See 2.3 below.

This highlighted the importance of traditional methods and in their absence why the 2020 Victorian Local Government Elections could have

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3

been considered as being an unfair playing field. Women candidates in the MWLG group have reported that the loss of traditional low-cost campaigning strategies (e.g. door knocking, hand delivery of flyers, community listening posts, and attending community events) severely impacted on their ability to reach widely and personally in the community.

Facebook has been the primary medium for women candidates in the experience of MWLG. This alone, while having many positive benefits, has also highlighted shortcomings and systemic issues raised in the recent documentary "The Social Dilemma".

2 How social media is used in local government elections – the experiences of women candidates in the MWLG Facebook group

2.1. Positives – can expand communication to previously untapped parts of the electorate; can allow additional and personal online interaction between voters and candidates; can overcome distance and time constraints; can encourage some individuals to become more "tech savvy";

2.2. Negatives – used alone, misses key parts of the electorate; requires access to reliable fast broadband service (as promised by the NBN but not readily available across all Victoria); can be easily misused to spread fake news and unsubstantiated rumours; can expose candidates to intimidation of online abuse in all its forms; can place women candidates in an unsafe position creating fear and high stress; the complexity of using social media in the public realm while protecting personal privacy was high in the minds on many women candidates;

2.3 In early October 2020, a member of MWLG conducted a poll about women candidate experiences to determine what level of harassment and negative behaviour those in the group have experienced during the election campaign to date. Of those who responded (65 votes and comments from women candidates), **37% had been harassed on social media**, 24% had experienced lies being spread about them within their communities and 6% had had intimidating and defamatory letters written about them.

3. The capacity of the current regulatory environment to respond to increasing use of social media in local elections

3.1 Despite 8 years of warning that social media campaigning is increasing in local government elections (since 2012), responsible authorities have, with a few exceptions, failed to keep up with how social media is used and abused. This includes both regulatory and investigative bodies.

Example: in one municipality involving several separate elections, the Election manager a fortnight before voting closed advised in writing that every single post on a candidate Facebook page had to be authorised.

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4

Subsequently after a number of complaints from distressed candidates, the VEC advised that this was not the case.

Example: electoral regulations have improved marginally in response to the new environment, eg, ability of candidates to purchase a PO Box address for authorisation purposes. An improvement for sure, but it is nevertheless easy for those wishing harm to find out where candidates live.

4.   The capacity of the Victorian Electoral Commission, the Local Government Inspectorate and potentially to support the increasing use of social and other online media in local government elections

4.1   There were concerns expressed about issues to do with the technology platform and tool for submitting candidate profiles and photos. This resulted in incomplete candidate information and voters missing out on access to information about serious candidates.

4.2.   With complaints about "dummy" candidates (signalled for example by no contact details, no candidate statement, no photo) and efforts at each election to overcome this problem for the community which skews election results in some areas, a simple way to eliminate the offenders, and to include the genuine, would be to check those unfinished submissions before closing.

4.2   The inability of authorities to respond in a clear and timely way to urgent complaints and concerns of candidates was too frequent – official websites unresponsive or frozen, confusion about authorisation practices for online campaigning, lack of clarity and effectiveness on issues of online abuse. These examples reflect an urgent need for the Victorian Government and its responsible election authorities to improve technology, in house expertise, and effective responses to some of the well known shortcomings of the online world (trolling, fake news, lies, abuse, threats, etc).

5.   Addressing the above issues

5.1   Misusing social media during an election (lies, fake news, threats, sexualised abuse and bullying)

Recommendation 1
If a candidate or voter is found to be guilty of spreading fake news, or generally misusing social media, including failure to identify themselves during an election, that person will be prohibited from standing for any public election for at least 5 years. If that person is elected, they shall not be allowed to hold the position during that term of office.

Recommendation 2
The Victorian Government funds fact-checking organisations.

5.2   Improving authorities and peak bodies responses from 2020 onwards

Recommendation 3
A public "audit" with a gender lens be undertaken cooperatively by the VEC, Local Government Inspectorate (LGI) and IBAC of the 2012, 2016 and 2020 VEC and other Elections Reports to Parliament, with particular reference to any detailed data about problems with social media in campaigns.

Recommendations for improvements be extracted, reviewed and implemented at least 12 months before the 2024 elections.
https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/VEC_2016_Local_Government_Elections_Consolidted_Report_for_tabling_-_14_June_2017__1__hhcC3ymT.PDF

Recommendation 4
An audit be undertaken by integrity agencies including VEC, the LGI and IBAC to identify and act on any differences in themes underlying complaints about elections between women and men.

Recommendation 5
Relevant authorities, including local governments themselves, openly seek out and publicise widely in the community, Victorian and federal police and other legal advice which clearly identifies the relevant laws concerning use of social media. The publicity campaign to use plain English and other community languages.

In the majority of elections, moderators believe that social media abuse is not prevalent. However the presence and enormity of what does occur is so terrible, it creates fear and loathing amongst women in all our diversities. It prevents engagement and re-engagement of candidates in local elections.

Recommendation 6
Local government peak bodies (LGPro, MAV and VLGA) and the Victorian Government create an ongoing effective media campaign about the positives of local governments and good governance. It is important that the reputation of local government reflects the balanced realities.

Recommendation 7
The Victorian Parliament enacts "truth in political advertising" laws.

Recommendation 8
Authorities enforce the law that electoral comment must be authorised by a real person, and come down hard and fast on anonymous activity in social media during elections.

4.3.   Improving candidate readiness for campaigning and potential office

Recommendation 9
Responsible authorities conduct media literacy campaigns for all candidates and the wider community, and partner with local community organisations and networks to spread the word.

Recommendation 10
Proper use of social media information and education be included in all compulsory candidate training session

Recommendation 11
All candidates be trained in use of social media though existing candidate training.

Recommendation 12
All candidates be required to sign a pledge identifying the standard of good governance campaigning hoped for in the wider community. An example which could be adapted is the St James Ethics Centre Politicians' Pledge.
https://www.smh.com.au/cqstatic/141b7u/thepledge.pdf

Recommendation 13
The election authority (VEC) provides specific online and social media rules and behaviour guidelines for Councils and election candidates to ensure accurate and consistent information.

Recommendation 14
The election authority (VEC) monitors and provides assistance to candidates with incomplete online profile submissions.