1 June 2007

Mark Roberts
Executive Officer (acting)
Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF THE 2006 VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION

Dear Mr Roberts,

I write to suggest to the some changes to the way the Victorian Electoral Commission counts ballots.

As the committee will know, the VEC does not currently conduct a full two-candidate count for each booth at a state election. Instead, it conducts a 'rough' two-candidate count at the booth level, and then a second, more formal count at the district level.

There is often a discrepancy between these two counts. However, no attempt is made to reconcile them.

Students and others who study Victoria's election results are often surprised to find that if they add up the two-candidate figures for each booth, they get a different result to that shown for the district as a whole. For instance, the booth figures for Frankston District in 2006 show Alistair Harkness out-polled Rochelle McArthur by 1,711 votes. The district figures show he out-polled Rochelle McArthur by 2,027 votes. There is no explanation as to where the extra 316 votes came from.

The uncertainty is compounded when preferences are not fully distributed, and when error tolerances are allowed during the reconciliation of certified lists.

It should be stressed that these ‘close enough, good enough’ practices are by no means a negative reflection on the VEC – rather, they reflect a historic prudence in the face of limited budgets and very labour-intensive requirements. But one of the great contributions of information technology professionals to our society is the development of more affordable data management systems. The public can now reasonably expect institutions to have a higher standard of accounting, and a higher standard of integrity as a result.

Committee members will understand why the VEC in particular should meet these standards. Unfortunately, there are only too many examples of the injustice and despair caused by governments that lack legitimacy.

I suggest to the committee that the Electoral Act 2002 be amended to require full two-candidate counts for every booth, full preference distributions for every district, and a full reconciliation of certified lists.

Yours sincerely,

Nathan Lambert
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