

Dear Mr Somyurek,

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Electoral Matters Committee.

The Electoral Reform Green Paper

The Greens are long term advocates of reform of electoral funding. In regard to the matters raised by Senator Faulkner our opinions are as follows:

- The setting of the campaign donation disclosure threshold at \$1000 is a “no-brainer”. It is essential that the public have access to information about any donations potentially large enough to affect the behaviour of political parties or parliamentarians. Annual donations of close to \$10,000 could certainly do this. While there is room for debate whether \$1000, \$500 or \$1500 best represents a balance between transparency and practicality, \$1000 is a reasonable figure to choose.
- The Greens are not aware of overseas donations having had a particularly undesirable influence on Australian politics. Moreover there are theoretical circumstances where overseas donations may have a valuable role to play – for example in strengthening opposition parties in newly democratic countries. However, such circumstances are unlikely to apply in Australia and, all things considered we believe the capacity of the AEC to enforce Australia's laws is reason enough to restrict donations to Australia.
- The Greens fully support the goal of ensuring that candidates do not run for election for the purposes of financial gain. This is one of the reasons we support the 4% threshold for public funding, despite having suffered greatly from it in the past. Nevertheless, we have deep concerns about the way in which this legislation may be implemented. Genuine political parties do not simply appear at election time and then go into hibernation until the next election. It is important they be able to operate properly between elections, and this takes money. It can be very hard to separate tasks done for one election from those done for the long term growth of the party. We believe public funding should be restricted to legitimate party building, rather than financing a new wing of a leader's house, but that a party should be able to determine how that party building is done. This point is largely irrelevant to parties with major sources of private funding, but very important to the Greens and smaller parties who depend on public funding to maintain infrastructure between elections so that we can be a credible force when these occur.
- As with the first point, the treating of divisions of a party as separate entities, so large donations can be split nine ways, can only be seen as an effort to undermine transparency and democracy and we welcome its elimination.
- The Greens would prefer to see quarterly disclosure time-frames as exist in many other countries. However, we accept six months as an encouraging first step.

Voter Participation and Informal Voting

In regard to the points self generated by the Committee in turn the Greens believe:

- There are deep ethical questions as to whether people should be forced to enrol. However, the fact is that very few people who are not on the roll are conscientious objectors. Most are not on the roll out of laziness, lack of knowledge as to how to enrol or because of widespread myths that late enrollers will have to pay fines for past transgressions. In this context the Greens would welcome automatic enrolment for new citizens and those turning 18. There may be grounds for exemptions for those with religious or political objections, but we do not expect these to be widely used.
- Election day registration exists in several states of America. The Greens see the idea as attractive in principle, but would welcome research into its advantages and drawbacks in the

places where it has been tried before leaping to a conclusion as to whether it should be introduced here.

- Low voter turnout, particularly amongst the young and the homeless is a problem which undermines the legitimacy of elected governments, and can increase the alienation of these groups from democracy and society in general. The 6% increase in votes between the 2006 state election and turnout in Victoria at the subsequent federal election demonstrates that there is considerable room for improvement in enrolment and turnout at state elections. Our understanding is that most of this comes from people under 25 and the homeless, but if there is a significant pool of non-voters amongst the elderly and new communities then this also needs to be addressed (this is separate from the question of encouraging immigrants to take out citizenship). As far as the Greens are aware the problem is primarily one of enrolment rather than access to the polls on or in the lead-up to election day.
Many successful strategies have been used to increase enrolment. What these generally have in common is that they cost money. The AEC has more funding to pursue those strategies than the VEC, and for this reason more people become enrolled in the lead-up to federal than state elections. The Greens believe that the cost of these projects is small compared to the benefits for democracy, and we would welcome increased funding for the VEC to enable them to be expanded in future. We do not consider it appropriate for political parties to be deciding how best the electoral commissions should run enrol to vote campaigns, although of course we have suggestions.
- In assessing informal voting it is important to distinguish between deliberately informal votes and votes informalised by mistake. Casting a deliberately informal vote is a basic right. Reducing the number of voters who choose to do so is a matter of improving the functioning of democracy generally, including the expansion of genuine choice. The Greens believe that increased proportional representation would help in this regard, but recognise that this is well outside the scope of this committee.
In regard to accidental informal votes there is no doubt that publicity campaigns such as those run before every election help, and increased funding for these would be useful. However, we are doubtful whether this is the most important strategy. Instead we believe more focus must be given to efforts on polling day, and well beforehand.
I personally received a truncated version of the correct instructions for voting at the 2006 state election. I don't blame the individual polling official – I had waited for almost an hour to vote and the queue was longer when I left than when I arrived. Staff were naturally keen to get people through as quickly as possible, and explaining how to vote was not their priority. Having more staff on hand in future, and giving them more training in how to explain the voting system, is probably the best investment we can make in reducing informal voting. Again this will require the government to provide more funding for the VEC, as well as counting on the VEC to spend it wisely.
In the likely event that the next state and federal elections are held close together it will be a particular challenge for the two electoral commissions to explain that the rules for voting below the line in the Senate and Legislative Council are not the same. We believe the AEC and VEC should be thinking about a coordinated approach to this problem well before time.
- The Greens seek an end to the punitive system of dealing with changes in enrolment. When moving house updating their enrolment is generally the last thing on people's minds. The situation where someone can be removed from the roll at their old address without being informed or any effort made to enrol them at their new address should change.
There is very little evidence of deliberate enrolment fraud for the purposes of state or federal elections in recent times. Fraudulent enrolment for internal party purposes, as exposed in the Shepherdson Inquiry, can be dealt with in other ways. We should be working to make enrolment easier, not putting obstacles in voters' way.

- Electronic voting technologies have a role to play in improving voter participation, but must be used with considerable care. The electronic voting systems for the vision impaired introduced at the 2006 state election were a worthy initiative and with proper assessment we would be happy to see their moderate expansion. However, the Greens are deeply opposed to the electronic voting for the bulk of voters, particularly without a voting receipt. Horror stories of US voting systems recording more votes than people living in the district, or other impossible outcomes, are widely available. Even if not all are true it is clear that we have far more to lose than gain through making electronic voting common. That said, the Greens would welcome the use of electronic voting for Antarctic researchers and some other overseas voters. We also believe there may be benefits in the provision of an electronic roll, ensuring that once a person is registered as having voted at one booth they cannot do so at another.

Stephen Luntz
On behalf of the Australian Greens Victoria