

Submission to the Electoral Matters Committee's  
Inquiry into the future of Victoria's Electoral  
Administration

February 1 2013

The Nationals - Victoria

The Nationals are pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Victoria Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration and matters related thereto.

It is The Nationals belief that Victoria, and Australia generally, has a robust, independent, and reliable system for the conduct of elections, and any changes to those systems should be approached cautiously. While our administration of elections will evolve over time, many decisions to change can have unintended or unforeseen consequences that may reduce the current strong public respect for our electoral system.

Australia's electoral administration has long been recognised as one of the best in the world, and international comparisons reinforce that view. It is The Nationals belief that changes to it should not be undertaken lightly.

#### **Discussion point one: Direct enrolment**

The Nationals have concerns regarding the introduction to direct enrolment and welcomes the cautious approach taken by the VEC in the 2010 Victorian State Election.

Direct enrolment is a significant change to the management of the electoral roll and any change to the way the electoral roll is managed, maintained and updated must not bring with it a reduction in the confidence electors have in it, or consequently raise questions about the outcomes of an election utilising that roll. With identity fraud on the increase, direct enrolment increases the possibility of manipulation of the electoral roll.

There are practical difficulties of assuring consistency of approach of direct enrolment such as individuals with (either legitimately or illegitimately) multiple addresses or conflicting information on different source databases. There have been quite legitimate concerns raised regarding the privacy implications of direct enrolment and the sharing of information.

There is currently absolutely no impediment to enroll to vote, and it is a simple process to complete. By removing the requirement for an individual to enroll, there is a reduction in the individual's responsibility to enroll and a decreasing connection with having to participate in the electoral process.

## **Discussion point two: Compulsory voting**

While there has been recent media coverage canvassing the possibility of abolishing compulsory voting in Australia, The Nationals believe that the status quo should be preserved.

It is an important distinction to make that electors are compelled only to attend a polling booth, not to cast a ballot.

## **Discussion point three: Informal voting**

While some increase in informal voting may have been observed in Victoria, it is still at a relatively low rate. The Nationals believe that only the rates of informal voting at a statewide election should be considered to indicate the general level of informal voting, rather than basing decisions on by-elections.

By-elections have a very different dynamic involved, including the range of candidates and the possibility of one of the larger parties not fielding a candidate. In such a circumstance, a voter who usually supports the party that is not contesting the seat may elect to cast an informal vote rather than vote for one of the candidates on the ballot paper.

The introduction of optional preferential voting in both Queensland and New South Wales for state elections, and the preservation of compulsory voting for federal elections has seen a significant increase in the rate of informal voting at federal elections in those states over time.

## **Discussion point four: Early voting**

In the submission to the Electoral Matter's Committee Inquiry into the conduct of the 2010 State Election, The Nationals canvassed the issue of early voting and our views remain the same.

The relevant section of that submission stated:-

We are firmly of the view that early voting should be limited to one week in lieu of the present arrangements.

Essentially, the greatest risk of the current long, early voting duration is that voters cast a vote for a particular candidate or party about which they may later have second thoughts. For instance, the major parties now seldom release all of their policies until very near the election date. In some cases, the campaign launch proper does not take place until after early voting has commenced. If an attractive policy is released or if a scandal envelops a candidate after a person has already cast an early vote, there is obviously no way that vote can be retracted or rescinded no matter how much the elector may then wish so to do.

Logic dictates that the most accurate representation of the electorate's intention will be captured if votes are cast as near as practicable to polling day.

The current extended early voting period imposes additional costs on all parties involved in the election; the VEC and therefore the taxpayer, political parties and individual candidates. It particularly disadvantages independents because they have little capacity to staff an early voting centre for a lengthy period. This difficulty is exacerbated if there is more than one early voting place in an Assembly division.

The Nationals endorse the concept of early voting in parallel with postal voting but believe that a duration of one week is more appropriate than the present arrangements. Since the introduction of early voting some years ago, the number of electors choosing to vote early has risen substantially at each succeeding poll. It beggars belief that many of these electors cannot attend a voting centre on election day and it therefore follows that many are breaching Section 98 of the *Electoral Act (2002)* either in ignorance or because they are prepared to make a false declaration. Neither circumstance is conducive for a healthy democracy.

When considering the range of options available to Victorians in how, when and where to cast their vote, we believe there are ample options through absentee mechanisms, postal ballot provisions and a 7 day pre poll to ensure integrity of outcome.

**The Nationals recommend an amendment to Section 99 of the *Electoral Act (2002)* specifying that early voting shall not commence earlier than 5 working days prior to voting day."**

### **Discussion point 5: Community engagement with the electoral process**

The Nationals commend the work that the VEC has undertaken in delivering community engagement and education activities. While there are specific groups targeted by the VEC, The Nationals believe it is important that there are activities targeted to the electorate as a whole to increase the general level of awareness of voters.

Those education activities, along with those of the parliament and the political parties will assist with the knowledge of the Legislative Council in Victoria. While there may be some confusion, or lack of knowledge regarding the Legislative Council, The Nationals believe that it is an important historical name and feature to retain the nomenclature Legislative Council in our bi-cameral state legislature.

While the discussion paper canvasses the idea of the introduction of US-style primaries for candidate selection, this is entirely a matter for each political party to decide.

The Nationals in New South Wales pioneered primaries in Australia, conducting a “community pre-selection” in the State seat of Tamworth prior to the 2011 NSW State election. On that occasion over 4000 people voted in the pre-selection and the successful candidate from the four nominees went on to win the seat at the 2011 NSW State election.

### **Discussion point six: Electronic voting**

There have been enormous increases in the use and capability of technologies, including within the electoral process, and there may be at a time in the future extensive use of electronic voting in elections. The Nationals however believe any changes to the current system should be approached with extreme caution.

The current ballot methods have served Victoria (and Australia) very well, and we see little of the disputes sometimes observed in other jurisdictions. Any change to that could have significant risks to voter confidence in our electoral system.

Questions of security, data accuracy, and data retention are just some of the many concerns with any change to electronic voting.

While it may happen at some time in the future, there would be an enormous amount of work, testing, and education before electronic voting could replace our current reliable and trusted methods. Remote electronic voting would be an even more difficult introduction.

### **Discussion point seven: Social media and Victorian electoral administration**

Social media has become a fundamental part of our modern society, including in the conduct of election campaigns. It brings with it challenges for those tasked with the administration of the electoral process.

The Nationals believe that just because social media is quite different from traditional methods of campaigning, that does not mean it should be exempt from authorisation. There would be an inherent inconsistency to only require a portion of material to be authorized.

A case could be argued that the need for authorisation is even more stark with social media due to the reach and speed with which information that is posted can be disseminated. While twitter may be more difficult to deal with authorisation, and it being impractical to require it in the space of 140 characters, there may be other solutions such as authorisation on the authors profile.