

Level 3,
Ross House,
247 Flinders Lane
Melbourne Victoria 3000
Tel 03 9654 1400
Toll Free 1800 033 660
Fax 03 9650 3200
TTY 03 9639 1728
Email: bca@bca.org.au

Blind Citizens Australia

Inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration
Executive Officer
Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3002



30th January 2013

Dear Electoral Matters Committee,

Blind Citizens Australia is a unique charitable organisation that is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. All of our Board of Directors and our committees are required by our Constitution to be people who are blind or vision impaired. Many of our staff are also vision impaired. We have over 3000 members around Australia who are all people who experience blindness. This is why we are best placed to comment on the very necessary changes needed to improve access to voting practices for people who are blind or vision impaired.

We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Blind Citizens Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to this Inquiry, with our submission informed from the direct experiences of people who are blind or vision impaired. Blind Citizens Australia has chosen only to comment on areas within the discussion paper where our expertise specifically extends.

We draw the Committee's attention to our previous submission to the Electoral Matters Committee in May 2010 which has been enclosed as Attachment A. We note that this submission appears to be absent from the Electoral Matters Committee website and therefore are uncertain whether this was considered in the deliberations of the Committee at that time. Blind Citizens Australia therefore requests that the Committee take note of the contents of our previous submission in addition to our comments below.

Electronic assisted voting

Electronic assisted voting provides an important alternative to traditional voting mechanisms particularly for electors who have difficulty accessing current voting systems, such as people who are blind or vision impaired. This is particularly important for voters who may have become disenfranchised from exercising their democratic right to vote independently due to the barriers they have experienced in the past.

There are varying levels of blindness and vision impairment with no such thing as a 'one size' fits all approach. People who are blind or vision impaired require different adjustments ranging from large print ballots and Braille ballot papers to information being provided audibly for people who do not have usable vision. Electronic assisted voting provides a mechanism which enables individuals who are blind or vision impaired to cast their votes privately and independently without the supervision or assistance of another person.

To highlight the importance of enabling independence and maintaining privacy during the voting process for people who are blind or vision impaired, Blind Citizens Australia draws from a member's voting experience during the 2010 federal election:

"I ended up going back to my local polling booth and had the official read the ballot paper to me. He sniggered when he got to the Sex Party and made a disparaging comment about the party I was to actually give my first vote to".
BCA Member, NSW

In addition to being inappropriate, conduct such as the above example raises further consequences for a voter who is blind or vision impaired who may have no choice but to rely on the assistance of a polling official. In this instance, there was no certainty that the vote was cast in line with the preferences of the voter. This is why it is vital that an accessible, secret, independent and verifiable mechanism is available for people who cannot complete a printed ballot.

Remote Voting

One of the most important benefits of electronic assisted voting is the ability for people who are blind or vision impaired to vote independently in a place which is accessible and meets their needs. As noted in our May 2010 submission, Blind Citizens Australia have found that there are consistent systemic barriers that prevent blind and vision impaired individuals in casting their vote at voting centres. The sheer distance to the nearest voting centre, insufficient access to public transport and the impracticalities of seeking orientation and mobility instruction to a location that requires a once off visit are the barriers most reported by members from previous voting experiences.

"I too am trying to think how to get to the nearest AEC venue, which is not on the public transport route. I'm not interested in Orientation and Mobility for this once only trek, and I wonder anyway whether my local blindness agency would have the time to teach me." BCA Member, Victoria

A number of members have noted that they would not have been able to vote accessibly if a family member had not driven them to the site. As noted by one person, "I was lucky I had someone to take me".

These systemic barriers remain difficult to resolve, particularly for individuals living in a regional and rural locations and individuals who are reliant on significant others to remain involved in the community. Until the availability of electronic assisted voting is increased to allow people to vote closer to or in their own home, many people will continue to rely on family and friends to cast their vote on their behalf or use a postal vote. This will continue to be the case even if this compromises a person's independence and privacy and in turn their civic participation.

We are encouraged by the progress of the NSW Electoral Commission in developing accessible home based voting systems and view this as a precedent which can be further developed and modified. Blind Citizens Australia strongly recommends the continued development and modification of electronic voting procedures in Victoria to ensure that the system is not only accessible, but also accurate, secure and verifiable.

Blind Citizens Australia makes the following recommendations:

1. That a form of electronic voting must continue to be offered not only for independence but to enable meaningful participation of people who are blind or vision impaired.
2. The continued development and modification of electronic voting procedures in Victoria to ensure that the system is not only independently accessible, but also accurate, secure and verifiable.
3. The continued development of 'bringing electronic assisted voting to the voter' and providing an option for individuals who are blind or vision impaired to be able to make an independent and private vote from the comfort of their own homes in light of the barriers people who are blind or vision impaired experience.
4. That information about accessible voting processes is included in public campaigns at future elections and in a timely manner.

Blind Citizens Australia would welcome further discussion on the issues raised in this response and in our previous submission attached. For more information, please contact Thai Nguyen, Advocacy and Policy Officer (Victoria) on (03) 9654 1400 or email thai.nguyen@bca.org.au

Yours Sincerely,

Thai Nguyen
Advocacy and Policy Officer (Victoria)
Blind Citizens Australia

Attachment A:

Blind Citizens Australia submission: Parliamentary inquiry into the functions and administration of voting centres (including joint voting centres) giving consideration to issues of location, accessibility, participation and transparency, 28 May 2010