



ELECTORAL COMMISSION
QUEENSLAND

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No 8

RECEIVED

17 MAR 2003

LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL AND
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
COMMITTEE

14 March 2003

Ms Sarah Lim
A/Research Director
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative
Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Ms Lim

I have read with interest the Issues Paper for the "Hands on Parliament" Inquiry. While the principal questions under review are of a policy nature, there is a number of matters where I believe the Electoral Commission can add useful comment.

Strategy 1. Active and informed participation in the democratic process requires appropriate awareness and civic education programs. In the case of the aboriginal and Torres Strait islander population, a variety of approaches have been used by election authorities in the past. In general, such approaches have been event-specific so that the benefits of participation can be more easily related to immediate outcomes.

An example is the field officer approach used to support enrolment and information programs prior to ATSI elections. For these elections, appropriate staff are recruited and trained before targeted visits to towns and communities where local meetings are arranged and the electoral roll is checked and updated where necessary. Information about the election relating to nomination and voting is provided and relevant material and contact details for the Returning Officers are distributed. Similar programs have been used for federal elections but in those cases, their effectiveness is questionable as there is no fixed date for the election and the timing of visits becomes an issue.

In the early 1990s, the Australian Electoral Commission ran a full time program called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service (ATSIEIS). In Queensland there were four full-time field officers who ran continual education activities in relevant communities. They also recruited local people who served as community contacts. This program was discontinued in 1996 after withdrawal of funding by the federal government.

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The Electoral Commission of Queensland is presently running an ATSI awareness campaign using radio and press advertising. This program forms a part of the community awareness initiative arising from the "Restoring Integrity" reforms of the government. The primary focus of the program is to promote the requirement for maintaining current enrolment.

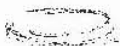
There is no greater difficulty with elector participation in the indigenous community than with any other sector of Queensland society. Voting statistics for identifiable aboriginal or islander communities have been on a par with the wider community. However, as there is no indication on the electoral roll regarding racial origin, similar statistics for urban indigenous electors are not available.

Strategies 3 and 4. In order to establish an Assembly or to provide for dedicated seats, the Committee will need to examine the need for a separate electoral roll for eligible indigenous voters. This is a difficult question as the identification and listing of individuals on the basis of race has many negative connotations. However, there has been the recent attempt to address this issue with the Tasmanian ATSIC elections. The separate roll for that event was dogged by controversy relating to the "aboriginality" of those people seeking registration. Nevertheless, the precedent now exists and could be considered.

A roll for the purposes of voting in a separate ATSI Assembly election could be prepared without any impact on the general electoral roll. However, if dedicated seats were set aside for ATSI members in the State Parliament, the question arises as to whether an ATSI elector should then have the choice of which electoral roll on which s/he would be recorded. This does happen in New Zealand where people of Maori descent exercise the "Maori Electoral Option" every five years. A person applying to be on the Maori roll has no vote for general electorates and the total number of Maori electing to be on the Maori roll also determines the number of dedicated Maori seats for the following election.

Strategy 5. Changes to the electoral system should be considered principally from the point of view of the potential elector. If the system established cannot be easily understood by the electors then it will fail to meet the aims of the reform. In any proposal to establish a separate ATSI Assembly or to set aside dedicated seats, the Commission recommends that broad consultation on the electoral system take place within the affected groups so that alternative systems and their differing outcomes might be properly understood. A second issue is that of similarity of systems with other jurisdictions. All voters in Queensland have experience with preferential voting, both full and optional as well as the Senate system of proportional representation. In addition, depending on their local government area, some voters will use first-past-the-post voting. In any event, any new election requirement should take account of the existing systems with which electors will be familiar.

Yours sincerely



R L LONGLAND
Electoral Commissioner