

# CORRECTED EVIDENCE

## ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

**Inquiry into the impact of social media on Victorian elections and Victoria's electoral administration**

Melbourne — 18 June 2014

### Members

Mr H. Delahunty  
Mr B. Finn  
Mrs I. Peulich

Mr A. Somyurek  
Mr L. Tarlamis

Chair: Mr B. Finn

Deputy Chair: Mr A. Somyurek

### Staff

Executive Officer: Mr M. Roberts

Research Officer: Mr N. Reader

### Witnesses

Mr J. Clifton, manager, government relations and policy advocacy and engagement,

Mr M. Bleechmore, government relations adviser, and

Mr N. Allan, adaptive technology consultant, equipment solutions, Vision Australia.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to  
executive officer of committee**

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to this public hearing of the Electoral Matters Committee’s inquiry into the impact of social media on Victorian elections and Victoria’s electoral administration. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and where applicable the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Have you read the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing pamphlet that the committee has provided to you?

**Mr CLIFTON** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — I ask you all to state your full names and business address, if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if you are representing an organisation, what position you hold in that organisation.

**Mr BLEECHMORE** — Marcus Bleechmore, government relations adviser with Vision Australia based at 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong.

**Mr CLIFTON** — I am Jacob Clifton, the manager of government relations and policy at the same address.

**Mr ALLAN** — I am Nick Allan, adaptive technology consultant, Vision Australia, at the same address.

**The CHAIR** — The evidence you are about to give will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I invite you now to make a verbal submission, and we will question you on your submission when you have finished. Over to you, gentlemen. Thank you.

**Mr CLIFTON** — Thanks, Chair. As you can see from our written submission the terms of reference have quite a few elements that are not directly relevant to the issues that affect the clients of Vision Australia, so I thought what I might do in this short opening address is speak to you more broadly about electoral issues relating to or affecting our clients and then focus more specifically on social media issues relating to elections that relate to people who are blind or who have low vision.

For those of you not familiar with Vision Australia, it is the country’s largest provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision. We provide services to approximately 30 000 Australians every year. We are a not-for-profit, and we are based here in Victoria. There are 27 offices nationally, with 12 in Victoria, including in regional Victoria. We estimate that there are approximately 90 000 Victorians who are blind or have low vision, which is the reason that we get engaged in these debates around Victorian election processes.

Until very recently people who are blind or have low vision have been unable to cast a secret, independent vote. Voting has tended to take place in a physical form with a ballot paper, which is obviously inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision, because it relies on sight to understand the form and complete the form. Voters who are blind or have a vision have relied on polling officials, friends or family members to read out candidate statements, to read out the candidate options on the ballot paper and then to complete the ballot papers for that person.

This obviously does not ensure the certainty that the vote of the person who has directed the vote to be cast is cast in an accurate way. In recent years, as you would know, there has been the development of digital technologies and changes to electoral laws, which have made independent and secret voting possible for people who are blind or have low vision. Progress has varied across the different jurisdictions and in the commonwealth, and it is fair to say that New South Wales, unfortunately, has been the standout performer rather than Victoria.

The technologies that different governments have introduced to ensure that people who are blind or have low vision are able to cast a secret, independent ballot can generally be categorised in three areas. Electronically assisted voting has been used at early voting centres here in Victoria. It is based on a terminal that provides output in enlarged text on screen, if that can be read by someone with low vision, or synthetic speech, or refreshable braille. It allows a vote to be cast independently and preferences assigned to the selections that are read out. There has also in jurisdictions been telephone-assisted voting, in which voters can use the telephone to interact with either a call centre or an automated system that allows them to cast a vote by voice or, in some instances, by a button on the telephone. The

best practice so far has been online voting, and there is a form of this used in New South Wales, where votes are cast using an accessible website.

I will just describe the iVote system, which is the New South Wales system, to those of you who might not be familiar with it. Eligible electors make an application to vote on iVote. They supply a personal identification number of six digits, then they are issued with what is called an iVote number and both of those numbers are used when voting. So the person is not revealing their name; they are revealing an unidentified number that is attached to their identity. The elector can then vote independently over the internet or by phone through the iVote website or the iVote call centre. The elector can during this process review their completed ballot before it is submitted, and when using it over the phone, preferences are read back to the elector. They can do this via their telephone or their keypad at home or at a polling booth. For the telephone voting option there is an automated process or a human process to use.

At the last New South Wales election the iVote system was used by approximately 46 000 electors via phone and internet. If you compare that to the number of people that use electronically assisted voting in Victoria, which is approximately 250 people, you find it absolutely dwarfs the number of people who are using assisted processes here in Victoria. And they are improving the New South Wales iVote system in the lead-up to the 2015 election. We also understand the Victorian Electoral Commission is making adjustments to electronically assisted voting in the lead-up to the Victorian election this year.

The introduction of this new voting technology has provided benefits for people with a disability, not just people who are blind or have low vision. It gives them the means to participate in the democratic process on an equal basis with the broader community.

The final thing I would say in relation to the number of people who can use those electronically assisted voting options is that the eligibility of who can use it is really important. If you narrow it down to a really tight definition of persons — whether it be legally blind, for instance — it really limits the number of people who can use it, and therefore you lose the benefits of critical mass for the investment you have made in that technology. It is fair to say that the eligibility requirements in New South Wales are quite broad, which has led to that number of 46 000.

I now make a few comments specifically related to social media in the Victorian election process. Just some background: those of you who use social media would understand that a lot of the content on social media is visual, whether that be the page layouts, photos or videos. But that is not to say that people who are blind or have low vision do not use social media; a lot do.

In general the feedback that Vision Australia gets — and Nick can talk more to this in any questions that you may have — is that people have assessed different social media sites to have different levels of accessibility. They have also expressed to us frustration when social media platforms change their layout or form, which Facebook often does, because once you learn how to navigate a social media site, whether it be by using a screen reader or a braille device, a change in that makes it quite unfamiliar.

It is fair to say also that the majority of social media websites, even though they vary in their accessibility, generally do present problematic issues for people who are blind or have low vision. I guess it is for this reason that the main thing we want to convey at this hearing is that we think it is important that electoral information and information published by the political parties which you all represent should never be published solely on social media.

Vision Australia would recommend that there always be dual publishing of important information. The information should be available in the more traditional formats accessible to people who are blind or have low vision, such as the official organisations' websites. Governments, electoral authorities, political parties and candidates have an obligation to make information relating to the electoral process available to the general community. We would also say, particularly with political parties, that it is in their interests. With 90 000 voters in Victoria who are blind or have low vision, it is quite a significant group of people.

We have looked at the information that has been made available in the past and ongoing on social media in relation to the electoral process and have identified about six general categories of information that we think it is important are made accessible and not just distributed via social media. They are, obviously, information regarding electoral roll matters, such as enrolment or electoral authority information; information about an upcoming election or an

upcoming referendum or specific information regarding a proposed constitutional change in the federal arena; how-to-vote cards — there is often a problem with them being inaccessible; all advertising material and communication channels, such as news media, social media and other web-based platforms, which particularly political parties use to make a political point, we think should also be distributed in an accessible format; policy brochures; and other general electoral information that is distributed via social media.

I guess the final point I would make in this opening statement is that social media is not just used as an avenue to provide information outwardly or to distribute information; it is also often used as a participant activity, allowing people to exchange their political views and participate in political discussions. Unfortunately, for the interest of the committee, a number of the social media sites require people to register — create a profile — to participate in that discussion.

Often they use the technology CAPTCHA, which you might be familiar with. It is to stop spamming, so there is a visual image of some letters or a word or what have you, which people might then have to enter or recite in order to gain access to that discussion forum or whatever other social media platform. These technologies are extremely problematic for people who are blind or have low vision, because a screen reader is not able to decipher them and you cannot Alt+Tab through them. A number of social media sites do not offer audio versions for registration, which they should do to enable people who are blind or have low vision to participate. This really is a problem for participation in the electoral process via social media.

Just to conclude, like I said, any transition to the provision of information via social media would make that information inaccessible, if it is published solely on social media platforms, to a number of people. For that reason we really recommend that the committee and the electoral commission have at the forefront of their minds in making recommendations and changes that dual publication of information, to ensure accessibility.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Would either of you gentlemen, Nick or Marcus, like to add anything?

**Mr BLEECHMORE** — Not me.

**Mr ALLAN** — No.

**Mr CLIFTON** — They are the experts, though, for your questions.

**The CHAIR** — We take aim at them, then.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — The Victorian Electoral Commission is obviously the main resource for providing information. This is probably targeted at you, Nick. Is the information accessible for you as a vision-impaired person? Do there need to be any improvements there, for a start?

**Mr ALLAN** — The one big thing would be to look at the format they do it in. For example, a lot of websites currently use PDFs as the container for their documents. Not all PDF files are accessible. Some organisations basically put a photo of a page inside a PDF, so it is basically a photo that looks like text to you, but for a screen reader it is just a photo. That would be the primary thing, to make sure that they are producing accessible PDF files, not just PDF files. In fact we as an organisation discourage PDF as the primary format; we would prefer a Word document or just to put it on the website without — —

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — So the reader can do it?

**Mr ALLAN** — Yes. Just to clear things up, a screen reader either produces synthetic speech output, so that whatever comes up on the screen is spoken out loud or, if you are deaf-blind, for example, you might use a braille display. A refreshable braille display is basically a line of text with the dots just automatically popping up and down as things change on the screen. With a PDF that has just got an image on it, there will not be any speech, and there will not be any dots popping up and down, basically.

**Mr TARLAMIS** — Would one way of doing that be to place it as text on the website, as opposed to an attachment, or as a Word document, which you are saying is the preferred version?

**Mr ALLAN** — Yes. The simplest solution is to just publish it as a web page on a website.

**Mr TARLAMIS** — Are there any other forms of document that would work? The VEC would probably tend to like PDFs. Although if you have the appropriate programs, you can change them, they like to go with PDFs because they are somewhat secure.

**Mr ALLAN** — Secure, yes. PDFs are fine, as long as they are done properly. It is doing that properly, depending on the complexity of the document layout, that can be difficult in a PDF. We have a section of Vision Australia that can help vet that sort of document.

**Mr TARLAMIS** — Have you communicated that to the VEC, in terms of that being a problem in the past, and have they been responsive to that?

**Mr BLEECHMORE** — Yes, we have, and we have worked closely with the Victorian Electoral Commission over a number of years in developing particular approaches that are inclusive. In relation to the design of a website, I am not sure whether or not we have worked closely with them on website design, but we are happy to go back and check and get Vision Australia to supply you with some further information in relation to that.

**Mr CLIFTON** — There is a Vision Australia staff member on the Victorian Electoral Commission — forgive me if I get the term wrong — disability advisory council, which I understand meets irregularly. Vision Australia offers its feedback through that body. But as we said, we certainly think there are things they could be doing better, and there are other states leading the way, particularly in relation to voting.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — Jacob, you made a comment about how, to use your words, you ‘loved to use social media’. When you say there are 90 000 Victorians who are blind or have low vision, what percentage are we looking at, and is it a growing usage by low or impaired-vision people? We are seeing that more and more in the community — you only have to look at the guys along here — we are touching base through social media. Is there a growing demand from people with low or impaired vision? What percentage of them are using it now?

**Mr CLIFTON** — The others might have better figures than me, but anecdotally, from Vision Australia’s experience, we have noticed an increase in the use of social media because of the number of clients who are engaging with Vision Australia through our Facebook page, which has about 5000 followers. Obviously not all of them are necessarily clients. Our Twitter followers number approximately 4000, again not all are clients, but a number of clients are using those forums to engage with the service provider, Vision Australia. Our anecdotal experience is with increasing usage. I do not know if Nick or Marcus could point to broader figures about the community though.

**Mr ALLAN** — No. It is not going to go down, it is always going to go up.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — No, no. But as a person who has to wear glasses to read the damned thing, what I am asking is: how do people use social media now? Can you explain it to us?

**Mr ALLAN** — If we are talking about something like Facebook, you are either going to do it through a web browser on a PC or on an iPhone using the Facebook app. Because the iPhone is now an accessible device that has speech output, the Facebook app is accessible most of the time. It becomes a nicer interface, a cleaner way to view Facebook content rather than the main Facebook website that tends to change its layout when Facebook changes it. It is the same thing with Twitter — iPhone apps and the main website would be the usual interface.

**Mr CLIFTON** — Nick, I do not know if it is worth mentioning that when there is an image on Facebook or Twitter, the way for that to be experienced is for there to be a description of the image in text underneath it. Is that a fair point to make? Often political parties will use a graph or an image.

**Mr ALLAN** — Yes, definitely. Any photo should really have a text description under it that says what the photo is.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — In your submission you talk about *Q & A* and the Twitter lines along the bottom of the screen. In your experience, how would they overcome that to service your needs?

**Mr ALLAN** — Because of the limits on the — —

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — Yes. You can hear the voice and what is being said on the TV, but you cannot read the text along the bottom. Literally, how would you solve that problem?

**Mr ALLAN** — With that submission, probably the one thing out of that that we would change — not that we cannot read the Twitter feed itself — is the app tag. They say, ‘Use the hashtag currently on your screen’. If they actually said what the hashtag was rather than saying that, we could then use the Twitter app.

**Mr SOMYUREK** — I thought it was the comments on the bottom.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — Yes, I thought that too.

**Mr SOMYUREK** — Like you, I was thinking there is a commentary. The program goes on, Tony Jones and his guests are speaking and then there are comments. It is confusing enough even if you can see or if you are listening. How would you solve that problem? You are not expecting them to solve that problem, you are saying — —

**Mr ALLAN** — The solution to the problem is that if they said what the hashtag was we could then use the Twitter app and get that same information through that other interface.

**Mr SOMYUREK** — Yes, I understand.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — That is good.

**Mr CLIFTON** — Just for your information, which might go to the broader issue of text on a TV screen or things that cannot be seen, Australia is one of the few comparable countries in the world that does not have audio description on our TVs. In other countries people who are blind or have low vision will have a secondary audio track describing what they cannot see. Say you are watching a drama, they can hear people communicating but the second track that they can access might say, ‘And Hugh Delahunty walks towards Bernie Finn’. Then you hear what they are saying. There would be audio description capabilities that could describe on another audio track, like you have text on the bottom of the screen for people who cannot hear, an audio track that is describing what people cannot see. The United Kingdom, the United States and other countries have that ability on their free-to-air TV; Australia does not.

**Mr ALLAN** — The ABC did a trial last year, I think it was, for audio description for some of their programming, which has finished now.

**The CHAIR** — How did that go? Was that successful?

**Mr ALLAN** — We think so. It remains to be seen if that will go any further.

**Mr CLIFTON** — Yes. Vision Australia is engaging with Minister Turnbull around what Australia should do to at least have some content on Australian TV with that audio description.

**Mr SOMYUREK** — You would need more funding for that.

**The CHAIR** — Any other questions, gentlemen?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — I found it very enlightening. Thank you, guys.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for coming in to speak to us today. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. Please check it for typos and minor problems like that but don’t change any of the substance; if you would be kind enough to do that, it would be wonderful. Thank you very much once again for coming in. It is very much appreciated.

**Mr CLIFTON** — Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**