

TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into electronic voting

Melbourne — 22 August 2016

Members

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Mr Marcus Bleechmore, acting manager, government relations and policy, Vision Australia.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission and for appearing before the committee. Were you here earlier when I introduced members of the committee, or would you like me to go through the names again?

Mr BLEECHMORE — I was here earlier.

The CHAIR — So you are fine; we do not need to go through that again. Can I just please check with you that you have received a copy of the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing?

Mr BLEECHMORE — Yes, I have.

The CHAIR — As long as you understand that you will get parliamentary privilege in here, but not outside this room. Could I please ask you to state your full name and your business address and to clarify whether you are appearing in a private capacity or whether you are actually representing an organisation. Hansard will of course record the evidence that you give us. I ask you to just commence with that little technical thing about your name and whether you are officially representing your organisation.

Mr BLEECHMORE — Thank you. My name is Marcus Bleechmore, and I am representing Vision Australia. Our address is 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong, in Victoria. Thanks very much for the opportunity to appear today before the committee. I am joining today's hearing in the absence of my colleague Karen Taranto, who is the acting manager of advocacy at Vision Australia. I am the acting manager of government relations and policy.

Vision Australia has a long-held and deep interest in securing a more effective means of voting across Australia's commonwealth, state and territory voting systems, and our interest is driven by our commitment to support social inclusion and independence for people who are blind or have low vision. We are also interested to ensure Victoria can meet the changes in society that are underway, including in technology and in community expectations. Vision Australia and the blindness community have been at the forefront of advocating for changes that benefit the broader community, and I carry a clear message from Vision Australia on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Australians who are blind or low vision: they want to participate in elections and to cast their vote secretly and independently, just like any other voter.

We want a method of voting that supports social inclusion and independence and that has four features. One, we want a system that is secret and independent so that voters rights are protected. The need for assistance to cast a vote and verify accuracy denies voters both their independence and the secrecy of their vote. By way of example, people who are blind or have low vision had to reveal their vote to an AEC assistant in the 2016 federal election.

Two, we want a system that is familiar to people and can be accessed in a relatively straightforward manner. We prefer a system and process that, from a user perspective, mimics existing ways of doing things, notwithstanding the previous witness's statement — a system like telephone or internet banking. The everyday nature of the use of this technology has helped build the understanding and confidence of the community, and any approach that requires a person to go into a separate booth or to use a system which relies on gestures or touch-screen technology, which is not accessible or well understood, or one that is only available at a few locations and not on polling day itself, risks failure. We think familiarity builds uptake and the chances of success.

Three, we want a system that is secure and safe. We want a system of voting that ensures and maintains the reputation of the system and the process. For example, we have seen recently at the national level reputational issues figure prominently in public discourse — the ABS for failures around census, where the main issue is to do with the capacity of the system — and for the AEC public perceptions have taken a nosedive on issues relating to ballot papers and lengthy waits on the time it take to count votes.

Four, we want a system that can be used by other people in the community. We are not seeking to develop or perpetuate a system that others do not use. We want an affordable system. In the past, unfairly, the blind community has worn the label of a higher cost system that is not available to others. In New South Wales at the 2015 election more than a quarter of a million voters used the online system, while in Victoria only

200 people used electronically assisted voting. The difference in numbers is explained by a range of factors, but most notably the New South Wales system is open to a greater category of voters.

It is worth noting that the New South Wales Electoral Commission cites cost as a positive reason for implementing iVote, and the cost of failure of the AEC and the paper ballots is well understood. The re-run of the 2013 Australian Senate election in WA, after ballot papers were lost, cost more than \$20 million. Where electronic systems are made available to broader categories of voters — for example, people who are overseas, who live in remote areas or who are voting outside their electorate or other people with disability — the critical mass of voters choosing this system can be achieved. This in turn provides greater opportunities for both assessing and improving the use of new technology.

In terms of other forms of electronic voting available in other states, New South Wales, ACT, Tasmania, WA and Queensland all have used electronic voting in recent elections. All technology models allowed for access, but their service delivery models varied. The system used in New South Wales, known as iVote, we think is the leading method in terms of delivery. It includes independence features for users.

The problems that we have found with the Victorian approach include that at the 2014 state election electronically assisted voting was only available at six accessibility centres and selected early voting centres. It was only available during the pre-polling period. It was only available for voters who are blind or have low vision, voters who have English language or literacy difficulties and those with a motor impairment. It was also a gesture-based technology which underpinned the system, and we think that is ineffective because it requires familiarisation before usage. The users tended to focus on the technology rather than on the function of the technology and were distracted from voting. We think that confidence in the technology is essential for uptake.

In terms of the take-up for Victoria, I mentioned that only 200 voters used EAV at the 2014 election. We do not think that indicates a lack of need and preference for electronic voting; we think that low uptake highlights the service delivery problems, which are about the very limited availability of EAV, the lack of familiarity and that it was not well understood as a new voting method or consistently used in different settings. We think also — and I need to make the point — that in the past the failures of electronic voting have needlessly impacted negatively on public perceptions of people with vision impairment and the organisations that support them.

I mentioned that we think the New South Wales system is the benchmark, so in relation to alternative electronic voting forms that we think have got integrity and security, I want to talk a bit about iVote, which was introduced in New South Wales in 2011 at the behest of the blindness community. It was established in close collaboration with stakeholders in the sector, and it is worthwhile thinking about the reasons why iVote was implemented.

According to the New South Wales electoral commissioner, the main reasons for implementing the iVote system were to improve the enfranchisement of electors who would not otherwise be able to vote independently or who have significant difficulty voting using existing channels. It was to improve the enfranchisement of electors who would by virtue of location during the election period not otherwise be able to vote or have significant difficulty voting. It was to reduce systemic errors in current voting processes. This includes reducing the informality in ballots cast, reducing loss of paper ballots in transit between the voter and counting centre as well as reducing transposition and counting areas and, finally, reducing the cost of voting and risks of failure associated with the management of postal voting.

In terms of iVote in New South Wales, that system provides access to online voting during the pre-polling period and on election day itself for people with vision impairment or other people with disability, for people living more than 20 kilometres away from a polling place or for those who are interstate or overseas on election day. Voters can use a smart phone, a computer or a telephone system, depending on their personal preference. It provides the option of speaking with a call centre operator for those people who prefer to be assisted when placing their vote.

Finally, I will just conclude by listing a few things that the New South Wales electoral commissioner found in their response to the New South Wales inquiry into the 2015 election. One is that the iVote system was used by 284 000 people in 2015 compared to 47 000 in 2011. The percentage of people who are blind or have low vision using iVote has increased from 1.4 per cent of the overall vote to 1.9 per cent, which represents an eightfold rise in the number of users from 668 in 2011 to 5296 in 2015. They found that 96 per cent of voters were satisfied with the iVote system. The commissioner found that the expansion of iVote has been a positive step for facilitating engagement with the democratic system. There was a big increase in the use of electronic voting — a 505 per cent increase. Electors who registered for iVote were more likely to have voted than those who registered for postal votes, and iVote contributes to increasing or at least maintaining voting participation in a world where people are seeking greater flexibility and the convenience of online operations.

There were a couple of issues. The names of two political parties were missing from the iVote Legislative Council ballot paper, but the commissioner's investigation of that matter revealed that that was caused by human error rather than a deficiency in the iVote system. There were also allegations about the security of the iVote system that received some media coverage. The commissioner considered that the only reasonable way of assessing risks associated with the iVote system was to perform a comparative risk analysis between iVote and traditional voting methods. The commissioner's assessment led them to conclude that iVote has a similar or lower risk level than the current paper-based voting system. The commissioner has also issued a statement about online security, which is available on their website. The commission is concerned also about the long-term reliability of postal voting as a viable voting channel due to changes in Australia Post's service model, especially in regional and rural areas. That concludes my opening statement.

The CHAIR — Thank you very, very much for the submission and for coming along and expanding on it. It is much appreciated.

Ms SPENCE — Just in regard to the registration process for iVote, were there particular aspects of that process that were designed to increase accessibility for vision-impaired voters?

Mr BLEECHMORE — Yes, there were. So it enabled people to register via the telephone and put forward a PIN number, which was their own PIN number which could be used. Then the commission would issue to their preferred email address or to their phone address or to their postal address the relevant iVote number. So those two numbers in tandem were used to undertake the voting, and the response that we had from our clients was that they could do that by themselves.

Mr DIXON — In a practical sense, if a vision-impaired person is going to cast an iVote, what do they do and what do they hear and feel? How does it work?

Mr BLEECHMORE — So it depends on what technology they are using. Generally it is an audio-based thing, so it is text to speech output. That can be electronic, so basically the software will read out the text that is on the screen. They would make their selection and then be able to verify that before they lodge their vote, and it will be — —

Mr DIXON — When you say they make their selection, do they do that verbally as well or with their own keyboard?

Mr BLEECHMORE — No, using a keyboard or the telephone keypad and then be able to have that read back to them.

Mr SOMYUREK — You are speaking about text to speech. I have trouble with speech to text. I do not think the technology is quite there yet. Is there much speech to text?

Mr BLEECHMORE — I am not aware of people who are blind or who have low vision using the speech to text.

Mr SOMYUREK — Sorry, of course.

Mr BLEECHMORE — But that could be — —

Mr SOMYUREK — You are just here for the vision impaired and not the whole disability — —

The CHAIR — No, he is just from Vision Australia.

Mr BLEECHMORE — But there are ways to verify what the system is accepting as what you have put in to check — —

Mr SOMYUREK — My question was more for people with a general disability. You are just for the blind — vision impaired, sorry.

Ms PATTEN — Obviously there was a 96 per cent satisfaction rate with the people who used iVote in New South Wales. Did you survey your members or vision-impaired people in New South Wales about their support for the iVote system or any of their current criticisms of the iVote system?

Mr BLEECHMORE — No, we have not had a specific piece of research or a survey of our clients in New South Wales about their use of iVote, but we do have a structure within the organisation for client consultation and engagement. It is through those forums that our clients are able to talk about particular issues, including things like public participation and voting — civic participation. The overwhelming anecdotal feedback from them was that that was a much-preferred system to that which is operated by the Australian Electoral Commission, for example, for federal elections. I mentioned a 96 per cent satisfaction rating for the New South Wales system. There were independent surveys of iVote users that found satisfaction up to 98 per cent.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Obviously the uptake was not as successful as what people might have hoped or anticipated it would be amongst visually impaired people. Do you put that down to the lack of familiarity, and if so, how do you think that that can be addressed in the future?

Mr BLEECHMORE — Are we talking about Victoria?

Ms BLANDTHORN — No, sorry, New South Wales.

Mr BLEECHMORE — There are a few things at play there, I guess. In terms of understanding the population of people who are blind or have low vision, generally blindness occurs in people later in their lives, so with people who have, for example, voted a particular way their entire life and then they have come to the latter stages of their life, they may tend to just keep doing what they have always done.

There are other kinds of issues that impact the uptake of that voting method that are around voting with their family and friends, so they might not necessarily seek to do iVoting when everyone else might be doing something else. It is a relatively new way of voting. I think as the baby boomers and newer generations come through after them, the push to online voting generally and familiarity with technology is increasing, and we would expect to see that uptake continuing to increase.

The New South Wales Electoral Commission has been fairly proactive in advertising the existence of iVote and making it available. It even has a test platform on its website where people can go on and practise voting online. They had a limited budget for communicating it to the public, but generally the success of it I think will continue to build the momentum for online voting, but 284 000 people did use that particular option.

Ms SPENCE — Just on those stats before we move off them, I think you said — and correct me if I am wrong — that it went from 1.6 per cent to 1.9 per cent take-up. Was that the figure that you used?

Mr BLEECHMORE — It was 1.4 to 1.9.

Ms SPENCE — I was kind of there; I was a little bit there. What would you see as being optimal, where you are not getting everyone but the uptake is considered to be extremely satisfactory?

Mr BLEECHMORE — It is hard to kind of put a percentage figure on it. Vision Australia is not saying to every person who is blind or has low vision that they should use iVote. What we are trying to put forward is that they have a means to be able to exercise an independent, secret vote and that they can do that themselves using technology and a process that they are familiar with. I cannot really put a percentage on it. I do note that we use the ABS stats on the incidence in the population of people who are blind or have low vision. Across Australia according to ABS stats for vision impairment there are 357 000 Australians who are blind or have low vision, and by low vision I mean people for whom the wearing of glasses is not going to restore their vision to a level that makes it easy for them to, for example, read print or that type of thing.

In Victoria on those same stats there are about 90 000 Victorians who are blind or have low vision, and 70 per cent of those would be 65 years or older, so it is an older demographic. But that is not to say that it is not as important for younger people, particularly people who were born blind or have low vision — it is a different type of situation — but for them to be able to exercise voting independently is something that we think is essential.

Ms PATTEN — Just further on that, looking at the figures, it has increased to 1.9 per cent of the overall vote. Do you have any concept of how many people with low vision in New South Wales took advantage of iVote? I suppose it is 5000 people, so that is how many of the overall vote, or is that —

Mr BLEECHMORE — In New South Wales — I might have to correct myself — I think it is over 100 000 people who are blind or have low vision.

Ms PATTEN — Yes, so that represents 5 per cent of them in that case?

Mr BLEECHMORE — Yes.

Ms PATTEN — With 5000 low-vision people, so 5 per cent of low-vision people took advantage of it?

Mr BLEECHMORE — Yes, but the 1.9 per cent figure that I used was in relation to the overall iVote users.

I guess the point that we are trying to make about it is kind of twofold: one, we do not want the blind community to wear an unfair label about the higher cost of having a system that allows them to vote as anyone else can vote, independently and in secret; and two, that they are able to participate in the process.

The CHAIR — Again, thank you very much. You will get your Hansard transcript in two weeks. If there are minor errors or whatever, feel free to correct them, but obviously you cannot change the basis of what you have actually said. Thank you very much. We greatly appreciate your participation in this process. It is very important to hear from your organisation.

Witness withdrew.

