

# Voting changes will strengthen our democracy

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*To ask eligible electors to enrol when they turn 18, or when they move house is not too much to ask.*

## **Australian voters have rights, but they also have responsibilities, writes Tony Smith.**

Australia has a good electoral system, but that does not mean it cannot be improved in several areas. One area is the electoral roll itself.

It is a legal requirement that all Australians entitled to vote enrol at the time they become eligible or change their enrolment details.

Yet on the other hand, another law allows for a seven-day period that provides an escape clause for those people who wish to ignore their first legal requirement.

This contradiction promotes the view that electoral enrolment is neither important nor necessary, is driving a growing and unrealistic volume of enrolment changes in the days after an election is called, and leaves the roll open to manipulation and abuse.

For all these reasons, the electoral roll should close at 8pm on the day that the writs are issued for an election.

Colin Hughes and Brian Costar outlined their opposition to this recommendation by the majority of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters - and another recommendation to remove the right of prisoners to vote - on this page last week ("Fiddling the ballot books" 3/11).

Prisoners serving sentences of three years or more are not permitted to vote. That is the current law. Clearly Costar and Hughes believe that prisoners in general should retain their right to vote.

The Parliament does not concur - nor would I suggest do the

majority of the public. The majority of the joint standing committee recommended that the current law should apply to all prisoners, not just those serving three years or more. On that we will just have to agree to disagree as a matter of principle.

However, when it comes to the closing of the rolls at the time the writs are issued for an election, it is not just principle on which we disagree, but also some compelling facts that they have either not considered or ignored.

Their breathless claim that closing the rolls on the issue of the writs "will disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of otherwise eligible citizens at federal elections" simply does not stack up factually.

Closing the electoral rolls on the day the election writs are issued cannot and will not disenfranchise any voters. "Disenfranchisement" occurs when a person is prevented from exercising their democratic right or they have it removed, not when a person simply fails to observe the enrolment law that applies to every voter.

his change will leave the democratic right and ability to enrol and vote entirely in the hands of every eligible voter in Australia. It is false to dress this up as "disenfranchisement".

Secondly, to assert that several hundred thousand people will not enrol before the next election on the sole basis that that number took advantage of a seven-day gap before the last election, has an amazing lack of logic to it.

If the law changes, so too will behaviour. To suggest that several hundred thousand people would simply ignore the new requirement is condescending and wrong.

As Electoral Commissioner Ian Campbell stated in evidence to the committee, "I could not draw any conclusion that a change in the closure date of the rolls would automatically lead to a particular number of electors who want to vote not being able to vote".

Claims that the late rush of enrolment updates do not cause the Electoral Commission concern ignore some obvious points.

While the commission carries out all the checks it can, there can be no argument that a deluge of last-minute enrolment changes cannot be processed with the same rigour as changes outside the election period, and that the scope for fraud and manipulation is increased.

Further, the volume of these enrolment updates is growing at a rate of about 50,000 each election. We are fast approaching the point where the processing will be unmanageable.

As the committee found, when expressed in terms of workload, the Electoral Commission processed 17.5 per cent of its annual transactions in the seven-day period. In addition, 60 per cent of those who made use of the seven-day period had been contacted by the commission in the previous year, at considerable cost, but chose to take no action.

A focus on democratic rights is a good thing, but Hughes and Costar should also pay attention to the democratic responsibilities that people also have.

To ask eligible electors to enrol when they turn 18, or when they move house is not too much to ask. Seventeen-year-olds can today provisionally enrol so that they can vote once they turn 18.

Seventeen and 18-year-olds fulfil all sorts of other requirements such as getting a driver's licence, a bank account and a mobile phone happily, as do people moving house, who must update utilities accounts, and many other details. This is also the best time to enrol or update enrolment details.

Between elections, about 7 million Australians enrol, re-enrol or update their enrolment details in a timely way - asking the other few hundred thousand to join them, to remove confusion, improve the accuracy of the electoral roll, and guard against potential fraud is not a lot to ask in a democracy that we all have a stake in.

Far from harming our democracy in Australia, this change will improve it.

Tony Smith is Liberal MHR for Casey and chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/voting-changes-will-strengthen-our-democracy/2005/11/08/1131407633349.html?page=2>