Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland

Submission to Discussion Paper on Electoral Reform

March 2013

ECCQ

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Table of contents

1. Introduction 5
2. Citizenship and culturally and linguistically diverse communities 5
3. Compulsory voting 5
4. Accessibility of the voting system 6
5. Contact and further information 7

1. Introduction

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) is a State-wide peak body with a focus on the interests of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD). ECCQ plays a critical role in identifying the issues and solutions that promote multiculturalism and uphold its mission "that all people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds have equal access to services and can fully participate in all aspects of a cohesive and harmonious Queensland".

ECCQ commends the Government for engaging Queenslanders in debate about the voting system. As migrants settle in Australia and transition to citizenship, the act of voting is often the basis for learning about how Australia's system of Government works. It raises many questions for people as they consider their rights and responsibilities. As many migrants are involved in key roles within communities, the opportunity to work with elected representatives also highlights the relationship of constituents to leaders.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities may experience a range of issues requiring careful consideration in evolving a voting system that is accessible and empowering for all Queenslanders. The issues that CALD communities may experience include:

- Language barriers
- Cultural factors including assumptions about citizenship and engagement with the political process
- Past trauma which may render people fearful of voting
- Isolation and uncertainty about the mechanics of voting.

This submission primarily responds to the question of whether voting should be compulsory and also identifies some issues and opportunities in improving the level of accessibility and engagement of new migrants with the voting process and system of Government in Australia.

2. Citizenship and culturally and linguistically diverse communities

The process of settlement and of becoming a citizen involves many steps and stages. Citizenship as a concept is very important because it implies both rights and responsibilities. ECCQ considers the notion of citizenship as unifying – that no matter how diverse we are, we unite in the process of contributing to our communities and our nation.

The migration and settlement process must necessarily grapple with our system of government, and with the opportunities that citizens have to participate in shaping the future of our nation and our state. The process of voting raises so many opportunities to think about the nature of citizenship and also puts people in touch with how leaders are elected. As such, ECCQ considers voting to be an absolutely essential foundation for engagement. Within a compulsory voting system, the opportunity exists to formalise learning about being a citizen including the voting process. It is essential that this process is handled independently and transparently. Nonetheless, people essentially begin connecting with or consolidate their identity as a citizen as they prepare to and then vote.

3. Compulsory voting

The following advantages to compulsory voting are identified in the discussion paper and are endorsed by ECCQ:

- voting is a civic duty comparable to other duties citizens perform e.g. taxation, compulsory education, jury duty

- it teaches the benefits of political participation

- parliament reflects more accurately the "will of the electorate"
- governments must consider the total electorate in policy formulation and management
- candidates can concentrate their campaigning energies on issues rather than encouraging voters to attend the poll
- the voter isn't actually compelled to vote for anyone because voting is by secret ballot.

Multicultural society brings many advantages. Diversity, tolerance and cultural exchange all contribute to social cohesion, learning and productivity. To enable multicultural society to flourish, it is essential that processes and rituals exist that strengthen and formalise our unity and shared understanding of democracy. Without compulsory voting, fewer formal and structured opportunities exist for migrants to consider their identity as citizens and to learn about how government in Australia actually works. For some, settlement can be struggle and without a definite requirement to vote, it may be something that is a lesser priority which further consolidates the struggle to belong and understand the way of life in Australia.

Public debate about migration often emphasises the importance of people coming to Australia embracing our way of life and systems of Government. Compulsory voting serves as a process through which people come to learn more about how Government works. It puts people in touch with elected leaders as well which improves participation and engagement. The alternative is the risk of disengagement and exclusion which can lay the foundation for disunity and lack of participation in community life and other key institutions. Compulsory voting at least asks people to think about what they believe and what is involved in actually voting. It could be a start to deeper citizenship or an important milestone in the settlement process that contributes to a sense of connection and responsibility for Australia's future.

In a system without compulsory voting, it is also likely that political parties would heavily invest in ensuring their constituencies vote. This could absorb considerable resources which may be better spent actually improving the level of community understanding of citizenship and how government actually works.

4. Accessibility of the voting system

The discussion paper raises issues such as:

- what system of preferential voting there should be
- code of conduct for people handing out how to vote cards
- possible restrictions on how to vote cards
- proof of identity
- options for where and how to vote.

Language and cultural barriers can be an issue in the process of voting. Understanding preferential voting systems, confusion about the purpose of how to vote cards and vulnerability to the biases of others who may be perceived as providing help and support are all potential issues for migrants. This is particularly the case for those with little or no English, or who are very new to Australia.

ECCQ commends the provision for translated materials and interpreters through the Electoral Commission of Queensland. A need has been identified to provide more direct engagement with ethnic communities in Queensland to actively facilitate a better understanding of the voting system. Some community members indicate they don't know what to do. Possible changes to preferential voting, increased ways through technology to cast a vote, and the introduction of proof of identity measures, make it essential to ensure that communities with a high proportion of CALD residents have access to increased information and education.

Community leaders are particularly important in reaching people with new information. Programs are needed that layer information with actual engagement about the voting system, particularly if any changes flagged in the discussion paper come into being.

ECCQ considers that any changes will require a robust implementation plan which explicitly identifies a cultural responsiveness strategy to ensure:

- any changes are well understood by migrants, particularly migrants who are disadvantaged
- community leaders are engaged further as a way of understanding community needs and of distributing information to communities
- there is direct engagement with ethnic communities to assist their understanding of the voting process.

ECCQ is interested in opportunities to work the State Government and the Electoral Commission to plan an implementation strategy which takes into account the needs of CALD communities.

5. Contact and further information

Please contact Fiona Caniglia on 0400 1964 92 or policy@eccq.com.au if further information is required. Thank you for this opportunity to make a contribution. This is a very important issue for people from CALD communities and ECCQ strongly supports an implementation plan that will ensure information and educational opportunities to CALD communities.

Yours sincerely

Ian L Muil
Executive Manager