

26th February 2013

Electoral Reform
Strategic Policy
Department of Justice and Attorney-General
Queensland Government

Re: Response to Electoral Reform Consultation Paper January 2013

Dear Sir/Madam

Vision Australia strongly values the opportunity to provide our views on electoral reform in Queensland behalf of our thousands of clients and people who are blind or have low vision who live in this state and wish to participate as equal citizens in the voting process but still remain unable to do so.

The Discussion Paper at pages 30-32 reads, "Issues for consultation – 5 – Electronic voting:

Comment is invited, in particular on:

- whether Queensland should introduce electronically assisted voting for: blind and vision impaired voters; and voters who require assistance voting because of a disability, motor impairment or insufficient literacy (option a);
- whether Queensland should introduce electronically assisted voting to voters who will not throughout the hours of polling on polling day be in Queensland and/or who do not reside within 20 kilometres, by the nearest practical route, of a polling place; or
- whether electronically assisted voting should be introduced for all voters in Queensland."

Vision Australia strongly urges that voting options including electronically assisted voting for voters, be introduced with no further delay at the earliest opportunity and amend the legislation at the earliest opportunity to allow the necessary planning, testing and infrastructure to be implemented before the next state election in 2015. This technology will enable people with a disability to vote – a basic human and citizen right.

Vision Australia calls for the introduction of electronic voting in Queensland at the earliest opportunity, noting that the Queensland Electoral Commissioner has indicated a willingness to proceed and only requires a minor legislative change to do

So, and that there is a relatively long lead time required to undertake feasibility and roll any system out.

The Commissioner has on numerous occasions indicated a willingness to proceed to introduce accessible voting including as follows:

“Commission has recommended a number of legislative changes to make the electoral system more accessible. These include internet and telephone voting options for people with disabilities, and provision for online enrolment.” (Queensland Electoral Commission, Media release, 29 October 2009)

“The one disappointment for the Commission has been the delay in legislation that would provide the option of telephone and internet voting for people with disabilities who otherwise need assistance in filling out a ballot paper and are thus denied a secret vote.” (Page 1, Queensland Electoral Commission Annual Report 2010/11)

“It is incumbent on electoral authorities to remain abreast of the latest developments in technology and to draw attention to possibilities for both modernising our electoral system and making it more accessible to citizens across the board.” (Page 1, Queensland Electoral Commission Annual Report 2011/12)

“The Commission has also raised with the incoming government the desirability of introducing internet and telephone voting facilities for people with disabilities, such as the blind and vision impaired, who are currently denied a secret vote because of their need to seek assistance in filling out a ballot paper. Such systems were successfully implemented at the 2011 New South Wales State election, allowing people with disabilities to cast their vote in secret and also improving access for these electors by enabling them to vote from their own homes. In the case of New South Wales, these systems also expanded access for electors in remote areas as well as interstate or overseas.” (Page 2, Queensland Electoral Commission Annual Report 2011/12)

At the 2012 election in Queensland, Vision Australia asked candidates to consider signing a pledge to overcome the current inequity in the Queensland voting system. More than 100 candidates signed a pledge to the community. Of these, 18 are now Members of Parliament from all parties. The pledge reads as follows:

"Pledge to Queenslanders who are blind or have low vision – I hereby pledge that now and in the next Queensland parliament I will act on: Voting - Despite having been successfully introduced in other states, accessible voting will not be available at the 2012 election. Compulsory voting was introduced in 1914 but nearly 100 years later Queenslanders who are blind or have low vision still cannot exercise a secret independent vote. I will support the introduction in the first term of the next parliament, legislation that provides the option of telephone and internet voting for people with disabilities who need assistance in filling out a ballot paper."

The Liberal National Party responded to our appeals including to introduce accessible voting on the 22 March 2012 as follows:

"When it comes to engaging people who are blind in the voting process, we are committed to developing an adequate system to ensure they can vote. Innovative modes of voting are something that we would consider and would be happy to work further on with Vision Australia into the future. Our understanding is that the Electoral Commission is already looking at this and we would hope that we could see it progress further, financial circumstances considered."

Vision Australia has received feedback from our clients across Australia that the system that has been introduced in New South Wales, i-Vote, is the preferred system at this stage as it provides the highest level of accessibility.

Accessible voting has been introduced and is operating elsewhere successfully. We have waited 100 years to vote independently and in secret - let there be no further delay.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views. We congratulate you on your work this far and look forward with interest to the next stage of this important work.

Yours sincerely

Karen Knight - State Manager Queensland, Independent Living Skills



Gerrard Gosens - Special Projects Manager, Public Affairs

