

# Fine tuning the election machine

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, and its predecessor, the Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform, have inquired into the conduct of every federal election since 1983. The body of work produced by these inquiries has contributed to Australia's distinguished electoral reputation; encouraged steady and appropriate reform of the electoral system; corrected deficiencies; and advocated the adoption of relevant procedural and technological advances.

Since the current inquiry into the 1998 federal election was initiated in December 1998, the Committee has received nearly 250 submissions. The Committee Chairman, Mr Gary Nairn MP, Member for Eden-Monaro, said that "submissions to election inquiries are generally of two types.

"The first relate to technical issues concerning the conduct of the election and the overall health of electoral laws. These submissions are generally from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the political parties. In evidence provided to the Committee these institutions focussed on: remote mobile polling; assisted voting (when a voter requires assistance casting a vote because of illiteracy or disability); the administration of polling booths; and the conduct of political campaigns, among other matters.

"The Committee spent some time investigating the administration of mobile polling and the level of assisted voting in remote areas of the Northern Territory. In some parts of the Territory, up to 90 per cent of votes are assisted. To develop an understanding of these issues, the Committee visited remote communities and heard from remote mobile poll administrators and party scrutineers.

"The administration of the Railway Side polling booth in Alice Springs also attracted the attention of the Committee," Mr Nairn said. "The Committee has received a number of submissions both opposing and supporting the location of this booth, which is in the grounds of the Tangentyere Council, an organisation that provides support services to town camp residents in Alice Springs.

"Matters raised by the AEC include concerns about some aspects of political campaigning, such as second preference How To Vote cards and the wide distribution of Postal Vote Application forms, which were extensively discussed in both submissions and public hearings.

"In addition, the AEC was concerned about the potential registration of fictitious political parties as a method of controlling the flow of minor party preferences in the Senate. The AEC discussed a range of possible changes to party registration guidelines that might prevent the registration of fictitious parties.

"Since the 1996 federal election, the AEC has put a great deal of work into improving its use of information technology," Mr Nairn said. "The Committee was particularly interested in the new Virtual Tally Room, which attracted 85,000 visitors on election night, and was one of the most popular government web sites in 1998. The AEC has also significantly improved its electoral roll management system, which will produce great improvements in the accuracy of the Commonwealth Electoral Roll over the next few years."

Mr Nairn indicated that the second type of submission "was from the general public, expressing their concerns about, among other things, campaigning issues and the electoral system."

Of this type of submission Mr Nairn said "by far the largest number received during this inquiry advocated a change in the electoral system from full to optional preferential voting.

"A number of these submissions were based on the misunderstanding that full preferential voting, in other words voting by sequentially numbering all squares on the ballot box, had only been introduced at the federal level in July 1998 as a method of reducing the electoral prospects of Pauline Hanson's One Nation." In fact, Mr Nairn pointed out, "full preferential voting has been part of federal elections since the 1920s."

Mr Nairn said "the Committee expects to respond to these and other issues raised during the inquiry when the report is tabled in March." Once tabled, the report will be made available through the Committee's web site at:

[www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/index.htm) or can be obtained by calling the committee secretariat on (02) 6277 2374 or emailing the secretariat at [JSCEM.Reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:JSCEM.Reps@aph.gov.au).



*The National Tally Room in Canberra on election night 1998.*