

Opening Statement | Electoral Commissioner

Public hearing – Inquiry into the 2022 federal election

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

6 September 2023

Chair and members,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. This is, as I understand it, to be the last, or one of the last, public hearings for the inquiry into the 2022 federal election.

On behalf of all Australians, the AEC undertook an enormous body of work to administer the 2022 federal election (FE22); an event where more people were on the roll, a greater percentage of the eligible population were on the roll, and more people voted than ever before in Australia's history. All of this was delivered whilst Australia was still subject to significant pandemic restrictions which, in turn, created extreme disruption to staffing, our supply chain, and general operations. AEC staff rose to the challenge to deal with those issues and successfully delivered one of the most complex electoral events in our history.

Surveys continue to show that community trust in the AEC's ability to deliver safe, fair, and transparent electoral results remains high. There are two key points from this.

Firstly, citizen faith in the electoral process, and trusted electoral outcomes is critical for Australia's democratic well-being, and the legitimacy of governments

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to govern. Trust in the result is, in many ways, the beginning of all transactions between governments and citizens, and is fundamental to national governance, stability and security.

Secondly, Australians' faith in the electoral process is no accident, and the AEC has worked assiduously over many, many years to improve, strengthen and streamline our electoral processes, systems, and procedures. Everything we do is focused on ensuring high integrity elections, with a minimum of friction for citizens and other participants in the electoral process. By way of example: over the last decade we have implemented a vast range of integrity measures to ensure the veracity of results, and bolster citizens' faith in the process. The security of the overall process has never been better, and at FE22 our ballot paper security, handling, transport, and storage was the most controlled in Australia's history. FE22 also represented the latest iteration of our queue management processes which we've been researching and implementing over the last few electoral events. Queue management remains complex (given we don't have fixed term elections and citizens can largely vote anywhere in Australia) but the measures implemented by the AEC, based on long-term data analysis and detailed modelling, have significantly removed this area of concern.

Amongst a range of other noteworthy achievements, FE22 was accompanied by truly significant levels of enrolment. This has continued since that time, and we now have the best roll in Australia's history. This is critical because a high level of enrolment is, in itself, a key integrity measure.

For the committee's information, there have been other, large-scale significant research and implementation projects undertaken by the AEC, mostly invisible to the public, which have nonetheless added to citizens' trust in the process. For example, since 2016, the AEC has been analysing our counting processes

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to ensure we're able to deliver the swiftest possible result in line with legislation. We are aware that perceived delays to results frequently causes negative public commentary along the lines of 'the AEC is deliberately delaying the count, or the AEC is being slow, or the AEC could count the votes if they wanted to' et cetera et cetera, all of which impacts on the reputation of the process. Accordingly, we continue to examine this area of our operations, and engage with this committee about this important matter.

FE22 also involved the AEC developing and using our innovative Reputation Management Strategy (RMS). The RMS, as it is known, is really a concept where all activities of the AEC are designed to promulgate accurate information about Australia's electoral processes, swiftly deal with mis and disinformation, and provide citizens with the certainty they deserve that Australia's electoral system is truly one of the world's best. There are many aspects of the RMS, and we have discussed some of these with the committee previously, including the conduct of our national "Stop and Consider" campaign, and the establishment of our Defending Democracy Unit – with a total focus on electoral integrity.

The AEC is incredibly proud of the work that it has done over many, many years to enable Australian citizens to express their views through one of the world's great, transparent, and safe electoral systems. AEC staff continue to work hard on behalf of all Australians, and I'm grateful to be part of such a fantastic team of public servants.

I'm happy to take any questions the Committee may have.