

Brian Moore

Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the 2017 State General Election

I note that your Community Development and Justice Standing Committee are conducting an inquiry into the above.

I also note that submissions closed on Friday 4 August 2017, so technically this may not be included. Basically I would like to add my experiences and thoughts on two aspects of the inquiry, those being –

- The participation of communities with traditionally low levels of enrolment or turn out, and/or high levels of informality;
- Remote polling services.

Background

I have been involved in the conduct of elections in this State since 1964, and have undertaken Returning Officer (RO) roles in the Metropolitan area and the Pilbara, as well as RO for the Local Government areas of Joondalup, Donnybrook-Balingup, Wiluna and Ngaanyatjarra.

In 2000 I conducted a roll check within the Shire of Ngaanyatjarra (Jarra Lands), and in 2005 I conducted the early polling in the communities in the Jarra Lands area. In conducting the 2005 remote polling I was accompanied by Mr Lindsay Bridge, and Ms Vanessa Beckingham, who later left the WAEC to take up a position at the State Parliament.

The experience of actually going into communities and meeting with the locals has given me a greater respect for them, but still leaves me pondering as what is the best way to look after them.

Remote Polling

Prior to each State Election Returning Officers (RO) are appointed to conduct the election for each electoral district. These appointments are normally given to persons external to the normal WAEC payroll. In the past a lot came from the Justice area, including Clerks of Courts, and other public sector areas. In more recent times the employment pool has widened to the extent that, in some cases, Returning Officers have been appointed with little or no electoral experience other than their own participation when voting.

This is not necessarily a bad thing providing the training reflects the total lack of knowledge some have.

Returning Officers then select from a pool of applicants those who will work for them on the day. In the case of Mining and Pastoral Districts, it is then up to the RO's to employ their staff from a pool of applicants and then train them themselves. These employees then may be assigned to undertake remote early polling in Communities. In most cases, RO's use staff that have previously undertaken this role.

I was fortunate, in 2005, to be employed at the WAEC and was asked to conduct the remote polling in the "Jarra Lands" area. Rather than obtain my support staff from the employment pool, I asked the Commission to release Vanessa Beckingham, a Research Officer to assist. I then sought out Mr Lindsay Bridge, who at the time was employed at the Department of Local Government, and had an indigenous background. We spent a week in the communities and flew out each day from our base at Warburton.

This meant that the three of us were being paid irrespective of the hours worked, unlike the 'temporary' employees engaged for the election. We also had a genuine interest in the procedure.

A number of things became obvious at our very first Community that changed the way we handled the polling.

1. In the main, Community members had little or no idea what was involved in the voting process.
2. At some Communities locals were brought to the polling place with express instructions on who to vote for.
3. The lack of interest some Parties placed on the Community vote was obvious.

Voter Assistance

With three of us in attendance at the polling place it was easy to have one person mark the roll and issue ballot papers whilst two of us 'taught' locals how to vote.

As the ballot papers were issued we would ask if the person required assistance, and in most cases, the offer was accepted. We would then accompany the person to the booth and ask who they wanted to vote for. Once this was established we would remove the other unwanted 'how to vote' cards and place the relevant card alongside the ballot paper, get them to check that was who they wanted to vote for and then copy the detail across. The same was then undertaken for the Upper House paper.

It was obvious that a training regime would not go astray in remote communities, BUT, in our view it had to be undertaken at the time of the poll, not weeks or months before, as generally the interest was not there.

In a number of cases locals were brought to the polling place by other locals, and were told who to vote for. We encountered a number of people who, when away from the person who had brought them in, said they wanted to vote for a different person/party. In these cases we would ask them to identify the person/party and repeat the procedure mentioned above.

Party Participation

On our remote polling trip we were 'followed' by the Labor Party team in their own chartered plane, and the Liberal representative by road. Normally there was sufficient time for the vehicle driver to get to the communities prior to polling. Other Parties did not have any representation available, nor had they sent any 'how to vote' cards to the communities enabling locals to know how to vote for them. We did note one exception where a Party had sent a bundle of 'how to vote' cards to a Community, but the office personnel had not passed them on or placed them in a public position.

This made it difficult to assist people who wanted to vote for someone other than the Labor or Liberal Party. All we could do was instruct where to put their '1' vote. How they completed the balance of the paper was their choice. Emphasis was placed on the fact that, to be a valid vote, the remaining squares had to be completed.

Having undertaken this exercise, I am firmly of the view that polling at remote communities should be removed from the role of the Returning Officer for the Districts and be undertaken by teams of people who are

prepared to educate at the same time as ensuring a formal ballot paper is obtained. I would like to see the task undertaken from within the WAEC and their Education unit in West Perth, possibly utilising government employees whose task involves indigenous people.

I appreciate that the Returning Office is ultimately responsible for each vote within the District allotted to, but the count result can be given to him or her in the same manner as absent and provisional vote results are.

Roll Check

The roll check gave me the insight into the shy nature of community people. You simply cannot walk up to a local and ask them personal questions, they back away. I found that by locating myself on the steps or just outside the community store gave me an opportunity to undertake some checking.

On occasions when a name was not on the roll I was asked to check under a different name. It is common to change names after a death has occurred where the name is the same. This leads to the problem as to how do you remove a person from the roll in situations like this. Whilst a new enrolment form can be given, unless you fill it out and have them sign it, or make their mark, it will never come back to the office for correction.

The local community health staff are very helpful in providing some information relating to locals and, in most cases, know a date of birth even if it the common 1 July.

I believe that the rolls for the remote communities are, to a large degree, inaccurate due to the inability to easily remove names of people who are listed more than once or are deceased.

Communities are generally lowly populated and for various cultural reasons locals are not always in residence. This makes proper roll checking both time consuming and expensive. I am not sure whether there is a link between the Commission and the Department of Social Security where a list of locals could be provided for comparison, but this would help.

I do ask the question, what action does the WAEC take to ensure the validity of the roll?

General comment

In conjunction with the 2005 State Election a referendum was held. Two questions had to be answered by voters. Those questions were –

Question 1: Do you believe that the Western Australian community would benefit if trading hours in the Perth Metropolitan Area were extended to allow general retail shops to trade until 9 pm Monday to Friday?

Question 2: Do you believe that the Western Australian community would benefit if trading hours in the Perth Metropolitan Area were extended to allow general retail shops to trade for 6 hours on Sunday?

The relevance of these questions was lost on the voting population we were trying to educate, and certainly complicated the process. Interestingly though, whilst most did not provide an answer to question 1, but preferred to leave the square blank, there was general consensus that Sunday was not a day of work!

Following the 2005 State Election I did issue a report to the Commission recommending the education process outlined here. I also made a submission to a Senate Committee examining electoral issues some years ago.

Finally, I add some photos taken during my participation in remote communities, in case Committee members have not had the opportunity to visit these areas.



Tjuntjuntjarra Community



Coonana Community



Inside Polling Place - Coonana



Polling Place – Tjuntjuntjarra Community



Lindsay Bridge & Vanessa Beckingham sheltering from heat at Blackstone airstrip with Labor Party plane in background.