Transcript

Public Hearing

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Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee inquiry into the Electoral Reform Amendment Bill 2013.

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KNIGHT, Ms Karen, General Manager Queensland, Vision Australia.

CHAIR: Karen and Liz, thank you very much for attending and assisting us in this inquiry into the Electoral Reform Amendment Bill 2013. Can I begin by asking if you object to being filmed or recorded by Hansard and the media?

Ms Knight: No.

Ms Jeffrey: No.

CHAIR: Can you confirm that you have read or have had read to you the guide 'Appearing as a witness'?

Ms Jeffrey: Yes.

Ms Knight: Yes.

CHAIR: I would ask you to please introduce yourselves, keeping in mind that we have Hansard recording everything that you say. I ask you to speak clearly for Hansard. You are welcome to make a short opening statement if there is anything you wish to add or highlight in your submission. Then we will progress to have the committee ask questions. Karen, I invite you to make an opening statement.

Ms Knight: I do have an opening statement. On behalf of Vision Australia and my colleague Liz Jeffrey, who is our Queensland advocacy officer, I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak directly to you on this critical matter. More than most people, committee members would be aware that voting is a fundamental right in a democracy and so, too, is being able to do it in an independent and secret manner. Apart from using braille ballot paper in a previous Queensland election, I have never been able to vote independently and secretly in any other state election in Queensland because the system is paper based and relies on visual cues to indicate vote preferences.

In many ways, my situation is not so important in that the reforms to Queensland's electoral system that you are now considering should not be about people who are blind or have low vision being provided a special or separate system to enable a secret and independent vote. The reforms should ensure the voting system and process is accessible and relevant to the needs of all members of the population and takes notice and advantage of technological and societal changes that are capable of delivering a range of benefits. The current system does not meet the needs of the population so we welcome the opportunity for change presented by the proposed legislative amendments.

The types of changes and the way in which they are made will be vital to the ultimate success and uptake by the community. We have learnt in the past. For example, the introduction of electronically assisted voting at the federal level in 2007 on a pilot basis largely failed because of the relatively low uptake by the intended cohort, the limited accessible options available and the applied cost attributed to this individual group. Unfortunately, instead of introducing a system that enabled participation by people who are blind or have low vision to vote like anyone else, the story became one of extra costs the community carried to make an exception for people with a disability. We want to avoid this problem in the future, and it does not need to be repeated.

We are adamant that changes made to the Queensland system must be made sensibly for the long term and that no individual subgroup receives needless or negative attention along the way—for example, in the cost of a new system or in the uptake by a certain cohort based on their personal situation, such as disability. After all, it is not about being blind; it is about being able to vote.

I used electronically assisted voting at the 2013 federal election, voting by telephone from outside a polling place prior to the election day. I registered first, provided a PIN number and was issued a unique user ID number via email. Later, in order to cast a vote, I spoke with a call centre officer and I gave them my user ID and PIN number. The call centre officer informed me that there was a third person present on the call. The call centre officer read me the ballot paper and I indicated my selections. The process was very quick and simple. However, it could have been equally as well done using a synthesized voice and using a telephone keypad to exercise my voting options independently and in secret.

It is an important point and I want to make a distinction between some of the current accessible voting systems that may be contemplated. Not all of them are equal. First, in terms of telephone voting, a truly accessible and independent system means that it should be fully automated. There should be no requirement to consult with another person while voting. Speaking to someone at a call centre on election day simply does not cut it. Committee members here will be aware of, and most likely have used, telephone banking - a fully automated process whereby your security, identification and transaction selections are made using the handset and verified by a machine which uses a synthesized voice to let you know your options. Likewise, internet banking is commonplace and occurs without human intervention other than that of the user. Your transactions are your business. You undertake these using your keypad. There is, for all intents and purposes, no third party or human intervention during the process. The telephone and internet options are provided through the New South Wales iVote system, which we view as the benchmark for accessible, independent and secret voting. We urge you to look closely at the features of the iVote system.

Finally, the type and number of users for a system like that should be as broad as possible to maximise the awareness and uptake of the new system that is being introduced. So we are really heartened by the Attorney-General making specific mention of voters outside of Queensland on polling day being an eligible category of voters who can use electronically assisted voting. This will also support uptake and provide benefits to voters and the system. Vision Australia would be more than happy to assist in further development or promotion of any electronically assisted voting in Queensland. We congratulate the Queensland government on this important initiative.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Karen. I might ask some questions in relation to the iVote system because you have experienced it firsthand. Leaving aside the synthesized voice and the fact that a person is there, how did you find the system in terms of ease of use for you?

Ms Knight: It was very easy to use.

CHAIR: Were you the only person who used that system that day or were there other people in line?

Ms Knight: I actually did it before polling day. I did it from my desk at work because all I needed to do was ring up. I already had my PIN and user ID. There was a time prior to the election—the pre-poll time—when you could do that at any time. I know many, many people who used it. As for when I used it, I just picked a convenient time and rang up.

CHAIR: You said that there was not a great uptake at that federal election as far as you are aware?

Miss BARTON: That was 2007.

CHAIR: Sorry.

Ms Knight: At the 2007 federal election it was not, but I understand that it was much better in 2013. Part of that was that we did a lot of work advertising it and encouraging people to do it. In fact, at Vision Australia we had volunteers who were ringing thousands of our clients to get them to use the system.

CHAIR: Did you need to have an impairment to be able to register?

Ms Knight: At the 2013 I think you did. That is what we like about this system—it makes it much broader because there are many other categories of people who can do it.

CHAIR: I understand there is a pilot system going but I have asked enough questions.

Mr CHOAT: Karen, we have had some evidence put before us by other people we have spoken to today about ID. I am curious because you seem quite chuffed with things that are coming up that give people like yourself better opportunities to get in and do your own thing and be independent whilst making those sorts of important decisions. Did you find it onerous that you had to actually say, 'This is me and, yes, I qualify for this different access to voting'? Or did you think of it as an expectation and that you were happy to take the opportunity?

Ms Knight: All I had to do was ring up and give them my name and my electorate. They would not have known if I was blind or not. There was no proof that I met the category to perform such a way of voting at all. For people who are blind or who have low vision, if it was photographic ID, that would be an issue. Obviously, we do not have a driver's licence and many do not have passports, so other forms of photo ID could be a problem. I think it needs to be thought through carefully. One option that has been discussed is a letter that you get from the Electoral Commission. For people who are blind or who have low vision, letters come and they sit there until you can find someone to read them so it is not reliable to expect that you will have a letter like that on you. I think there are issues that have been raised by other speakers that are quite legitimate and I support that it can be a challenge that needs to be thought through.

Mr CHOAT: Can I follow on. Would you suggest that there might be strategies you could use with people who associate with your organisation to get the communication and knowledge out— like, for example, you guys working with the Electoral Commission?

Ms Knight: Yes. We have partnered with the Electoral Commission in the past to do a number of initiatives—with not only the Electoral Commission of Queensland but the Australian Electoral Commission. I think, yes, certainly there are, but there are many blind and low-vision people who do not have anything to do with Vision Australia, so it needs to be a very broadbrushed population approach. A lot of people who lose their sight are older so we need to keep that in mind as well.

Ms Jeffrey: I have to say that I have already been getting a lot of phone calls from older people with a lot of fear about them not having a driver's licence and how they are going to vote. Even the idea of having ID is actually instilling a lot of fear into the community already.

Mr WATTS: Obviously, people who lose their vision later in life would already be on the roll, but if someone had no vision prior to that, what is the process they go through to get on the electoral roll in the first place?

Ms Knight: Because there is quite a lot of advertising that happens coming up to election time, they are usually by one means or another aware of that sort of information and they would probably ask someone to assist them because there is no way at this stage they could do that completely independently. A lot of people report that people coming around and knocking on their door is a way that they access the pathway to do that, but again there is some assistance that is needed.

Mr WATTS: Thank you.

Mr BYRNE: I like the fact that your evidence has given me a great insight. I was interested in the analogy with banking systems and the automation, independence and privacy associated with that. I was also thinking at the time that to get into a banking system you need 100 points, and there are all the other pieces and filters and security arrangements that are necessary to operate in any of the banking systems either by phone or by other means. This comes back to the capacity to demonstrate your identity I suppose before you even get into those systems. Even I have noticed that I have had trouble finding 100 points on the odd occasion.

Mr WELLINGTON: Haven't we all?

CHAIR: You do only have to do it once.

Mr BYRNE: Do you see any problems? If you are going to go fully electronic—and I accept completely what you are saying and support what you are saying—there has got to be a portal to actually enter the system and the identification piece. Do you have any thoughts about the ease or otherwise of that?

Ms Knight: One of the things about the banks is that you usually have set up accounts and then you do not need any further ID to use the other aspects of it. I accept that in order to get into a portal like that you will need some sort of pathway to do it. I thought the user ID and PIN was a good way of doing it because the PIN was unique to me. I told them what my PIN was; they did not give it out to me. It was only the user ID that they gave me. They also were flexible about the way they gave it to me. They did not necessarily have to send me a letter, although that was an option. They said that I could have it by email, or they could ring me up and tell me or they could send it to me as an SMS. There were a whole range of ways of communicating that with me and it was up to me to choose the way that was going to suit me best, and I chose email. So I think it is about making it secure but having some flexibility about how you do that.

Miss BARTON: Just following on from what Bill was saying, when you were talking about the ability for members of our community to access their bank accounts via the internet and via the phone, my understanding was that you were more making the observation that, if we can do that, why can't we then take advantage of the technology that we have to I guess enfranchise more people with disabilities so that they might vote, rather than making a reflection on the individual system that banks use and necessitating certain types of identification. It was more that we are obviously intelligent enough beings to have this technology so why not take advantage of it. I just wanted to clarify that I fully understood.

Ms Knight: Yes, it is about the fact that the technology is available and we use it now. Really it is the same technology that you would use for something like an iVote system.

Miss BARTON: I would think the really big thing about that for you as well is the lack of human intervention. One of the things that I take pride in—and I am assuming that most people would know that I voted for myself—is that I do not have to tell anyone how I am voting. It is a secret ballot and that is one of the things that is very integral to our system. I would think one of the great things about a system similar to internet and phone banking would be the lack of human intervention which is something you did start to touch on. Just how important is that for you as a person—to know that you can do that on your own and that you are a fully independent person able to do that?

Ms Knight: It is a wonderful thing for me to be able to do that. I value it very highly because I had many voting experiences when I was younger and there was not the technology like there is now and I did have to get someone to do it for me. When I first was just over 18, it was a parent and I generally wanted to vote different to the way they did and I was not sure if I should really let them know that.

CHAIR: You are not sure what they put down, are you?

Ms Knight: That is right. Then I used to get polling officials to assist, but again there is a skill in being able to do it yourself. I did it myself for the very first time at the 2007 federal election. I know in Queensland we only have the one house of parliament, but before then I had never, ever had the concept of voting below the line.

Miss BARTON: It takes a long time, trust me. I do it every year.

Ms Knight: That is right. That is why even in the last federal election when I could do the system I did not vote below the line. Because I thought how horrible to make them read all that to me, and what if I cannot remember? So I think the power that it gives you as an individual and the confidence that you are actually making your own choices is so valuable.

Mr DILLAWAY: Karen, I just want to congratulate Vision Australia, because I know that you guys have been big advocates of this, and you certainly wrote to us on many occasions prior to the 2012 election. I guess from my perspective you are the guinea pigs, so congratulations. I look forward to this spanning out and hopefully encapsulating more of the electorate, so well done.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Karen and Liz, for giving us your time and making that contribution to the parliamentary process.

ENDS