

Crisis in the Australian Electoral Commission 2003

by Amy McGrath, 27 November 2003

The Commonwealth Electoral Act says:

'There shall be a Divisional Returning Office for each Division who shall be charged with the duty of giving effect to this Act within or for the division subject to the directions of the Electoral Commissioner and the Australian Electoral Officer for the State.'

The Australian Electoral Commission began centralising by amalgamations from 1987.

Its policy to co-locate divisional offices out of their neighbourhoods to new locations. Smaller staff would move into smaller standard size offices in clusters of 2, 3 or 4. This would save 15-20% in rental, 30% in rents and 15-25% in staffing cost.

Both parties opposed amalgamations in the JSCEM in 1992, 1996, and 2003.

Advice to the AEC, as to legality of amalgamation, was negative until now. The AEC now claims to have positive advice but refuses to let anyone see it

All 150 Divisional Offices petitioned the Special Minister of State, Senator Abetz

They object to amalgamations still in progress in defiance of the Minister

All 150 Divisional Offices went on protest strike on 7 November 2003 for three hours.

Their 6.5% pay rise over 2 years is linked to agreeing to amalgamation. They object to lack of consultation with themselves or their union, the CPSU.

The Special Minister of State then wrote to every Divisional Returning Officer.

No further action on amalgamations without consent of the Parliament or Minister

The Divisional Returning Officers say they put the electoral system in jeopardy.

Divisional staff lose contact with the physical nature of their electorate and electors. They have a reduced ability to detect enrolment fraud via roll reviews. They cannot manage elections as efficiently eg supervision on polling day. They lose demographic familiarity essential for redistributions.

Divisional Officers disagree that amalgamation will save money.

The average rent of 23 Queensland divisional offices was \$35,000. The rent of Queensland Head Office + 4 Divisions \$400,000 and West End 400,000. Therefore it is cheaper to move Queensland Head Office than the Divisional Offices.

Divisional Officers ask why they are the target of economy in the system

Senior executives in Canberra received \$652,187 in performance bonuses. They bought wide TV screens and photocopiers equal in price to a small car.

Examples:

Lilley/Moreton/Brisbane/Bonner (new electorate) in Brisbane Central, Qld
Bradfield/North Sydney/Berowra/Bennelong in Chatswood, NSW