

Outsourcing the electoral roll

by Dr. Amy McGrath - May 2002

Until recently, I laboured under the delusion that the AEC owned its own computer. I only found out on reading the evidence of Mr. Dacey, the AEC's Assistant Commissioner Election and Enrolment Division to the Senate Committee on Finance and Administrative Services on June 16, 1999 that "The AEC has not in its history (from 1984) used its own computer system or its own computer to manage the roll. It was managed on the computer of the old Department of Administrative Services (DAS) now the Department of Finance and Administration. The input of data into the computer is done by AEC staff but the computer itself is managed on an outsourced basis."

Why was it 'outsourced' in the first place? According to Senator Ray 'They do not have their own computers. There are a lot of good financial reasons for that.'

Surely no price can be too high for the protection of democracy. And democracy could not be protected by using mainframe DAS computers in a large separate building with a large separate staff, computers that do not stand alone either in daily maintenance of the roll or in ballot counting during elections.

Mr. Dacey further conceded that the roll was now to be 'outsourced' to a private firm (Computer Services Corporation) a step which was presumably no more than a logical progression from existing arrangements, although in fact there is a very significant difference. The CSC would not be subject to the normal constraints of public service inherent in the 'overlord' relationship of DAS to the AEC. As Mr. Dacey confirmed 'the government has outsourced Information Technology and the AEC is part of Cluster 3 which is being outsourced. Those contracts are being signed' A statement qualified by Senator Ray's subsequent remark 'I understand Cluster 3 is not going too well.'

Yet stand-alone computers are held to be imperative for all election process by the US National Standards Institute (Gaitersberg) in its publications on standard IT practice to prevent intrusion by hackers into computer terminals. This is exactly what did occur in January 1993 when a computer hacker, Timothy Cooper, 'hacked' into the AEC's computer system at the highest level, according to the AEC's own statement to the Brisbane District Court when he went on trial in December 1996. He did so through silent numbers in the private homes of two AEC employees who were not DRO's which gave him the capacity to install or alter existing programs including ballot count and election and electoral roll management. Of these he only intruded into the ballot count.

