

Pre-Poll and Postal Votes

Dr Amy McGrath - 6 March 2002

Are checks being made as to whether voters are who they say they are?

The number of voters applying for pre-poll and postal votes are now so great they can change the fate of many a candidate in an election, even elections themselves. These votes can amount to 15% of the vote - nearly 2,000,000 votes. They are not secret ballot votes cast with all the security of a polling booth on polling day.

They are **declaration votes** issued, and cast, with scant regard to earlier principles of the secret ballot designed to ensure that the voter was well-known to the witness, who had to be drawn from a limited list of authorised witnesses, and that the voter qualified as a person entitled to a vote because it would be difficult to attend a polling place on polling day. The first no longer applies. The second does in the letter of the law - repeated in the handbooks to scrutineers, a handbook to all 12,500,000 electors in the November 10, 2001 and Notice 50 in pre-polling centres - but not the practice of it.

If I had any doubt about this, the extraordinary response of the Australian Electoral Commissioner, Mr. Andy Becker, to my enquiry whether the Australian Electoral Commission checked declaration votes in any way, was that it accepted an elector's declaration, when requesting a pre-poll or postal vote **at face value** without checking, because the Commonwealth Electoral Act:

1. does not require proof the grounds claimed are genuine
2. does not require interrogation the grounds claimed are genuine.

I responded to Mr. Becker thus:

"Some members *[of the H.S. Chapman Society]* have checked the administration of the booths issuing these votes for the November 10, 2001 poll in various electorates. On four occasions members have been advised they can cast a vote **even after they have read the notice, and told the polling clerk they do not qualify under the conditions listed in the Notice 50 in the booth.** The centres are in Hurstville / Rockdale / Bondi Junction / Campbell St (Sydney & Wentworth).

"I would appreciate an urgent ruling as to whether your staff are entitled to advise voters they can have votes. which prescribe specific qualifications, without qualification, or to advise a voter as in Rockdale that no reasons apply. Surely, as these conditions have been laid down in the election book sent to every elector, and penalties apply to voters who do not conform it is wrong for this advice to be given. Moreover it swells the numbers of those choosing to vote in centres where party scrutineers are not allowed to be present.

"What checks are made to ensure votes freely applying for votes without hindrance have not cast either ordinary or absent votes again on polling day?"

Why do declaration envelopes not carry boxes wherein voters must attest reasons for voting as in state elections eg. out of the state, not within eight kilometres of a polling booth, infirm, seriously ill, in prison, in hospital, working, or religious reasons?"



A couple of key questions ...

Why are pre-poll votes issued at all when voters can cast absent votes?

Why can polling clerks permit, even advise, voters to break the law?

Five more key questions specific to the 10 November 2001 federal election ...
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1.	<p>Did the Mayor of Sutherland Council spend \$250,000 of ratepayers money to run a hostile campaign against Danna Vale, standing for re-election for the seat of Hughes, on the issue of upgrading the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor?</p> <p><i>(note - she received a 2% swing in her favour in the area closest to the reactor.)</i></p>
2.	<p>Did the union giant CFMEU assist in the campaign of independent candidate, Dr. Peter McDonald, in Warringah as rumour has it? Were paid union organisers and members among the 1,200 "volunteers" he claimed to have had assisting him? Were they among those said to be push-polling on the phone? The same union was said to have organisers in Farrell. The AWU was also active in Cowper.</p> <p><i>(note - the Queensland Trades Halls quoted Wayne Swan acknowledging the value of union organisers and resources in returning the ALP candidate in the Dickson by-election April 17, 1991)</i></p>
3.	<p>The ALP boasts it is the only party which can man every polling booth in Australia. The aggression with which they do this has been the cause of many complaints at large, or in submissions to the Joint Standing Committee of Electoral Matters. Abuse and intimidation abuse are all too common. I have experienced the former. And Unity Ticket workers, whose preference went to the Liberals in Barton, were hassled by such a group, telling them this was illegal. In Barton's 1988 state election, some were reported as being paid.</p>
4.	<p>Why did the AEC print its declaration vote envelopes with a red stripe, not tamper proof and the wrong size for the automated sorting line in mail exchanges in this election? A senior AEC manager explained to Alan Jones this was to make it easier to pick out of AEC mail. Would it not make it far easier for any one of the 12 pairs of hands sorting mail in Australia Post to divert them, delay them or open them to alter or substitute the vote within?</p> <p><i>(note - this is such notorious practice in the postal ballots of union elections - as exposed in cases in the courts - that the AEC designs the declaration envelopes to be as nondescript as possible.)</i></p>
5.	<p>Why did certain pre-poll booth officials advise myself and others we could vote pre-poll, when we said clearly that we did not conform to the conditions in Notice 50 that were present in the booths.</p> <p><i>(note - some booths had these on the tables, others on the wall though often in an inconspicuous spot, the odd booth not at all - none had any notice advising there are penalties for non-conformity)</i></p>

