

## Opening statement | Electoral Commissioner

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### Administration of the referendum into an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

#### Finance and Public Administration References Committee

Parliamentary Hearing, 4 May 2023

Chair and members,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss the administration of the referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

I won't take up the Committee's time with a lengthy opening statement, however, I do wish to briefly highlight some key points for the Committee's attention as part of this inquiry.

The AEC has been working extensively on preparations to deliver the proposed referendum in 2023. This will be Australia's first referendum in 24 years and much has changed since the last one was held in 1999. Perhaps most significantly, it was conducted in an entirely different information eco-system in an era with no social media. Any mis or disinformation was confined to marginal viewpoints expressed in limited media channels and hard copy information delivered to letterboxes. Now, citizens are bombarded with information through a range of mainstream and social media channels which ranges from factual information through to outright disinformation and lies. All of which can spread rapidly in the era of social media.

We're already seeing an increase in disinformation in process related social media – and we're going to need to adapt our approach to manage this for the

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referendum. I'd like to remind the Committee and those who might be listening that our focus is on the process – not the topic. We're working incredibly hard to ensure all Australians understand the process and how to participate in the referendum. The AEC has one of the largest public information campaigns across government. We will also educate voters during the referendum about mis and disinformation through our Stop and Consider campaign to encourage people to consider the source of the information they come across.

In addition, we work with partner agencies through the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (EIAT) who monitor and assess the environment and provide advice on potential threats to electoral integrity, including disinformation campaigns, foreign interference, and cyber threats.

We've started a comprehensive education campaign to inform those who may have a disclosure obligation for the referendum. We've got a range of information already on our website and we've run ads in social media and print.

We'll also educate people on authorisation requirements. There is enduring information available on our website on this topic.

Another major area of focus has been to grow the electoral roll – which is in the best shape it's ever been, and we continue to be proud of our work in this area. This referendum will have the most complete electoral roll in history. The national roll is currently at 97.2%, which is extraordinary and envied around the world.

There are two cohorts that are underrepresented - youth and Indigenous Australians. We are working hard to improve this. The youth enrolment rate does fluctuate given the turnover in the age bracket, and is currently at a high point at 87%. The estimated Indigenous enrolment is at a record high, now at 84.5% nationally. We are closing the gap, we have seen six consecutive years of growth, but we know more needs to be done. I note that closing the gap relates to a whole range of issues across government, not just electoral

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participation. In the AEC, we are achieving results through direct enrolment trials; remote engagement work through AEC staff and around 100 community partners; and Indigenous enrolment communication campaigns. Now that citizens can use their Medicare card as evidence of identity, this has been a further huge step in making it easier for citizens to enrol or update their details to vote.

We're also working to improve Indigenous electoral participation more broadly. For the Referendum we are tracking well to have:

- Far more First Nations people enrolled than ever before (currently 84.5%).
- More First Nations people working for us than ever before (2,070 or 2% of TEW at the 2022 federal election)
- More partners than ever before (currently around 100)
- More support materials and translated resources to support participation (videos in 24 languages; 2022 federal election remote polling ads in 20 languages + NITV partnership).
- More remote polling than in the past.

There are some key challenges in administering this referendum, which we have highlighted to the Committee through our submission.

As I've said to various committees previously – elections have always been amongst the largest, most complex peacetime logistical events in our country. Statistically, more Australians (17.2 million) will participate in this referendum than any other in our history. This, along with passionate and entrenched views that are always prevalent in referenda, will combine to make this one of the most complex events the AEC has ever delivered.

Thank you, I'm happy to take questions.