

# **Protecting Australia's Precious Democracy**

*Group of Eight Australia event, Monday 14 April 2025 – Jeff Pope APM*

I thank the Distinguished Professor Genevieve Bell AO for hosting us here at ANU and her peer vice chancellors, executives and academics of Australia's leading universities for their research-intensive work in this space.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to open this important discussion with the Group of Eight Australia member universities and stakeholders, and I appreciate the deep interest of Group of Eight Chair Mark Scott, CEO Vicki Thompson and her team. I also thank my fellow speakers for their valuable contribution to this discussion.

I recall my first voting experience. It was under the watchful eye of Mr Jordan, a Kaftan wearing piano accordion playing Grade 2 teacher at North Ringwood Primary School which in those days was on the far eastern outskirts of Melbourne – in amongst orchards and paddocks. It was 1977, and every Friday afternoon the class got to vote by raising your hand for either rounders or poison ball to finish off the week. All students were on the roll – that was dutifully checked every morning by needing to call out “Here or Present” (good to see

that he was practicing continuous roll management like the AEC does). Voting was compulsory, every vote counted when hands went into the air to express your vote, with a first past the post system majority vote leading to the decision.

While you might think this is a little trite, it did teach us at an early age the importance of forming a view and expressing that view in accordance with Mr Jordan's rules. It taught us to participate. It taught us how decisions can be made, particularly decisions for a group of unwieldy students. It most importantly taught us to accept the result, whatever it was, with grace and humility, otherwise you sat out the first five minutes and disadvantaged your team. The vote importantly moderated the opinions of the room – everyone had been heard, and the decision was final.

Little did I appreciate at that young age how much voting would feature in life, from groups of friends reconciling differences of opinion about how to spend their night out, to families deciding holiday destinations, to workplaces with Enterprise Agreements, to our jury process that underpins our justice system and of course electing representatives in local, state and federal government to best represent our interests – and those we elect make decisions for us, by voting.

It permeates many aspects of our life. It helps bring us together as equals. It helps hold us together through challenging moments, it moderates us (particularly when it is a compulsory system and all voices are heard) and it will continue to be the vehicle for how Australians shape our future as a nation. It is one of the most enduring and acceptable decision-making processes known to mankind.

It is essential to our social fabric and our social contract, to our peace, that we respect the role of voting in society. At every opportunity to vote we all need to participate, contribute our views, be counted as equals, respect the process and the outcome.

And, so here we are on the eve of another opportunity for the nation to participate in another federal election with all eligible Australians exercising their enshrined freedom that our forebearers designed and fought to protect, and that is so precious that we must all work hard to continue to nurture and protect.

Australia has one of the best voting systems in the western world. The AEC regularly receives requests from other countries who wish to

learn from us. And is it any wonder, while noting my bias, our election at times feels almost like a modern miracle.

While speaking to you I can hear the whirring of massive printing machines across Australia that are getting towards the final stages of printing 60 million ballot papers. These ballot papers will find their way into the hands of up to nearly 18.1 million Australian voters that we will service in over 8000 polling locations all around Australia, including 111 locations overseas. This will occur over a 10 day voting period.

There will be 250,000 pencils used (or you can bring your own pen if you wish – more on that later), 80,000 ballot boxes and about 40,000 transport routes. We are delivering 158 separate but concurrent elections – 150 for the House of Representatives and 8 for the Senate in each state and territory. From Braddon, to Ballarat, to Burnie, to Barossa Valley, to Bunbury, to Barunga, to Bundaberg, to Byron Bay, to Berlin, to Bogota and I could go on, but you get the idea.

Wherever Australians vote they get the same consistent service. For those unable to attend a polling place we have just posted the first tranche of postal votes to about 1.5 million Australians, including many Australians overseas, and we will pump out probably another million or so over the next week and a bit. We often refer to this as probably Australia's largest peacetime logistical event, or one of

Australia's largest and most important service delivery offerings in a short period of time. It is a massive undertaking.

And here is the modern miracle part. There will be unbelievably positive stories and experiences from this election. I recall at the last election meeting Father Elmer Ibarra who just emerged from a polling place with a huge smile on his face. I chatted to him because he was clearly not from the area. He was a new Australian citizen, from the Philippines, who had just voted in his first election in Australia with our remote polling team in Santa Teresa, about an hour down a very rough dirt road out of Alice Springs, surrounded by the beauty of red dust. He couldn't believe the lengths we had gone to bring remote voting to Santa Teresa – I was slightly more believing but still nonetheless unbelievably impressed and proud of our voting service and system. There will be thousands of these stories for voters in this election in many places around Australia or overseas. For instance, right now we are preparing over 200 postal votes for the men and women onboard HMAS Sydney who are in the Asian region and otherwise won't get a chance to vote. When they dock at their Asian port their postal votes will be ready for them, catering to the various electoral divisions in which they are enrolled.

Another favourite part of polling day is watching parents proudly step their child through their first voting experience – I watched this occur

at the last election at the iconic Old Parliament House. It is a rite of passage for all young adult Australians. These sorts of experiences literally give me tingles and sometimes I get a bit emotional which is driven by my absolute pride in what we at the AEC are delivering for Australians.

This is only possible because of the wonderful and committed staff of the AEC who I have the absolute privilege and honour to lead and the incredibly important and equally wonderful 100,000 temporary election workers that we employ right across the country – which on polling day makes the AEC about the third largest employer in Australia.

While the scale is complex in such a short period of time, with 33 days notice and almost a ‘vote anywhere’ system, that complexity also comes from needing to adhere to the precise requirements of a dense and prescriptive Commonwealth Electoral Act. Complexity can also come from the varied responses and feedback we get from our very diverse range of stakeholders, which includes political parties, candidates, politically active entities, party workers and campaigners, scrutineers, media and voters (effectively all adult Australians).

All these stakeholders are an essential part of our election and democratic process and a critical check and balance ingredient to delivering a trusted election with integrity. We couldn't do it without them, and we greatly respect their role in the process. It certainly helps drive transparency and holds us accountable to our decisions and actions.

Then of course, further complexity can come from things like the COVID pandemic at the last election, and this election the number of communities that are potentially isolated from the late-onset monsoon and floods across a few states. We currently have a status report and a regular update on every airstrip in Australia so we can assess our options and execute our contingency plans if needed.

And recently, complexity has increased, and rightly so I might add, by voter expectations of the quality of our service delivery. You get the sense that in our compulsory system, if Australians are being compelled to come out and vote they want an efficient service. We have seen the public's response to wait times and queues at the recent state election in Western Australia, which is now the subject of an independent inquiry.

Our survey data over a number of elections also shows that voter's perception of a trusted election can be largely, if not entirely influenced by their voting experience. Therefore, in addition to our absolute impartiality and political neutrality, we must aim for and deliver very high service standards, which generally means that the AEC:

- Must treat everyone with respect (something that is incredibly important to me as it helps to strengthen the social contract that underpins participation in our voting system)
- We have to provide timely, clear, concise and accurate information and educational material
- We must do everything possible to enable the voter to access our services, such as the 200,000 or so kilometres our remote voter service teams will travel in the coming weeks to service about 500 remote locations across Australia
- We have to do everything possible to ensure there are minimal queues and wait times, while voters have the flexibility to pretty much vote anywhere
- We must fairly regulate to the extent of our legislation and our capacity which is essential to ensuring a free and fair election, and
- Despite the scale and very manual nature of our voting system, Australians expect a result as quickly as possible (generally on



polling night). For this election we will be counting over 200 million preferences.

That's a high bar for an event with no fixed date to prepare to, but we relish the challenge.

Whilst everyone at the AEC would like this to be a perfect experience for all voters, unfortunately there will always be some challenges.

Sometimes that has something to do with us, like an Officer in Charge being given the wrong key and can't open the polling place right on 8am on election day, or some staff call in sick and queues form.

There are also humans involved in every stage of this process and sometimes interactions are not as civil as they should be, emotions can run high and judgment can occasionally be a little off - but 99% of all Australians and our staff do the right thing. Sometimes also, life also gets in the way and communities might be closed for sorry business and we have no time to circle back in our tight agenda, or people who desperately want to vote unexpectedly end up in a situation where they can no longer access a polling place and postal voting is closed. We always do our best, but we are not able to cater to everyone's individual circumstances which I know at times can cause frustration.

Probably the greatest change to the complexity of our elections over the past few years stems from the potential threats to electoral integrity which can come in the form of cyber or physical security incidents, misinformation or disinformation campaigns and through perceived or actual interference in electoral processes. These have been evolving since 2019 but as the world continues to rapidly change, these vectors also evolve. More recent threats to election integrity and delivery also include:

- Social tensions arising from groups and individuals focused on issues which can increase emotions and can manifest through intimidation, harassment, threats, vandalism and property damage.
- Artificial intelligence which continues to rapidly evolve. Perceived concern about the impact of AI is increasing despite the actual incidents and impacts detected throughout the year of elections in 2024 was very low.
- The use of bots to drive the mass dissemination of false and misleading information or to drive influence campaigns.
- New social media platforms used by some diaspora communities that challenges the jurisdiction and reach of the AEC regulatory remit.

- The global rise of the debate around free speech and what that means, which also underpins the posture of some social media companies and their platform rules and underscores the now highly contentious issue of regulating speech.
- The apparent increase in public commentary on desired electoral outcomes of other countries
- The increase in sovereign citizens which are on the rise in Australia, who don't recognise the Constitution or government agencies and write to me demanding that I remove them from the electoral roll, or I will be the subject of a fine. I do not and will not agree to their demands and consequently I think I now owe tens of millions of dollars in supposed fines since the start of this year. Many of these sovereign citizens, or freedom fighters, are besotted with conspiratorial rhetoric that questions the integrity of electoral processes and results. It seems to be a learned behaviour, exacerbated when spoken by people in authority, that sows seeds of belief that is very difficult, if not impossible, to reverse even with facts and logic. And no, we don't have an army of people to rub out your votes written with a pencil – that is so outrageous and offensive. But if you wish, you may bring your own pen.
- And regrettably some apathy among young voters who have a declining level of trust and engagement in democracy more broadly. This declining trust in democracy, and our democratic

institutions, is a real challenge that we must all invest in tackling. Researchers from the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy have found that, when asked how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country, the percentage of individuals worldwide who say they are “dissatisfied” has increased from 47 per cent in the mid-1990s to 57.5 per cent in 2019. Public satisfaction is a key indicator for democratic legitimacy, meaning this decrease in public satisfaction with democracy is contributing to a decline in the legitimacy of even well-established democracies, such as the US, Brazil and the UK. Now of course, satisfaction in democracy is a broader concept than satisfaction in elections, but we have a crucial role to play which goes to my earlier point about excellent service delivery.

You will note that some of these threats are occurring to us through a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment and new technology, and some we are doing to ourselves and potentially have more control over addressing.

Irrespective of the source of the threat, we are working night and day to continue to evolve as an agency to ensure we do everything we can to mitigate these threats – this is a key part of the role of our

Defending Democracy Unit. We have learnt from others, such as the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Election Processes and Democratic Institutions in Canada, the cyber intrusion of the electoral roll in the UK, the impact of mis and disinformation and conspiracies on voters and society in many western democracies.

The AEC invests greatly in our cyber security capabilities and measures but those who circle in that world know nothing is ever absolute. We have the most active social media team in Australian government to engage on various platforms, but also to call out disinformation about electoral processes on our Disinformation Register. We have excellent working relationships with the AFP and all state and territory police forces to assist with any social unrest or threats. We have worked closely with companies developing AI and examined their generative AI capability and rules and are fairly satisfied that the rules and measures put in place by various companies to prevent abuse of AI in elections are pretty good (although some did produce images of me that are far more handsome than the reality).

But one of our most important safeguards is the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce which I was a part of establishing in 2018 and until the end of last year Chaired the Board. This taskforce is a fantastic cooperation of national intelligence and security agencies,

law enforcement and relevant policy agencies where their excellent capabilities and expertise is focused on mitigating or minimising threats to the actual or perceived integrity of the election.

Intelligence, information and expertise is shared to give us all a holistic picture of the environment in which the election is being delivered and any threats emerging. It is a model envied by many around the world and has become absolutely essential to trying to ensure electoral integrity in Australia. It is worth noting that this national capability also assists the State and Territory election management bodies with their elections.

Whilst noting the great capabilities of the Taskforce, it and the AEC will never be able to stop mis and disinformation, conspiracy theories, cyber-attacks or the development of AI. These are societal issues not limited only to elections. Therefore, the most important counter to these threats sits with all Australian voters who continue to prove to be resilient through all of these changes.

It is up to the voter, and always has been, to navigate through the information environment that surrounds an election. To make informed decisions. To distil and hopefully dismiss and not share mis and disinformation. To be conscious of the bias that is fed from their social media algorithms. To ensure that they know that Australian

elections are only for Australian voters and are not to be influenced by others outside of Australia.

What has become clearer over the last few elections, and when you gaze into the future, is that the AEC must do everything possible to help educate and inform the voter. Not just about election processes and how to cast a formal vote, but also about digital literacy, mis and disinformation tactics, the potential threats of AI and many others.

This is why over the last 6 months or so we have held over 700 education sessions in multicultural and Indigenous communities all around Australia, many of those in the language of those communities. It is why we run the largest advertising campaign of any government agency translated in up to 59 languages (34 CALD and 25 Indigenous). It is why we are nearing the final stages of delivering an Official Guide to nearly 12 million households around Australia. It is why we have expanded our information and educational offering to the disability community around Australia. It is why we have had a dedicated effort towards greater equity of access to electoral services and information for those who would otherwise face barriers to participation. It is why we have added a lot of educational and awareness information to our website which is consistently getting over 200,000 visitors a day since the election was

called. It is why we position our website to be the single source of truth on electoral processes. It is why we are incredibly active in the media during an election. It is also why we have developed and expanded our digital literacy campaign called Stop and Consider, asking the voter to stop and consider the source of the information they are consuming – next week this will be available on mainstream and social media changes in up to 15 languages. It is why we are the most active government agency on various social media platforms where we debunk and educate voters about the voting process, and it is why we have expanded that footprint for the first time to TikTok to reach those younger voters who don't watch the mainstream news services or listen to the radio. This will be Australia's first election when our younger generation is larger in number than the older generation.

We continue to evolve as an agency to ensure we deliver sound electoral events with the best possible level of service. It was once enough to deliver an operationally sound election. We go to great lengths to engage, as evident from our record enrolment figures last week with 98.2% of eligible Australian voters on the roll for this election. We must continue to do that, but now we must also be an outstanding communications organisation and provide the best educational and awareness material possible to support the voter to navigate this challenging electoral environment. This also highlights



the critical role of the media and educational institutions who can help drive that engagement and education of Australian voters.

We are somewhat fortunate though that a strong feature of the Australian culture is to have a healthy degree of scepticism and to call out what they believe to be rubbish or unfair. Australians are good at it – across a spectrum of issues and topics, and we need that to be exercised throughout the election. This is one of the most effective regulatory activities Australians can undertake with respect to false and misleading information. It is not up to the AEC, and nor should it be, to be the arbiter of truth of political debate and advertising– that role risks compromising our political neutrality. This is best done by informed voters, the media and political participants.

Australians should feel confident that we, and they, are well positioned for the challenges faced in our modern democracy. But, at the end of the day, it is up to the voter to proceed into the polling place, a quiet space, a private space, and to cast a secret ballot that is informed by matters that are important to them, their family, their community, their future. It is your vote, no one else's. I have not met a voter yet who cast a vote on the back of a social media post, or a meme, or just because some stranger told them to vote in a particular way. We need that to continue to be the case and we all

have a role in supporting the voter to navigate this ever-evolving electoral environment.

Thank you to the Group of 8 for allowing me to open this important discussion, and it is in Australia's best interests that this discussion continue long into our future. Our democracy is precious, and it is up to all of us to protect and nurture it. Excellent elections supporting an informed, educated and highly engaged electorate is an essential element of the future and strength of our democracy.