**Episode 10 – What happens next?**

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Kerry: This year, Australia will hold a national referendum. This referendum will ask voters if the Constitution should be altered to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

With Australia’s last referendum being held over 20 years ago, many might not know why they’re held or how to vote.

Hi, I’m Kerry, and in this podcast, I’ll be joined by the team from the Australian Electoral Commission to unpack the process ahead of the referendum so that you can vote with confidence.

This is an unbiased and detailed look at why the referendum is important, how you can make your vote count, and why your answer matters.

I’m joined by Alex and Meg one last time to go over everything you can expect after that final sausage leaves the grill. Hi Meg, hi Alex!

Alex: Hey Kerry, here we are.

Kerry: Here we are. So, what happens as soon as voting closes on voting day?

Alex: When voting closes, we move from one impossible challenge to the other, really. So, first we‘ve set up and run polling in eight thousand polling places all over the continent of Australia. So, just a cheeky little job there. And then we start counting those votes. So, there’s going to be at least 17 and a half million votes for the AEC to count. We’re going to count every vote that we have in our possession on the night. So, there’s a lot of work for our hundred thousand staff to be cracking into. You’ll be able to track and see how that count is progressing on the AEC’s tally room, which is available on our website. And of course, if you’re watching on the television or listening on the radio, you’ll be able to follow along with the feed that we provide to media outlets as well.

Kerry: That’s a lot of votes to be counted. So what measures are in place to ensure the security of the vote counting?

Meg: So, there are a lot of measures in place. And the most visible is the presence of scrutineers. Now, we touched on this before, but those are people appointed by parties who watch the count, and they kind of oversee the entire process, and they can also challenge any calls that the polling or the counting staff make in counting the votes. They could say - oh, that looks more like a ‘Yes’ or that looks more like a ‘No’. We also count everything twice, which is really important. Not because people have two votes, or because we didn’t think our first count was good, but it’s just that the result is important, and we want to make sure that every single ballot paper is accounted for.

Kerry: So, how long does it take to get to the outcome?

Alex: If a contest is particularly tight, and of course we’ve got a count that we’re doing for each of the six states as well as the national count – so, if there’s a really close result in any of those, it might be a while before we arrive at a formal result, which is – the AEC is in a position to declare a result once it’s mathematically impossible for any other result to happen. We’ve talked about this earlier in the series. But what that means is that we might need to wait the 13 days after voting day for all of the postal votes to arrive and of course, we’ve got postal votes that are criss-crossing Australia coming from, you know, say you’re up in Broome and your home electorate is in Melbourne, your vote would actually have to be transported back to Melbourne to be counted in its home electorate. We count every vote in its home electorate. So, that means that we’re doing the transport. Likewise, if you’re voting in Greece, at an embassy in Greece, your ballot paper would actually be sent back to Australia via diplomatic mail and would come to us that way. So again, there is some transit time that we allow as part of that count process just to make sure that everyone’s vote can be counted and to give us time to receive it.

Kerry: What are some of the things that can delay an outcome?

Meg: Where we’re not mathematically certain about an outcome, we may have to wait 13 days til all of the postal votes to come in and there’s a number of other things that can delay the vote. And just on the point of polling night, it’s important to remember that, while we’re voting in one part of Australia, Perth polling may not have even closed yet. So that’s another reason why things may take a little longer, because we’re waiting for all the votes to come in from everywhere.

Alex: That’s always a big part of any election night, for a federal election. And it’ll be the same for the referendum as well. So, depending on the timing, WA is either going to be two or three hours behind us on the east coast, and that means that there will be that moment a little bit later in the night where the WA results start coming into the tally room. And that’s going to be a big moment because WA is of course one of the six states that needs to vote either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ for the referendum to pass or not pass. So that is going to be a key moment for the referendum count.

Kerry: OK, so, we’re at the pointy end where all votes are counted. So, what happens next if it’s a ‘Yes’ vote?

Meg: If it’s determined that it’s a ‘Yes’ vote - so it’s passed that double majority - we would return the writ indicating that it’s a ‘Yes’ vote to the Governor General.

Kerry: Ok, so that’s ‘Yes’ vote. On the flip side, what happens next if it is a ‘No’ vote?

Alex: If it’s a ‘No’ vote, nothing happens next. So, we would return the Writ to the Governor General. The Governor General would take that ‘No’ vote as the change to the Constitution not having the endorsement of the will of the people, and that would be the end of it. Nothing further would happen from there. So, the referendum is the last possible step before the Constitutional change either happens or doesn’t.

Meg: And if you’re interested in learning a little bit more about what goes on after the referendum, visit our website at aec.gov.au for more information.

Kerry: And a question that’s probably on everyone’s minds…that I’m sure a lot of people kind of want to know about, I’m certainly intrigued…is the decision final~~?~~

Meg: The decision is final for this question. We’re not aware of any law that limits the government from asking the same question in the future. I’m not aware of any time that it’s been done before. But it’s up to the government, it’s up to Parliament whether they think this is something they would like to do, and it goes through the same process again. So, it certainly *can* happen, we can’t predict the future, but regardless of what government says, the AEC will be ready to run a referendum.

Alex: We always are.

Kerry: It’s been so great chatting to you guys. I’ve learnt so much about the upcoming referendum. I look forward to catching up with you again for the next referendum. Thanks Meg, thanks Alex.

Alex: You’re so welcome.

Meg: Thanks Kerry.

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