

Tom Rogers: Well, hi everybody. My name's Tom Rogers and I'm the Australian Electoral Commissioner and this presentation as part of the graduate data forum is provisionally entitled what will your voting experience be like in 2030 or vote 2030 and I'm going to largely stick to that topic with some other points on the way through. I really commend the organisers of this for including a session on voting in the overall programme because it's such an important thing. This presentation is also designed to be viewed with a slide deck and I am hoping you're able to see that as I'm talking at the moment. The first slide is a quote from Winston Churchill that talks about the importance of the voting process and that's why it's so important as citizens we really focus on it. As Churchill said, it really is about the importance of the act of voting and what that means for all of us.

Tom Rogers: To that end, let me first of all tell you just a tiny bit about the AEC and there's a slide there with three things on it and effectively they are the three items that we are funded to provide for the Australian community. We manage the electoral role, which is an ongoing process we do at all times of the year, and we also manage that on behalf of the state electoral commissions. We deliver elections and clearly you'd expect us to do that with our name and our overall role.

Tom Rogers: And of course we contribute to public education on all things to do with electoral matters. We run an electoral education centre in Canberra where we get about 100,000 school kids a year and others through that and we run major national campaigns as well. That's not all we do, we're also responsible for boundary redistributions, funding and disclosure matters for parties, party registration, and also industrial and commercial elections. So that's kind of the background of who we are, why it's we make such an important contribution to the life of Australia because elections don't make up the total of democracy, but they're a very important contributor to that.

Tom Rogers: So with that in mind, what I'd like to do over the next few minutes is talk about three broad areas. I'd like to talk about our journey because I think context is important. Before you start thinking about what the future might be like, you need to understand where you are and where you've come from. I want to talk about some current modernization initiatives that we've already undertaken, so innovations and successes, and then I want to talk specifically about the mythical silver bullet. Whenever we start talking about voting in the future, particularly something like voting in 2030, people automatically think of electronic voting in some way, shape or form or internet-based voting. And I specifically want to talk about that because it has been such a controversial issue.

Tom Rogers: All of that will be wrapped up with some other explanations about where we are. I'm also conscious though the big-ticket innovations like electronic voting would involve decisions from our elected representatives in parliament making those decisions rather than the AEC. Our role in those sorts of cases is to make sure that we're administering the electoral act as best as we can and to give voice to those requirements from parliament.

Tom Rogers: So away we go. First of all, Australia's electoral journey is a complex one and I've put a graph up called the Complexity Conundrum and it kind of explains how development occurs in any case. As years go past and electoral cycles move forward and we keep

delivering elections, what we found is they've become more and more complex. It really is a very hard thing to deliver a successful election in the modern era for any electoral commission in any democracy. Largely elections are the largest single peace time logistic event in the life of the country, and it's no different for Australia. And as life continues, citizens' expectations become heightened and we found that in Australia we're still delivering effectively a manual system, paper and pencil, when citizens have developed digital expectations.

Tom Rogers: So particularly at election time, citizens think that they should be receiving a very high level of service, which is absolutely true, but their expectations are almost immediate results and in a manual system that's nigh on impossible and we have to make sure that we are following the legislation and that sometimes creates grief. And in the past this complexity conundrum has also been at play and it's led to some developments and modernizations along the way. So as things become more complex, our ability to meet citizens' expectations drops, and then we innovate to try and meet those expectations.

Tom Rogers: And what that means, the next slide gives you a picture of what the modern election is like and just how complex it is. As you can see on that slide, the last election we ran had about a 96.8% enrolment rate, which is fantastic, 90,000 polling officials, close to 7,000 polling places, 500 early voting centres, 40 plus remote mobile teams going into the remotest parts of Australia by car, helicopter and by boat at the last election as well to get the vote out to all Australians. What it doesn't have on that slide is we also had voting in 84 of Australia's overseas missions, so this is a huge process that by and large runs pretty well and that Australian citizens are pretty happy with and I'll talk about their views about the current electoral process when I get a bit further into the presentation.

Tom Rogers: Notably though what the citizens sees when the citizen walks into a polling booth on polling day is a process that may well be like what the very first election in modern Australia was like in 1901 after federation. And that picture there that you see on the slide is of three gentlemen and we think that is taken in the very early part of last century in George Street in Sydney and you can see that someone's name is being marked off an electoral roll just prior to them being issued a vote. And that's exactly what would have occurred all the way through the 20th century and up until now, and in many, many polling places, it's still exactly the same with a paper based electoral roll and individuals with their names being marked off.

Tom Rogers: So many of those quirky elements that you would have seen back in those first elections are still with us. And the next slide is a great example of that where you will see a blindfolded member of the AEC staff pulling out a ball out of a barrel and that helps us determine the order on the ballot paper. And that happens in every division for the 151 House of Rep seats, it happens in each of the states for the Senate and it's still very much like the process that would have been in place earlier on. So it doesn't look modern, but behind the scenes there's more modern processes.

Tom Rogers: And again, the next slide is a voting at Bondi Surf Life Saving Club and you can see in there, there are people standing at booths marking a vote with paper and pencil. There's a dog there as well, still very much the same as it was previously. The next slide

shows one of our staff, a very happy member of staff as it transpires, helping with the count of the Senate ballot paper, a huge one metre long Senate ballot paper prior to those ballot papers being packed off for further counting. So all of those things about humans being involved in the voting process is still with us and will likely be with us for some time into the future.

Tom Rogers: And the next slide is probably the most interesting one in many ways, it's an epitome of the intensity of the current system. It's one of our divisional returning officers examining an individual vote and all of the individuals standing around our divisional returning officer are scrutineers for political parties and they're looking at one vote to determine whether or not I would suggest the number one on that vote is actually a valid number one to make that vote count.

Tom Rogers: And the final picture slide I wish to show from the last electoral event to give you a picture of how complex it is, is a very large count centre and I think the number of those count centres we have around Australia might have been about 80. So there's this huge operation of us counting in polling places, taking those votes to count centres to have them further counted and quality assured on the way through and it is a highly complex organisation but still using a large amount of paper and an intense process involving people counting paper as they would have done in many ways in elections throughout the 20th century and still do in other democracies in the world as well.

Tom Rogers: All right, so I mentioned I did want to talk about some of the other changes that are developing in the election space and have developed and I've put a slide up there called Innovation Response, Roll and Queue and Senate and I just want to talk about those before we then move forward to look at what might occur in the future.

Tom Rogers: So, we've already innovated a heck of a lot and modernised over the last decade or so with how we do business and how we engage with electors. The first of those is in the roll management space and over the last few electoral events we've really driven a modernised and automated roll management process. So, as we've moved forward, our enrolment rate is the highest it's ever been since Federation. Part of that is because of a thing called direct enrolment and the second part is online enrolment. And we've introduced one of the most modern enrolment systems in the world for electoral commissions. Citizens are able to enrol online, signature on glass. We have a high level of confidence in the roll. They're able to look up online their own information, submit updates to the roll online and it has really revolutionised the way in which we're able to make sure that Australians are represented and are able to have their say. That took a lot of effort from the AEC, from our staff, a lot of innovations and also legislative change. We worked with parliamentarians and with parliament to make sure that we could introduce that.

Tom Rogers: When I first joined the AEC as the state manager for New South Wales in 2007 I think our overall enrolment rate nationally was about 90 odd percent and we never thought we would get above sort of 95 and here we are at the best roll we've ever had since Federation. And that's as a result of innovation and also the clever application of data in how we capture enrolment information by data mining from a whole range of trusted

government sources only, sharing that data appropriately with some of our state colleagues and making sure that we're growing the roll in an appropriate way.

Tom Rogers: The next thing is the Senate voting process. If I take you to the next slide, there's a picture of a couple of us at the Moorebank count centre. Whilst the house of reps vote is still very manual, conducted in polling places on polling night and after that very manually, the majority of the Senate count is now automated or a large part of it's now automated. And we've done that simply because of the scale and changes to the legislation that occurred before the 2016 election. We have established eight count centres for Senate papers around Australia working with our partners, Fuji Xerox, who assist us with the scanning process. And all ballot papers are both manually entered, data entered and automatically scanned and that data entered as well and there's a whole complex process. A great project actually and the AEC had a very limited amount of time to do that before the 2016 election. We took a highly complex piece of legislation, introduced a novel way of counting which we'd never done before and had it ready for the election within a 12-week period and it worked pretty seamlessly and is still working today.

Tom Rogers: So that's another great example of how we've already modernised the process as we move forward. And I'm conscious that citizens don't see that, it's not front of house, it's back of house. As we think about voting in 2030, we have to think both about front of house and back of house to make sure the process as a whole remains modern and relevant, not just fixing one part or the other part. So that's the second, I mentioned roll, I mentioned the Senate and the third thing I wanted to talk about was queuing.

Tom Rogers: And I've put a slide up there from the New Daily that says, "Voters cranky about queues," and that occurred after the 2016 election where there were some queues, not a huge number, but nonetheless, there were some queues at polling places for a range of reasons, largely outside the electoral commission's control, but it generated a huge amount of public commentary and media commentary. We did a lot of research on this and as it transpires, not just in Australia but in the West, people have lost patience with queuing and given that we have only four weeks' notice to set up the electoral event and we have over 7,000 polling places, we actually do pretty well in managing the queue. But nonetheless, we were coming in for a lot of criticism.

Tom Rogers: So, what we decided to do after 2016 is really focus on queuing because it was having an impact on how people viewed the electoral process. If they had an experience where they were unhappy in the queue, they were then unhappy with the vote or unhappy with the AEC and they were unhappy with the entire democratic process of voting. So we partnered with Deakin University and they helped us research this in great detail and helped us produce a model of delivery that minimised queues and it really had a great impact. In 2019 we used that data and the report from Deakin to change the way we managed queues and that we set up polling places and it had a dramatic impact on the way citizens viewed the electoral process. We went from I think about 80% satisfaction in 2016 to over 90% satisfaction with queue wait times in 2019. So, it's an example of innovation, modernising, but also using data.

Tom Rogers: And interesting there, I've put a slide up of a queue at Old Parliament House in Canberra and it's looking down the steps of Old Parliament House towards that queue. I took that photo on the day of the election and interestingly, of course if we'd had a queue like that for voting, it would have been very bad. But that is actually people queuing up to buy a sausage from the rotary tent I think it is at the other end, so they're happy to queue for that and less happy to queue for the vote.

Tom Rogers: And the next slide I put there is in fact a take from what citizens said at the last election, our top line findings from the voter survey. And as you can see there, people were happy with the wait, they're happy with the assistance they received from electoral staff, but more importantly their satisfaction with the overall voting experience was hovering well over 90% at 94% and a lot of that is due to some of the innovations we've already done, which is I think credit to everyone on the AEC and credit to parliament for some of the legislative changes they've made as well.

Tom Rogers: All right, to finish off the bit about where we are on those innovations, I put up a slide there with a postcard we received from an electorate the last election and you can read it yourself, but it says effectively thanks to the AEC for the work that you do and for making that process easy. And I wanted to finish off that section with that card because it's important as we start to move forward that we don't lose that touch with people where citizens feel engaged with the voting process and they feel that it's their voting process, it's their democracy, their voting process. It's feedback we get very regularly and we need to make sure that any innovations we introduce, certainly don't lose that.

Tom Rogers: All right, the next slide is, I want to now deal with that final thing specifically about will we be doing online voting in 2030. So, I've extracted a quote there from the last time parliament looked at this and the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters looked specifically at electronic voting in 2014. There was a quote there where someone said citizens would rather be online than in line, but the report itself said Australia wasn't ready for electronic voting of any form. There are a range of reasons for that and I kind of get it. It's a very difficult thing to get right.

Tom Rogers: If you look at the next slide that I've put up there, I've just extracted some headlines from various media reports about the difficulty of introducing highly secure electronic voting and this is difficult. When that parliamentary inquiry occurred, I mentioned the report previously, they had a lot of people appear at that committee who very anti electronic voting and the whole reason was security and there was a broad field. In 2014 the security aspect wasn't yet solved and we're still seeing in some of these headlines even now, some of these are very current, there's still some concerns that there are security aspects of online and in booth electronic voting that are not yet to be solved. Now I'm not sure about that and the decision for Australia to go to electronic voting will not be one for us, for the AEC, it'll certainly be for parliament, but at this stage I don't see an appetite for the introduction of electronic voting and we're certainly not making moves for that at the moment. The next election will be largely the same as the one we've just delivered. As to the future, who knows.

Tom Rogers: And I wanted just to move forward to talk about other pressure points that may hasten the introduction of something like that. The next slide I've put up there is if you can see

it's two gentlemen standing there spraying a polling place with disinfectant and if you look closely at the citizens that are voting, they're all wearing masks, and that's a photo from the Korean election that's recently been conducted. And to get that election underway in the time of COVID was difficult and they had a series of very set and difficult procedures. Every citizen had to have a temperature check before they went into the polling place, they had to wear gloves and masks, they had to throw away the gloves as they left. It was a really interesting thing as you can see there, people constantly sanitised the polling place.

Tom Rogers: Were we to do that federally would be a huge logistic event for us, far bigger again than anything we've done previously and the cost will also be through the roof. So maybe it could be that an event like the coronavirus might act as an additional spur to look at alternative methods of voting. And if I think about 2030, perhaps that might be a spur that introduces that or it simply might be that there's more usage of things like postal voting. The last election, I think I put it on an earlier slide, I think we had about 1.2 million Australians used postal votes and maybe that might be something we look at at that point.

Tom Rogers: So, I wanted to finish off, I've put a slide up there with a quote from General Monash. He made that quote in the '20s and he spoke about the importance of democracy and that the best hope for Australia in the future is the ballot box. Now of course he didn't mean the physical ballot box, he meant democracy and the process of voting. But nonetheless, whatever happens in 2030, we need to make sure that we do retain citizens' confidence in the process, which we seem to have at the moment. We appear at the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters on a regular basis, we provide them advice, and it seems to me that we're at a really interesting point in the development of modernization of elections.

Tom Rogers: I don't actually know what elections are going to be like in 2030, I have a gut feel that they're likely to be similar to where we are today perhaps with more modernised administration behind the scenes, things like electoral rolls, we've started to make them more electronic and perhaps we'll go further down that path. Unless there's a major introduction of an impetus, like the outcome of coronavirus I can't see us going to electronic voting, but what I will predict is that in 2030 the AEC will still be producing great results and helping citizens have their say.

Tom Rogers: Thanks ladies and gentlemen. It's been great talking to you about the modernization journey of Australian elections. If you are viewing this video and you do have questions, I'm more than happy to take them by email and if you go onto our website, there are contact details there for how you can get a question to us and we'll make sure that you get an answer. Thanks again and thanks for listening. Cheers.