

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into the conduct of the 2024 House of Assembly general election and 2024 Legislative Council election

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To:Electoral Matters <electoralmatters@parliament.tas.gov.au>

I am writing to you from the perspective and experience of a first time Independent candidate in the 2024 House of Assembly general election.

I acknowledge that we are lucky enough to live in a country with a representative democratic system that serves us well and is a great model for the rest of the world. However democratic systems are under threat all over the world and all models need continual review and improvement including Tasmanian HoA and LC elections.

An election (and campaign) process is democratic, inclusive, free from bias, fair and transparent when certain principles are upheld:

1. Equality :

All candidates should have equal access to resources such as funding for printing and bulk mail outs, media coverage and attendance at public forums in order to engage with voters and present their platforms. I found it impossible to compete on a level playing field re corflute production and mail outs. This is a barrier to informing the public of all candidates and what they stand for.

Many times voters expressed their frustration in not being able to find information on the candidates. With early voting becoming more and more popular (20 % in the HoA election and more than 50% in the recent MT election) then a significant number of votes are cast before all of the candidates are known. In the HoA election early voting was open <72 hrs after candidates and contact details listed on the TEC website (<48hr published major newspapers) and this period included a weekend. Many voters don't know that they need to go to the TEC website to find that list. Some voters can't access a website.

So there are two issues here that need to be addressed:

a) Significant and increasing early voting (not best informed) trend

b) Voter awareness of all of the candidates, contact details and platforms. I think candidate information should be sent to all electors as it is in Tasmanian council elections. Local Government Act 1993.

If candidates want to send out more than once then they do this at their own cost.

Corflutes of all candidates should be prominently displayed together in a high traffic place.

I think every regional newspaper (not just the three main mastheads) should be funded by the TEC to run a special candidate edition like the New Norfolk Times did in the 2024 HoA election (at their own expense with some advertising). In this way every voter has equal exposure to information about candidates and it is easily accessible so that they have sufficient information to make an informed decision.

Have one paid mail out to every elector with all of the candidates for that electorate featured- saving money (as it is the TEC pays for the major mastheads and individuals and parties pay for multiple mail outs to each household where if each candidate contributed to the one mail out it would be a huge cost saving) and printing and waste in addition to being equitable to all of the candidates. Everyone would benefit from this arrangement the democratic system, voters, candidates, the environment and the economy.

2. Public understanding/voter education:

The level of understanding and appreciation of civics and politics is low in the community. This used to be me!

I spent a lot of time explaining what majority and minority government is and what Independents are and what the JLN is during the campaign period. I spent a lot of time discussing what the job of elected representatives is and how parliament works. I hear commentators talking about minority governments and it is evident that our collective understanding is poor.

In order to address this issue we need to improve levels of understanding through education initiatives and the provision of information.

Perhaps we need to change the language we use. Substitute a better word for "civics", no longer use "two party preferred", no longer use "hung" parliament, no longer use "safe" seats as they no longer exist.

3. Transparency:

We need to maintain transparency in campaign financing (improving our electoral donation laws minimum \$1000 and require real time reporting and source disclosure and costed election promises if made demonstrating that they have been budgeted for and disclosing the real state of finances), electoral processes (the TEC do an exceptional job and perform a vital function) and decision making in order to build and maintain trust in our electoral system.

4. Inclusiveness and non discrimination:

We need to ensure that all eligible voters regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status or physical ability have equal access to the voting process. In this the TEC do a wonderful job.

5. Freedom of expression:

We need to protect the freedom of speech for candidates, voters and the media to facilitate open and robust but respectful debate during the campaign process. We need to avoid and call out disrespectful, dishonest dialogue and behaviour.

We need to be cognisant of and manage disinformation and misinformation and AI and bad actor interference.

6. Ethical conduct:

All participants adhere to ethical standards and a code of conduct avoiding misinformation, hate speech or personal attacks abiding by codes of behaviour expected in every other workplace and institution and setting an example of leadership expected of everyone else in society and in particular of elected representatives.

7. Clear, fair, impartial and consistent rules and regulations:

To me and many voters I have spoken with the current format of the HoA ballot paper is confusing and unclear making it unfair and giving candidates in parties an advantage over Independent candidates. You could also argue that Independent candidates registering as a Group of 1 (I think this is an oxymoron but not according to some definitions of the word "group") have an added advantage over the last column on the ballot paper, which lists the Independents that needed 10 elector signatures as opposed to 100, in to run titled "Ungrouped".

It took along time for me to understand this system and I have had to explain it to every voter. It really is not transparent, intuitive and I believe unfair.

In researching how the formatting and labelling of candidates and columns in the HoA ballot has come about I have found that the decision to include or not the designation of the word "Independent" next to

a candidate's name on any ballot paper at any level of government in Australia varies depending on the laws and regulations governing elections in particular jurisdictions.

The rules on the HoA ballot paper should be that it includes:

1. Candidates name
2. Party affiliation
3. The word "Independent" if the candidate is not affiliated with a political party. This is typically indicated on a ballot paper to inform voters in other jurisdictions and in other democracies.

If the average voter does not understand what an Independent candidate is and what their job entails if elected - the same work that every other elected candidate is expected to do- then we really need to have a public education campaign focusing on the role of our elected representatives, how does government form, what is the job of our elected representatives. Why it is important that you vote for the person that you think will best represent you and why democracy is important.

If your average voter does not know what Independent candidates are and what members of parliament do then there is unconscious bias operating when they are voting for a party. If they are not wanting to vote for a party and they do not know who the last column on the ballot paper are or who the Independents in their columns of one (not labelled as Independents) then they voted for Jacqui Lambie (not the individual JLN members or the party of which there was very little information prior to the election) or they voted informally. This is far from an ideal situation.

As well as a public information campaign we need to change the naming and positioning of columns on the HoA ballot paper so that it is more transparent and equitable. We could change the last column from "Ungrouped" to "Independents" , it could be drawn out and randomly assigned a position on the ballot paper as all other columns are (rather than being fixed last) and the order of candidates within the column altered with Robson Rotation as is the order of candidates in all of the other columns.

This means amending the Tasmanian Electoral Act 2004 (pre social media!) which is well overdue revision to bring processes and procedures up to date and make them more equitable.

Ideally it would be reviewed in light of similar other state and territory legislation and incorporate elements that will improve voter participation and understanding making voter engagement easier and our democratic processes fairer and more transparent.

In conclusion the goal of democratic processes is that sufficient information is easily available to all voters so that they can make an informed decision when they vote.

For a vibrant, robust democracy we want lots of people to feel supported to run for election, an election free from bias to major party candidates that is inclusive in order to attract a diverse pool of candidates. **Our communities are best served by having a diversity of candidates to choose from.**

We want to improve voter participation, engagement and understanding and make voting easier to understand, fairer and more transparent.

We want to make it fairer for Independents and smaller parties that do not have the resources of the larger parties- including bringing in people from interstate to campaign, to campaign on a more level playing field.

We want to maximise accessibility to candidate information and minimise waste.

We need to revise and update the Electoral Act 2004.

Early voting is becoming earlier < 48 hours after candidates names are published and ballot papers printed 2024 meaning any very early vote is unlikely to be an informed vote.

Early voting is an increasing trend that we need to address.

Sincerely

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Independent candidate for Lyons

