

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT  
OF THE 2017 STATE GENERAL ELECTION



TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 6 SEPTEMBER 2017

## Members

Mr P.A. Katsambanis (Chairman)  
Mr M.J. Folkard (Deputy Chairman)  
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup  
Mr A. Krsticevic  
Mr D.T. Punch

---

**Hearing commenced at 10.58 am**

**Ms ANNE FERGUSSON-STEWART**

**State Secretary, Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party (WA) Inc, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide evidence in relation to the inquiry into the administration and management of the 2017 state general election. As the inquiry title suggests, we are interested in how the WAEC managed and administered the 2017 election. We are not considering matters such as voting systems or electoral boundary redistributions, which are legislative matters and outside the control of this committee and the scope of this inquiry. My name is Peter Katsambanis and I am the Chairman of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I would like to introduce the other members of the committee: the deputy chair, Mark Folkard, member for Burns Beach; Zak Kirkup, member for Dawesville; and Tony Krsticevic, member for Carine. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, this privilege does not apply to anything that you might say outside of today's proceedings.

Before we begin with our questions, do you have any questions of us or any opening statement that you want to make?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** No. I would like to thank the committee, on behalf of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, for the opportunity to make a submission on the recent election. There probably is not very much that I can add to the submission that I made, except that we perhaps would have liked to have seen a slight expansion of the terms of reference to cover some of the issues that might fall under the voting system. One issue that we did raise, which was the extended voting period before the election, probably falls under the voting system as well, which we do understand falls under legislative requirements.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I am happy to have those issues put on the record, if you like, so that when we are deliberating in this committee we can consider next steps and possible recommendations for the future. Are you able to encapsulate in dot points your concerns about the voting system, and then we will address the early voting issue that you raised in your submission?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** It is not so much the voting system as the processes, and that was something that we had an opportunity to raise with the WAEC in an exit survey that it did provide. One of the main issues that we faced as a very small party was in the scrutineering process following the election. It was not transparent where the voting boxes were at any one time. We were fielding volunteers to scrutineer ballot papers that were in transit, and it was very, very difficult to get an idea of where the ballot papers were while they were not actually at the polling station, and no-one from the WAEC could give us an accurate estimation of when they would arrive.

**The CHAIRMAN:** This is in transit from the building to your counting centre?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** Indeed—from the rural counting centres to the actual Perth counting centre, yes. We, of course, fielded candidates in the Pilbara. That was our main cause for concern.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In your submission, you express concerns about the length of time for which the early voting centres operated. Do you want to expand on how that impacted on your party, and perhaps any suggestions as to how that can change in the future?

---

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** It is a very difficult area to criticise, obviously. Political parties have certain requirements and operate largely on a volunteer basis. Given the very extended early-polling period, we found it impossible to adequately canvass those polling centres and provide how-to-vote cards to people who actually wanted to vote for us. For the ones that we did manage to get to, on return visits we often found that our material had been shuffled aside or concealed. I am not saying that was deliberate; it is the nature of the game.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think the three-week period for which the early voting centres were open was appropriate or would you like to see that truncated?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** We would very much like to see it truncated. We did notice that an amazing proportion of people did seem to vote during that period. It is hard to work out why we actually have a nominated polling day when we have such an extended polling period within which votes can be lodged. It is a massive disadvantage to small political parties and we would like to see at best a maximum of one week, and perhaps even go back to the old system whereby people had to have a reason for pre-polling.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In relation to the how-to-vote information, do you think there is a better system whereby that could be coordinated?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I think it should be possible to allow the Electoral Commission to provide materials at those voting places that have been provided to it by political parties and perhaps to disallow the use of volunteers. We were experiencing also at our polling places a large percentage of people who would almost leap the kerb or leap a fence just to avoid volunteers from the various political parties on polling day.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think the technical term used is “running the gauntlet”!

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** It is.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think all of us at this table are fully aware of what you are talking about. That helps us with some of our thinking around what has happened at election periods. In your submission, you discuss the ballot security at the Northam early voting centre and say you have some concerns about that. Do you want to expand on that?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I did have some concerns. I understood that in relation to Northam and perhaps a number of other regional centres that officials had been seconded from other states for the extended pre-election period. I did ask about the security of the votes at the end of each day and over the weekends and I was not given a very adequate answer, just the fact that they were locked within the memorial hall. I have been a scrutineer at WAEC counts and I have noticed that at the end of the day, all the boxes were secured with the right seals et cetera. Whether that happened during the pre-voting period and how those voting boxes were secured over the weekends, I have no idea.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In relation to fielding, you said you fielded candidates in the Pilbara. In those larger, more remote electorates, the WAEC has early voting at remote communities on a roster basis. Does your party and smaller parties like yours have the opportunity to attend those smaller voting places?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** No, we do not. Because of the tyranny of distance, it is hard—it is pretty much impossible—and also accommodation and access and all those things. I think there were also floods during that period of time when even the WAEC had trouble accessing one or two of the remote polling places. So it is pretty much out of the question for a small party like ours.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would a formal process of providing how-to-vote cards in those circumstances be of assistance?

---

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** Again, my previous suggestion that if the material was provided to the WAEC and if they were able to distribute it, on request, even, at these polling places, I think would be very helpful. The other thing with some of these remote and isolated communities is that they tend to fall prey to perhaps the strongest political representation that is there. I did note during the counting that some of those regional polling places virtually all went pretty much one way. It seemed to be a matter of influence as to who was actually working in that community and who influenced it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are you suggesting there are issues around the sanctity of the secret ballot?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I think there have always been issues around the sanctity of the secret ballot in some areas, yes.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** You mentioned something about the length of the pre-poll period. Can you elaborate a bit further on what you mean?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** Okay. I did not understand until following the election that this is actually something that falls under legislation, and varies, and I am not sure how that works or why it is that way. I cannot see a rationale for having a three-week voting period available to all members of the community. It makes it a much more expensive process, I am sure, for the WAEC, or for the taxpayer. It certainly makes it a lot more onerous for political parties. There are, I am sure, easier ways that it can be done. I understand that this year the WAEC rolled out electronic voting for disabled people. It would be very interesting to see the results of that and how successful that was and perhaps expand something like that to the wider community rather than have an extended pre-poll period.

[11.10 am]

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** The question I asked was: how do you deal with that? Are we talking about a resourcing issue for minor parties or are we talking about an oversight issue of the Electoral Commission?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I think both issues are there. It is very expensive to resource for minor parties and major parties, and for the Electoral Commission itself. I am not sure what the rationale is for a three-week voting period.

**Mr M.J. FOLKARD:** It is three-week pre-polling.

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** Pre-polling, yes.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** How long would you want the pre-polling period to be?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** A week at most, I would say.

**Mr A. KRSTICEVIC:** Would you be looking at different hours, including weekends and after-hours? Do you have a view about that?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** As a party we have not drilled down into the nitty-gritty of that, but, yes, we would be happy to consider perhaps a seven-day period of nine to five. That should give people from all walks of life a reasonable opportunity to vote. There can still be absentee votes and votes lodged overseas, and there can still be opportunities for extended online voting, or electronic voting, I think.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** I would like to understand more about the experience you guys had in the Pilbara with Fiona up there. We have had prior to this point a number of public hearings with major parties, and I think you probably would be aware of the public commentary about the National Party's concerns with respect to enrolments and things like that and people coming late onto the rolls in

---

the district of Pilbara. Did you guys from Shooters, Fishers and Farmers find any small issues there? As a minor party, I realise that there may have been some logistical issues there as well. We are keen to understand what that looks like for you guys in trying to represent your constituents, because it would certainly deliver a message to that constituency.

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** It is a very challenging area, and because we are such a small party virtually every candidate was pretty much a one-man band, with in the case of Fiona having the support of the Mining and Pastoral candidates as well. In the Pilbara of course, this election was a particular challenge because of the activities of basically the CME. We were quite amused to have been requested to put up their placards for them, which we actually had to refuse to do because of the limited resources that we had. I think the Pilbara for the 2017 election, I would not want to make any recommendations with regard to it because I think we had a very special set of circumstances there this year.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** I consider you a very experienced political operator and someone who has been around politics for a very long time.

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** Yes!

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** I mean that with great respect. I can remember being a high school graduate and talking to you, Anne. You have seen past elections time and again. Is there anything that would lead you to believe that there was something awry or amiss in the Pilbara or was it simply just a heightened level of attention?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** No, I do not believe it was so much heightened local attention as much as the activities of all the major candidates certainly in that electorate, and that particular set of circumstances in regard to the goldmining royalties. There is also the fluctuation of fly in, fly out people actually establishing themselves in communities rather than remaining fly in, fly out. There is a whole heap of issues. I think it was a particular set of circumstances that we are not likely to see again. So I would not like to try to make any projections for the future based on what happened in 2017. But if you are asking me if I thought there was anything shonky going on, I would say no.

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** That is precisely the set of words I was looking for! I appreciate that. I am keen to understand a bit more about your experiences at early voting centres. I can say anecdotally, as someone who was at the Mandurah early-voting centre at Greenfields, the second busiest in the state, short of the one in the CBD, that I understand the challenges that Shooters, Fishers and Farmers had there, and I would consider Mandurah, whilst regional, certainly more accessible regionally compared to the Pilbara and things like that. If there was a shorter or more condensed time frame, would that make it easier for Shooters, Fishers and Farmers to attend, or would you guys still do what you did there and simply leave material? I am trying to understand, I suppose, if there was a smaller window of opportunity for early voting, whether for minor parties, which are important in the democratic process, that would enable them to better communicate or campaign during elections?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I hesitate to say this, but probably Mandurah was the area that we best canvassed in the early polling places, and that was simply because we had an existing member of Parliament —

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** That is right, with Nigel Hallett.

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** —who had the resources there to even make sure that material was provided. In the other centres, we actually did not, short of me driving up perhaps the weekend before and providing material to Northam—I cannot remember all the polling places, but it was pretty much impossible.

---

**Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP:** We have seen a number of parties make reference to the lack of resourcing generally speaking with respect to the Electoral Commission. In your experience and in that context, do you share those concerns? Certainly the National Party has announced great concern about the lack of resourcing for the Electoral Commission. Did you guys see that in the sort of experiences you had? You have talked about the temporary nature of the staff that they employ, or short-term contract staff. Do you see resourcing as a major contributor to some of those issues?

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** I did not particularly notice any lack of resources. Again, it is a difficult area. Given that elections come around only perhaps every year, it is very difficult for the AEC or the WAEC to maintain anything other than a basic staff level for the periods when there are no elections, which is a significant amount of time. At the places I went to, there were no long queues, there were no great delays; everything seemed to happen. I actually thought that the WAEC ran a really good ship.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you think you were given adequate opportunity to provide feedback post-election? You said there was an exit survey of sorts.

**Ms FERGUSSON-STEWART:** We did very much appreciate the opportunities that were given to us, not just post-election, but all along we found the WAEC singularly helpful and quite supportive and very professional. I think we had every opportunity and access at a number of different levels, from the people working on the floor in the scrutineering system up to the officer dedicated to us and on to the director and assistant director. We were very happy with the level of access and support.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Excellent.

Thank you for your time today and thank you for the evidence that you have provided to the committee. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 working days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. You cannot try to provide new material through the correction process and you cannot change the sense of your evidence, but of course if there is anything else you have not told us that you want to tell us and you think we need to know, or you want to elaborate on anything you have already said, please feel free to do it by supplementary submission and we will definitely consider that.

**Hearing concluded at 11.21 am**

---