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YEAR IN REVIEW

70 000+

POLLING OFFICIALS AND
OTHER STAFF 2016 election

95% *NEW RECORD*

ELIGIBLE AUSTRALIANS
ENROLLED ↑ 2.7% since 2013

1 700

INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL
AND PROTECTED BALLOTS

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Commissioner's review



Throughout 2015–16 the AEC continued its commitment to electoral integrity through upholding the values of quality, professionalism and agility in its preparation for the conduct of

the 2016 federal election. The 2016 federal election, conducted on 2 July, was the AEC's first opportunity to demonstrate on a national scale its progress in improving its policies and procedures to ensure it can deliver trusted, consistently reliable, high quality and high integrity electoral events and services.

The AEC demonstrated it is committed to transparency, continuous evaluation and improvement with the publication of the 2016 Federal Election Service Plan. This plan outlines the key election services and standards underpinning the AEC's delivery of the 2016 federal election. The AEC will measure and report against the standards in the Plan.

Changes to electoral delivery

The AEC continues to make steady progress towards the closure of recommendations from Mr Mick Keelty in his *Inquiry into the 2013 WA Senate election* (the Keelty Report) and from the Australian National Audit Office. In 2015, the AEC delivered two by-elections (the Divisions of Canning and North Sydney in September and December, respectively), which provided opportunities to implement and refine changes to the AEC's policies, procedures and processes ahead of the 2016 federal election.

While large parts of the AEC were engaged in the extensive work involved in preparing, delivering and evaluating these electoral events, the agency also progressed longer term reform

and process improvements. This included a fundamental revamp of election planning and preparation processes to improve long term planning and preparation for the conduct of electoral events.

Ahead of the 2016 federal election, the AEC continued its steady introduction of technology into electoral processes, using scanning and data capture services to count Senate ballot papers and process paper Postal Vote Application (PVA) forms and expanding the deployment of electronic certified lists (ECLs).

One of the 'Spotlight' reviews in this chapter summarises many of the changes implemented for the 2016 federal election.

The AEC also continued the agency's cultural journey, developing the skills and capacity of the leadership cohort, working with them to instil our values of electoral integrity, professionalism, quality and agility throughout the agency.

A limited number of recommendations have not been progressed due to legislative restrictions, or only partly implemented due to our capacity to absorb change in a truncated electoral cycle. The AEC is committed to continued implementation of outstanding recommendations during the forthcoming financial year and the years beyond.

Legislative change

The latter part of the 2015–16 financial year saw further significant change, with the passage of legislative amendments in March 2016. Those changes modified the Senate voting system, introduced party logos and unique registered officers for registered political parties, and changed how the AEC was required to handle declaration votes.

The significant workload to implement legislative change in this very tight timeframe was managed alongside the delivery of a double dissolution election. The AEC

demonstrated its agility and professionalism in designing and implementing a semi-automated process to conduct the Senate count. This involved scanning Senate ballot papers using optical character recognition technology to capture preferences, with verification by a human operator.

Financial and resource management

In 2015–16 the AEC recorded an operating deficit of \$25.0 million including depreciation. This was higher than our estimated actual result in the 2016–17 Portfolio Budget Statements and was attributable to the timing of costs associated with the 2016 federal election.

During 2015–16 our internal budgeting model and methodology continued to be improved to ensure that the AEC Corporate Plan drives resourcing decisions. Efficient and effective resource allocation, along with financial management reporting, are key contributors to the success of the agency's change journey.

2017 and beyond

A new electoral cycle will begin during the 2016–17 financial year, which may also include further electoral events such as a plebiscite and/or a referendum. During this cycle, the AEC will continue work to move to a more sustainable, cost-effective and efficient temporary election staffing model. It is at best optimistic to believe that every individual in a workforce of 70 000 people, many of whom work for only one day, will be able to fully and completely adhere to highly complex legislative requirements. This is further compounded by the limited time and resources available for training.

The AEC will also implement an improved evaluation process to review both reform and business-as-usual aspects of election delivery. Along with implementation of external review outcomes, it will continue driving internal

process improvements, with a focus on logistics and materials management, learning and development, and data use and analysis.

SPOTLIGHT

Governor-General visits AEC

The Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd), and Her Excellency Lady Cosgrove, visited the AEC's National Office on Thursday 14 April 2016.

It is the first time a Governor-General has visited an AEC office and came about after Sir Peter expressed an interest in how the AEC provides services to blind voters, low vision voters, and other people with disability.

The Electoral Commissioner, Tom Rogers, and the Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Kath Toohey, provided a briefing to His Excellency and Lady Cosgrove before attending an afternoon tea with National Office staff.

Sir Peter expressed his gratitude for the work of the AEC and the fundamental role the agency plays in ensuring Australia maintains its strong international reputation in delivering electoral services to the community – including for people with disability. He also praised the work of the AEC's staff in ensuring this solid reputation is upheld.

After his address, His Excellency and Lady Cosgrove gave generously of their time to meet AEC staff and wish everyone well in delivering the 2016 federal election.

SPOTLIGHT

Changes implemented for the 2016 election

Election-specific changes implemented since the conduct of the 2013 federal election can be categorised into one or more of the following five themes:

- enhanced electoral integrity and ballot paper security
- communication with stakeholders
- enhancing national consistency through new and revised processes, procedures and policies
- people and culture
- logistics, materials and contract management.

A small selection of major or notable achievements against these themes is set out below.

Enhanced electoral integrity and ballot paper security

- Ballot paper principles that refocused the agency on the sanctity of ballot papers, and which can be applied where a policy or procedure does not exist.
- Implementation and communication of ballot paper principles and ballot paper handling policy.
- Requirement for all staff to complete online training on the ballot paper handling policy.
- Ahead of 2016 federal election, all ongoing and temporary staff required to sign undertakings on ballot papers, political neutrality and related matters.

- Key temporary election staff subject to a character check process.
- Greater professional focus on appropriate security, including after hours at selected premises.
- More robust integrity checks on enrolment transactions during close of rolls period.

Communication with stakeholders

- Increased commitment to transparency, continuous evaluation and improvement through publication of service plans for the 2015 Canning and North Sydney by-elections, and the 2016 federal election.
- Commitment to measuring and reporting on standards achieved against service plans for electoral events.
- Communication with a wide range of stakeholders, including government departments, candidates for election, political parties, and electors affected by redistributions.
- National communication campaign for electors on Senate voting changes and other information relevant to 2016 federal election – involving mass media advertising, public relations, media liaison and a national mailout to all Australian households. Information was available in 27 languages and in Braille, large print and audio versions.
- Redesigned election-time website provided clearer and more detailed information for the public on polling place locations, accessibility of polling places, and progress of the count.

- Engagement with international and state/territory electoral management bodies yielded improvements in materials management, and in overcoming risks and issues with employing a large temporary workforce to deliver high-quality results in a time-compressed, highly decentralised electoral process.

Enhancing national consistency through new and revised processes, procedures and policies

- Suite of new policies and supporting documentation for national consistency in election delivery. New policies covered (for example) ballot paper handling and security, election waste and election personnel identification.
- New standard operating procedures for key election activities, with supporting guides.
- Secure packaging and transport of ballot papers, new vests for easy identification of AEC officials during election activities.

People and culture

- New workforce plans covering election-critical ongoing and non-ongoing job roles at divisional and state levels.
- New and revised job roles that focus on quality and compliance and ensure safe custody of ballot papers.
- Increased allocation of staff in 2015–16 to assist with operation of polling places on election day, and to assist electors in casting a formal vote (with particular emphasis on Senate voting changes).
- Reciprocal arrangement with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to support the sourcing of temporary election staff.

- Polling Official page on AEC website outlining duties and training for each critical election role.
- Registrations of interest for temporary election employment systematically assessed for suitability prior to allocation of role.
- Temporary election staff required to undertake mandatory training, with completion actively monitored and logged.
- Training supplemented by more comprehensive briefing process at start of duties, including ballot paper security, and workplace health and safety.
- Employment of 'reserve' temporary election staff to cover unforeseen requirements.

Logistics, materials and contract management

- Improved contracting framework and panel arrangements for services, including ballot material printing and logistics.
- Procedures for contractors and suppliers to ensure compliance with minimum standards (for example political neutrality).
- New and improved Procurement and Contract Management Register and associated processes.