

The Wrap



PEOPLE POWER: *Free and fair elections in Georgia say observers*

Australia supports Georgian elections

Poll brings about peaceful change of government.

Two Australian senators were part of an international team of election observers to the recent parliamentary elections in Georgia which unseated the incumbent government of Mikheil Saakashvili.

As the soon-to-be Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili put the finishing touches to his new cabinet, Senator Mark Furner (Qld) and Senator John Williams (NSW) spoke about their role in scrutinising the October 1 poll. They were just two of a 2,000 strong team of international observers backed up by some 3,000 domestic observers overseeing the vote.

“It’s a level of scrutiny we certainly don’t have here in Australia,” Senator Furner said.

“Georgia has gone through a democratic review of its election laws and processes and I guess they wanted to show that off to the world.”

He said there were a lot more checks that voters have to go through before they received their ballots, such as inking their hand to prove they had not already voted and presenting photographic identification.

The two senators visited several polling stations in the capital, Tbilisi, and then went to a regional polling station in the town of Gori about

70kms northwest of Tbilisi to visit further stations there.

The biggest issue they had with operations on the day was that each station had only three booths in which to cast a vote and some stations were expecting 1,500 voters. This led to long queues outside polling stations and a wait of up to an hour-and-a-half before some people could vote.

Another major concern was the lack of pre-polling in the Georgian election. There was no postal or absentee voting for the general population, however the contingent of 1,000 Georgian soldiers serving in Afghanistan were afforded an opportunity to vote in advance.

“If you’re wheel-chair bound, or sick in hospital, how do you vote,” Senator Williams asked.

“I believe many could not have their say on the day, so there’s room for improvement there and Senator Furner and I will be recommending that absentee voting afforded the military be extended to the rest of the population.”

Despite these limitations, as well as concerns over uneven distribution of population across electoral boundaries, both senators had faith in the result which saw Mr Ivanishvili’s Dream Coalition – described as a mix of liberals and radical nationalists – win 83 seats in the 150 seat parliament, while Mr Saakashvili’s United National Movement captured only 67 seats.

“The incumbent government could not deny or refute the process because they put it all in place,” Senator Furner said.

“The process was seamless and the next day there were celebrations, and no uprising or anarchy in the streets as was thought might be the case.

“Scrutineers were allowed in to see the count once polling was closed, so there was no way anything could have been shonky, defrauded or cheated.”

“The good thing is for the first time in a 100 years, a government was changed in Georgia without a revolution and I think that’s a huge step in the right direction,” Senator Williams said.

To see video interviews by Senator Furner and Senator Williams visit: www.aph.gov.au/international. •