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FREE AND FAIR: Senator Stephen Parry and Janelle Saffin at a polling booth in Timor-Leste

AUSTRALIAN OBSERVERS PRAISE TIMOR-LESTE POLL

Two Australian parliamentarians have no doubt the recent presidential election in Timor-Leste was free and fair after being invited by the fledgling democracy to act as election observers.

Deputy President of the Australian Senate, Senator Stephen Parry (Tas) and the Member for Page (NSW) Janelle Saffin were both impressed by East Timor's electoral processes and the openness of their voting system.

"No one can dispute in my view the polling booths I went to," Senator Parry said. "No one can dispute the honesty of the ballot. There was no untoward activity — I had full access to observe every aspect of the voting from the opening of the ballot box in the first light of the morning to the closing of the ballot box, to the actual count and then the ballot boxes returning to Dili. I witnessed all those processes and I would be exceptionally confident that the ballot was conducted in the most fairest and honest manner."

Despite poor literacy and even poorer roads, many of East Timor's 600,000 voters were not deterred from voting for their nation's president on

17 March. Current President Jose Ramos-Horta lost his bid for a second term, with voters to choose at another election in April between Taur Matan Ruak and Francisco Lu-Olo Guterres.

While earlier elections have been marred by violence, the Australian parliamentarians were staggered by how patient the Timorese people were, waiting in long queues to receive their ballot paper and either punch a hole through their preferred candidate's picture with a nail or mark it with a cross.

"It's always good to see people voting and particularly in a country where they value the vote — it's not taken for granted because they haven't been voting in elections for all that long a time," Ms Saffin said. "They orderly queue up not complaining and waiting their turn."

The parliamentarians visited a range of polling booths in Dili and in the Liquica district west of Dili to observe the voting and the vote counting afterwards. They were able to ask questions about the process and see how the holes on some ballot papers were disputed.