

THE LAW

AAP/ONE



NO FORM NEEDED: Automatic enrolments under electoral reforms

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Electoral reforms to allow automatic enrolments

Move to boost number of enrolled voters.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) will be able to directly enrol people and automatically update their address under major changes to the Electoral Act currently being considered by federal parliament.

For enrolment and change of address, the AEC will be able to use trusted third party information from sources such as Centrelink and roads and traffic authorities.

Currently people must fill out and sign a voter enrolment form to become eligible to vote, and need to inform the AEC when they move address to avoid being removed from the roll. An estimated 1.5 million eligible Australians are not enrolled to vote.

After reviewing the legislation, federal parliament's Electoral Matters Committee supported the reforms. Committee member Daryl Melham (Banks, NSW) said using trusted information to add people to the roll makes sense, given it is already used to

remove people from the roll who have failed to update their address details.

"If we trust this data to disenfranchise Australians by removing them from the roll, then surely the AEC should also have the flexibility to use this data to enfranchise eligible electors," Mr Melham said.

However opposition members of the committee have criticised the amendments, which they claim will undermine the integrity of the electoral roll.

"The bottom line is that under the Electoral Act there is an obligation on an elector to enrol," Bronwyn Bishop (Mackellar, NSW) said. "If people are not on the roll, it is because they have failed to meet that obligation."

The changes will also give the AEC discretion to consider further any provisional votes cast at elections by people not currently on the electoral roll, allowing more of those votes to be counted. •

BROADCASTING

Summer break for local content

Greater flexibility for regional radio.

Legislative amendments passed by parliament will loosen requirements for regional commercial radio stations to broadcast local content.

Reforms in 2006 required regional commercial radio stations to broadcast a minimum of three hours of local content per working day.

Radio stations are also required to permanently maintain local content and staffing levels in the event of a licence being sold or transferred or a new cross media group being formed.

The Broadcasting Services Amendment (Regional Commercial Radio) Bill 2011 will allow licensees to alter staffing and content levels two years after a licence has changed hands.

The local content requirements will also be lifted for five weeks per year over summer, while remote area and regional racing broadcasters will be exempted from the requirements entirely.

Manager of Government Business in the Senate Joe Ludwig said the 2006 reforms have not allowed the industry the flexibility to survive while still providing a local presence.

A review in 2010 showed the requirement to maintain staffing levels and use of facilities in perpetuity after the transfer of a licence has been of particular concern for the industry.

"With many regional commercial radio licensees already struggling to maintain profitability, these onerous requirements — as well as the administrative reporting burden associated with them — significantly reduce the ability of licensees to adapt their business to deal with new or changed market conditions," Senator Ludwig said.

However the review also showed opposition to reducing the