New Electoral Commissioner takes up the reins

After the successful delivery of the 2013 Western Australia State election, Electoral Commissioner Warwick Gately AM has taken up the reins in Victoria’s equivalent role.

In his 10 years with the WA Electoral Commission, Warwick oversaw three State general elections, council elections every two years, referendums on retail trading hours and daylight saving and the redrawing of the State’s electoral boundaries.

With a Naval background, he was also appointed as a Member (AM) in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in June 1999, for exceptional service to the Australian Defence Force in a number of key operational appointments.

Warwick said that moving to Victoria offered further professional challenges, albeit in familiar electoral operations, and came with the exciting prospect of living and working in Melbourne.

‘I’ve observed the VEC from interstate for some time and have always considered the VEC to be progressive, professional and in tune with the community. While there are many similarities with Western Australia, there are equally many differences in terms of legislation, procedures and processes,’ he said.

‘In the immediate short term, the focus will be on planning for the November 2014 State election. The introduction of a revamped electronic voting system and various modules of the VEC’s electoral management system will also require attention.’

Warwick is pleased that he arrived in time to be involved in the VEC’s corporate planning process for the next 4–5 year outlook and a cultural realignment project that the organisation is undertaking, which he said is very important for the VEC.

‘Then once the next State election is over, the priority will be to complete the redevelopment of the electoral management system and consider an upgrade of the roll management system.’

‘I think in non-election years, a focus must go to staff development, knowledge transfer and retention and better preparing the next generation of election officials.’

Warwick said his impressions of the VEC have been confirmed and he is enjoying getting to know the organisation first-hand.

Planning underway for 2014

It is now only 16 months until the next State election, and planning is well underway.

‘In some ways, planning for the next State election starts on the Monday after the polls of the last State election close,’ said Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Liz Williams. ‘The VEC is meticulous about assessing each election and this includes what worked, what didn’t go to plan and where the opportunities may be for the next election.’

A draft plan for the 2014 Victorian State election will be available on the VEC’s website later this year.

A breakdown of key dates for the election is available on page 2.
State redivision
The 10 per cent challenge

Victoria’s Electoral Boundaries Commission (EBC) is facing the 10 per cent challenge, as it grapples with the task of reviewing the State’s electoral boundaries.

The EBC is a statutory body, separate from the VEC, which consists of the Chief Judge of the County Court, the Electoral Commissioner and the Surveyor-General. The VEC provides technical and administrative support to the EBC for State electoral boundary reviews (known as redivisions under Victorian law).

The function of the EBC is to create electorates of approximately equal enrolment, not varying by more than 10 per cent from the State average. The purpose of this 10 per cent rule is to ensure that, as near as possible, there is an equality of representation for all Victorian electors, based on the democratic principle of ‘one vote, one value’.

At present, 34 of Victoria’s 88 electoral districts (Lower House electorates) have enrolments that are more than 10 per cent outside the average. Substantial changes will be required to return all the districts to approximate equality. Even districts that are currently within the 10 per cent tolerance may be changed as a result of a flow-on from neighbouring districts.

As well as the numbers, the EBC is considering community of interest, area, physical features and communications, as well as likely future population changes. The EBC does not take account of the political effects of boundary changes, though understandably political parties and members of Parliament are very interested in this aspect.

The EBC is conducting the first redivision of both Houses of Parliament since 2001. The process, which commenced in December 2012, is open and transparent, with all the submissions received — from four political parties and 13 other people and organisations — available for public viewing on the EBC website.

The EBC released its proposed electoral boundaries in late June. Individuals and organisations have a month to submit any comments on the proposed boundaries, and this may be followed by public hearings. After taking account of any comments, the EBC will release a report with the final boundaries in early October 2013.

The new electoral boundaries will take effect at the next State election, in November 2014.

For more information about the redivision, visit the EBC website at ebc.vic.gov.au.

Timeline for the 2014 State election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.00 pm, Tuesday, 4 November 2014</td>
<td>Issue of the Writs (Melbourne Cup Day)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.00 pm, Tuesday, 11 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of the electoral roll</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 noon, Thursday, 13 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of nominations (party endorsed candidates)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 noon, Friday, 14 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of nominations (independent candidates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 noon, Sunday, 16 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of group voting tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 noon, Friday, 21 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of ‘how-to-vote’ card registration applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.00 pm, Friday, 28 November 2014</td>
<td>Close of early voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday, 29 November 2014</td>
<td>ELECTION DAY</td>
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Connect with the VEC

Communicating effectively with voters is critical to the success of any major election, and the strategies the VEC uses evolve each year.

The VEC’s Facebook page was quietly launched in 2010 and two years later an official Twitter feed was added. These channels now have thousands of followers from a huge range of perspectives.

‘All the major journalists that cover elections follow our feed,’ said Thomas Harper, Senior Communication Officer, ‘as well as many of our stakeholders, local councillors, the political parties, interested individuals and budding psephologists.’
Paving the way for electronic voting

An expanded and improved electronic voting service is on schedule for the Victorian State election in November 2014.

The VEC’s own e-voting system, for use in voting centres, is currently being built with the co-operation of international e-voting experts at the University of Surrey (UK), and the University of Luxembourg, and locally with the help of the University of New South Wales and the University of Melbourne.

The VEC’s e-voting system uses a tablet computer, similar to an iPad, allowing electors to cast their vote by touching screen graphics, using tablet screen gestures, or with audio guidance. For audio voting, the elector is guided through commentary on headphones to vote either by providing a gesture on the screen or using an innovative tablet flip-cover — a 12-key keypad, offering full keying feedback to the fingers while firing touch screen areas. For both audio voting modes the screen is blank to protect the secrecy of the vote.

The most innovative aspect, however, is that the VEC’s e-voting system is the world’s first deployment of an all-electronic verifiable voting system. The e-voting system is based on Prêt à Voter (‘ready to vote’), which was invented by academic Peter Ryan from Luxembourg University in 2005. Prêt à Voter (and related designs) provides integrity measures that form mathematical or statistical proofs of the system’s performance, detecting all classes of voting fraud — or ballot damage or loss — with very high degrees of confidence.

The e-voting system’s ‘software independent’ design means that the detection of any problems does not rely on the e-voting software, but on a number of special ‘audits’ that can be performed by VEC staff, electors, scrutineers or auditors from the system. To electors, this audit system is mostly evident in the receipts they are given.

Business planning for a sustainable future

Service to the public and high levels of accountability to the Victorian community and Parliament are what the VEC prides itself on.

Good corporate governance and transparent reporting help ensure continued public confidence in the VEC and its processes. Maintaining appropriate corporate systems enables it to deliver quality electoral services, and operate effectively and efficiently on a day-to-day basis.

To ensure continued good corporate governance, the VEC embarked on a strategic planning project incorporating an intensive review of activity in the first half of 2013. The resulting five-year strategic plan is based on staff consultation and reflection, analysis of past performance and community needs and expectations. The plan will help provide direction, purpose and an accountability framework to the organisation as a whole, and to teams and individuals as they proceed with special projects and operational activity.

With growing demand for social accountability across the public sector, the process of operating a business brings ever-increasing challenges to government organisations. The VEC is determined to ensure that the business environment, its processes, policies and practices can withstand scrutiny, and serve the Victorian public and VEC staff well.

Implementation of the plan will commence officially in July. Along with 2014 State election preparations, cohesive operational planning, and the review and documentation of business processes are among the priorities for 2013–2014.
It’s a Big Issue!

The VEC works closely with homelessness organisations across Victoria to ensure the voices of people experiencing homelessness are represented during elections.

Through its ‘Homeless not Voteless’ initiative, the VEC provides regular enrolment outreach and, where relevant, mobile voting services at drop-in and crisis accommodation centres.

The VEC has found that, despite women representing 44 per cent of those experiencing homelessness on any one night, only 15 per cent of new enrolments have come from women. Acknowledging this problem, the VEC is committed to making inroads with women experiencing homelessness or disadvantage.

The VEC took the opportunity to develop a new partnership with The Big Issue organisation during the Melbourne by-election in 2012. Consequently, four women from the service were employed as election officials for the by-election.

Two of the women also assisted the VEC at the Indigenous Dreamtime Careers Expo, held in May this year.

Further opportunities around the new partnership with The Big Issue will be explored as part of the VEC’s ongoing education strategy.

Passport to Democracy on film

Educating students about the importance of Victoria’s democratic system is a prime focus of the VEC’s Education Team. As part of its ‘Passport to Democracy’ program, a series of films are being produced to showcase how students can influence change in their communities, and to inspire others to do the same.

Passport to Democracy is an active citizenship education resource for teachers and students, aimed at encouraging students to make connections between politics and their everyday lives.

Students at Box Hill Institute and Koonung, Ringwood and Warracknabeal Secondary Colleges were selected to participate in the films. The VEC will incorporate the short films as part of the resource to showcase how students have set about to influence change on issues important to them.

In order to promote and support teachers in the delivery of the program, the VEC organised a ‘Young Citizens in Action’ professional development day in late June. Interest in the event was high, with up to 50 teachers in attendance.

For further information about Passport to Democracy, contact Danijela Spoljaric on (03) 8620 1182 or at danijela.spoljaric@vec.vic.gov.au

VEC achieves Communication Access Accreditation

People with complex communication difficulties can now confidently attend or call the VEC’s head office, and election offices during elections, sure in the knowledge the VEC has trained staff to assist.

The VEC recently became the first Victorian Government agency to become accredited for communication access. Following SCOPE’s formal launch of the communication access symbol and assessment program in late 2011, the VEC decided to seek communication access accreditation in line with its Disability Action Plan objective to ‘Improve staff awareness and assistance’.

One in 500 Victorians has a complex communication difficulty, typically as a result of a traumatic brain injury, a neurological disorder or an intellectual impairment. People with complex communication difficulties are people who either cannot speak or have speech that is difficult to understand. The Australian Speech Pathology Association estimates that one in seven Australians has a speech difficulty.

With SCOPE’s assistance, the VEC developed communication boards to assist staff with communicating with electors with communication difficulties. The communication boards have been designed to make common responses — relevant to elections — visible and accessible for individuals. Talking boards can be also beneficial for people with hearing impairments and English language difficulties.

Staff at two key access points at the VEC — Reception and Enrolment Branch — participated in training, learning strategies and techniques to better assist people with complex communication needs in person and over the phone. The VEC has now developed appropriate talking boards for both of these areas.

In addition, the VEC trained two election staff members from each of the attendance election offices during the 2012 council elections. The VEC plans to have trained staff available in each of the 2014 State election offices that also function as early voting centres.
It’s ‘My Vote, Your Vote, Our Vote’

Over 10,000 people came together for ‘Long Walk’ festivities held at Federation Square on Saturday, 25 March, before heading towards AFL’s Dreamtime at the ‘G clash.

Celebrating Indigenous achievements and raising awareness of Indigenous issues, this year’s festival was the ideal occasion to welcome Debby Walker to the VEC as the new Aboriginal Outreach Officer.

Acknowledging the past struggles of Indigenous ancestors past and present to achieve the right to vote, the VEC’s new motto ‘My Vote, Your Vote, Our Vote’, underpins the organisation’s Indigenous engagement strategy and aims to promote the importance and power of the Indigenous voice in Victorian elections.

Featured on the big screen at Federation Square and supported by a community stall, the motto and message to ensure that enrolment details are current, was received positively by community. Valuable new contacts were made with community representatives throughout the State.

The festival also enabled the VEC to reaffirm its commitment to engaging the Indigenous community. As AFL legend and The Long Walk Trust patron Michael Long reminded the wider community audience that reconciliation ‘... isn’t about Indigenous Australia and white Australia — this is about ALL Australia’.

Valuing a diverse election workforce

This year was the VEC’s first time participating in the Dreamtime Career Expo. Now in its second year running, the event is hosted by the Korin Gamadji Institute and held at the Richmond Football Club to coincide with the AFL’s ‘Dreamtime at the G’ game.

The atmosphere at this year’s event was buzzing, with over 1200 Indigenous job seekers, students and community members exploring an array of employment and education opportunities at the expo.

The VEC’s stall promoted election appointment opportunities as well as roles at the VEC head office in Melbourne.

The VEC is committed to providing employment opportunities for Victoria’s Indigenous community and in ensuring that election staff reflect the diversity of the communities in which they serve.

Determined and strong young Koori leaders of tomorrow...

This is by far the most eye opening, empowering and soul-touching camp that I believe I will experience … It truly touches my heart to see so many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people care so deeply and passionately about the struggles our young people face. Lillian, 16-year-old Korin Gamadji Institute (KGI) alumni participant.

Powerful words from just one of the KGI REAL camp graduates and true evidence of the leadership program’s impact on the lives of Koori youth across Victoria.

REAL stands for Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leaders camps. The camps are run in partnership with the Tigers in the Community Foundation’s Korin Gamadji Institute, the YMCA and the Victorian Electoral Commission.

The camps run for four to five days over the school holidays and cover topics such as leadership and active participation, active engagement, physical health and nutrition, and personal and cultural development. Victorian secondary school teachers nominate students for the program based on their leadership ability and good school attendance.

It is not often that the VEC’s office is filled with the sounds of young people singing, discussing and debating, but the young participants are warmly welcomed to the office to participate in an active citizenship workshop. Participants identify issues that are important to them in their community and consider how they can bring about a meaningful change within their community, and how they can engage their local Members of Parliament.

The success of the camps has also led to the creation of a 2013 KGI Youth Parliament team, where it is hoped they will be able to further explore and take action on their chosen community issue.

The VEC looks forward to continuing to work closely with these young leaders to ensure the next generation Indigenous leaders are actively involved in strengthening Victoria’s democracy.
2012 in review

Even-numbered years pose the biggest challenge for the VEC, and 2012 was no different. Yet even before the VEC could focus its attention on the local council elections, there were numerous electoral events to manage.

The resignation of The Hon. Rob Hulls MP in January triggered a by-election in Niddrie District; the first for the District since he was elected in the seat just prior to the 1996 State election. A second State by-election arose less than four months later with the resignation for the Member for Melbourne, The Hon. Bronwyn Pike MP, in May. Ben Carroll MP and Jennifer Kanis MP, respectively, were elected to the seats.

Both by-elections offered opportunities to trial innovations. Firstly, a suite of netbook computers were rolled out to test the VEC's electronic roll mark-off tool. These machines enable quick and easy searches of the electoral roll, and a centralised system ensures the same name could not be inadvertently marked off twice.

Secondly, new avenues for electoral communication were explored with the launch of an official VEC Twitter feed for the Melbourne District by-election. The new online presence provided assistance on election day, answering questions about the process and providing official information from inside the tallyroom. Feedback from users was extremely positive — consequently, the VEC’s following grew from zero to more than 1200 over the year.

The 2011/2012 electoral representation review cycle finally came to a close in April of 2012. Following the Minister for Local Government’s approval of the VEC’s recommendations, Enrolment Branch set about updating the enrolment details of every voter who was affected by the boundary changes. This critical stage had to be completed in time for October’s elections, when changes were to come into effect.

Of course, the main focus of 2012 was on the local council elections. The VEC conducted elections on behalf of 78 of Victoria’s 79 councils (Brimbank City Council being under administration). This included co-ordinating attendance elections for eight councils and postal elections for 70 councils. The planning required to deliver these elections was well underway at the start of 2012, but much of the implementation could not commence until contract arrangements were finalised with each council — which in many cases was after 30 June 2012. Overall, more than 230 voting centres and election offices were opened throughout the State and 78 Returning Officers, a mix of new and more experienced hands, processed candidate nominations between Thursday, 20 September and Tuesday, 25 September. Some 2,000 candidates competed for 631 councillor positions.

In spite of a broad communications campaign, including a ballot pack or an EasyVote letter being sent to each voter, turnout rates decreased in comparison to 2008 rates. Voter turnout for those entitled to vote (excluding elections for the Melbourne City Council’s Leadership Team and Geelong City Council’s Mayor) was 70.96 per cent. As expected, the rate for postal elections (72.53 per cent) was higher than that for attendance elections (63.62 per cent). This is of concern to the VEC and countering this decline will be a focus of evaluation and future planning.
One of the VEC’s legislative functions is to conduct research and promote public awareness of electoral matters that are in the general public interest.

The VEC conducts its research program with the aims of finding areas where better services can be provided and public understanding of electoral matters can be developed. Major recent and current research projects include:

**Arabic and Turkish communities**
As there is a significant correlation between the informal vote and the proportion of residents who are not proficient in English, it is important for the VEC to learn about attitudes and understand the level of knowledge in CALD communities.

The Arabic-speaking and Turkish communities in Victoria are large, long-standing, and concentrated at certain localities. The VEC engaged Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) to investigate barriers to enrolment and voting, and attitudes to electronic voting, among these communities. CIRCA conducted eight focus groups with Arabic-speaking participants, who were from a range of countries and age groups. Two focus groups were with Turkish-speaking participants.

Key findings were a generally positive attitude to enrolment and voting (with some exceptions), patchy knowledge about how the electoral system works, and the importance of low English-language skills as a barrier to participation. The research also found that participants relied on family to assist them to vote, regarded voting in secret as not very important, and expressed some interest in online voting.

**Blind and low vision voters**
The VEC has just concluded research into electronically assisted voting. The Victorian Taxi Directorate allowed the VEC to write to clients who are blind or have low vision, inviting them to call the Social Research Centre to participate in a survey. The aim of this research project is to learn about the service and information needs of voters who are blind or have low vision, and about their views on electronically assisted voting.

**Electoral Regulation Research Network**
The Electoral Regulation Research Network is a collaborative project between the VEC, the New South Wales Electoral Commission and the Melbourne Law School. The Network was established in March 2012 with the aim of fostering exchange on discussion relating to electoral regulation. Events have been held across Australia, dealing with subjects ranging from youth electoral participation to electoral funding legislation.

The seminars have provided forums where parliamentarians, electoral commission officials, academics and other interested persons can engage in robust discussion of issues relating to electoral regulation. The most recent seminar on Melbourne was on ‘Drawing lines without drawing blood: redistricting institutions and criteria in America and Australia’ — a fitting subject considering the current redivision of Victorian electoral boundaries.
Reaching out to the community

Challenging the myths around voting and disability, the VEC’s Voting is for Everyone DVD has been a hit with over 300 members of the Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID).

In partnership with VALID, the VEC visited five metropolitan network meetings across Melbourne to spread the message that everyone in our community, including those living with a disability, have the right to express their opinions through voting in local, State and Federal elections.

Many members began the session believing they were not entitled to vote, after being told for many years that their intellectual disability or inability to read and write would preclude them. However, after exploring the importance of voting and the help available to those living with a disability, including the availability of ‘talking boards’ at early voting centres for those with communication difficulties, many left the meeting feeling empowered to enrol and vote at the next election.

The success of this partnership can be seen through the feedback from one participant, ‘The government makes decisions that affect my life and my Mum’s life. I’m happy to find out that I am allowed to vote. I didn’t think that was possible’.

The VEC hopes to strengthen this partnership with VALID, and intends to run mock elections at future meetings to provide an experience of voting prior to the real thing.

Meanwhile, the VEC’s ‘Homeless not Voteless’ program goes from strength to strength. Through staff network groups, including Homeground’s Advocacy Committee and regional staff homelessness networks in Central and East Gippsland, North/West Victoria, the VEC’s Community Education Outreach Team has engaged with over 200 homelessness workers, sharing information about upcoming elections and strategies to empower service users.

Pete Burns, Peer Education Support Program volunteer at the Council to Homeless Persons, recently joined the VEC’s Homelessness Advisory Group. Having experienced homelessness himself, Pete is passionate about working with the VEC to enable better understanding of the barriers faced by those experiencing homelessness, resulting in improved accessibility for the community.

The VEC’s Community Outreach Team was also busy engaging the homelessness and Indigenous communities during the recent Lyndhurst District by-election. Working closely with Cornerstone Contact Centre in central Dandenong and the Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative, the Team delivered enrolment and education sessions, followed by a mobile voting session at Cornerstone in the week of the election. The VEC’s presence at Cornerstone and the Cooperative during the by-election period helped to raise the profile of upcoming elections and start the conversation — with both communities — to get involved in the Federal election and next year’s State election.

Feedback wanted

We’re keen to hear your thoughts on the annual Selections newsletter, and would love you to take part in our quick survey.

Tell us what’s good, what’s bad and what you would like to see more of. Tell us if you would prefer to receive this newsletter electronically and more frequently. The survey is available online, until 5.00 pm on Monday, 5 August 2013, at: vec.vic.gov.au/selections