

The Hon John Howard, MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
CANBERRA A C T 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Affect of Electoral Reforms on Prisoners

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is a forum for the promotion of the health of the public as well as being a professional resource for public health personnel. The Association provides opportunities for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and information on public health and actively undertakes advocacy for public health policy, development, research and training.

It was recently brought to the PHAA's attention that you are proposing a number of changes to electoral governance that are of some concern to the Association. These are:

- limiting the time available to update enrolments to only three days; and
- removal of the voting rights of prisoners serving less than three years.

The first reform provides for a small time frame that would be difficult for many people in urban areas to meet, but which may be next to impossible for people in rural and remote areas. We are particularly concerned that this would impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, leaving many individuals feeling disenfranchised.

As we know from the history of invasion and colonisation, Australia has had a long history of disenfranchising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals, the lack of elected representation and the lack of rights to self-determination has been a contributing factor to the social and economic factors that underlie the disastrous state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Nationally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes remain much worse than for other Australians (eg life expectancy at birth is 56 years (male) and 63 years (female) against 77 and 82 respectively for other Australians and infant and childhood mortality is over three times higher than for the non-Aboriginal population.

Similarly, incarceration disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the poor and those with mental illness. Those who are in prison are usually disconnected from society and their own communities in many ways. Rather than depriving them of their right to vote, we should be looking at using the opportunities provided by elections to encourage the development of personal understanding of and responsibilities in a modern community – including responsibilities around voting.

Further, the PHAA believes that deprivation of liberty – a punishment of last resort - is the punishment of those who are imprisoned. Any further deprivation of human rights, including the voting rights afforded all Australians, should not be allowed.

I would be happy to discuss the issues raised with you or your staff should that be useful and can be contacted on (02) 62852373 or at plaut@phaa.net.au

Yours sincerely

Pieta Laut
Executive Director

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