



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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Wahine O Aotearoa

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25 February 2005

S05.15

**Submission to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee on the
Inquiry into the 2004 Local Authority Elections**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 42 nationally organised societies. It has 33 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies. NCWNZ also represents a number of individual women. The Council's function is to serve women, the family and the community at local, national and international levels through research, study, discussion and action.

NCWNZ has always taken a close interest in all aspects of the democratic electoral process and strongly encourages all New Zealanders to exercise their voting responsibilities. However, although the issues arising from the 2004 Local Authority elections are of interest to all our members, the format and timing of the discussion paper restricted our ability to consult all members through the usual channels. On this occasion, our submission is based on responses from 7 members of the Public Issues Standing Committee and on a written survey of 24 members attending the Nelson Branch meeting. These respondents were voters in either the Nelson or Tasman districts with two also voting as ratepayers in two North Island local authorities

We have chosen to reply to the following selected sections of the discussion paper as below:

1. Assessment of the Local Electoral Act 2001 and regulations

Undertake an analysis of whether the principles of the Local Electoral Act 2001 and regulations have been achieved. On the basis of that, identify any aspects of the legislation which could require reform prior to the 2007 local authority elections. Specifically:

- Consider current arrangements for agency oversight of local authority and district health board elections, and whether other arrangements would be more effective:

NCWNZ Response: No strong reason is identified as to why other arrangements would be more effective. Financial analysis of current cost to all ratepayers in comparison to other means such as the establishment and administration of an electoral commission would provide useful guidance. A dilemma is created by Local Authorities having the ability to decide the voting method but the elections will always be conducted alongside the DHB elections which central government has decided will be STV

- Assess the integrity of the postal voting system; assess whether current mechanisms for making and considering complaints for alleged/actual breaches of electoral law are sufficiently robust;

NCWNZ Response: Involvement of scrutineers early in the processing of returns could add another level to ensure the system is sufficiently robust. However, given that few scrutineers are appointed in the Nelson area, it appears to suggest that most candidates are comfortable with the security of the procedure at present.





- Review the law relating to the order of listing of candidates on the ballot paper.

NCWNZ Response: NCWNZ strongly supports the use of alphabetical listing. Reasons for this were that it is a widespread convention by which you locate a name and it is fair as people are used to it. A pertinent point made by respondents was that, whatever order is used, one candidate will be at the top. The argument of bias is countered by the fact that all means of listing will have some sort of bias.

- Assess the desirable length of the postal voting period;

NCWNZ Response: All respondents to the survey preferred a 2 – 3 week maximum period but it must be ensured that this period does not coincide with at least one week of any school holidays. Consideration of rural postal service is of vital importance if any change is debated here, as a restricted return time could disenfranchise those rural women with infrequent mail deliveries and collection.

- Given the “community of interest” feature of the Act, consider whether or not there should be any limitations on numbers of positions individuals can be nominated for in one local authority election period and whether or not residency in a community board area/ward/city/district/region should be a prerequisite to candidacy;

NCWNZ Response: This section resulted in very strong comment particularly in regard to residency in the area. The majority of members (23) felt that residency within an area/ward/city/district/region is an essential requirement for all candidates to ensure essential knowledge of the district and to competently represent the voters. 13 respondents had reservations about candidates nominated for more than one position in regard to the time they would have available to adequately represent constituents.

- Review the effects and levels of campaign spending limits. The identified maximum allowable spending limits for campaigns seems to be unrealistic and revision is required. It is noted in main centres the maximum is often met by donations.

NCWNZ Response: One respondent felt that there should be a clear limit to the amount that could be spent on advertising by candidates to prevent standing for election becoming the prerogative of the rich but other members surveyed did not feel strongly about the matter.

2. Participation and elector turnout

- Obtain feedback from voters (through qualitative research, including focus groups) about their participation or otherwise in the elections, the nature of the ballot paper and the material included with the ballot paper;

NCWNZ Response: It was felt that in the Nelson and Tasman voting papers, the font was too small in the candidate information sheets and layout could have been more professional. On the voting papers, the columns of names should have been adjusted to be of even length –the few names in the second column could have been overlooked or disadvantaged.

- Identify what factors influenced elector turnout (including the extent to which particular factors affect turnout, such as the use of Single Transferable Vote (STV), the impact of a vigorous mayoral contest or a controversial local issue); Anecdotal information suggest



- that a new method of selection, STV, influenced some voters not to complete and return forms.

NCWNZ Response: 6 respondents said the strongest influence for them was that they considered it a civic duty to vote and that this should be the main message in voter education rather than encouraging people to vote because of a controversial local issue

- Identify the approach of local authorities and others in New Zealand and overseas in encouraging elector turnout, and the effectiveness of those approaches;

NCWNZ Response: The Tauranga initiative where supermarkets were provided with a voters “posting box”, was applauded because it attracted attention and after removal on the Friday afternoon voters were looking for it. Nelson local authority staff were provided with VOTE tee shirts and all Council letterhead and envelopes were overprinted with the words “VOTE” and used from the time the candidate list was declared. No statistical information is available to say if returned votes would have been lower if these means were not used.

- Review the effectiveness of advertising in raising voter awareness of the election

NCWNZ Response: Several respondents noted that, when the public become aware of advertising purchased by candidates, this raises awareness that an election is happening and may influence people to vote.

- Review the impact of the media coverage of the elections;

NCWNZ Response: Responses were mixed with seven stating media had very little influence, three some and five that they had a lot. One woman commented that any exposure highlights candidates and that profiles were helpful. The example was given that in Nelson it could have given one candidate an advantage in that he owns a TV station and it was suggested that the Public Broadcasting charter may require amendment to cover this situation. Many respondents commented that the media have a responsibility to cover the good aspects as well as the controversial.

- Report on other forms of voting and assess their merits on a comparative basis with postal voting;

NCWNZ Response: There was no conclusive response about other forms of voting but several comments suggested that polling booth voting gave greater “status” to the process and that raising voter awareness/education can be more targeted to one particular date. Another comment asked that rural voting patterns and needs should receive adequate consideration.

- Assess whether a school civics education programme might affect election turnouts and encourage greater participation in our democracy.

NCWNZ Response: NCWNZ members considered that “Civics” programmes in schools would be useful and empowering to students with an emphasis on the responsibility they have in the future when they reached voting age and importance of casting a vote. There is evidence that children can influence family life such as in the smoke-free and drink driving promotions. The Ministry of Education and the Electoral Commission could work together on formulating a programme for use in all schools



3. Electoral systems

- Assess the management and impact of different electoral systems (STV and First Past the Post) being operated through the same ballot paper, including the desirability of separate ballot papers. Compare the level of spoilt ballot papers, especially in those areas that only used STV and those that only used STV for district health board elections. Consider whether there should be only one electoral system at local level or whether voter education and ballot paper design could overcome the potential confusion of having two systems operating at once;

NCWNZ Response: Members of the Public Issues Committee and the Branch meeting discussed this at length. It was unanimously agreed that the voting papers for DHB and Local Authority should be physically separate rather than perforated, or at least a different colour used for each. Nevertheless there was scepticism whether all the design and education in the world would significantly reduce confusion from having two systems operating at once.

- Assess the impact of STV on representation, including population groups and different geographic areas;

NCWNZ Response: There was general support for STV to be given a chance as overseas experience indicates that it takes at least three elections for voters to get used to a voting system. Members supported the re-introduction of the ward system for DHBs because of the greater geographic area the Boards cover especially in the South Island. Candidates among the survey respondents reported that promotion across provinces was difficult, costly and completely unrealistic.

4. Election management

- Consider whether the process used by the Department of Internal Affairs to license the use of the STV calculator to count votes was adequate and could be improved;

NCWNZ Response: The calculator appeared to be adequate, however the software used prior to this differed between companies. Given that the same calculator delivered speedy results in some areas through different contractors this suggests other factors were the problem.

- Review and report on the delays in completing the election count in some areas, and the operation of the processing and counting systems (including whether there were contingency plans in place in case of systems failure);

NCWNZ Response: The impact of these delays was far-reaching. It was particularly stressful for candidates and families, especially because of uncertainty about the duration of the wait. Delays in the hand-over and installation of new health board members was destabilizing for all working in the sector.

- Consider the role of local authorities in contracting out vote processing and counting (including any performance targets and sanctions in the contracts). Investigate the difference in methodology used in the processing of votes between different organisations;



NCWNZ Response: The delay in announcing a final result in some electorates damaged the credibility and integrity of the use of a new voting system. As it was contracted out and then totally beyond the control of the Returning Officer, internal stress at councils was evident and the information as to the likely time of a final result was either unavailable or unreliable.

- Assess the quality and accessibility of the voting data that is made publicly available after elections.

NCWNZ Response: STV data available was mystifying, as actual vote counts were not given for the Nelson/Marlborough DHB, just the names of who had succeeded.

General comments

The media release from the Minister of Local Government accompanying this Justice and Electoral Committee Inquiry, stated:

- “It is proposed to simplify rolls by removing the requirement for voters to have their occupations stated on the roll. This is in accordance with the requirements of the privacy legislation although for the sake of clarity men may request that their occupations be included”.

NCWNZ Response: Members of the NCWNZ Public Issues Standing Committee query what this “sake of clarity” is and why it only applies to men. We are also concerned that historical data may be less valuable if comparison between occupational groups can no longer be made. Electoral rolls are a simple, transparent means of identifying and collecting statistical details combined with what can be sourced through the census. It was felt that electoral rolls are, and would continue to provide, a useful tool for genealogical research and are a good reason for this information to be collected and to remain publicly available.

The Minister’s press release further stated:

“To compensate for the fact that occupations need not be stated, the government proposes to introduce a national identification number for use in local and national elections”

NCWNZ Response: This was acceptable to the majority of respondents but three women did not want a number.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this topic which is of great interest to our membership.

Christine Low
National President

Mary Gavin
Convener, Public Issues Standing Committee