

VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

By the time you receive this copy of Public Sector, New Zealanders will be heading to the polls to vote in the 2017 general election. In the third in our series on public sector Commissions, writer SHELLY FARR BISWELL went behind the voting place to find out about the Electoral Commission and their work.



Alicia Wright

Chief Electoral Officer Alicia Wright only took up her new role in early 2017, but she says her interest in New Zealand's electoral process goes back to her time with the Ministry of Defence.

"I was involved in preparing New Zealand's response for Transparency International's Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index. As part of that exercise, I found that the integrity and transparency in our electoral system is so built-in that as a country we almost take it for granted.

"We have accountabilities that protect our election process that are different even from other countries which operate under the Westminster system."

Wright is clear about the role the Electoral Commission plays in New Zealand's democratic system.

"When people vote, they need to have confidence. For our team, that means we need to have careful and considered processes in place."

It's an impressive undertaking, with the Electoral Commission becoming the largest government employer for a day – going from about 100 full-time staff across 20 regional offices to 15,000 temporary staff for the general election.

"In the lead-up to a general election, we offer training and hold several operational tests – dress rehearsals – that allow us to check our systems and identify any problems.

"Even our election staff who have been with us for several elections - for example, we have at least half a dozen people who have worked the last 12 elections - still need to go through training and operational tests each time. There's no second chances when it comes to voting, so everything we do needs to be right."

Wright says that by the time of the general election, well over 3.14 million people will be enrolled to vote. Those voters' enrolment details will have been checked and re-checked.

"We then create printed rolls for each electorate that go through the same review process," she says.

A single electoral agency

In 2008, the Government moved to establish a single electoral agency. The transition meant bringing three electoral agencies together.

First, the former Electoral Commission and the Chief Electoral Office were amalgamated to create the Electoral Commission in 2010. Next, in 2012 enrolment functions were transferred from the Electoral Enrolment Centre of NZ Post Ltd to the Electoral Commission, with NZ Post Ltd continuing to carry out enrolments under an instrument of delegation.

In 2015, the Electoral Commission decided to bring enrolment services in-house. The transfer of the enrolment services and staff to the Electoral Commission was completed on 1 July 2016. This shift meant the organisation went from 30 permanent, Wellington-based staff to 100 permanent staff (46 in Wellington and 54 in the regions).

"This change allows for an end-to-end electoral system where the voter is very much at the centre of everything we do," Wright says.

"We have two main levers to get enrolled voters to vote. One is to make it as easy as possible for people to register and update their voting details. The second is to put voting places where people are.

"For this general election, we've made several operational changes to use both those levers, including offering advanced voting in places such as universities, malls and even grocery stores, which we're trialling in parts of Auckland."

Board work

The Electoral Commission is led by a three-member board that includes the Chair, a Deputy Chair and the Chief Electoral Officer. Electoral Commission Board Chair Hon Sir Hugh Williams says the fundamental role of the board is to preserve the independence of the Electoral Commission. The



board also performs a supervisory role within the Commission as required.

“Fortunately, a strength of the Electoral Commission is that we work well as a team. There is an *esprit de corps* amongst staff and the board – and a sense that we are all working toward the same goals,” he says.



Electoral Commission youth advocates

One of the board’s responsibilities is determining the broadcasting allocation that is appropriated by Parliament for all registered political parties for election advertising and programmes.

“For example, we may be asked to review advisory opinions on whether an advertisement constitutes election advertising under the Electoral Act,” Williams says.

“The Electoral Commission has responded to over 650 advisory opinion requests already this year in the lead up to this general election. Most requests are straightforward and can be addressed by staff, but if there is a grey area or an issue that is particularly contentious or complex, the board may be asked to provide guidance on an opinion.”

Like many other OECD countries, New Zealand’s voter turnout rates have been in decline in past decades – with a high of 89 percent in 1984 to a low of just under 70 percent in 2011. Following the 2014 election, when there was a slight increase to just over 72 percent, New Zealand ranked ninth out of OECD countries in voter turnout rates.

As the Electoral Commission noted in its final report following the 2014 general election, “Turnout has been in decline in most developed democracies over the last 30 years, but New Zealand’s decline has been particularly steep and persistent. At the 2011 election, turnout as a percentage of those eligible to enrol dropped to 69.57 percent, the lowest recorded at a New Zealand parliamentary election since the adoption of universal suffrage in 1893.”

Hugh Williams says, “After the poor voter turnout of 2011 we knew we needed to become champions of the voting process.

“We adopted an advocacy role to spark public debate about democracy and the role of voting. Our purpose is not to take a position, but to encourage dialogue.”

Williams says the board is also unhesitatingly supportive of a range of actions to improve enrolment.

“The Electoral Commission is one of New Zealand’s guardians of democracy,” he says. “We’re focused on making it as easy as possible for as many eligible voters as possible to exercise their democratic right.”

Wright and Williams both acknowledge, however; that improving voter turnout will take time. As a case in point, by mid-August, 450,000 eligible New Zealanders still hadn’t enrolled to vote in the 2017 general election, with half of those under the age of 30.

Who’s not voting?

The 2014 general election represented the first time that voting statistics were available by age and Māori descent. The statistics showed that:

- New Zealanders under the age of 50 were less likely to enrol and vote than the rest of the population, with people under the age of 34 *significantly* less likely to enrol and vote;
- New Zealanders who identified as being of Māori descent on the general roll were less likely to vote than non-Māori of the same age; and
- New Zealanders on the Māori roll were less likely to vote than Māori of the same age on the general roll.

Additionally, analysing voter participation by electorate in the 2014 general election, the Electoral Commission found that electorates with high populations of Pacific Island and Asian New Zealanders had low voter participation.

Alicia Wright says identifying populations and electorates with low voter participation rates has guided much of the Electoral Commission’s work programme in the lead up to the 2017 general election.

“We have set our strategic priorities, and key to this is increasing voter turnout. For the upcoming general election, we have put an emphasis on getting young people enrolled, because the trend appears to show that if people don’t enrol when they are young, they are less likely to participate when they get older.

“The last three general elections have seen enrolment rates fall in all age groups between the ages of 18 and 39. This generational effect – where each new generation is less likely than the previous generation to enrol and vote – means we need to actively address this issue,” she says.

Taking action

For the 2017 general election, the Electoral Commission joined up with Te Puni Kōkiri to hire a team of youth advocates to encourage young people in Northland, South Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua and Gisborne to enrol to vote.

“We successfully trialled the youth advocate programme during the Northland by-election in 2015. Our youth advocates go where young people gather to provide information about how to enrol and why it’s important to vote,” Wright says.

Youth advocate Teina Wells-Smith says one of the barriers for young people is lack of awareness about the mechanics of voting.

“A lot of younger people don’t understand the voting process, but youth advocates can provide young people with the information they need. We can also talk about how decisions made in Parliament affect us and our futures, so we should all vote,” Wells-Smith says.

The Electoral Commission is committed to getting young people to talk about voting before they turn 18. To do this, they have created a series of school resources and a Kids Voting Programme.

“For the 2017 general election, we have 144,000 kids from over 800 schools participating. As part of the programme, students vote for real candidates, on a real ballot paper, and compare the results of their classrooms’ election with the results of the real election.

“The idea behind these resources is to raise awareness among young people about our democratic processes and to underscore the fact that every vote counts,” Wright says.

A digital approach

Wright says that the Electoral Commission is committed to using technology where possible.

“A few years ago, there was a global movement to move election processes more and more online, but as issues in the US and other places have shown, there can be limitations in terms of security and privacy,” she says.

“As a country, we have taken a cautious approach to introducing online voting. That said, we have introduced a suite of services to make it easier for people to enrol and to update their enrolment details. Our aim is to make the process as easy as possible, while still maintaining the integrity of the system.”

She adds that technology is only part of the solution for getting people to enrol and vote.

“For some people, there may be barriers, ranging from language to personal safety concerns. As an organisation, we work to remove as many obstacles as possible. Our aim is to meet people where they’re at so that they can participate as a citizen.”

In the case of removing language barriers, the Electoral Commission has created information resources in 27 languages, including New Zealand Sign Language. When it comes to safety concerns, the Electoral Commission maintains an Unpublished Roll that people can ask to be included on, where their details are held by the Electoral Commission and will not be released.

Wright says while it’s a big job holding such a “big event” every three years, it’s well worth it.

“In this job, you are constantly reminded of how lucky we are to live in a democracy. The Electoral Commission plays an important role in maintaining that democracy, but we can’t do it alone. Our work over the coming years is to ensure increased voter turnout is a strategic priority for our government, our communities and our citizens – it’s an exciting and rewarding challenge.”

Māori Electoral Option

One aspect of the electoral process that is unique to New Zealand is the Māori Electoral Option. The option was established in 1975 and is offered every five years. At that time, Māori voters can choose whether they want to enroll to vote for general seats or Māori seats in Parliament (Māori enrolling for the first time can choose to be on the general or the Māori roll even if it’s outside of this time). No matter which roll people are on, they choose from the same list of political parties for their Party Vote.

Before 1975, Māori voters were only allowed to enroll to vote for representation through the four Māori seats that were established by the New Zealand Parliament in 1867.

When the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting system was introduced in 1993, the law was changed so that the number of Māori electorates would be based on the number of people on the Māori roll. Using this calculation, the number of Māori electorates has grown from four to seven.

Time to progress your policy career?

If you’re open to considering new employment opportunities now is the time to start the conversation. The policy job market hasn’t shown any sign of slowing down in the lead up to the election and we are speaking to a number of Managers with a desire to bring additional Principal and Senior Policy Analysts into their busy teams.

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