Adam Giles
Chief Minister of the Northern Territory

NT voters given more flexibility in how they cast their votes

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Territorians could be given more options to cast pre-poll and postal votes and won’t have to ‘run the gauntlet’ of how-to-vote card spruikers under proposed changes to electoral laws.

Chief Minister Adam Giles said the proposed changes were about giving voters more freedom of choice in how they cast their vote in an effort to encourage more Territorians to participate in elections.

“Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that the current electoral roll captures only about 81.6 per cent of the eligible population in the Northern Territory, and of those enrolled, only 76.9 per cent participated in the 2012 general election,” he said.

“Electoral Commission data shows that 3.2 per cent of the votes cast at the 2012 election were informal and the informal vote rates were highest in remote and regional parts of the Northern Territory.

“For example, the electorate of Namitjira had a voter turnout of just 59.8 per cent and an informal rate of 4.7 per cent in the 2012 general election.

“These proposed amendments are aimed at reducing informal voting and increasing voter participation by providing voters with more flexibility in how they can vote.”

The Chief Minister will this week introduce a Bill into Parliament to make changes to the Electoral Act with key amendments including:

- Allowing for any person entitled to vote to apply for a postal vote without the need to satisfy any conditions;
- The development of a system for the electronic lodgement of scanned postal vote certificates and ballot papers;
- Allowing any person entitled to vote to do so at a pre-election voting centre without the need to satisfy any conditions;
- Extending the current restriction on canvassing from within 10 metres of the entrance of a polling place to 500 metres;
• Changing the current preferential voting system to optional preferential voting meaning voters can either just vote for the candidate of their choice or number some squares or every square, similar to the system used in Queensland. This change would give voters greater freedom of choice and help reduce informal voting;

• Allowing the ballot paper draw for the order of candidates’ names to be held outside Darwin at the Electoral Commission’s discretion; and

• An express reference to the compulsory requirement to enrol to vote.

Mr Giles said the Northern Territory Government had listened to community concerns about canvassing outside polling places.

“Under the new arrangements, Territorians will no longer be faced with the uncomfortable and often confronting prospect of having to run the gauntlet of party officials and spruikers trying to thrust how to vote material into their hands,” he said.

“The objective is to have elections conducted in an orderly fashion free from undue pressure.”

Mr Giles said the increased flexibility for pre-poll and postal voting was designed to make it easier for busy Territorians to vote.

“These changes mean that those who make plans on Election Day are not restricted to remaining in their electorate to vote,” Mr Giles said.

“If you know you are heading out on to the water for a fish, going camping, playing sport or attending an event away from home, you can head to a pre-election polling centre and cast a vote.”

Mr Giles said while the Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill will be introduced this week, it would not be debated until next year to give the public and Members time to consider the amendments and make comments or suggest changes.

“There have been a number of reports into electoral laws in recent years and addressing many of these issues will take time, and require further discussion and research,” he said.

“That’s why the Northern Territory Government has chosen to move ahead with a limited number of amendments that focus on having as many eligible people as possible enrolled and participating in an election.”

Feedback can be provided at www.haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/electoralact