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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of the House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: jscem@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir,

INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of Free TV Australia which is the industry body that represents all of Australia's free-to-air commercial television broadcasters.

Free TV welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Committee's term of reference regarding the continuing relevance of the National Tally Room (NTR) to the media.

In March this year, some of Free TV's members received a letter from the Australian Electoral Commission alerting them that the existence of the NTR was under review and it may be abolished before the upcoming Federal election.

Free TV's members were strongly opposed to that proposal and responded to the Electoral Commission setting out our views as to the continuing relevance and value of the NTR.

Free TV and its members continue to be strongly opposed to any proposal to abolish the NTR for the upcoming Federal election or subsequent elections.

The NTR is a key part of broadcaster's election night coverage and serves both viewers and broadcasters as a central focus for the election night count.

It symbolises the transparency of the election process by providing a place where voters can come and watch the counting of the vote or are able to view the counting of the vote in their own homes.

It also provides a common area for accessing party officials and commentators who usually are available for more than one broadcaster's coverage on the night. There is no way of substituting this commentary via the AEC's website.

The AEC's letter to broadcasters cited the slowness of updating the manual tally board as one of the reasons for abolishing the tally room. The manual board is not the only reason for the NTR and given developments in technology over recent years, we would expect that there are a number of ways in which the speed with which the Board is updated can be improved to reflect the speed with which the computer is now handling data.

The AEC's letter also stated that the increasing cost of conducting the NTR for both the AEC and the media may no longer be warranted for either party. Broadcasters do not regard the cost of setting up a temporary studio at the NTR as an 'unwarranted' expense. Rather, broadcasters believe the enhanced coverage they are able to provide to viewers via the NTR is a necessary and justified expense.

Broadcasters were already well advanced in their preparations for this year's Federal election and the NTR forms the basis of those plans. We were very surprised that a proposal to abolish the NTR was being considered this late in the electoral cycle. We therefore welcomed the electoral commission's announcement in May 2007 that it will proceed with the NTR for the 2007 election.

We strongly support the ongoing existence of the NTR. Any proposed changes to its current operations must be discussed with all stakeholders. We would be very happy to appear before the Committee to discuss our views in more detail.

Yours sincerely



Julie Flynn
Chief Executive Officer