



29 January 2021

The Hon Michael Sukkar MP  
Assistant Treasurer  
by email: [prebudgetsubs@treasury.gov.au](mailto:prebudgetsubs@treasury.gov.au)

## **FUNDING FOR THE INDIGENOUS ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION PROGRAM, 2021-22 BUDGET**

The First Nations Justice team at GetUp welcomes the opportunity to engage in the Pre-Budget Submission process for the 2021-22 Budget. This submission is focused on restoration of funding for the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP), particularly in the Northern Territory.

### ***Lowest national enrolment rates***

Only 83 per cent of eligible Northern Territorians are enrolled to vote, compared to the national average of 96.8 per cent. One in three remote Indigenous voters are not enrolled to vote. The NT electoral commissioner has said about 25,000 people are believed to be missing from the electoral roll.<sup>1</sup> The AEC has suggested up to 42% of First Nations people are not enrolled.<sup>2</sup>

The two Territory electorates of Lingiari and Solomon produced the worst and second-worst turnouts in the country at the 2019 May Federal election.

The Australian Electoral Commission has raised concerns that a cultural barrier exists in communities where people are disengaged.

Political participation is a human right and is fundamental to our democracy. The right to vote, without discrimination, is set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 25) and the International Covenant on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (article 5(c)). Both of those human rights treaties bind the Australian Government. The right to vote is also set out in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (article 21). But without being enrolled these rights cannot be realised.

The impacts of low enrolment and engagement rates amongst First Nations People would be exacerbated if we were to proceed to a referendum on Constitutional recognition in the coming years without urgent attention and restoration of funding.

### ***Why are the rates so low?***

Since the 2017 Budget, the Federal Government has made repeated and significant cuts to the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP), and the number of AEC staff at the Darwin

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<sup>1</sup> <https://alicespringsnews.com.au/2019/08/22/voter-apaty-greatest-threat-to-territory-democracy/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-17/voter-participation-enrolled-lingiari-snowdon-iacinta-price/10620932>



the office was reduced from 16 to 3. The forward estimates of the 2017-2018 Budget mapped out cuts to the 'Australian Electoral Commission - restructure of the Northern Territory Office' totalling -\$6.7m.<sup>3</sup>

Those staff lost in the 'restructure' would have been responsible for the outreach work done under the IEPP and the reduction in resourcing is having an adverse impact on First Nations people and remote communities.

The objectives of the IEPP, as set out by the AEC, "are to increase enrolment, voter turnout, formality and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian elections." Our experience in the recent Northern Territory election is that with the reduced funding allocation these objectives are not being met. The gradual and eventual shutdown of remote enrolment programs is leading to disenfranchisement of First Nations People.

Additionally, an automatic update to the electoral roll purged people off this list due to inaccuracies around names and addresses. Many people GetUp have spoken to had no idea they were no longer on the electoral roll. Over the last few years, thousands of these people were on the roll but have been kicked off for various reasons, including:

- People change their names with Centrelink
- Issues with address - street names are rare in remote communities
- Cultural name changes
- Limited access to technology means devices, emails, SIM cards are regularly changed and shared meaning communications from the AEC are lost or not delivered

### ***GetUp's first hand experience in the Northern Territory***

In the recent Northern Territory election GetUp's First Nations Justice team travelled over 40,000 kms between remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. From Ngukurr, Tjikala, Minyeri to Borroloola, we listened to people talk about the issues that matter the most in the lead up to the Territory election. GetUp volunteers were active in 6 electorates and remote polling stations: Arnhem, Barkly, Braitling, Katherine, Mulka, Namatjira. After running a similar enrollment and engagement effort in remote communities during the federal election, feedback from our supporters suggests it was one of the most valued campaigns.

During our work in remote communities in the 2019 federal election, we found many examples of First Nations people who had been removed from the roll. And the first time many of them knew this was when they went to vote.

It is our experience that the AEC is operating a one-size-fits-all approach to electoral roll management and that simply doesn't work for many First Nations peoples especially in remote

communities for a range of well established reasons. The standard of contacting voters by mail before removal is not appropriate, based on our experience. More resources and a better

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<sup>3</sup>[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/budget/2017\\_15/upload\\_binary/bp2.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22library/budget/2017\\_15%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/budget/2017_15/upload_binary/bp2.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22library/budget/2017_15%22)



approach needs to be taken to ensure First Nations people are not inadvertently taken off the roll.

We also found that when it comes to enrolling people in the first place, the Federal Direct Enrolment Program relies on regular mail services and we accept that this has been successful for urban enrolments, but this simply does not work for remote communities. Following the closure of the Northern Territory AEC office, which we acknowledge was not initiated by the AEC, it is concerning that there doesn't appear to be tailor-made programs to increase the rate of enrolment of First Nations people, particularly those in remote communities.

In the 2019 Federal Election, GetUp worked at booths/mobile voting centres in 11 remote communities. On multiple occasions we saw First Nations voters being turned away, In Ngukurr particularly many people waited hours for translation services and we're turned away - we had multiple instances of people coming up to us and expressing that they have voted before. Translation services even within promotion materials are not widely used or accessible across the 2019 election or 2020 NT Election.

In every community and every conversation, we heard the same issues raised. People want a ban on fracking, investment in housing for all Aboriginal families, money for roads and infrastructure and an end to over-policing in favour of community solutions that actually work. For years these communities have been vocal about these issues and the impacts to their communities. Yet 16,000 Aboriginal people are not enrolled to vote in the NT election. This simply can not continue through to the upcoming federal election.

### ***Recommendations***

GetUp makes the following recommendations for the 2021-22 Budget, that:

1. Funding for the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program be fully restored
2. Funding be provided for translation services into local languages such as Kriol or Aranda
3. Full access to provisional voting is retained
4. No reforms of voter identification laws are made which would result in First Nations People being turned away from voting on election day just because they don't have the right identification documents.

Please do not hesitate to contact our Political Director, Emma Bull ([emmab@getup.org.au](mailto:emmab@getup.org.au)) should you require any further information. We will be engaging and mobilising GetUp members throughout the Budget process, to Budget Night in May and beyond.

Larissa Baldwin  
First Nations Justice Campaign Director



## APPENDIX

### AEC Enrolments at 30 April 2020

Year	Lingiari	% deviation from average divisional enrolment	Soloman	% deviation from average divisional enrolment
2020	71,204	1.90	68,546	-1.90
2019	70,171	0.64	69,269	-0.64
2018	70,163	1.02	68,738	-1.02
2017	68422	0.01	68401	-0.01
2016	61919	-5.38	68970	5.38
2015	62615	-3.19	66747	3.19

(data received under Freedom of Information request to the Australian Electoral Commission, September 2020)

### ABOUT GETUP

By combining the power of one million members, movement partners and a central team of expert strategists, GetUp works to have extraordinary impact on the issues that matter.

GetUp members come from every walk of life, coming together around a shared belief in fairness, compassion and courage. It is GetUp members who set our movement's agenda on the issues they care about, in the areas of Environmental Justice, Human Rights, First Nations Justice, Economic Fairness and Democratic Integrity. Our work is driven by our shared values, not party politics.

GetUp is an independent, not for profit community campaigning organisation, incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. GetUp receives no political party or government funding, and every campaign we run is entirely supported by voluntary donations. GetUp's purpose is set out in our constitution – to advance progressive public policy in Australia. We do this by empowering everyday people to have their say.

GetUp is also guided by a Statement of Independence, which defines us as an active values-led participant in our politics, independent from the control, direction or influence of political parties and politicians.