2017 PARSA Annual General Elections

Returning Officer’s Report

Introduction:

It was a privilege to serve as Returning Officer for the 2017 PARSA Annual General Elections, albeit I was not fully aware of some of the demands and difficulties involved. University student associations are vital to the life of the university; they contribute to the broader purpose of a university; they give opportunity for leadership development and have been the ‘nurseries’ of much of our national political life; they enrich the university experience; and they have a crucial role in advocacy and support for the academic and personal wellbeing of students. The PARSA elections, while inevitably subject to the challenges of politics at ‘play’, should be seen as part of the wider context and purpose of the Association and in the interests of all graduate students.

Observations:

1. The General Manager, Mike Heffron, and staff of the PARSA Office could not have been more helpful in their support of the role of the Returning Officer and the Probity Officer; advice, communication and availability were offered willingly, promptly and constructively, and with professional impartiality. Legal Officer, Michael Curtotti, was also excellent in his advice and support.

2. The work of the Returning Officer was also very much assisted by the appointment, for the first time for PARSA, of a Probity Officer. Mr Shankar Ravikumar undertook closer investigation of complaints and issues and was able to monitor and provide information that assisted the Returning
Officer in making decisions. Probitly Officers could exercise more of the delegated powers to make findings and impose penalties (14 e.), but there would need to be consistency exercised if there was more than one Probitly Officer appointed.

3. The Probitly Officer has provided further reflections on the elections and, for example, develops observations I make in this Report concerning ‘tickets’ and independent candidates.

4. The ‘Ticket’ System allows for like-minded candidates to present a sense of strength, unity of purpose and team work, and also a more contained focus in dealing with issues and complaints – rather than fielding a whole range of individual concerns if all candidates were independent. However, the system requires good team work and discipline and, in some ways, can disadvantage independent candidates in their ability to compete and to have a real voice in the campaign.

5. Interpretation of the regulations is a challenge, particularly e.g. in defining “a place of work” (13 f.xi.A), and “a place normally used as a place of study by students” (13 f.xi.B). The decision to confine campaigning to outside/outdoors (except e.g. “in common areas of residential colleges”) also had its complications. Should any outdoor/indoor common areas associated with cafés, food outlets, etc. be exempt? Campaigning (such as handing out leaflets) that impedes, obstructs, disrupts, interferes etc. with people’s work should not be allowed; but OK in an area where people are just passing by or gathering socially etc.?

6. Putting up posters (outside or inside), which could be viewed as ‘passive’ campaigning, arguably does not cause any disruption provided that the material complies with Election Regulations 13 (b). It is challenging to ‘police’ the placing of posters rather than just their content (which, of
course, can also be challenging) and, aside from class/tutorial/seminar rooms and lecture theatres, perhaps posters can be placed in common areas subject to the agreement of the relevant management authorities such as in the residential communities.

7. The use of a range of social media is a growing challenge and, particularly in this election, in relation to ‘WeChat’. This raises issues of cultural differences, expectations, practices etc. that need further consideration. Perhaps e.g. consideration of the suggestion of setting up an ANU (and/or PARSA election) WeChat channel?

8. Difficulties occurred with candidates taking part in (and, in some case, organising) events that clearly blurred the lines in terms of electioneering – whether they were functions/activities associated with PARSA or with promoting the activities of clubs, societies, or other organisations. As far as possible, events should not be planned/held during the campaign period and candidates should certainly not be involved in organising or hosting such events.

9. I think it is reasonable and realistic that the campaign period be from the close of nominations to the close of polling.

10. While the nomination form requires agreement to abide by the Election Regulations, and to be familiar with them, ways could be considered of promoting a better understanding of them to potential/candidates – albeit that much is subject to interpretation. While there is opportunity for the Returning Officer to meet with candidates following the close of nominations, an information session or some other means could be considered prior to the nominations period (if not already done?). Matters such as the closing date/time of nominations and the closing date/time of withdrawal of candidacy need to be emphasised.
11. There were requests made for apologies to be given by a number of those who were found “to have committed an electoral offence” (13 j.). In the light of reprimands/penalties being imposed, as well as in the context of political competition and debate, the demand for the Returning Officer to require such apologies from the penalised candidate/s is, I believe, inappropriate.

12. No doubt a number of ‘technical’ issues in relation e.g. to the provision of lists of postgraduate students, and to the impact on the MSL system of paper ballots, will be worked-through prior to the next election.

**Recommendations:**

1. An information session particularly focused on Election Regulations be held prior to the opening of nominations or at the start of the nominations period.

2. As a result of discussion with IT/Registrar, consideration be given to setting a deadline for voters to be enrolled so as to cut down on last-minute changes to data, cross-checks, having to manually adjust the voter rolls, and issuing paper ballots; this would need to be considered in the light of any necessary constitutional change, and whether it could disadvantage any particular cohort of students in terms of late enrolment.

3. A clause could follow 9 i. that notes: “If a nominee wishes to withdraw her/his nomination after the closing date set for withdrawals, their name will remain on the ballot and their decision to withdraw and not to take up the position if elected will be noted on the PARSA Election news site.”

4. 11 e. Amend as follows: “The option of submitting or amending a Candidate Profile closes at the same time as nominations close unless the Returning Officer approves a late submission or amendment.”
5. 13 f.ix. Amend as follows: “to use the PARSA office or PARSA materials (such as computer, printer, paper etc.) for a campaign.”

6. 13 f.xi. this section requires further consideration about what constitutes a “place of work” and “a place normally used as a place of study by students”, as well as about the placement of posters – whether they can be seen as separate from the ‘physical’ aspects of campaigning and therefore not excluded from a range of indoor places/spaces.

7. 13 f.xi.C Amend as follows: “any student accommodation (except in common areas of residences, subject to the permission of the residence’s administration)”.

8. Conduct a review of cross-cultural issues related to student elections and campaigning, including the use of social media.

9. While the period of time involved is limited, and the role is very much part of voluntary service to the ANU community, given the demands on time over and above regular work commitments, consideration might be given to appointing a retired ANU alumnus/staff member as Returning Officer, albeit with issues of access to University lists and forms of communication.

Dr Ian Walker
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