

## **Transcript AEC – 1994 – Michael Maley:**

Good morning! My name is Michael Maley, and I've been asked to give a presentation in my capacity as the retired but founding Director of the Australian Electoral Commission's Research and International Services Section. And what I want to do today is outline really first, the history of that organisation, and then how it got involved in international work.

Australia has had a federal electoral administration since shortly after the country was formed as a nation in 1902; and for the first 71 years of its existence it was simply a branch of a federal government department. In 1973, it was recreated as a standalone statutory body called the Australian Electoral Office, but it was still not independent of government. It was only in 1984 that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) was created from that body as an independent organisation of the type that we have now seen proliferating in many places around the world.

Prior to 1984 there wasn't a great deal of Australian involvement in international elections, but two particular cases arose in 1980, where the Chief Australian Electoral Officer of the time, and a senior staffer of the Electoral Office, served as members of an Australian Observer Group to the Rhodesian Independence elections; and there was also a single senior officer contributed to the Commonwealth Observer Group which went to the Ugandan elections in 1980. But the real action started in 1989, reflecting a lot of the developments which were taking place at the end of the Cold War

A request came through from the United Nations to the Foreign Ministry in Australia for the contribution of an electoral expert to serve with the Electoral Component of the UN Transition Assistance Group in Namibia, and I was lucky enough to be the person selected to do that mission, and spent five months in Windhoek assisting with the development of the procedures which would be used for supervising the election. At election time, there was quite a substantial Australian component sent to join the international election supervisors, and they were deployed in various parts of the country, and a lot of them were drawn from the Australian Electoral Commission too. Namibia was significant because it was the largest multidimensional peacekeeping operation which the UN had mounted since that in the Belgian Congo in the early 1960s, and it was very widely regarded as one of the great UN success stories; and that created an enthusiasm I think around the world for the possibility of elections being incorporated into peacekeeping operations as a mechanism for a transition to democratic government.

Also striking was the end of the Cold War, in that literally the Berlin Wall fell in the middle of the Namibian elections in November 1989, which was symbolically quite significant; but there was quite a bit more going on in negotiations around the world to try to end various different conflicts, and one of those was in Cambodia, where there had been a long-standing war following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese in 1979. Negotiations under the auspices of the Paris agreement process had been taking place, and Australia's Foreign Minister at the time, Senator Gareth Evans, was an active participant in that process, working closely with the Indonesian Foreign Minister at the time, Ali Alatas. And as part of those negotiations, there was a meeting scheduled in Jakarta for early 1990, at which the modalities of a peacekeeping

operation were to be further elaborated; and so Australia at that point sent a mission to Cambodia, of which again I was a member, to come up with a whole series of proposals for what the UN mission might look like, and that included proposals for the election of a Constituent Assembly. I really got involved in that because I've been in Namibia. At the same time the UN was getting more involved in a whole range of different operations, one of which was a proposed referendum in Western Sahara - which in fact has never happened - but I found myself in New York in 1990 doing some work on that, and later in the year as a member of the UN survey mission to the territory to try to elaborate ideas for a referendum in a bit more detail.

So already at that point Australian involvement in these operations was getting a little bit more engaged with what was happening in the broader world. The Electoral Commission at that point was confronted with an inquiry being conducted by a Committee of the Australian Senate into Australia's support for peacekeeping, and the Electoral Commission took the opportunity to make a submission to that Committee, "putting goods in the shop window" essentially, to advise the Committee of what we'd been doing. And the Committee very kindly observed that the work that the Commission had been doing was "second to none", and should be made available, where appropriate, overseas; and that that should be reflected in both the Commission's legal mandate and its organisational arrangements. And so in 1994 the Electoral Act was actually amended to make it one of the Commission's statutory functions:

*"to provide, in cases approved by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, assistance in matters relating to elections and referendums (including the secondment of personnel and the supply or loan of materiel) to authorities of foreign countries or to foreign organisations".*

Now the mention of the Foreign Minister was important there, in that the Electoral Commission didn't see its role as that of creating an independent foreign policy for Australia. It was always essential that any work to be done be done in very close cooperation with the foreign affairs authorities. So that put the work of the Commission on a somewhat more formal basis.

Cambodia then came to fruition with the UNTAC mission which ran from late 1991 through to 1993, and again I found myself in Cambodia working with UNTAC as Deputy Chief Electoral Officer for 16 months, and the AEC's contribution to that was essentially to make me available. But they also made several other highly skilled staff available, and at the time of the 1993 election, again, they contributed a significant number of staff to the large group of people who came in for the intensive work around polling and counting. So that was a significant undertaking for the AEC as an organisation.

Then along came the South African election in 1994, which has been described by some people as the election of the century; and again I was lucky enough to be there with the UN Observer Mission along with, again, a number of my AEC colleagues, and there were also individuals contributed at the time of the election.

So activities were getting busier and busier, but they had at that point largely been directed to support for peacekeeping operations, and this was really the first phase of the activities of the organisation. But after South Africa what started to happen was more specific requests for technical assistance from countries in Australia's region, and a particular focus was on countries in the Pacific; but also things were happening in Southeast Asia. In 1997 the Commission funded a meeting that was held in Fiji of all of the electoral authorities from Pacific Island States and also New Zealand, and this was the first time that they had really all been brought together and given the opportunity to share their points of view about the challenges they were facing; and spontaneously the Pacific players got together and adopted a declaration that they wanted to form a network which could continue the work of that first workshop, and it came to be known as the PIANZEA network, standing for the "Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Election Administrators" network; and 27 years later, it is still flourishing and providing a very useful forum for cooperation in the region.

In Southeast Asia there were two critical developments which took place, the first of which was the fall of President Suharto in Indonesia and the transition of Indonesia towards democracy in 1999; and Indonesia found itself establishing an independent electoral commission known as the KPU and running what were really to be the first genuine and free elections in that country since 1955. And Australia having a very vital bilateral relationship with Indonesia, there was quite a lot to be done by way of support for that operation; and the AEC's role in that was substantially to help with a results compilation system because this is a particular challenge in Indonesia, which has one of the largest electorates in the world and certainly I think the largest one where all voting takes place on a single day. So to have good results compilation was seen as a very important contribution to the legitimacy of the election process. So there was quite a lot of work being done by the AEC in 1999.

And in between that it had come to our attention in the late 1990s - and Indonesia exemplified this - that a lot of people were being brought into the electoral world from outside, where there was a need for a new election management body to be established in a country transitioning to democracy, where the old authorities had either not run free elections or were discredited from being associated with the previous regime. And it then occurred to us that a lot of these people, frankly, had no idea how to run elections. They were politically credible, they were highly respectable, but they had not had that sort of experience; so it seemed to us that there was a niche opportunity to create a sort of course for election administrators which could be used to support people who were put in this sort of position. The first work was done on that in 1998, and it later became what's known as the BRIDGE course which I'll talk about a little bit later.

But in 1999, along came perhaps the most consequential international involvement which the Australian Electoral Commission has ever had, which was support for the vote which was to be taken in the territory of East Timor to determine whether or not it was to become independent from Indonesia. That was significant because the agreement which made that vote possible had dropped into place very suddenly, and there was a requirement to put together all of the arrangements for a legitimate ballot within a period of only about three months. And so the UN came to the AEC, conscious that we were a regional player but also had a long relationship with

the UN, and asked for as much support as could possibly be provided to help that operation succeed, and that took place on a grand scale.

The sorts of involvements that the AEC had with that included deploying experts to help develop the legal and quasi-legal framework for the process, including procedures for voter registration, polling and counting; development of training packages for the UN volunteers who were to be on the ground running the operation; conduct in Australia of the out-of-country voting for people from an East Timorese background who were to have the opportunity to vote in the operation; computerisation of the data being captured for voter registration; and a whole lot of other logistical support, including the procurement and purchase of virtually all of the materials that were used for the polling and counting, with the exception of indelible ink and ballot boxes. The ballot papers for the vote were printed in Sydney in Australia, just to give but one example; and the UN made it very clear in correspondence after that operation that had it not been for the support that had been provided by the AEC, the vote simply could not have taken place. So that was a high point in all those years of activity.

After the vote for independence in East Timor, there was a UN transitional administration put in place for several years, one of the mandates of which was the conduct of electoral capacity building to enable East Timor to develop its own electoral authority; and at that point the UN came to the AEC again and asked for help with that. And we were able to point to the course that we had started to develop as an ideal platform for that sort of assistance, and it was then further developed in East Timor in a major program rolled out in 2001, supported by the Australian aid program, which led to the successful conduct of a Constituent Assembly election in 2001, and then a presidential election in 2002, which shortly preceded the country's restoration of independence.

At that point a lot of the development had taken place and people were starting to get really interested in this course, and a partnership was then formed to sustain it between the AEC, the UN Electoral Assistance Division in New York, the UN Development Programme, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). That partnership was marked by the formal launch of the BRIDGE Project in 2002 in Stockholm, and it has continued ever since, with BRIDGE being a program that is now being used in well over 60 countries with thousands of participants around the world, and a program that is now seen as the gold standard for electoral capacity building where these sorts of courses are required.

So what the Australian Electoral Commission has experienced is a transition from ad hoc requests being answered to a consolidation within its organisational framework of international electoral cooperation and assistance as one of its core functions; and this has been supported in Australia by a whole series of governments of different political persuasions, all of whom I think see the benefit in this work being done.

So that is just a brief outline of how Australia got involved in electoral assistance, and I trust that you will find this of use when you further reflect on how International electoral assistance can be developed and consolidated. Thank you very much for your time.

