**Episode 3 – What is the AEC?**

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Kerry: This year, Australia will hold a national referendum. This referendum will ask voters if the Constitution should be altered to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

With Australia’s last referendum being held over 20 years ago, many might not know why they’re held, or how to vote.

Hi, I’m Kerry, and in this podcast, I’ll be joined by the team from the Australian Electoral Commission to unpack the process ahead of the referendum so that you can vote with confidence.

This is an unbiased and detailed look at why the referendum is important, how you can make your vote count, and why your answer matters.

Last episode, we looked at the history of referendums and how we got here.

In this episode, Meg and Alex are with us once again to talk about the role that the AEC plays in the referendum, what it *doesn’t* do, and why that distinction is important.

Hi Meg, hi Alex, good to see you again…

Meg: Hi Kerry, we’re back!

Kerry: Alright, let’s start with an easy one. What is the AEC?

Meg: We’re Australia’s independent election experts, and we don’t just do events. We promote enrolment, we do public education activities, and when there’s not an event running, we redraw the boundary lines for electorates to make sure everything’s fair and balanced.

The most important thing though, is that we’re neutral. Every single staff member in the AEC signs a declaration of neutrality so that you can trust any staff member across Australia to deliver a fair and transparent result.

Kerry: Why is it important to have an independent body to oversee this process?

Alex: Yeah, look, it really is all about trust. So, it can be a bit reductive to compare an election or a referendum to a sporting game, but if you do think about, like, football or cricket, you’ve got the players there who are trying to win, they’re campaigning, they’re pushing hard - but you’ve also got umpires who are making sure that everything’s happening according to the rules, and that if there’s a free kick that needs to be awarded or something like that that happens, and that’s kind of our position in all of this.

So, the independence really means that you can trust that the AEC is managing things and making sure that everything is being run the way that it should be run. So, in accordance with electoral and referendum law, and making sure that the basic rules are followed. So, things like authorisation and even financial disclosure. All of those rules are being followed.

Kerry: So, it’s like a referendum bestie, making sure that you don’t, you know, slip up or get the wrong idea.

Alex: I don’t know if you’ve actually seen one of our letters before, but they do open: Hey there, bestie. So, yeah, that’s really amazing that you just sort of intuited that. I love it!

Kerry: I bet some people have a few weird misconceptions about the role of the AEC. Maybe you guys could shed some light on what some of those are.

Meg: Yeah, as I said I work in social media so I kind of see this stuff every day. Some of my favourite claims are - one is we use voting machines to vote. Now, if you’ve voted in Australia, in a federal election, you know that’s absolutely not true.

Another is that we rub out your vote. That’s also not true. You can bring a pen, if that’s something that you’re concerned about, but scrutineers oversee the entire process.

And then it goes to claims such as the Constitution is invalid, which by the way it’s not.

Alex: Oh, that’s good to know…

Kerry: That is good to know! I kind of mentioned before about the AEC being like the referendum bestie. Alex, I think you mentioned it’s like an umpire, but could you just explain to me what exactly does that mean?

Alex: What that really means is that we’re not really interested in which side or the other wins. That’s not to say that we don’t care, we’re just impartial. We want the process to be the real winner out of any referendum. So, we want any debate to happen fairly, we want any campaigning to happen according to the rules around campaigning, and that can be rules like, what things have to be authorised, how those things have to be authorised and how you go about recording how much money that you’ve spent or how much money that you’ve donated about the referendum. Now, if you’re interested in the rules around that, you can find them all on our website – they’re really, really easy to find, and there’s a chance that some people who are campaigning for this referendum might be new to campaigning altogether, because they wouldn’t normally participate in an election campaign. And for those people in particular, it’s really important that they get across what those rules are, so that we don’t have to reach out to them and go hey, you know, this might not be 100 per cent right so we need you to step in and fix it. So, everyone really has a role to play in making sure that everything is happening fairly, and that of course includes us stepping in sometimes and making a call.

Kerry: I feel like I need one of these referendum besties/umpires for a lot of things in my life, not just the referendum.

Alex: Well, you’ve got two of them now.

Kerry: So, we talked about and covered misconceptions before. What is the AEC definitely *not* responsible for?

Meg: That’s a good question. Alex talked about political advertising and making sure things are authorised, which we’re responsible for.

We’re absolutely *not* responsible for regulating truth in political advertising. So, we’re all about countering misinformation about the process, but when it comes to the topic, and any kind of subjective truth within the topic, we have no role to play in that. Specifically, in relation to a referendum, one of the things that we’re required to do is to send out a pamphlet. In that pamphlet there’ll be a ‘Yes’ and a ‘No’ case. So, arguments for the ‘Yes’ case, arguments for the ‘No’ case. We’re just a post box in that process. We just send it out. We get it in, we send it out, but we don’t have any part in editing any of that content.

Kerry: So, I’ve seen billboards around, and I’ve been handed pamphlets regarding the referendum. Lots of people obviously feel very passionate about it. Do all those advertising and marketing materials and pamphlets, do they have to come through you guys?

Alex: That’s a really common question. So, when you see a billboard or a pamphlet or something like that, it’ll have a message on it that says it’s authorised by a certain individual. And of course, the classic example on the TV ads is the fast words at the end of it – authorised by… Authorised means that that person has approved it. It does not mean that the AEC has looked at it and reviewed it in any way.

So, we’re not vouching for its accuracy, we’re not vouching for, you know, ‘the AEC has given this the tick of approval’. All that an authorisation message tells you is that something a) is being authorised in accordance with electoral or referendum law and b) who the authorising entity is, so that you can actually follow that message and go – okay, well if it’s authorised by the Electoral Commissioner Canberra, you can search the Electoral Commissioner Canberra and find more information about the AEC. Kerry: On that, talking about everything everywhere and obviously there’s a lot of communications going around on a very important topic. The AEC themselves are constantly putting out videos and social media posts talking about rules and integrity, which is great. Why are these things so important to the AEC?

Meg: Our entire electoral system is built on trust and communicating that trust to the public is one of the most important things that we do. Social media is where a lot of our voters are and so that reach is there, and also, it’s just fun!

Kerry: Meg and Alex, thanks so much for your time again today.

Meg: Thanks Kerry!

Alex: You’re so welcome.

Kerry: On the next episode…

Alex: Just like any Bill that gets debated and passed in Parliament, the government might introduce a certain wording and then certainly in the case of this referendum, it’s gone to a Parliamentary Committee that’s asked for submissions from the public. Everyone’s had a bit of a say on what the referendum question should look like, and that’s ultimately been passed by both houses of Parliament and that’s decided on the wording.

Kerry: …we look at exactly how a referendum comes to be, and what the most important steps are along the way. That’s next time, on Your Answer Matters.

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