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The Hon Tony Smith MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT, 2600

Dear Sir,

Inquiry into delivery of electoral education

My name is Lisa Shukroon and I teach Yr12 Australian Politics at The University High School. Thank-you for this opportunity to make a submission to your committee on this most important issue.

I will start by apologising to the committee for writing a submission at this 11th hour in your call for submissions – I apologise for its rushed nature and I apologise to my students, and students more broadly in Australia, for not seizing upon this opportunity in a more measured, researched and articulate way – I only found out about the call for submissions on Monday – the the first day of this term. Since then I have been a little busy!

On Tuesday, when I next taught my class of 22 Year 12 Australian Politics students, I asked *THEM* what they knew about democracy and electoral processes before arriving at the course, what they had been taught prior... I will come back to that. More importantly I asked them who thought electoral education was an important issue – all of them did. I asked them if they would like to make individual submissions and a few did. When I later discovered that submissions were due today and told them on Wednesday, few had the time between musical rehearsals, sport commitments and work – despite their desire to.

Why have I told you this? Because the first fallacy that must be dismissed is that young people don't care about politics, they do – passionately, diversely. They would love to be listened to about this – they have the most to gain and the most to share on this issue that is closest to their experience, rather than ours.

I would like to give you some context to the school I teach at. University High School has an unusually strong and consistent history of teaching Australian Politics. We have a class of 22 this year. What is painful to report is that our class makes up 15% of the students studying it in the state! It is now only being taught to 150 student in 10 schools. And declining. That is a travesty.

It caused me to reflect on why our school has bucked the trend. It cannot be denied that our school has a largely (though not remotely exclusively) middleclass, educated cohort – and that helps with political engagement. But more, I think, both my predecessor and myself have seen the importance of inviting the political world into our school and making it available to all students at all year levels. They get to see how democracy can include them, respond to them. We routinely invite speakers from the media, the judiciary and the political world for lunchtime – how satisfying is it for the students – whether yr7, 9 or 12 – to have their sincere questions answered honestly and directly by Julian Burnside, Michael Bachalard, Adam Bandt... to name but just a few. Their questions can be difficult, naïve, articulate and, at time, fierce – but listened to is what is important. It is what keeps them engaged. I am not sure Senator Jacqui Lambie expected the more than 100 students spilling out of doorways to grill her about “banning the burqa” and “gay marriage” but I am forever grateful to her for her commitment to open and participatory democracy.

As a school we also actively support the SRC (with elected student reps) and a variety of politically engaged student initiated groups – SMAD (a fundraising group), SPECTRUM (gay, lesbian, transgender), LEAP (an environmental group).

But back to my students and what they knew about electoral matters before they took on this subject. Some knew some “stuff” but when we drilled down, how much had been taught? A few recalled a voting exercise in primary schools where they voted on their favourite ice-cream flavours ... in an official booth – most couldn’t even recall that. Some remembered going to the Electoral Commission offices as part of a yr9 excursion.

But what we are talking about here is a few one day hit and miss activities that are not particularly likely to translate to an understanding of our electoral system by the time they are participants in it. At our school they may also get a week on federation and Eureka but also hardly a dent into an understanding of democracy. My students tell me that most of their friends don’t understand how to vote or what the two houses of parliament do – this stacks up with what I experienced when I held a “How to Vote” session prior to the last election 40 of age students turned up to be shown ballot papers and to have preferencing explained. Most of them would have otherwise entered the booths unequipped.

So let me go through the committee’s terms of reference and focus and let me give it to you as I have experienced it:

- • electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers – while the AEC and State Parliament house have great resources a lack of an embedded consistent curriculum in yr7-9 means that it is entirely hit and miss as to whether this is accessed by schools.
- • the teaching methodology and results of the national Civics and Citizenship Curriculum; the national curriculum is a nebulous concept barely rolled out in schools – it needs greater rigour and detail and I

agree with most of Professor Anne Twomey's submission regarding when it should be pitched barr one important thing – it needs to be delivered by yr9 as many schools start introducing elective curriculum in yr10 and there is no guarantee students will choose it.

- • evolving technology and new platforms for delivering electoral education. There is so much potential here but without \$ being put into building resources and MEANGFULLY funding time to pd teachers it will sit there unused. Teachers are not effectively taught the evolving technologies and thus embed the in an adhoc way but it would be great to have regular online youth conventions etc

The focus of the electoral education inquiry will include:

- • what is being taught to students when they visit Parliament House and Canberra? **Great stuff I understand**
- • what are the barriers preventing some schools from travelling to Canberra and what can be done about it.
I have tried – it is \$. The current subsidy available (approx. \$30 per student from Melbourne) would be around 5% of either a week-long camp or “day trip” – it needs to be grown.
- • what resources and training are the teachers provided with to deliver effective electoral education?
THIS NEEDS ACCREDITED government provided and subsidised (ie we will pay for relief teachers) for this to be a priority of schools
- • what are the electoral commissions delivering in terms of electoral education? **My experience is its there if you look – it needs to seek out teachers and schools to get utilised more**

With 5 minutes left of deadline (why do I suddenly feel like a student!!) I put to the committee this invitation. Our school would be happy to host an electoral forum where you could witness and directly ask a cross section of students, from a variety of schools and universities to have a discussion and to draft recommendations to the committee about their diverse experiences of recent electoral education. Then, eventually, maybe more than 42% of people under 29 would think that 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government'. *Lowy Institute 2014 Poll*

Lisa Shukroon

PS wish I had time to proofread this – please forgive!