

Statement in the House

Tuesday 23 June 2015

I would like to update the House on the current work of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

As Members would be aware, the Committee has tabled reports into Senate voting practices, electronic voting options, and on Budget Day, the final report into the 2013 Federal Election.

I inform the House that the Committee has recently adopted terms of reference for two new inquiries, one on the delivery of electoral education, and the other on campaigning activities and conduct at polling places. I am pleased to formally launch both today.

The launch of the electoral education inquiry ties in with the anniversaries of two historic and significant events that have shaped the Western World – the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta and 750 years since the first Westminster Parliament.

The democratic principles of Magna Carta and the democratic architecture of Westminster developed, advanced and evolved over centuries, and took root here in colonies.

Such was the democratic transformation that the manner of the birth of the Australian nation in 1901 was unique, for it was created not by a war or revolution, but by a vote of the people.

As a young democracy, we were therefore ideally placed to then lead the world in so many democratic advances.

We took the best of both the British and American systems.

We adopted the accountability of the British Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, but with the class-free features of the Americans.

We established a House of Representatives instead of a House of Commons, and an elected Senate rather than an appointed House of Lords.

We led both these democracies by decades in giving women the right to vote, when the first federal parliament passed its first electoral law in 1902.

Our right to vote, how our federal parliament was created, its purpose and its operation have been the vital foundations for our success as a nation.

The freedoms that flow from our democracy have been pivotal in providing generations of individuals with the opportunities that have built both their and, in turn, our nation's success.

Every voter is a citizen shareholder in our nation, determining the direction of the nation through the ballot box at regular elections. Knowing our history is critical to understanding why politics and Parliament matters, and how every citizen has a stake in the future.

Maintaining the strength and vibrancy of our democracy in the years ahead requires an investment in Australia's young citizens, who are its future custodians.

Teachers play a crucial part in shaping young peoples' understanding of their role as citizens and future electors. Their work helps guide the democratic development of our nation.

The Committee will conduct its investigations focusing on the following terms of reference:

- electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers
- the teaching methodology and results of the national Civics and Citizenship Curriculum; and
- evolving technology and new platforms for delivering electoral education.

The focus of the electoral education inquiry will include:

- what is being taught to students when they visit Parliament House and Canberra?
- what are the barriers preventing some schools from travelling to Canberra and what can be done about it.
- what resources and training are the teachers provided with to deliver effective electoral education?
- what are the electoral commissions delivering in terms of electoral education?
- how can the delivery of electoral education be improved?

Our second inquiry follows a reference from the Special Minister of State, Senator Ronaldson, in relation to campaigning activities at polling places.

The Committee will inquire into and report on current rules and practices in relation to campaign activities in the vicinity of polling places, with particular reference to:

- the distribution of how-to-vote cards;

- campaigning by organisations other than political parties at polling places;
- allegations in relation to the conduct of, and material disseminated by, campaigners at state and federal elections in the vicinity of polling places intended or likely to mislead or intimidate electors; and
- any other related matter.

There have been allegations aired in the media of bullying and intimidation of candidates and voters at polling places, and misleading conduct designed to deceive voters and distort their electoral will. The Committee will consider these issues, as well as the rules and regulations around conduct at polling places.