



## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
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### **RE: Submission to the Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia**

This submission is presented on behalf of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory to provide feedback on civics education, engagement and participation in Australian democratic life from the perspective of a small jurisdiction and the challenges entail.

The specific terms of reference addressed in this submission are:

- *the effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement;*
- *the vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system;*
- *opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation.*

Yours sincerely

**MATHEW BATES**  
**Clerk**  
20 May 2024

## Background

The Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory is a unicameral 25 member Parliament, representing a population of approximately 252,000 living across 1.35 million square kilometres.

The Territory's low population density creates challenges for equitable access to service delivery.

People of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin make up 26.3% of the population. About 40% of the population speak a language other than English at home, with a number of Indigenous languages being the most common, followed by Greek and Nepali.

Approximately half of the population of the NT lives in the greater Darwin area; the remainder are geographically dispersed across the Territory living in regional hubs, towns, communities and homelands. Homelands (or outstations) are small, often remote, Aboriginal living areas outside larger communities and urban regions. They are defined by the residents' cultural or traditional relationship to the land.

There are approximately 600 homelands across the NT, with an estimated population of 6,000 – 8,000 residents. There are an additional 40,000 people linked to homelands who reside in larger communities.

Annual interstate migration is approximately 7 times the national average, meaning the Territory has a very fluid population and workforce.

## Connection to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

**This submission relates primarily to:**

***the effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement.***

- **The work the Legislative Assembly does in supporting civic knowledge, understanding and engagement** is undertaken by the Department of the Legislative Assembly's Parliamentary Education Service (PES).
- PES is staffed by 2 FTE officers and is responsible for all engagement and visitor experiences.
- In the 2023 calendar year, PES engaged with students or members of the public from all the Territory's 25 electorates. This widespread contact with learners provides an insight into the effectiveness of formalised civics education in schools and the wider community.
- The mandating of civics and citizenship curriculum for students from Year 3 to Year 10 has been a positive initiative.

- Students in the primary years generally do appear to have some understanding of the curriculum covered in their specific year and demonstrate this to varying levels when interacting with PES. With time, this level of understanding in Middle and Senior school is becoming evident but not always at the same level of engagement.
- The mandated civics curriculum has provided educators opportunity to bring civics into the community in an engaging and student focused manner. Many teachers and students across the Territory benefit from this by embedding engagement with PES in their curriculum. Last year, we hosted approximately 3,400 school kids at the parliament.
- While civics and citizenship is not formally assessed as part of NAPLAN testing, the introduction of opt-in testing from 2025 will at least give some data into the future regarding how well students are performing in this area of their learning.
- PES notes that in some instances teachers remark that the teaching of HASS and in particular the civics and citizenship component is not part of their area of expertise or interest, and that their interaction with PES has not only provided the students with learning enrichment, but the teachers as well. Sessions with teachers always provide the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge, capability, and confidence in the teaching of civics and citizenship. Where the teacher is engaged and interested, generally the students are more likely also be interested.
- Further detail of engagement is included in Appendix A.

***the vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system.***

- Of the territory's population, 50,000 are within the age range for school attendance.
- Around 220,000 of the population fall within voting age range. The largest cohort being 30 – 34-year-olds who would not have completed their secondary education in the era of mandated civics education. How governments and the community leverage this demographic is challenging.
- We accept that the ways in which people access information is varied according to a range of factors such as language, location, age, access to technology, and preferences. How a person retrieves information should not be the issue, but rather that the quality of information sourced is factual and easily accessible. It should be evident that it is current.
- Public tours provide an informal opportunity for visitors to the Parliament to gain information about our democracy, elections and voting. They provide opportunities for discussion and information sharing as visitors share their experiences from their local area.

- Almost all visitors to the Parliament as part of a public tour are not from the Northern Territory. Provision is in place to provide a self-guided tour book and a number of static displays for visitors on site at other times. A virtual tour is also available on the Parliament House website. We are, however, engaging with community members who have already shown a level of interest. How we go beyond that is currently beyond the scope of the resources we have available.
- The capacity of Parliament to informally reach out to the biggest demographic in the NT is a challenge logistically and financially. While being involved in the NT show circuit<sup>1</sup>, for example, could have some benefit, the potential for the blurring of lines between access to information and politics would be high. Political parties and MLAs have a high profile at these events.

***opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation.***

- The resources available to the public are not always available in simple English or translated into Indigenous languages. The way in which we typically deliver learning/information may not align with best practice for cultural/traditional learning.
- In the context of learning about the role and functions of parliament, resources tend to be in the language of parliament – quite a bit more formal than the language of most confident English speakers let alone Indigenous Australians and multicultural communities.
- This is evident not just in printed materials but also digitally.

### **What works?**

- Taking the time to get it right.
- Face to face in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way
- We cannot rely on a one size fits all model to supporting Territorians in accessing relevant appropriate and culturally suitable information.
- A mix of approaches is best by utilising traditional digital platforms including websites, social media and printed resources.
- Partnering and empowering groups such as First Circles to lead the way for communities to the information they need.
- Supporting the culturally and linguistically diverse communities also requires time, effort, expertise and sufficient ongoing funding. Reliance on digital platforms does not work when access to the internet is intermittent and/or unaffordable, so building face-to-face relationships is key.

## **Appendix A**

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<sup>1</sup> Each larger town in the NT will host an annual show during the dry season months.

## PES reach across the Northern Territory

- The **Michael Long Learning and Leadership Centre** (MLLLC) in Darwin is designed to harness the power of AFL football in the NT to give young Indigenous Territorians the same opportunities as all Australians. The Centre has a focus well beyond football, delivering education programs for Indigenous students from remote areas. These students have been selected from within their communities and are already showing potential as leaders. School attendance, engagement and behaviour, completion of secondary education, work readiness and awareness of opportunities are some of the many outcomes the Centre is focused on improving.

Student groups from the MLLLC visit Parliament House almost every week of the school term across the year. PES has 18 groups already booked in for 2024. Previously, these visits were scheduled for after school on a Monday. This has been changed to Tuesday morning which increases the opportunity for students to watch parliament in action and to meet their local Member of the Legislative Assembly. These groups of school-aged students are generally very engaged during their visit to Parliament House. Feedback from a student living in a remote community in the Barkly Electorate shows the impact this can have.

**MLLLC CAMP**

What a week! How'd you go?  
You have done an incredible job on this camp! We'd love for you to tell us about it.  
Circle the amount of footballs that reflect your week.

Not so much      A lot

I enjoyed my time      5 footballs

I learnt new things      5 footballs

I am proud of myself      5 footballs

Complete the sentence - The activity I enjoyed the most was...  
parliament house and seeing Steve Edgington

One thing I learnt this week was...  
being a leader

When I go back home, I am going to...  
tell everybody how good and fun it was

Michael Long  
Member of the Northern Territory Government

Groups are accompanied by an MLLLC staff member, with whom PES has a particularly good working relationship, and a teacher from the students' home community. PES uses this opportunity to educate the community schoolteachers about the work of parliament and leverage this relationship by scheduling a visit to the school – weather, budget and long-distance travel permitting. School outreach visits to remote communities is a focus for 2024.

<https://www.michaellongfoundation.org.au/>

- The **First Circles Leadership Program** is an annual NT Government program with the aim of identifying, mentoring and supporting Aboriginal emerging

leaders from remote communities across the Northern Territory. Members take part in learning and development activities to expand their leadership skills, increase their personal governance capabilities, learn more about the impact of public policies and programs in their communities, and help influence and contribute to change. PES, in working with this group provide background on the legislative process including their role in engaging with MLAs. Participants in the program make presentations to Cabinet, familiarisation with being in the Parliament earlier in the program assists in making them feel they have a role to play in what happens in the building.

Since the program started in 2014, over 100 Aboriginal leaders have participated. Selena Uibo, a Minister in the current NT Government, is a graduate of the First Circles program.

<https://aboriginalaffairs.nt.gov.au/first-circles>

- Programs delivered by the **Clontarf Academy and Stars Foundation** use sport as the vehicle for young Indigenous men and women to improve education, discipline, life skills, self-esteem, and employment prospects. The programs are embedded in schools in the NT and groups of students from the Greater Darwin region visit Parliament House during all sitting periods of the Legislative Assembly.

These visits provide the opportunity for the students to meet their local MLA, meet Ministers, tour the building, and observe question time. PES notes that the teachers accompanying the students often reinforce the positive opportunities open to students by highlighting the Indigenous MLAs and emphasising the importance of an Indigenous voice being heard in the Assembly.

<https://clontarf.org.au/>

<https://starsfoundation.org.au/>

- From time-to-time PES engages with groups such as the Defence Department's Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course and Indigenous pre-law groups from Charles Darwin University. These visitors may meet Ministers, tour the building, discuss the features of democratic government and the opportunities open to them.
- PES facilitates primary and secondary school age **student visitors to the Parliament**. These programs form the bulk of the civics education that is undertaken. Sessions are facilitated for Year 3 through to Year 12, as well as those schools which offer a Year 13 course.

School visits occur both during Parliamentary sitting periods where students have the opportunity to watch the Assembly as well as visits undertaken during non-sitting periods. In addition to covering basic information on the law-making process, the MLAs and a parliamentary day, students learn some history of

democracy in the NT. Tours are tailored to suit the curriculum and learning needs of the student visitors.

PES works with legal studies classes both at school and at the Parliament to run a mock parliament program called **Step Up Be Heard**. With PES assistance, students prepare a bill, write their debate speeches, and then visit the Parliament or local council chambers to run a mock parliament. Most often, their MLA will chair the session. Some Darwin schools use this program as an assessment task for their classes.

PES runs outreach regularly at schools in the greater Darwin area. The bulk of schools which take up this opportunity will have visited the Parliament and a follow up visit from PES provides student enrichment through a mock parliament role play. This activity is an excellent cross curricula opportunity for civics and citizenship and English. A mock parliament activity allows students to utilise a number of general capabilities and skills required in the civics and citizenship curriculum.

**Regional and remote outreach visits** occur as often as staffing and budget allow. Two remote/regional visits are planned for each year, focusing on different locations. Our connection with the MLLLC is a good connection that provides consolidation of learning at school. In travel planned for Term 2 2024, almost all schools to be visited will have visited the Parliament in 2023 as part of their MLLLC experience. These visits reinforce the leadership skills they develop and make evident the connection between education and opportunity that being part of the MLLLC program provides. Students see role models from their communities who are now perhaps MLAs or working with MLAs and who advocate for remote Territorians.

PES also participates in **Democracy Dash**, an initiative of NTEC (Northern Territory Electoral Commission). Middle and senior high school students undertake an 'amazing race' style dash around the Darwin or Alice Springs CBD checking in and doing activities at agencies which play a role in the lives of young people. This activity runs up to four times a year in Darwin and twice in Alice Springs. Up to 100 participants are involved at each event.

- **Youth Parliament** runs annually. An initiative of the YNT (formerly YMCA NT), PES and the DLA provide support in running three days of parliamentary debate on bills decided on and written by the young people in the program. This program provides young people, who come from all over the NT, the opportunity to engage with their peers in a powerful way, through debating matters of interest to them and meeting with MLAs who are involved in the program. Bills debated during the program are presented to the government.

Youth Parliament has been effective in encouraging young peoples' civic engagement. Two current MLAs are alumni of this program. A participant from the 2023 program has been recognised as both 2023 Centralian Young Citizen of the Year and 2024 NT Young Achiever of the Year.

- PES supports the **Professional Teachers Association of the NT** by being a stall holder at their bi-annual conference. PES targets teachers new to the NT, graduate teachers and those studying towards their teaching degree, providing them with advice on excursion planning, and in-school enrichment as they prepare their civics and citizenship units of work.

Whilst having a presence at a conference promotes opportunities for current and future civics educators to discover how we can enrich the curriculum with them, many seem focussed on other subject areas. There is a common concern voiced about the burden of administration attached to school excursions that some teachers seem unprepared to take on.

- **Know Your Assembly** is a face-to-face program providing participants with an overview of the Legislative Assembly, how laws are made in the NT, what a parliamentary day looks like and the role of committees. The program is open to all (NT public servants and the general public), and uptake is highest among public sector workers.

Some government departments make Know Your Assembly mandatory for new starters and staff in graduate programs.

The program is run up to 4 times in Darwin each year and also in the regions (Alice Springs and Katherine).

Using similar content to Know Your Assembly, PES runs face to face sessions with public servants who are enrolled in courses through the **Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment** – Public Sector Management. This occurs quarterly.

Less frequently, PES provides a similar session for participants of **Public Sector Management** courses.

- Parliament House **visitor tours** run weekly from April to October. Visitor numbers have not bounced back to pre-covid times. More than 90% of participants in these tours are interstate visitors, as opposed to higher numbers of international visitors pre-covid.

PES provides access to a self-guided tour booklet for those not on the visitor tour.

- PES collaborates regularly with our **refugee communities** – often school age groups who are doing specific programs during school holiday periods. In 2023, a young person from one of these groups was so engaged during their time at Parliament that they built on this experience and became a Youth Parliamentarian.



Similar activities are undertaken with the NT's **international student community**. International House students at Charles Darwin University have regular visits to the Parliament. Many of these groups incorporate an NTEC learning activity during their visit.

Similarly, PES engages with not-for-profit agencies which run programs for **speakers of languages other than English** to broaden their English skills. These groups are widening their language skills at the same time as learning about democracy in the NT. These are the groups that often are surprised that they are allowed to visit the Parliament, are permitted to watch sittings, and look forward to their opportunity to vote once they have attained their citizenship.