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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

As the Committee may be aware, I provided an expert report in 2014 to the Commonwealth Government on the review of the Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum (see *Review of the Australian Curriculum – Supplementary Material*, August 2014, p 320). This submission draws on the substance of that report.

The primary aim of the civics and citizenship curriculum is to enable 'students to become active and informed citizens who participate in and sustain Australia's democracy'. One of the most significant ways in which Australians participate in democracy is through voting in elections at the local, State and Commonwealth levels. While in most other countries, the focus of the citizenship curriculum is to increase voter participation, Australia's system of compulsory voting means that the aim is somewhat different – to ensure that when people vote they are capable of making an informed choice and that they understand the voting system sufficiently well to ensure that the outcome of their vote gives effect to their voting intention.

The system of preferential voting generally aids the expression of voting intention. However, the system of compulsory full-preferential voting, when combined with above-the-line voting for upper Houses, frequently results in voters unwittingly contributing to the election of candidates that they oppose. This is because the above-the-line voting system results in voters relying on preference flows dictated by parties which may not reflect the preferences of the voter. Indeed, no one who votes above-the-line can possibly be informed of the likely consequences of their vote in contributing to the election of candidates. Even experts find this impossible to predict. We therefore have an opaque voting system that denies even well-informed and conscientious voters full knowledge of the effect of their vote, if they vote above-the-line.

One way of improving the relationship between voting intentions and voting outcomes would be to introduce at the Commonwealth level a system of optional preferential above-the-line voting, as applies to the election of the New South Wales Legislative Council, which returns to voters control over the distribution of their preferences and the ability to exhaust their vote rather than have it used to elect candidates which are unacceptable to them.

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Greater efforts also need to be made in educating students and the general public about how the electoral system works and in helping them make an informed choice in exercising their vote. The proposed civics and citizenship curriculum (at least in the form in which it existed in 2014) covers voting and the electoral system in Year 5. It then deals with referenda and constitutional reform in Year 7 and addresses in Year 9 the influences on voters and how they make their choices. My criticism of the curriculum in this regard was directed more at timing than content. The main consideration of the voting system, including complicated issues such as 'discussing the democratic ideas behind preferential voting and proportional representation', occurs in Year 5 in primary school, which is far too early. The discussion, at that age, is likely to be superficial and will be forgotten once students enter secondary school, well before the time that students contemplate having to vote. It is unlikely that any 18 year old will remember what he or she was taught about the voting system in Year 5.

It would therefore be preferable to have a preliminary and principle-based discussion of voting in Year 5, with a more detailed and sophisticated analysis of voting and its political ramifications (eg in relation to hung Parliaments, minority government, upper Houses and the balance of power) in Year 10, when it will be more meaningful for students who will be beginning to anticipate their voting responsibilities (or be able to exercise them if the voting age is ever reduced to 16). The study of influences upon voters, which currently is undertaken in Year 9, could also be shifted to Year 10, so that both the mechanics and the choices involved in voting could be addressed at the same time.

It is also important that students obtain a basic understanding of the system of government and the roles and responsibilities of the different institutions and levels of government, in order to inform their subsequent voting choices. As noted in my review of the civics and citizenship curriculum, one major hole in it is the absence of any discussion or analysis of the role and function of the executive government. While not directly related to voting, it is important that this be fixed so that students can later vote with a clear understanding of how governments are formed and function.

If the Committee wishes me to provide any further information, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Twomey
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