

My submission about civics education, engagement and participation in Australia.

Let me start by saying that formalised 'civics' education in Australia is abysmal. Children learn the bare basics about the houses of federal parliament in year 6 at school and usually do a trip to Canberra where most students learn that the lower house is green and is called the House of Representatives, the higher house is red and is called the Senate, then there's a Mace and a few other useless things in parliament and then students visit Questacon and a few other places, then they go home. Unless a high school student deliberately picks law/legal subjects (if they're even available at the school), or they watch/read the news, the student will invariably learn nothing else other than politicians gasbag about something or other and that they vote on Legislation (which most students will then think 'whatever that is and does it affect me anyway?'). The formal civics education in Australia has been designed to NOT teach people anything – which I think is appalling. When most students finish primary school, they are none the wiser as to how politics works in this country. And when they leave high school they suffer the same fate – unless they've deliberately studied legal subjects, regularly watch/read the news (but that is often skewed, anyway) or they have parents/friends who know about politics and discuss this with them (and invariably that is again skewed!).

When young people first come to vote, they invariably vote how their parents vote. They know too little to vote independently – because civics education in Australia is almost absent. People are not told to view the policies for each party before they vote, or to at least consider voting for the good of the country, rather than just how it relates to their hip pocket. Many parties in fact do not even HAVE their policies on their webpage! In good conscience, I can never vote for a party that does not show its policies. I figure if you don't know a party or an individual's policies, you don't know what you're voting for! But I've become an informed voter in my time – no thanks to the school system. I've at least had the luck (or curse?) to be surrounded by people interested in politics. I've even handed out leaflets for a friend standing at state level once. I still remember being floored by the ferocity of one man's words to me about why would he vote for a small party like that and how could that ever make a difference? See, that voter didn't understand that if LOTS of people vote for a small party, it becomes a big party as many people from that party get elected! Adults and young people alike do NOT understand how the political system works in this country, and until they do, we're not going to get the politics we deserve in this country.

To address this lack of civics education in Australia, I think there needs to be some sort of 'civics' education classes throughout high school, whereby students can learn to do their tax, learn to drive, learn about how the political system works (and I mean PROPERLY works, not basic, effectively useless information). There are so many things you could incorporate into these Civics classes. If you want an educated population, you have to actually educate people, not leave it up to them to figure out. Imagine how much easier it would be if all high school students spent hours upon hours learning how government and political systems worked? By the time they left school, and they could drive, vote and work, they'd know how the taxation system operated, along with Centrelink, Jobseeker, Roads; you name it. It would streamline things and create a lot less confusion in the real world. When you're 15 and you don't have 3 kids and a broken marriage and house payments owing, it's much easier to learn how these systems work. Then when bad things might happen later and you need to utilise some other

systems for help, you CAN. Much more easily. Much less stressfully. And it also means you'll be able to be an informed voter along the way, having your say on things, just like I am right now with this Submission.

Evidently, the electoral commissions do not do a good enough job. People don't know about how voting works, let alone how Councils work! I ask questions, and I traipse through websites, so I figure things out – but I'm still figuring things out in my middle age and I'm smart! So I hate to think how most people will live and die and never have much of a clue about how the political system truly works in this country.

I've been an avid, informed voter almost all my life, but even I once missed a local election in 2017 because I'd had a baby at home very recently, we lived at the outer edge of the electoral boundary (rurally), we never got ONE piece of information telling us the local elections were on, the adjacent electoral area that we drove through/shopped in wasn't having an election (this was around the time of council mergers when some elections were postponed and others weren't) and so I had no idea there was even an election on. So I was fined for not voting! My husband didn't have to pay the fine because they accepted his claim that he was 'caring' for me as I'd just had a baby! But me? New Mum? New baby? No idea about the election? None of that even counted as an excuse! I was FINED for not voting in an election that I didn't even know existed! The lady who I spoke to about it from the electoral commission said 'not knowing' wasn't an excuse, and that I was somehow meant to remember that every 4 years in September there was a local election (even though this year it was different). Many people don't even remember their annual wedding anniversaries or their kids' birthdays; as if they're going to remember an election every 4 years! It's preposterous. So when we are fined unreasonably, you can understand it's even MORE reason for people not to like anything to do with elections! I have a cousin who has never signed up to vote. And she likes it that way. She never gets fined. And she never has to vote. And the government has no idea. I'm sure there are plenty of people around like that. In the meantime, most people are meant to 'know' that an election is on, and they will potentially be fined if they don't get their name crossed off come polling day! It's a bit of a miserable carrot and stick method: vote or you'll be punished! I like the US method – vote if you want to! Yes, I know it's fraught with problems (like dead people voting...) but to be fined for not voting should NOT occur. People should be able to say 'I didn't want to vote' – for whatever reason – and it should be valid. Telling people to vote – no matter how much things get blared on television or radio or printed in newspapers or flashed on screens – will never make everyone vote. Moreover, surely it's our democratic right to choose NOT to vote, just as much as it is TO vote? Punishing people unreasonably for not voting is ludicrous. I'm happy to vote – most of the time. But I'm not happy to be punished for something I didn't know existed. Not everyone watches or reads the news or listens to the radio. It's stressful doing that. I try to avoid it as much as I can! So obviously I'm going to miss out on all the electoral commission's calls for votes. Moreover, sometimes the AEC ads have been problematic, vague, giving wrong impressions or even telling voters the wrong thing, let alone individual party ads. If people are registered to vote, I think it would be a good idea to mail every eligible voter about an upcoming election – be it local, state OR federal. Email is also good, and could be sent up to 3 times: at least 1 month before an election (local, state AND federal), 2 weeks before, and a week before. It would give people the chance to be informed. Of course, this depends on people's addresses being up to date with the AEC. That's why email is good. It goes anywhere you do! Unless you change your email, of course. There

is no foolproof way to get everyone to vote, but there could certainly be better ways to inform people about ALL elections coming up at the local, state AND federal levels. People need reminders. They get busy in life. Voting isn't normally the thing they hang out to do the most in their life! It's usually a burden for most people. Which is why if Civics classes can be introduced throughout high school, people will be better informed as they step out into the world as adults, and more will sign up to vote, and more will do their civic 'duties'. And I agree that being part of a society does require some civic duties. It's like any job in life – there are always the more annoying parts to it, but if people can be INFORMED about how the systems work, from a younger age, then they might not find these parts so annoying after all. I still don't think fining people for not voting is the way to get more people involved, though. That's just mean. If you're going to do that, at least get people to agree to being fined for ANY election when they first sign up to vote! Then they're at least informed about the risks if they DON'T vote! And also tell them that the AEC etc will contact them before every election so long as their details are up to date. THAT would be fair. When you learn to drive, you are tested on the road rules, so you have to study them first or you won't pass your exams. That way, when/if you break the road rules/guidelines, you know what the consequences may be. However, when you sign up to vote, you are NOT told about all the consequences (if any) and I don't think that is reasonable. That needs to change.

I look forward to an overhaul of the high school education system to incorporate 'civics' classes – across the country. I look forward to a better educated population. I also look forward to people not being fined for not voting – or for the legal voting sign-up sheets to explain the consequences of not voting, and what the electoral commission/s will do for the voter to remind them about upcoming elections. The government cannot hope to have an educated population if they fail to educate people. We will be waiting a long time indeed for people to educate themselves otherwise!

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