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Ms Kate Thwaites MP
Chair of Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Via email: em@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Thwaites

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

The Northern Territory Government welcomes the Inquiry and the opportunity to emphasise the importance of national leadership and collaboration to deliver equitable access to culturally appropriate services that support one system of democracy, improve electoral participation and safeguard electoral processes. This includes opportunities to improve regional decision-making through greater collaboration as a way of ensuring investment and efforts are focused on areas that will have the greatest impact for our communities.

When compared to national averages, the Territory experiences lower enrolment participation, lower voter turnout and higher informality in remote communities. Electoral education and awareness programs can play an important role in reversing these trends, together with mechanisms to overcome literacy and numeracy challenges.

To improve electoral participation, information and services need to be accessible and developed in a culturally appropriate manner. The Territory has a diverse and sparse population, with around 20 per cent of residents born overseas and around 76 500 Aboriginal people speaking over 100 different languages and dialects. Around 49 000 Aboriginal Territorians live in some of Australia's most remote areas across 76 remote Aboriginal communities and over 500 homelands. Population turnover remains a key challenge for the Territory, with relatively high levels of interstate migration and regular movement of residents between townships and remote communities.

To improve voter motivation and interest in participating, greater investment and support is needed on an ongoing basis that covers preparation for elections, as well as the electoral system more generally. For the delivery of civics education and promotion of voting and electoral events, there is an ongoing requirement for information to be shared in First Languages, particularly in remote communities and using a range of media platforms. The sharing and distribution of interpreted or translated information should occur in a time sensitive manner that allows for engagement across remote communities, outstations and homelands. The Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) Indigenous Electoral Participation Program is a good example of partnering with communities and organisations to deliver electoral participation services, through dedicated Territory-based staff.

Recent changes to the AEC's Federal Direct Enrolment and Update (FDEU) program has seen an increase in the number of Territorians added to the electoral roll through automatic registration. This improvement is welcome but does not necessarily lead to improved participation rates if directly enrolled Territorians do not know they are on the roll and may not have an understanding of their responsibilities as a voter. The FDEU could be further enhanced to educate directly enrolled voters about their responsibilities and voting systems relevant to their location.

A recent positive example is *'Your Voice. Your Community'*, where Northern Territory Government agencies, together with the NT Aboriginal Interpreter Service and local government councils, collaborated to deliver an electoral enrolment campaign. This involved communication materials across a range of platforms such as posters, local radio messages, direct messaging and posts on community sites. The accuracy of the electoral roll improved following this campaign.

Interactive and engaging electoral education programs in the Territory are delivered through the Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC) in partnership with the Department of the Legislative Assembly (DLA).

- The DLA runs a number of programs, in partnership with a diverse number of community organisations, aimed at engaging school-based young Indigenous Territorians and growing the next generation of leaders, including: Parliament House excursions and tours, and electoral educational sessions with a mock election and vote count.
- The NTEC delivers an educational program in Darwin and Alice Springs called Democracy Dash, targeting middle and senior school students where students learn about democratic processes and institutions of relevance to young people e.g. Youth Law Australia.
- The NTEC provides in-school electoral education sessions linked to the Australian Curriculum in civics and citizenship for different year groups and assistance for running school elections.

There are inherent challenges with Territory-wide delivery of these programs, which are most effective in urban and regional centres involving face-to-face engagement and on-site learning. Consideration could be given to a more joined up and decentralised approach that better supports one system of democracy in Australia. Delivering civics education to the Australian community is a responsibility of all governments and the AEC holds an important role in delivering civics education programs and other measures to improve voter participation rates.

Similarly, the Commonwealth has an important role in supporting states and territories to safeguard electoral processes. Greater leadership and collaboration, including through the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce, provides opportunities to jointly prepare for, manage and respond to emerging issues such as the impact of Artificial Intelligence on mis- and disinformation. As an example, support provided by the Australia Cyber Security Centre in the lead up to a Northern Territory General Election is crucial for a small jurisdiction to be able to counter foreign interference and safeguard electoral processes.

I encourage the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters to draw on publications from the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University¹ which provide key insights into the Territory's challenges. Additionally, I invite the Inquiry to visit the Northern Territory and hear firsthand from Territorians about opportunities to improve civics education, engagement and democratic participation in the Northern Territory.

Yours sincerely



EVA LAWLER

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¹ Spencer, M., & Christie, M. (2020), *Remote Engagement Coordination - Indigenous Evaluation Research (RECIER): Phase 2: Electoral Engagement and Education*, Northern Institute.