

Page 1/6

Submission to the:

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

From:
Mr. Glenn W. Marchant

To the Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on what can only be described as critical and ongoing issues in relation to young people and their knowledge of electoral matters and democracy. I am currently teaching a range of Humanities subjects in a diverse and academically engaged secondary school in inner suburban Melbourne. I teach Political Studies, Civics and Citizenship Education and I'm also the Student Leadership Co-ordinator. I regularly deliver Professional Development to a number of Subject Associations in the general area of social education. My concerns and suggestions relate to extensive experience in educational fields for some 25 years.

I don't want to submit extensive data but I would point out that in Victoria the number of students studying National Politics (previously Political Studies) has continued to decline. The provisional numbers for 2006 are 711 students (down from 897 in 2005). It's only a few years ago that 1200 students were studying Politics in their final year of secondary schooling and that figure was a significant drop from 20 years ago.

I'm fortunate to work in one of the few schools in Victoria where student interest in a diverse range of political issues continues to grow and I wanted to share some of my strategies with you to (hopefully) reverse the trend

across Victoria (and, I suspect, the rest of Australia). Much of what I have to say is based on empirical evidence accumulated by my extensive experience in politics, history and travelling around Australia and overseas over many years.

My recommendations include:

1. The Establishment of a Student Leadership Co-ordinator

My first recommendation is that every secondary school in Australia should have a Student Leadership Co-ordinator (SLCO). This is a relatively inexpensive position to create; it would require either a small time allowance, special payment or Leading Teacher position being created (in the latter case combined with other duties).

The SLCO should have a number of responsibilities that would stimulate student interest in a range of Civics and Citizenship activities including:

*the establishment of an SRC (Student Representative Council) based on AEC principles. I established such a system at our school and can see first hand, the positive impact this has had on the student body. Students nominate and second their peers for the SRC and a secret ballot is used to elect representatives. Speeches are delivered and the process usually involves English teachers assisting with the implementation of a structured public speaking program. The students should also write a Constitution for the SRC; basing it on aspects of the Australian Constitution, thereby linking federal and local values of representation, participation and accountability (as well as an understanding of political structures).

The students are introduced to the concept of voting using the preferential and proportional methods. These students act as mentors to other students and so the multiplier effect plays an important part in spreading key values such as: participation, representation, accountability, freedom (rights and responsibilities) and a forum for debate. The main aim of this exercise is to ensure that students themselves expect to have a functioning SRC and, are ultimately better prepared for life as an adult voter.

*the establishment of a student Charity Action Group (or similar). Again, this kind of group encourages students to make connections to their local, state, federal and international communities in a range of activities. This might include world poverty, homeless people or environmental issues. It encourages decision making and a range of values including responsibility and social awareness. Students publicise and fundraise one activity per term. It invariably means working with people outside the school environment including local councils and groups such as Rotary. The latter often sponsor our students to Canberra for trips to Parliament House and Mini-United Nations Forums. This is a great learning process for students and again, the expectation is that students want to participate once a group has credibility in the school. The flow on effect for Civics and Citizenship Education creates a positive environment for 'connectedness' in the school environment in relation to student awareness of the need for co-operation and an understanding of strong community values.

Students involved in these activities report regularly to assemblies, the School Council and the local community. The important point to remember is that most students will respond if given initial guidance on meeting procedures, setting up a constitution and electoral systems. The SRC must be elected using AEC guidelines. I've witnessed many SRCs that continue to be haphazardly established and ultimately lack the credibility with the students to be taken seriously and ultimately flounder and fail. These tend to be SRCs that are appointed and/or established without the use of democratic principles and an ongoing commitment from a staff member with a keen interest in political systems.

2. Resources

The *Discovering Democracy* kits that have been distributed to schools are, to be frank, both 'a hit and a miss'. I say this because, although the material itself is important, the presentation: a constant stream of handouts and folders in green packs, lacked the capacity to have an impact with many (most?) teachers and students and, I suspect, most are simply gathering dust in a storeroom somewhere.

By contrast, the Australian Reader, *Discovering Democracy*, Middle and Upper Secondary Collection contain engaging and challenging materials relating to historical and contemporary values. These are the kinds of texts that need to be produced for young people to fully appreciate the historical and political context of Australian democracy. They explore the past, use primary material, including visuals and allow students to understand the evolving nature of the Australian political system.

I firmly believe that students should be familiar with a range of inspirational Political speakers; incorporating the words of historical and contemporary figures. This should include Australian speeches. A text such as *Well May We Say... The Speeches That Made Australia*, edited by Sally Warhaft, is an excellent resource that I use regularly in Politics and Australian History classes. Students should have an understanding of our cultural and political values including the evolution of our country through the views of our leaders.

We want our young people to appreciate our political leaders, to respect them as leaders and the institutions they represent as well as understanding freedom and the role of criticism in a democracy. Leaders help us to understand the need for political vision; an important value to teach young Australians. We should feel confident and optimistic about our political institutions and stress to young Australians that our leaders are custodians of these institutions. We live in a liberal democracy and value the equality of the sexes, tolerance, a fair go and compassion to those in need. We need to commit ourselves to educating an increasingly diverse nation that parliamentary democracy is the way forward for each and every one of us as Australians.

3. Australian Values

There has been a lot of debate about Australian values. I would like to strongly endorse the idea that we must, as a nation, have a clear set of core values. I'm amazed that some members of the community claim that there is no such thing as core values. I would point out that the Australian Constitution, political institutions, culture and history, as well as political conventions have contributed to core values. These include: a secular

society, democracy (with rights and responsibilities), the rule of law, freedom and human rights.

I believe that we can learn a lot from the Americans: a respect for political institutions and a positive feeling for one's country or national pride. It saddens me that many intellectuals ridicule Australia and Australian History, particularly the contribution of British culture to Australia's political system. This negativity, often posing as accountability, is contributing to cynicism in the community and particularly with many of our young Australians who feel ashamed to be Australian. I've initiated and supported a range of reconciliation issues in the school community but there is a difference between acknowledging the past and moving on with practical solutions and being rooted in the politics of guilt that some intellectuals engage in when teaching reconciliation. The latter contributes to undue negativity and contributes to cynicism and a loathing of Australia, its political system and its values and hinders national pride and a sense of community. This is a dangerous path to follow.

All young people should understand the make-up of the Australian flag, the National Anthem, the voting system and a basic understanding of the Constitution as part of their study of Australia's political and electoral systems. It is important that citizens understand their responsibilities as well as their rights. The AEC provides a link to our core values; acting as an independent check and balance on the implementation and maintenance of democracy in society. It is a necessary learning tool in the classroom through its website, published material and AEC centres.

4. Booklet on Australia and Core values

Given that Australia is increasingly drawing people from all over the world it is absolutely necessary that all new arrivals embrace some Australian values as soon as possible. This should include learning the English language and understanding some aspects of Australia's political history. I believe that all new citizens should receive a pocket booklet with the following information: the Australian Flag, aspects of the Australian Constitution, the National Anthem, indigenous culture, a brief account of key points in Australian History and an explanation of core Australian

6/6

values such as: a secular society, representative democracy, the rule of law, the equal role of women in society, diversity, individualism, initiative and a sense of community.

It is not good enough to simply say to new arrivals 'do your own thing; this is a free country'. Freedom must be balanced by responsibilities. We must remember that many new arrivals come from violent societies with tribal conflicts, a State sponsored religion and repressive attitudes to women and minorities. We, as a nation, must educate our fellow Australians to appreciate our core values as well individual freedoms.

I feel very passionate about Australia, its history and political system. I feel very confident that we have strong foundations set up (mainly) by the British and now enjoyed by an increasingly diverse population. It is critical that we engage more of our young people to take an interest in, and feel positive about, their country and its political and electoral systems by encouraging co-operation in our community. The best way to do this is not by stressing our differences but by what we have in common as human beings and as Australians with a clear set of core values. You cannot have a diverse society without, for example, an understanding of, and commitment to, a liberal democracy or secular society.

Americans *may* love their country too much, but we Australians love our country too little; it's time to change that. Let's celebrate what we have in common above our differences.

Sincerely,
Mr. Glenn W. Marchant