

SUBMISSION TO THE

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into Civics and Electoral

Education

from the Australian Greens

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Introduction

Any inquiry into civic and electoral education in Australia must first address the multiplicity of electoral systems within Australia. It is not possible to describe a single form of electoral education covering all jurisdictions, from variations in local government elections to complexities of state lower and upper house voting (where upper houses even visit) That said, it is clearly important that both civics and electoral education continue and be enhanced in Australia.

Further, with the teaching of civics in school there is a greater responsibility on elected representatives to equally uphold the values of integrity and honesty in their dealing with the electorate, and for the Australian population to have trust in the both the electoral system and political structures as they exist.

1. Current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

The knowledge of young people of the electoral system is generally poor, but this is not so in respect of issues. Many young people are fully aware of the challenges and issues that they face in the post-schooling world. This includes their responsibilities to take part in debate within the community. However, this is not reinforced post-schooling and there appears to be a marked drop off in engagement after leaving school.

Mainstream media (and alternative youth media) have been effective communicators of cultural and governance issues, and this has been shown in the interest by young people in a variety of issues (especially environmental and social change issues), but is not reinforced as they grow older. While formal education does increase both young people's and adult knowledge of complex cultural, social and international issues, this is not necessarily carried through in the broader community.

A similar situation appears to exist in relation the responsibility to vote, or even being registered to vote. This is borne out in the numbers of people, especially young people, who enrol only once an election is called. With an estimate of up to 50,000 young people enrolling after writs have been issued indicates a lack of understanding amongst young people that they should be enrolled to vote. The corollary to this is that those young people who are approaching 18 should be given every opportunity to actually enrol. Young people who leave prior to year 12, and those that simply show a disinclination to theoretical education, are continually disadvantaged by their ongoing lack of access to reinforcing education otherwise designed to impress the need to both register and vote.

Further, there also exists a deeper malaise, often identified or treated as 'apathy' amongst young people towards voting and the electoral system. This appears to systemic, and relates more broadly

both to young peoples alienation from the electoral system and to their increasing sense of disillusionment with current political leaders and parties. For civics education (and by corollary electoral education) to have a lasting impact on young people and young adults there needs also to be a greater emphasis on ethics amongst politicians and their parties. The various scandals involving branch stacking , non-core promises (ie; promises that are not kept), uses of the public sector for political ends, scare campaigns (ie; interest rates & GST campaigns to name a two), and the like, can only serve to undermine public, and particularly youth, confidence in the political process.

Lastly, young people also need to feel that they have a place in the system. The early close of enrolments, which has all the appearances of locking people out of the electoral system, is an example of young people being targeted in such a way as to discourage involvement in the political process. Establishment of pseudo-Advisory Councils whether for young people or other groups, hand-picked and designed to provide unchallenging advice, simply signals that young people's voice is not required to be heard – that they are literally to be seen and not heard.

Recommendation 1. That a program of ethics and responsibilities training be instituted for Member of Parliament and their staff.

Recommendation 2. That the Advertising Standards Bureau become a statutory authority with the ability to investigate and resolve complaints against political advertising arising out of false or misleading claims.

Recommendation 3. That the changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, changing the enrolment period after the issuing of the writs to the close of business, be repealed.

2. The nature of civics education and its link with electoral education

Although civics education in at least some states begins at an early age (at Years 5 and 6), and includes significant foci on the various tiers of government, and their electoral systems, this is not reinforced post-school when it may in fact be most important. The link between civic and electoral education is a critical yet undervalued link, in that while individuals may well understand how the system works, they may not actually participate in the workings of that system. Thus civics – the study and learning of the cultural and government systems - needs to be clearly, distinctly and continually linked to how the various electoral systems actually work.

3. The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as TAFE colleges and universities

Currently, the adequacy of such programs need only be questioned in terms of the adequacy of teaching the mechanics of the electoral system. The preferential and proportional system in use in Australia can at times be complicated, but even in their simplest form are often misunderstood. The teaching, and learning, of the systems as they exist is critically important so that when electors cast a vote they do so in the fullest possible knowledge of what they are actually doing. To allow people

to do any less is to promote the undermining of the democratic model. Therefore it follows that the practical mechanics of the system go hand in hand with the theoretical basis for society and democracy.

This extends further than just the programs provided in educational institutions, to the very real need for electors to have continual training, reminding, refreshing of the mechanics of elections and how their vote is cast and counted. AEC's and SEO's bear a singular responsibility in this regard, so should be treating the training, advertising and educating about electoral mechanics as a core responsibility on a par with actually running elections.

Recommendation 4. That all civic and electoral education programs contain a component of teaching of the mechanics of Australia's electoral systems, and that the non-institutional provision and advertising of such programs be a core responsibility of AEC/SEO's.

4. The school age at which electoral education should begin

Civics should be seen as a key and enduring component of all education programs from year 1 onwards. Specific programs from high school, with basic electoral education included, expanding on those programs, and integrating them in to social and cultural studies programs need to be continued and expanded. As children may leave at Yr 10 it is important that students be taught basic electoral information (role of Government, electoral system, structure of government - obviously state/territory specific/the way the Westminster system works and what is meant by preferential voting) by end of Yr 10, with governance as issue for investigation as specific component of Yr 11-12.

This said, the existing programs where primary school age children begin the process of what Government is, how it is formed and its history, including visits to state and federal parliaments are worthwhile introductions to the nature of parliament and the electoral system. This is especially true when discussing the nature of law and the legal system, and the how and why of its structure. However, broader issues of culture and multiculturalism still need to be addressed in the context of Australia's broad cultural mix.

Recommendation 5. That the current system of engagement of primary through secondary school with civics education be retained but that electoral education programs be overhauled so as to provide an effective understanding of mechanics of the electoral system (ie; proportional and preferential voting).

5. The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

The key to an expanded knowledge (and by corollary, a continued and increased engagement in the electoral process) is continuous education. Schools teaching current young generation, but many have voted without necessarily understanding what they are doing, plus changes to the system at various levels may confuse (particularly elderly). Education programs through pensioner, carer and institutional centres/groups to ensure adequate knowledge of older CALD groups (new or existing migrant population) as well as to English speaking.

While currently students attending universities can continue electoral and political education as part of their own further education, the need to keep educating the general public of whatever age is critical. As there are a number of electoral systems in use across Australia at the various levels of Government, continued engagement by the community is not guaranteed when these systems may change and when elections may be 3 or 4 years apart. Continuous education regarding both the electoral system and the politics of the day is required, outside the realm of commercial and media operators.

Recommendation 6. That the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Offices investigate the accessibility of groups outside of the formal education system, and that this investigation include investigation of an adequate system of education and advertising to these groups.

6. The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens

Currently, with the limited language skills training for new migrants and minimal input into information provision in sufficient languages, the level of electoral education to migrants is very poor. Language difficulties, lack of English learning/training plus lack of adequate information in appropriate languages all conspire to ensure that migrant/CALD voters are disadvantaged in the electoral process. This extends to their potential manipulation by better educated members of their own cultural or language group, and misinformation campaigns by less than scrupulous political or commercial operatives.

There also appears to be a limited requirement for language/cultural skills amongst polling and returning officers, nor the necessary knowledge and ability to communicate effectively to migrant/CALD electors. This applies not just at management level but right down to the local polling place level. Education programs linked to migrant communities and avenues for English learning need to be established, but as importantly polling officials need to be able to explain the electoral system on polling day.

Recommendation 7. That the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Offices train all electoral officials and managers in communication English as Second Language skills.

Recommendation 8. That provision be made for interpreting services be made in all forward and electoral budgeting.

Recommendation 9. That all electoral information be made available in the widest possible numbers of languages in the broadest possible cultural situations.

7. The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education

If the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Office's are to have an adequate role then this will obviously require sufficient funding. This immediately begs the

question of the adequacy of the AEC budget. This applies not just to funding to organise and run elections but also to ongoing electoral administration and education prior to elections. This is now especially important with changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act reduced the time to enrol once an elect has been called as many would not be aware either not enrolled or at the wrong address.

While the operation of elections obviously to the AEC and various SEO's, it is equally important that they, as impartial (in theory and generally in practice), have a key role in ongoing electoral education. The state education system has an obvious and expanding role as a primary deliverer of information to school age children, but community wide education falls back to the AEC/SEO's. Their role is as the developer of education packages and material, and as key deliverers of this material as well.

This includes, at a basic level, running seminars at TAFE and community Colleges, running stalls and information sessions at universities, stalls and fair days, and providing outreach services to migrant/CALD communities where-ever they may exist. It should also include general community advertising (concerning enrolment, voting and rights under the various Electoral Acts) and information provision through publication and distribution of materials and packages of information.

Access to broader groups outside of the education system needs to be considered in the context of where people actually go, and what do they actually do. Young people may also be contacted through the various youth services and employment agencies catering to them. People with intellectual disabilities can be contacted through the agencies and carers that support them. This does not mean that the individuals performing the services become proxy-officials of the state or commonwealth authorities, but that the various non-Government agencies and bodies provide a ready access point to contacting these people, and through them the various election agencies can make better contact with people otherwise not easily contacted or informed about the political and electoral system.

Electoral education programs could also be performed through dedicated training sessions for employers and staff, through the various Chambers of Commerce and peak industry bodies. This is about accessing people through their place of employment. As this is not a direct responsibility of employers or employer groups, and nor should it be, the AEC & SEO's need to be more active in providing staff and material resources to provide these programs. Rural people could be accessed through the various farming and community groups that currently exist (such as the National Farmers Federation, Country Women's Association or Australian Rural Youth).

In terms of older people, while many may have an effective knowledge of the electoral system, some, as migrants through the Family Reunion program, or through lack of education, may not have gained a good knowledge of the electoral system. These people still have a right to participate in the electoral system in the fullest possible manner. The various electoral commissions already conduct polling through mobile booths and at 'special institutions' – this system could be utilised to provide electoral education just prior to elections.

Lastly, the various electoral agencies have an ongoing responsibility to be ready for elections. With fixed term governments they are in a position to be able to pace and manage their education programs to fit the electoral cycle. Even with non-fixed term governments, they still retain the

capacity to predict well enough in advance the likelihood of an election to be able to begin education programs prior to election day. Even then, if advertising and promotional material was prepared in advance, they could still educate the population between the issuing of writs and polling day. However, all of this requires an adequate level of funding for it to be effective.

Recommendation 10. That the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Offices be adequately funded to provide a full range of electoral education programs.

Recommendation 11. That community outreach services provided by the AEC and SEO's be expanded to include all major community events as well as all educational establishments.

Recommendation 12. That the AEC & SEO's undertake major advertising and educational programs prior to every election, and that these programs include specific programs aimed at employer, community, non-Government and rural organisations.

Recommendation 13. That the AEC & SEO's be adequately funded to provide these programs.

8. The role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education

Each level of Government has a critical role to play, given the disparity of electoral systems, which requires an increased knowledge by the electorate of not just how, but when, where, and what is being voted for. This goes hand in hand with understanding the nature of the 3 tiers of government and general civics education (plus differences between states – ie; NSW vs ACT).

Governments at all levels also have a role to play in promoting knowledge of the political system outside of specific electoral education programs, through continuing to provide access to the Parliamentary process, and adequately promoting citizen involvement in this process. This can be at the level of increasing the level and adequacy of advertising of submissions to actively promoting citizen involvement in the electoral process.

Recommendation 14. That Governments, through Parliament and Parliamentary Education services continue to provide access and information on the parliamentary system.

Recommendation 15. That Governments at all levels (federal, state and local) expand provision for inquiry and submission into matters of public importance, and that adequate notice, information and advertising occur to improve community involvement in this process.

9. The access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament

Access to Parliaments is important but should not be restricted solely to Federal Parliament. Any introduction to local democracy should rightfully be through local councils, and they should be mandated and required to provide the same level of access to their processes as exists at both State and Federal levels.

Visits to all tiers of government are important as much learning the roles of judiciary, public service and elected representatives, and potentially should include education and visits to courts and public sector departments to better understand the workings of Government. Further, information supporting existing civics educational information should be provided at any venue, agency of department explaining that body's role within the government and society.

Recommendation 16. That all representational chambers (parliaments and councils) remain open to the public at all times, with adequate security provisions, and provision for community input into these processes be expanded.

Recommendation 17. That Courts and Judicial chambers be further opened to the public and schools, with adequate provision of educational and promotional material, to provide an understanding of the legal and judicial system as part of civics education.

Recommendation 18. That the public sector be encouraged to open public service departments and agencies to the public, where this does not compromise operational effectiveness.

10. Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United State, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand, be examined

We definitely should not overlook other nations, especially countries with low literacy levels, innovative approaches to electoral education. While other nations may use different electoral systems, if they have effective mechanisms for educating and engaging electors in their electoral system this should be examined. That said, we should not be look at a US-style electronic voting system to improve our own system as it is widely held that there are serious accountability issues with this form of system.

One suggestion would be to look at candidate identification (picture) or party identification (symbol) as a way of improving access to voters with low literacy or language levels. Such systems are used in the former colony PNG, and other former British colonies (South Africa, Zimbabwe etc). We should equally look carefully at developments in, and state of, electoral education in South East Asia nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia. Further to examining the process of national electoral offices and commission, international bodies and agencies such as the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance should also be investigated for alternative and innovate approaches.

Recommendation 19. That the AEC and SEO's investigate electoral education methods used overseas, with specific focus on programs operating in developing nations.

Recommendation 20. That international agencies such as International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance be investigated and engaged to further develop these approaches.

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