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

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Introduction

This submission takes a conventional definition of civics and citizenship education as being concerned with the instruction, study and learning of citizenship and the rights and duties of each citizen within a democratic polity. Traditionally, civics education has two overlapping functions: firstly, to provide information to citizens about national identity and its historical development; and secondly, to provide information about civic life, politics and government. This definition is consistent with the terms of reference of this Inquiry, in which "A healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed, appreciate and participate in the various elements of representative democracy. Civics education, including electoral education, is a key part of this goal and helps to ensure that citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively."

This submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education will focus on the following Terms of Reference:

- the content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study;
- the school age at which electoral education should begin;
- the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs; and
- opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education.

This discussion will also touch upon the following Terms of Reference:

- the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system; and
- the nature of civics education.

The major themes of this submission include: a critique of recent approaches to civics and citizenship education; the need to develop more participatory approaches to civics and electoral education; and the strengths and limitations of using information and communications technologies (ICTs) to enhance civics and electoral education.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Lucas Walsh'.

Dr Lucas Walsh

1 June 2006

The content and adequacy of electoral education in government school programs of study

It is firstly important to place any consideration of civics and electoral education in the context of the recent development of civics and citizenship education in Australia. Over ten years ago, the Civics Expert Group rightly argued that the goal of civics education should be “to ensure that Australians can participate fully in civic decision-making processes” as part of formal education in schools and the promotion of citizenship for the broader community (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, pp. 5-7). However, by appealing to historical and culturally-biased conceptions of democratic citizenship, conventional proposals for civics reform such as *Whereas the people...* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994), have not sufficiently addressed the changing nature of political cultures and institutions intrinsic to the development of citizenship. By appealing to certain historical values of citizenship and representative democracy, conservative approaches to citizenship education, like that of the Civics Experts Group, have inappropriately returned to traditional democratic values’ in the face of social, political, economic and cultural change.

While these kinds of appeals to respect the historical development of democracy are important, they also reflect a discourse of civics education that is limited to values and institutions which are either outdated or have the potential to restrict the exploration of new and innovative democratic improvements that reflect changing political, economic and social contexts. These approaches (perhaps unintentionally) legitimate the antiquated and culturally defined values and institutions and in doing so, affirm patterns of social, political and economic inequality. The development of citizenship in Australia continues to be marked by a dangerous ideological tension between citizenship as impassive, dutiful membership and citizenship as critical, pro-active and inclusionary.

In Australia, citizenship is generally taken to refer to the status of nationality and the rules and laws which govern that status (such as passports and the right to vote). The Australian notion of citizenship continues to be primarily legal in understanding, in which the citizen has various (implied) rights and duties in respect to political participation such as voting, land ownership and travel outside of national boundaries (Barrett, 1995, p. 17). The formal and legal status of citizenship continues to be defined in the Australian Citizenship Act 1948, and much of the formal notion of citizenship in Australia hasn’t developed much since the nineteenth century (James, 1994/5, p. 82).

Beneath the formal definition of citizenship is a much broader and more social notion that takes citizenship to mean the quality of full membership and active participation in a just, democratic and mutually supportive political community. Rights “have as a corollary duties to respect the enjoyment of rights by others” (SLCRC, 1995, p. 14). As Kymlicka and Norman have pointed out: “Citizenship is not just a certain status, defined by a set of rights and responsibilities. It is also an identity, an expression of one’s membership in a political community” (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994, p. 352). Here is a broader notion of the democratic citizen who participates in government to guarantee liberty through the cultivation of civic virtues and devotion to the common good (Mouffe, 1992, pp. 227-228). There is an ongoing tension between the idea of citizenship as a narrowly prescribed legal status defining relations between individual and state, and a deeper notion of citizenship being about civic participation. Any reflection on civics and electoral education needs to be mindful of this tension, and seek to explore and promote this latter under-developed dimension of Australian citizenship.

Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education

In 1995, the Australian Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee acknowledged that there has been a “decline in civic values as evidenced by marked increases in the sense of personal alienation, powerlessness and a diminished sense of community” (SLCRC, 1995, p. 6). Australians have come to increasingly rely on economic indicators to measure social well-being: “Older images (of national identity)...have been replaced by the more abstract idea of ‘the economy’” (Horne, cited in SLCRC, 1995, p. 26). There has, for some time, been evidence to suggest that many Australian citizens are experiencing a lack of direction and a growing feeling of isolation, especially in young people (Mackay, 1993, p. 25). The Senate Committee’s report recommended that “these circumstances suggest the need for some reappraisal of citizenship, national identity and community goals” (SLCRC, 1995, p. 6). There continues to be a need for a more defined, reflective and participatory strategy to civics and electoral education that incorporates an ongoing reappraisal of these areas. For example, the general understanding voting as associated with the formal dimension of citizenship described above could be more directly linked to participatory aspects of citizenship through civics and electoral education. A useful way of doing this is through the practise of voting through participation at school, local community, state and federal levels in other forums to reinforce the efficacy of voting, as well as contextualise it as part of a broader sense of citizenship. Various strategies, including ones which utilise information and communications technologies (ICTs) will be discussed below.

Turning firstly to schools, some of the most basic challenges facing civics and citizenship education, including electoral education, arise because of the structural and pedagogical limitations of education systems and schools themselves. Schools are in some ways imperfect organisations models for democracy and citizenship. As Professor Michael Salvaris and I have argued elsewhere, weak models of citizenship are transmitted in schools in part because of ambivalence on the part of the state’s commitment to ideas like democracy and citizenship (Walsh and Salvaris, 1998). To some extent, the limitations of teaching citizenship and civics arise from the conflicting functions of schools themselves. Schools are, on the one hand, based on an institutional framework that inherently reproduces social order imposed through institutional bias and civics curricula promoting an uncritical acceptance of authority and conformity, rather than critical, independent citizens, on the other. Furthermore, civics and citizenship education has traditionally relied on class-based, teacher-centred methods that rely on passive-learning on the part of students. Despite government initiatives to stimulate active participation through civics and citizenship education, “the reality of classroom life in Australian schools is that traditional, didactic teaching strategies predominate” (Print, 1996).

Civics and citizenship education needs to be developed as a set of inclusionary skills; a knowledge which is potentially empowering to individuals and groups. This is based on a conception of citizenship defined by an ideal or desirable type of citizenship and citizen about which young people should be educated. This ideal type of democratic citizenship includes the education of active, critical, and politically literate citizens. Active democratic citizens ought to have a well developed sense of civic ethic or duty within a concept of citizenship that emphasises community/social solidarity within a broader framework of good international citizenship practises. Crucial to the concrete definition of desirable citizenship for Australian practise is the implementation of standards, benchmarks and indicators (Walsh and Salvaris, 1998).

We need to explore new directions and possibilities for schooling for active democratic citizenship, in which electoral rights and obligations are a critical component. For citizenship to be meaningful, the citizen must be active, critical and politically literate, possessing a well developed sense of civic ethic or duty. Teaching

civics and citizenship in schools requires a clear and popularly recognised sense of what legitimate and effective democratic citizenship means at a practical level (Walsh and Salvaris, 1998).

Recent government agencies and movements for democratic change agree that reforms to citizenship need to focus on the ethical content of citizenship - especially the idea of civic duty. Civic duty means that individuals and groups must be able to actively and knowledgeably participate in the governance of the political community in which they are members. Essential to civic duty is that all citizens take responsibility in the public interest. This in turn requires a sense of solidarity and belonging. A key assumption is that people have *the desire or will* to become involved in the political life of the nation. A belief in the capacity of humanity to participate in democratic life is a vital component of political life in a democracy (Oldfield, 1990, p. 187). Without this core belief, democracy is emptied of its validity.

Rights are of little use if they are not actively enjoyed and seen to be effective (Pateman, 1970). Participatory notions of democracy advocate a model of democratic citizenship in which there is a high degree of ongoing citizen involvement with social justice issues and in various organisations. Participatory advocates argue "for democratisation and politisation of small scale associations in which individuals can play a significant role", placing "emphasis on institutions other than those of the central government" (Lively, 1990, pp. 140-141). This means a wider degree of democratic participation in other spheres of life from the classroom to the workplace to encourage "the belief that one can be self-governing, and confidence in one's ability to participate responsibly and effectively, and to control one's life and environment" (Pateman, 1970, p. 46).

The school age at which electoral education should begin

Citizenship education must begin early with role playing using democratic problem solving to teach how to define and overcome conflicts and problems democratically. For example, these tasks could use constitution reform issues as real life case study of how citizens should make their own democratic governance (or perhaps, how they don't get to participate in governance). This includes the transmission of skills such as voting and getting young people to define their idea of their human rights and duties in school, and how electoral behaviours are related to these ideas. Within the classroom, participatory pedagogies involve group problem-solving exercises during which students work together to identify the issues or resolve the problems. The teacher guides students through activities requiring active student participation. Strategies for effective citizenship education require the development of citizenship education pedagogies that foster critical thinking particularly through group work, simulations, role play, the use of technology as a resource and a variety of other cooperative learning strategies involving group problem-solving exercises. Giroux argues for a critical pedagogy enabling students to become more critically aware of "the various ways in which representations are constructed as a means of comprehending the past through the present in order to legitimate and secure a particular view of the future" (Giroux, 1991, p. 19).

There is evidence to suggest that cooperative learning strategies are more effective than the individualistic and competitive models of learning currently predominating Australian schooling (Print, 1996). While cooperative learning strategies can be found in many parts of Australian school curricula, their implementation has been minimal. Cooperative learning involves the use of small group engagement in topical discussions, debates and role-playing activities, in which the learning process is shared. Other strategies include student-run school assemblies, active multicultural /harmony days, fieldwork to Parliament House and in local community governance, voluntary programs within the community (eg "Meals on Wheels"), or school council

elections. For these activities to be effective, there needs to be a high degree of student involvement and they must be seen as relevant to students' own experiences of political life (Print, 1996).

Using all possible and legitimate school resources, civics and citizenship education must be based on general principles, desirable qualities and approaches of democratic citizenship. This approach emphasises the use of practical models within school and local community to engage democratic processes including pedagogical and institutional strategies aimed at areas such as the curriculum, teaching method and the conception of the school as a democratic civic community.

Effective citizenship education needs to emphasise certain civic themes, such as cultural diversity, tolerance and the celebration of legitimate differences within respect for universal rights, and their associated obligations and duties. The experience of active participation is a particularly valuable form of political education, which has the potential to empower citizens and groups with a greater critical awareness of their own rights and responsibilities, as well as those of others. Research suggests that active participation in a democratic school climate, where principles of democracy are operationalised in school decision-making processes, students are more likely to acquire the values and skills of democratic citizenship (Print, 1996). Carole Pateman writes that "for maximum participation by all the people... democracy must take place at other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed" (Pateman, 1970, p. 42). This view suggests an extension of participation into schools and other educational places themselves as valuable contexts of 'social training'. Increased awareness of citizenship through civics education and participation in school decision-making processes are just some of the ways through which formal and informal qualities of democratic citizenship can be learned.

The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

A promising and under-developed area of civics education concerns the use of technology to promote democracy via electronic media such as the Internet and interactive television, to enhance citizen participation in government decision-making and 'grassroots' development. This type of activity has extremes ranging from citizen polling and consultation with government, to a more direct democratic model of participation based on the 'electronic town meeting', in which media such as electronic voting (e-voting) and the Web are used for mass decision-making by plebiscite. Proposals for, and experiments seeking to enhance citizen participation in government based on the model of the town meeting, such as an "electronic commonwealth," have been around for some time. While it must be acknowledged that many of these experiments have been regarded as unsuccessful due to low participation rates, prohibitive costs and security issues, there continues to be considerable interest in the use of e-voting for governance and citizen participation (Abramson, Arterton & Orren 1988; Balnaves, Walsh & Shoesmith, 2006).

E-voting is an area in which Australia has yet to develop (Walsh, 2006), particularly in relation to developments on the scale of the electronic voting machines used during the 2004 general elections in India (ECI, 2004; Haidar, 2004), or the complexity of local UK government trials of several different e-voting systems. For example, Liverpool and Sheffield local councils trialled an integrated system of electronic voting and electronic counting of votes during 2002 elections, through which votes were lodged via telephone, Internet, electronic kiosk, mobile phone (SMS) alongside conventional polling stations and post (Barry *et al.*, 2002, p. 5). While e-voting may be promoted as a means of encouraging greater participation in non-compulsory voting jurisdictions, evidence of this practice is debatable and may not be as relevant to Australia, in which voting is compulsory (Walsh, 2006). While there have been

some potentially encouraging uses of the new technology to increase voter participation (Done, 2003, p. 261), recent studies of e-voting in the UK indicated that providing the facilities to e-vote did not substantially increase voter participation (LGA, 2002, p. 4).

Much of the recent activity using the Internet to encourage citizen participation has taken a moderate approach to complement representative democracy, rather than replace it with a more direct participatory model of democracy. Some of these activities could be used to promote and enhance civics education by fostering the kinds of participatory strategies described above. Brazil's city council of Porto Alegre has used email and the web to facilitate a degree of direct democracy by enabling citizens to discuss and vote on issues (Hobsbawn, 2003). Minnesota E-Democracy also hosts online public spaces for citizen interaction on public issues to increase participation in elections and public discourse in Minnesota through the use of information networks (<http://www.e-democracy.org/>). Citizens of Estonia use an online consultation process to comment on draft laws and suggest new ones (<http://tom.riik.ee>). In Denmark, government has attempted to counter low voter turnout by using ICT to make regional decision-making process more understandable to its citizens (www.nordpol.dk). In Australia, the "Community Builders" network in NSW operates as an interactive electronic clearing house for community level social, economic and environmental renewal. Using the Web to enable online community consultation, e-petitions and to broadcast parliamentary activities, the Queensland Government's e-Democracy Unit is exploring how ICT can enhance the community's access to government and its participation in government decision-making. The Citizenscape Website of Western Australia also seeks to promote citizenship related activities and involvement in decision-making. These projects have experienced varying levels of success in both disseminating resources from government to citizens as well as encouraging greater citizen involvement in representative government (Trinitas, 2002: 57-63, Balnaves, Walsh & Shoemith, 2006). What makes these projects significant to this Inquiry is that they suggest new ways of developing and operationalising civics and electoral education by extending the scope for participation through forums of community engagement, information dissemination and learning through simulation.

A key issue here is whether Australians have the necessary capabilities, networks and tools to enable them to participate in the information economy. The issue of access to the technological architecture and software necessary to use electronic information and services has as its corollary the knowledge and skills necessary to use the technology effectively. In civil society, there is a need to make explicit links between the digital skills to use the technology and the political literacies required for effective democratic citizenship. For this to take place, emphasis must be placed on nurturing the knowledge, capacities, values and skills necessary to use the technology in an informed and deliberate way for active political participation, and to develop strong civic culture and sense of community. The capacities and skills necessary to use the technology to convert information into knowledge, and knowledge into political efficacy, are central to the development of civics and citizenship in Australia.

A number of barriers currently inhibit the possibility of greater and more effective involvement by civil society, such as: the provision of ICT training; legal issues of confidentiality, security and privacy; a lack of effective governance models for the use of ICTs across government, business and civil society sectors, and underdeveloped ICT architecture – particularly in remote areas. (While Australians have a relatively high rate of Internet access, some estimate that Australia's rate of overall technological access has declined in comparison to other developed nations (Muir, 2004, p. 5).)

For an ICT-based strategy of civics education to be coherent and effective, there needs to be an explicit identification of key priorities and strategies to facilitate future development and effective use of ICT in civics education, including explicit definitions of minimum standards of access, skills and education in the use of ICT for all Australians and the development of governance models appropriate for the growing role of non-educational actors, such as telecentres and other relevant NGOs. A good comparative example of the unique challenges faced in Australia is Canada. In summary, a corollary of any technologically-based initiative in civics education needs to address key problems of digital inclusion and spatial isolation, particularly to Indigenous Australians in remote regions of Australia.

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