**Submission to JSCEM inquiry into
Civics and Electoral Education**

31 May 2006

Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The Democratic Audit of Australia has a close interest in civics and electoral education. It contributes to such education through the provision of lively analysis on its website <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>.

Democratic Audit reports and discussion papers take as their starting point four core values of representative democracy—political equality, popular control of government, civil liberties/human rights, and the quality of public deliberation. We use Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom as our main comparators for the purpose of analysing how our political institutions measure up against these values. In this submission we deal with two main issues: (1) we commend a Canadian approach to engaging young people more effectively with electoral politics and (2) we examine some gaps in Australian electoral education.

Student Vote

The Student Vote project in Canada http://www.studentvote.ca has, we believe, been outstandingly successful in increasing youth engagement with the electoral process. It confirms the findings of most studies, that it is 'doing politics' that is most successful in building a sense of citizenship efficacy and engagement. The project involves running elections in secondary schools in parallel with elections being held at federal or provincial levels. For example, some 2500 schools participated in Student Vote at the time of the 2006 federal election, providing the means for students to research and vote for the local House of Commons candidates. If their votes had counted in the main election, the House of Commons would have ended up with more diverse representation and fewer major party representatives.

The Student Vote project is a non-partisan initiative supported by education ministries, non-government education bodies, federal and provincial electoral commissions and media organisations. Students put together material on the political parties and prepare intensively for 'all-candidate' meetings and for election day, when they will perform roles as polling officials as well as voting. The exercise is covered extensively by sponsoring newspapers and other media. Of students who participated in Student Vote in 2004, 78 per cent felt it had increased their interest in voting and 88 per cent said they would vote in future. of the teachers, 97 per cent greed that Student Vote had helped raise student awareness, interest and knowledge of the Canadian electoral process and political issues.

We feel that the Canadian experiment is a worthwhile supplement to the hands-on citizenship approaches taken in some Australian schools to getting students to identify local issues and learn how to campaign and achieve Council involvement.

How to ensure votes express the voter's intention

One of the major obstacles to electoral education in Australia is the diversity of electoral systems that any given voter will need to use, depending on which level of government they are voting for and which house of parliament. A much higher level of electoral literacy could be expected if there was greater consistency in voting systems. The differing requirements for a formal vote may confuse many voters. In the absence of likely change to a more national approach, however, there are still areas of electoral education that could be greatly improved in the interests of effective citizenship.

For example, one of the major gaps in the educational packages available in Australia is information about how to ensure that a Senate vote expresses the voter's intention. For over 20 years, Australian voters have had the option of voting 'above the line' on the Senate ballot paper, and 96 per cent now choose to do so. It saves the laborious numbering of preferences for all candidates 'below the line' required by the compulsory preferential system—there were 78 candidates to be numbered sequentially in NSW in 2004.

However, information about where preferences will flow if a voter casts a vote 'above-the-line' in the Senate is very hard to come by. Such preferences will flow in directions that may

well be very surprising to the voter, and contrary to their intentions. The flow of above-the-line preferences is in accordance with group voting tickets, which must be registered with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) within 24 hours of the declaration of Senate nominations. The rapid negotiation that takes place between parties appears to take little account of the preferences of their voters. This results in outcomes such as that in Victoria in 2004 when a party was elected to the Senate with less than two per cent of the primary vote, over a party with almost nine per cent.[1]

To know whom their vote may elect, a voter needs prior knowledge of the group ticket system. They need to know that their preferences may elect a party they do not support. They also need to know they can request to see the booklet containing registered group tickets at a polling booth or request one to be sent through the mail. Such knowledge is extremely rare in the community and the need for such knowledge is not being adequately addressed by electoral education. One solution would be to introduce an above-the-line preferential system, as recommended by the JSCEM in 2005, so that voters would themselves indicate how they wished their preferences to flow between parties. In the absence of allowing voters to express their own preferences 'above the line' the issue of voter knowledge of the group ticket system needs to be tackled.

A good place to start on education about the group ticket system would be the AEC website. At present this website is not easy to navigate unless you already have considerable knowledge. To find information on group voting tickets, for example, the place to start is with a menu called 'WHEN'. Having opened 'WHEN' one needs to know to select 'Federal Elections'. If one then selects '2004 Federal Election' one will at last arrive at the bottom of that page at 'Group Voting Tickets'. An alternative is to do a search by 'tickets'—which will work if you already know this search term. One will then be given registered group tickets by State and Territory but no advice concerning the importance of making votes effective by checking where they will end up. The AEC website lacks a well-designed electoral education area that will help voters ensure their vote reflects their intention. This is an historical irony considering that the single transferable vote (STV) form of proportional representation was

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[1] See Peter Brent, 2004, 'Time to Scrap the Ticket Vote for the Senate?, Democratic Audit of Australia, November http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au

regarded as suitable for the English-speaking world because the voter, not the political party retained control over electoral choices.

Another gap in electoral education relates to optional preferential voting systems, as in NSW and Queensland Legislative Assembly elections. Few voters seem to be aware of the full implications of ' just voting one' and that candidates may end up being elected with as little as 35 per cent of the formal vote, as in the last Queensland State election. If the voter does not intend their vote to exhaust and have this kind of outcome, then this is not kind of effective voting required by democratic elections. The related problem raised by lack of adequate electoral education over optional preferential voting is the confusion between optional preferential voting for State lower houses and the compulsory preferential voting required for the federal House of Representatives. Consequent informal voting for the House of Representatives, as in NSW in 2004, again results in a lack of effective citizenship and political equality. [2]

The AEC website

In addition to suggestions above, there are further ways the AEC's website could be improved to play a further role in civics and electoral education. The site is admirable in many ways—particularly in the scope of information it provides—but is at times difficult to navigate. In particular, the 'what', 'who', 'why', 'when' and 'how' menu system is not always appropriate.

Moreover, even with the most wonderful site in the world, people must still have the inclination to visit it. The question becomes how to encourage real involvement of people, particularly young people, with the political system, in this case through the website of the body which runs elections.

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[2] See John Wanna, 2004, 'Democratic and electoral shifts in Queensland: Back to first past the post voting', Democratic Audit of Australia, February, http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au; Sally Young, 2004, 'Wasted votes? Informal voting and the 2004 election', Democratic Audit of Australia, November, http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au

Many young people are technologically 'savvy'. One potential avenue of involvement may be through enticing interaction via mobile phones and SMS. The New Zealand Electoral Commission has found that young people prefer communicating with it by SMS (.eg., for enrolment purposes). This is just a generic idea, but we need to examine ways to get young people involved with the AEC not because they 'should', but because they want to.

In the 19th century Australia was the site of much innovation to involve people in the electoral process.[3] These innovations were subsequently taken up by the rest of the world and remain standard practices today. Perhaps we can be innovative again.

We will be happy to provide any further information the Committee may require.

Yours sincerely

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[3] Marian Sawer (ed), *Elections—Full, Free and Fair*, Federation Press, 2001; Peter Brent, Enrolling the People, http://www.enrollingthepeople.com