



Local
Government
Association
of the
Northern
Territory

Our Ref: G03

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	94
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Secretary	<i>[Signature]</i>

26 June 2006

Ms Sonia Palmieri
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Palmieri

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

I thank the Joint Standing Committee for its invitation to provide a submission to the inquiry and subsequent consent to receiving the submission after the deadline of 2 June 2006.

On behalf of local government in the Northern Territory, the Association has prepared the attached submission. I note the committee's advice that the Association cannot publish its submission nor disclose it to another person without the Committee's authorisation.

I look forward to future contact with the Committee in relation to the submission.

Yours sincerely

Tony Tapsell
Chief Executive Officer

**SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND
ELECTORAL EDUCATION**

JUNE 2006

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION
OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

1. ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

This submission is the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory ('the Association') submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters regarding its inquiry into civics and electoral education.

The submission is divided into six parts including background about the Association, key findings and summary of recommendations as well as specific matters that the Association considers of the most importance under the inquiry's terms of reference to do with the adequacy of electoral education in Australia.

2. THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Association was first incorporated in 1992 and is the single peak organization representing local government in the Northern Territory. The Association is established as an incorporated body by section 224 of the *Local Government Act* of the Northern Territory. Membership of the Association is voluntary and currently 61 of the 63 local governing bodies in the Northern Territory are members. Over 50 of these bodies have total indigenous representation on them.

The Association's vision, mission and key activities are included in Appendix A. Further details are available on the Association's website at www.lgant.nt.gov.au.

3. KEY FINDINGS AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Association purports that in terms of the adequacy of electoral education in the Northern Territory that there is a glaring gap to be filled particularly for adult indigenous citizens. The Association is willing to play its part in civics and electoral education and recommends:

- That the Commonwealth Government brings together in a composite set of materials civics education with electoral education
- That the Commonwealth Government commit resources to continuous civics education in partnership with the Territory Government and the Association
- That the Commonwealth Government address the manner and frequency of electoral and civics education for indigenous people and consider establishing an Electoral Education Centre in the Northern Territory
- That the Commonwealth Government commit resources to continuous electoral education in partnership with the Territory Government and the Association

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4. THE NATURE OF CIVICS EDUCATION AND ITS LINKS WITH ELECTORAL EDUCATION

The Australian Government's own materials developed under the *Discovering Democracy Programme* in 1997 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) give some explanation about the nature, and need for, civics education in Australia.

'Civics education involves the knowledge that is a necessary precondition for informed and responsible citizenship. Citizenship education supports the skills and capacities that enable citizens to take part voluntarily and responsibly in the life of civic society and in the governance of their political communities... Without these skills and involvement, citizens cannot effectively deal with proposed changes or make informed choices needed for a healthy democratic life.' (*Three Spheres of Government in Australia*, p.7).

The materials developed (learning cycle kits) are comprehensive, designed for wide audiences, are practical and give a large range of other reference material and contacts. They specify the content of civics education which is suitable for teachers and trainers alike to use in accredited courses as well as for others wanting to use them in less formal settings. If used properly they should be effective in reaching the outcomes espoused above for civics education. Like all teaching materials however, they need constant updating as circumstances in society change or more appropriate material can be developed.

Material developed by the Victoria Law Foundation (Aldous and Schlueter, 2002) also is very useful material despite being directed mainly at school students and aimed at civics education.

In terms of its links with electoral education the Association considers that more needs to be done to bring together civics and electoral education. The kits and materials (mentioned above) that have been developed for civics education are not strong on electoral education even though they do have accompanying materials (*Australian Democracy Magazine*) produced by the Australian Electoral Office which are very useful. Civics and electoral education have obvious links yet it seems the two have not been developed for delivery together as education programs.

If there is to be a continuance of civics and electoral education materials developed by the Commonwealth Government the Association argues that they should be brought together rather than have them handled separately.

Recommendation

That the Commonwealth Government brings together in a composite set of materials civics education with electoral education

On the question of civics education the Association considers that, as with electoral education (see below) there needs to be greater efforts made towards addressing the manner and frequency with which education is carried out, particularly for adults.

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The concepts of citizenship for adult persons born in Australia is, in the view of the Association, not well understood probably because much of the recent effort on civics education has been directed at young people at school. Even the recommendations of the Australian Citizenship Council (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, pp 83-84) in terms of civics education supports action towards high school education and the education of new citizens, not other Australian adult citizens. The Association argues that this gap in education needs addressing with all spheres of government partnering in activities.

Recommendation

That the Commonwealth Government commit resources to continuous civics education in partnership with the Territory Government and the Association.

5. THE ADEQUACY OF ELECTORAL EDUCATION IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The Association is of the view that electoral education in indigenous communities is sporadic at best and is unlikely to very effective due to the infrequency with which it is undertaken. This is particularly so for adults than for children who may receive such education as part of their school curricula.

'The political community makes authoritative decisions that govern community affairs and affects the lives of its members. The citizen shares in that collective decision-making in a substantive way, but is also bound to obey the decisions that are made. In a representative democracy, one of the most obvious ways that a citizen shares in collective-decision making is through voting...citizens have to obey the collective decisions made, which can affect every aspect of personal and social life from privacy and personal relationships to public behaviour and property. A citizen cannot opt out.' (Galligan and Roberts, P.2).

Given some of the social unrest that has been reported in recent times in the *Weekend Australian* in the Northern Territory there is no doubt that one very useful component that could be employed to bring about change is in the area of civics and electoral education.

The low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst residents of indigenous communities means that special materials have to be developed (along with possibly, interpreters) if effective learning is to be achieved. The Association bases its findings on its involvement with its members and the experiences it has with their electoral processes.

The Northern Territory Government's own independent review of the Northern Territory Electoral System (Northern Territory Government, 2003) recommended, amongst other things, that the NT Electoral Commission:

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'Explore conducting electoral education and information programs in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission, the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and the Education Department.'

The report also made reference to the need to provide electoral education training using *'a mobile electoral education team, that can travel to regional and remote areas and deliver culturally appropriate education using a face-to-face approach'* (Ibid., p.32).

The most obvious time in which to deliver such education would be in the lead up to Federal, Territory or Local Government elections.

The Association considers that the Commonwealth Government must address the manner and frequency of electoral education (and for that matter civics education as well) for adult indigenous Australians. The Association would like to see not only education taking place, and more often, but also to see resources such as an 'Electoral Education Centre' established in the Northern Territory to help accelerate learning outcomes.

Considering the large number of indigenous persons living in the Northern Territory and their need for electoral education the Association believes such a facility would be a great boost. If establishing a centre is not viable the Association believes the Australian Electoral Commission should assist to organize training sessions in Darwin and Alice Springs on an annual basis using the resources that are held interstate. Such training could also potentially occur alongside Association general meetings.

Recommendation

That the Commonwealth Government address the manner and frequency of electoral and civics education for indigenous people and consider establishing an Electoral Education Centre in the Northern Territory

6. THE ROLE OF FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN ELECTORAL EDUCATION

All governments have a role in electoral education but given the Commonwealth Government has more resources than the other two spheres it should play a major part in both funding and assisting the other two spheres with such activities. This is even more evident when there are such similarities in electoral processes amongst the spheres and also because the Australian Electoral Commission has such a key role in elections for all governments (although perhaps not as much for local government).

The Association is willing to assist in the delivery of electoral education (as it has done to some extent with the NT Electoral Office) and has produced materials for persons considering standing for election in local government. Without doubt though

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there needs to be ongoing efforts made to enable all electors to better understand (and therefore better participate in) electoral processes.

It is the Association's view that many people do not understand preferential and other voting systems and that unless continuous efforts are made to provide this kind of education that a large group of people will either vote informally, not participate in elections or be skeptical about the need for them. Engagement of people is so important in these processes and electoral education is a key mechanism for effecting change and maintaining understanding.

Recommendation

That the Commonwealth Government commit resources to continuous electoral education in partnership with the Territory Government and the Association.

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7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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