

Introduction

- 1.1 There is much to be proud of in Australia's democratic history. This country has been, in many respects, a democratic pioneer: Australia was the first country in the world to adopt the secret ballot, and to grant women the right to vote and stand for election; Australian democracy emerged not from a bloody revolution, but from a series of enlightened constitutional debates.
- 1.2 Nonetheless, a healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed and who are involved and engaged in the issues that are important to them. It is therefore concerning that there is evidence to suggest increasing apathy and a decline in traditional forms of political participation such as joining political parties, attending party meetings and voting.
- 1.3 Evidence suggests a sense of disengagement amongst young people and also a sense of disillusionment with the political process. This does not imply, however, that young people are not interested in the world around them or in broader political issues. Rather, young people do not appear to make the connection between these issues and politics as a vehicle through which to address them and have their say.
- 1.4 Young people are not alone in this feeling of disconnection: Indigenous Australians and new migrant citizens also appear to have some difficulties in their interactions with the democratic process.
- 1.5 Although not easily quantified, it is estimated that Indigenous Australians are under-enrolled, and face a series of challenges in participating in elections. Due to lower than national average literacy and numeracy levels, it has been difficult to implement civics and electoral education

programmes, especially in remote Indigenous communities where general civic awareness is already low.

- 1.6 Australia's increasingly diverse migrant population also face challenges when engaging in the Australian democratic process, often due to comparatively low levels of English language proficiency, and their experiences under previous regimes. While enthusiastic about the Australian democratic process, new citizens are most likely to cast informal ballots and, thereby, miss their chance to 'have a say'.
- 1.7 The question is why this disconnection is so apparent. Is it that the 'product', being the democratic process, is not seen as particularly attractive, or is that the 'customers' require the product to be more effectively marketed? To what extent should it be the role of policy and law makers to engage citizens and ensure their participation in democratic processes? Conversely, to what extent should the onus be on citizens themselves to engage in these processes and have a sense of civic duty?
- 1.8 Throughout this inquiry, then, the Committee was keen to find meaningful ways in which to engage citizens more constructively so they want to participate more directly and enhance Australian democracy.

Background to the inquiry

Calls for a dedicated inquiry

- 1.9 The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is well known for its regular reviews on the conduct of federal elections.¹ In the course of its inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election, the Committee recommended that it be referred an inquiry into electoral education.²
- 1.10 At the time, the Committee reflected on the continued decline in young people's electoral enrolment, and was concerned that efforts to inform young voters of their obligations had not been particularly effective. The Committee concluded that 'more effort is needed to promote democratic opportunities as well as obligations'.³ To this end, the Committee recommended:

1 The Committee and its predecessor have reviewed federal elections since 1983.

2 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *2004 Federal Election Report*, Recommendation 56, p. 354.

3 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *2004 Federal Election Report*, p. 346.

...that State, Territory and Federal education authorities coordinate their contributions to students' understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government

[and] that State, Territory and Federal education authorities increase their financial contribution to enable students in grades five and six to visit the National Capital to further their understanding of democracy.⁴

- 1.11 In its response to this report, the Australian Government supported these recommendations in principle, 'subject to the outcomes of the current inquiry ... into civics and electoral education'.⁵

Civics, values and Australian history

- 1.12 The civics and electoral education inquiry follows an interesting phase in primary and secondary education, with strong emphasis currently being placed by the Australian Government on civics and citizenship education, values education and Australian history.

- 1.13 Between 1997 and 2004, the Australian Government allocated \$31.5 million towards civics and citizenship education and an additional \$4.9 million over four years in its 2004-2005 Budget.⁶ These funds developed the *Discovering Democracy* programme, which was distributed to all schools across the country (Chapter Three details this initiative further). Civics and citizenship have now become a national priority area in education.

- 1.14 In 2005, \$29.7 million was allocated to values education initiatives to be implemented over the following four years through the Values Education Programme.⁷ The Programme aimed to help make values education a core part of Australian schooling and promoted values such as care and compassion, doing your best, giving people a fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility, and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.⁸

4 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *2004 Federal Election Report*, p. 354.

5 Australian Government, *Response to the JSCEM 2004 Federal Election Report*, 30 August 2006, p. 23.

6 Department of Education, Science and Training, *Submission no. 100*, p. 2.

7 Australian Government, Values Education website, <<http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/default.asp?id=8880>>. Accessed 18 January 2007.

8 Australian Government, 2005, *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, p. 3.

- 1.15 On 17 August 2006, the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon. Julie Bishop MP, met with 23 leading Australian historians, public figures who promote the study of history and educational leaders at the Australian History Summit in Canberra. The Summit communiqué concluded that:

Australia's history is longer than that of many European countries, and is in many ways unique. Australia is one of the world's oldest, continuous democracies. A knowledge of our history is therefore vital. Nearly all of the crucial public debates embody and appeal to history. We are convinced of the urgent need for a nation wide revival in the teaching of Australian History and its global, environmental and social contexts. We urge that steps be taken to enlist all States and Territories and relevant authorities in the task.⁹

- 1.16 It is by no means coincidental that these areas of education are mutually reinforcing. Indeed, fundamental to all these initiatives is an examination of the Australian national character and identity.

What is civics and electoral education?

- 1.17 Civics education has been defined as:

...the development of citizenship or civic competence by conveying the unique meaning, obligation, and virtue of citizenship in a particular society or the acquisition of values, dispositions, and skills appropriate to that society.¹⁰

- 1.18 A clear objective of civics education is the development of 'active citizens', namely those who are able to 'discharge the formal obligations of citizenship' and 'make an informed judgment about the extent of their civic participation.'¹¹

- 1.19 In this respect, electoral education forms a fundamental part of civics education. Many political theorists have argued that only politically active citizens enjoy 'full political independence'.¹² Unless citizens are aware of the mechanisms through which they can participate, they cannot fully

9 Australian History Summit Communiqué, 17 August 2006, available online at: <http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Bishop/2006/08/b002170806.asp>.

10 See Saha, L. 2000. 'Political activism and civic education among Australian secondary school students', *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 155-74.

11 Civics Expert Group 1994. *Whereas the People: Civics and Citizenship Education*. Report of the Civics Expert Group, AGPS, Canberra, p. 6.

12 See Saha, L. 2000. "Political activism and civic education among Australian secondary school students", *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 155-74.

become 'active citizens' of their polity. Electoral education thus provides citizens with the keys to active and informed participation.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.20 The inquiry was referred by the Hon. Gary Nairn MP, Special Minister of State, on 24 March 2006, and advertised in *The Australian* on 27 March 2006.
- 1.21 To ensure a broad range of submissions were received, letters of invitation were sent to a number of individuals and organisations including: Members of the House of Representatives and Senators, Premiers and Chief Ministers, after school care organisations, teacher/education associations and unions, state and federal electoral offices, multicultural and ethnic organisations, government agencies and local government associations, media organisations, parliamentary education departments, political parties, and research institutions and 'think tanks'.
- 1.22 In total, the inquiry received 118 submissions and 10 exhibits (a full list of submissions and exhibits is available at Appendix A).
- 1.23 The Committee conducted 11 public hearings in total, which included hearings in every state and territory, where it spoke to a wide variety of groups and individuals (the public hearing programme is available at Appendix B).
- 1.24 In the early planning stages, the Committee decided that a key feature of this inquiry should be an extensive programme of school visits. In a sense, these visits became a form of focus group research for the Committee's inquiry, with members seeking the views of school students, both primary and secondary, in regional and metropolitan areas, on levels of civic engagement and civic knowledge. The Committee spoke with senior students of each of the ten schools it visited.
- 1.25 In an effort to speak to a diverse range of students from different schools, the Committee also held two school forums, the first in the South Australian House of Assembly, Adelaide and the second at Parliament House, Canberra. The 60 students who attended the forum in Adelaide came from a range of metropolitan schools in the Adelaide area, while the students participating in the Canberra forum had been selected from across Australia to participate in *Celebrate Democracy Week* activities. In total, the Committee spoke with 244 students and 47 of their teachers (see Appendix B for the schools and forums).

- 1.26 The Committee is particularly appreciative of the efforts made by schools to accommodate its visits and thanks the students for their sincere and frank discussions. It was clear that all students appreciated the opportunity to speak to parliamentarians and learnt a great deal from the interaction, not least of which being the process of presenting evidence to parliamentary committees.

Structure of the report

- 1.27 The terms of reference for this inquiry specify three target audiences: young people, Indigenous Australians and migrant citizens. The report is therefore structured according to these target groups.
- 1.28 Chapter Two concerns young people's civic engagement, defined as firstly, their awareness of democratic rights and responsibilities and secondly, the ways in which young people interact with the democratic process.
- 1.29 Chapter Three deals with young people's civic knowledge, including the current state of civics and electoral education in schools and the tertiary sector.
- 1.30 Chapter Four examines the accessibility of students to the National Capital, widely recognised as a premier location for civics and electoral education.
- 1.31 Chapter Five is concerned with Indigenous Australians' civic engagement, knowledge and participation, with specific emphasis on factors likely to impact levels of enrolment and participation, and activities being undertaken by federal and state electoral commissions.
- 1.32 Chapter Six examines the issues surrounding the civic engagement of migrants and, more particularly, new Australian citizens.