



31 May 2006

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

For the Attention of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,

Re: Inquiry into Civics and Electoral information

The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has an interest in promoting civic engagement through media, particularly for Indigenous Australians and Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The SBS Charter requires SBS to 'provide multilingual and multicultural services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society'. As part of the work of fulfilling this Charter, SBS seeks to find ways of engaging diverse audiences with Australian cultural democracy by improving access to relevant, independent information in many languages across various platforms.

SBS Radio programs, which are broadcast nationally in 68 languages, include news and current affairs programs, electoral coverage, talk-back segments and settlement information. The settlement information targeted at recent arrivals to Australia includes information about the Australian electoral process. SBS Radio also broadcasts community information and community service announcements which provide information to SBS audiences which is considered to be in the public interest. Other, paid, Government campaigns are run on SBS TV, Radio and Online through agreements with the SBS marketing division.

Code 6 of the SBS Codes of Practice which deals with 'Political Broadcasts and Election Coverage' outlines the SBS practices in relation to electoral coverage and information about elections:

"Section 70A(1) of the SBS Act allows SBS to solely determine to what extent and in what manner political matter or controversial matter will be broadcast by SBS.

SBS provides information to the community about elections through:

- the allocation of free airtime to political parties; and*
- coverage of elections and electoral issues through regular SBS news and current affairs services.*

During Federal election campaigns, SBS provides free airtime on Television and Radio to political parties for their policy speeches and statements on election issues. Free airtime is also available on Radio for State election campaigns. As a general guide, the Government and the Opposition are allocated equal time and minor parties are treated on the basis of their representation in the Federal or State parliaments as appropriate. Referenda are treated in a similar manner. Any additional time which political parties wish to be allocated on SBS Television and Radio is considered to be advertising for which parties are charged accordingly.

Further information on the allocation of free airtime is available from SBS on request.

SBS also has a broader interest in encouraging engagement with Australian public life for diverse Australians. The recently published SBS commissioned study based on the attitudes of younger Australians of culturally diverse backgrounds titled *Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes in Multicultural Australia* explored issues of engagement with public life. The independent report was authored by four leading Australian academics; Professor Ien Ang, Associate Professor Jeff Brand, Dr Greg Noble and Dr Jason Sternberg. The conclusions reached in the study included the following:

Connecting Diversity tells a very different story about younger Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds from that which is often discussed in debates about generational change. Far from being apathetic, the focus group participants in this study are hungry for citizenship; for participation in public life and engagement with democracy. They are seeking connection through media and through personal relationships and are searching for better, more trustworthy tools with which to influence the world around them.

This kind of research is considered in SBS planning and adds to the body of knowledge applied by SBS in developing new content relevant to the SBS Charter. A full copy of the report is available at <http://www20.sbs.com.au/sbscorporate/index.php?id=1210>.

Please do not hesitate to contact SBS for further information on this matter.

Regards,


Shaun Brown
Managing Director