



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

OFFICE OF THE CLERK OF THE HOUSE

PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
TEL: (02) 6277 4111  
FAX: (02) 6277 2006  
EMAIL: Clerk.Reps@aph.gov.au

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	91
Date Received	31/7/06
Secretary	[Signature]

30 June 2006

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

Dear Secretary

**Inquiry into civics and electoral education**

I am pleased to provide the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters with the attached submission from the Department of the House of Representatives to the inquiry into civics and electoral education.

Yours sincerely

I C HARRIS  
Clerk of the House



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

**Submission from the Department of the House of Representatives to  
the inquiry into civics and electoral education by the  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**

**1. Introduction**

1.1 The terms of reference for the inquiry into civics and electoral education by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters indicate that “a healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed, appreciate and participate in the various elements of our representative democracy”. The Department of the House of Representatives, through its community outreach program, informs the Australian public about one of the nation’s key democratic institutions and encourages public participation in its work. As such, the department is an active contributor to the civics education of the Australian community.

1.2 The House of Representatives community outreach program aims to increase understanding of and participation in the work the House of Representatives among the Australian community. The program is coordinated through the department’s Liaison and Projects Office, working in association with other departmental areas. It includes a range of programs and activities, which are gaining a significant following within the community (as detailed below).

**2. House of Representatives community outreach program**

*About the House magazine*

2.1 Now in its seventh year, the About the House magazine has an estimated readership of more than 70,000 people throughout Australia (growing weekly). The magazine, which is free of charge, includes news and features on the work of the House of Representatives, with a particular focus on the work of committees. It also covers some legislation and issues raised in the House, for example during members’ statements and adjournment debates.

2.2 The magazine’s growing readership and the positive feedback it attracts are indicators of the community’s interest in finding out about the work of the parliament, particularly if the information is presented in an easy to read, interesting and apolitical way. A number of feature stories in the magazine have been picked up by mainstream media outlets, as well as community magazines and newsletters.

2.3 The editorial team has received a number of emails from teachers and university lecturers who have indicated they are using articles from the magazine in their classes. In response, we recently sent a copy of the magazine to all high schools in Australia, inviting them to join the magazine’s mailing list. A large number of schools have been taking up the invitation.

2.4 A survey of the readership provided the following responses: 95 per cent of respondents said reading *About the House* had increased their knowledge about the work and procedures of the House; more than 80 per cent read most or all of the magazine; and well over 90 per cent rated the magazine as good to excellent in its range of topics, content, readability, layout and design.

2.5 One recent email from a reader is typical of the responses we regularly get to the magazine. The reader stated: "I have just completed reading, cover to cover, Issue 27 of *About the House*, and I wanted you to know what an informative and well written magazine it is. I have been receiving issues for about a year now and read every article each time. They are full of interesting and relevant (to me as an Australian) information about the real workings of government, with no sign of politics. Please keep up the good work. It would be good if the magazine could reach more people."

#### *About the House TV program*

2.6 Complementing the magazine, the department's Liaison and Projects Office, in association with the Broadcasting Section of the Department of Parliamentary Services, produces a current affairs style television program that is screened on the Sky News channel in the months when parliament is sitting. The program currently is shown on the Friday of sitting weeks. Its content is focused on parliamentary committee investigations, and helps to inform people about new inquiries, evidence presented at public hearings and reports tabled. We are planning to make segments of the program available via the internet.

#### *Email alert service*

2.7 The Liaison and Projects Office operates a free email alert service that provides subscribers with regular information on the activities of House of Representatives committees and joint committees administered by the Department of the House of Representatives. The email alert service has more than 2,200 subscribers, including more than 1,200 media outlets. They receive regular media alerts about new committee inquiries, public hearings and reports.

#### *Media service*

2.8 A media adviser employed in the Liaison and Projects Office provides regular and up to date information to the media on the work of parliamentary committees. This helps to bring that work to the attention of the media and has, in recent years, resulted in increased and more accurate media coverage of committee work. Demand has been increasing for this assistance, and additional resources will be directed to this effort from July 2006.

#### *House News website*

2.9 The House News website at [www.aph.gov.au/house/news](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/news) is also a source of up to date information on the work of the House of Representatives and its committees. The website attracts some 8,000 visitors a month, with popular pages being the news page and the page dealing with the upcoming business of the House. Recently free RSS feeds were introduced for this site, enabling subscribers to be informed about new items posted to the site.

### *Advertising*

2.10 An information advertisement on the work of parliamentary committees is published fortnightly by the Department of the House of Representatives on page 2 of *The Australian* newspaper on Wednesdays. The advertisement alternates with an advertisement published by the Department of the Senate, ensuring a parliamentary presence each Wednesday. The advertisement alerts people to new committee inquiries, public hearings and reports.

2.11 Recently the House of Representatives also introduced a similar information advertisement in *The Bulletin* magazine once a month. The first such advertisement was published in June 2006, resulting in more than 200 requests for the *About the House* magazine, which was promoted in the advertisement.

### *Seminars*

2.12 The Department of the House of Representatives conducts an annual seminar program on the procedures and practices of the House. The program includes the following seminars: About the House, which provides a general overview of the operations of the House of Representatives; From Bills to Acts, on the legislative process; About Committees, on parliamentary committee processes; About Parliamentary Consideration of the Budget, on parliament's processes for considering the budget; and Working with the House, providing practical advice to people dealing with House chamber matters.

2.13 The seminars are held mainly at Parliament House in Canberra, with public servants being the main audience. The seminars are conducted on a partial cost recovery basis. They attract more than 600 participants annually.

2.14 Seminars are also arranged for organisations that wish to have presentations that are tailored to their interests. These have been of growing popularity in recent years.

2.15 From time to time, seminars are held outside Canberra, with Melbourne and Hobart being two locations in which About the House seminars have been conducted in recent years. Occasionally, public seminars on the work of the House have also been organised, in conjunction with Members of the House of Representatives who have sought to inform their communities about parliamentary processes.

### *University lectures*

2.16 For the past few years, the Department of the House of Representatives has conducted a university lecture program, called *House Calls*. Under the program the Speaker and Clerk of the House deliver guest lectures on the realities of working in today's House of Representatives to tertiary students. Each lecture is accompanied by a question and answer session that allows students to explore issues of interest to them regarding the House and the way it operates.

2.17 The lectures are provided at no cost to the universities. The universities that have participated in the program in recent years include: Australian National

University; Bond; Murdoch; New England; New South Wales; Newcastle; and Southern Queensland.

### *Community publications*

2.18 A community guide on the House of Representatives, called *Your Key to the House*, has been widely distributed throughout Australia. More than 50,000 copies of the guide have been provided free of charge to schools universities, libraries and the general public. The third edition of the guide is currently in production.

2.19 *Infosheets* on the House of Representatives are also a popular source of information on the workings of the House. They are available in printed form and via the House of Representatives website.

### *History project*

2.20 The Department of the House of Representatives has produced a multimedia history project on the first 100 years of the House. The project is called *A House for the Nation* and includes a CD-ROM encyclopaedia of the House, a four episode documentary, a website ([www.houseforthenation.gov.au](http://www.houseforthenation.gov.au)), a touch screen kiosk at Parliament House, and a study guide.

2.21 The CD-ROM provides the most comprehensive collection of facts, stories and images of the House of Representatives ever produced. It enables people to explore how the House works, where its procedures and traditions have come from, who have been its influential people, where the House has met, and how the Australian people get a say. Specially designed journeys take people through some of the major issues that have made the House what it is today. Historical images, video footage and specially commissioned cartoons help bring the House and its history to life.

2.22 The documentary, narrated by Australian Film Institute award-winner Rachael Blake (from the film *Lantana*), looks at key issues that have confronted the House of Representatives during its first century. In four episodes, the documentary considers the influence of political parties in the House, the House's role in national affairs, how representative the House has been, and the changing pressures and demands faced by Members of the House. Featuring historical film from ScreenSound Australia, images from various national collections, and interviews with current and former Members of Parliament, the documentary assesses the House's past and asks what the House should become in the future.

2.23 The 133-page study guide for the project, linked to the school curriculum, is designed to assist teachers and students to incorporate the project into their study of civics and politics. The study guide comes free of charge with any purchase of the CD-ROM or documentary.

2.24 More than 1,000 copies of the CD-ROM have been sold to date, with schools and universities being a major target audience. The CD-ROM was a finalist as best tertiary resource for the Australian Teachers of Media awards. A number of universities have adopted the CD-ROM as a resource for students.

2.25 The documentary has been screened on Sky News and more than 200 copies have been sold, with schools and libraries being key purchasers. The documentary was offered to both ABC and SBS for screening (free of charge) but they both declined to take up the offer.

2.26 The Liaison and Projects Office is continuing to promote the history project to schools and universities. We believe it provides a comprehensive product that assists in the teaching of civics.

### **3. Conclusion**

3.1 Through its community outreach program, as outlined above, the Department of the House of Representatives is making a significant investment in and contribution to informing Australians about the work and processes of the House of Representatives. The popularity of our community outreach products is increasing as more and more people find out about our *About the House* magazine, television program, website, seminars and email alert service. We will continue to develop and promote these products, particularly given the positive response to them from the public.

3.2 We are keen to provide schools and universities with access to the history project *A House for the Nation* and are planning further promotion of this project. It provides a comprehensive resource for the teaching of civics and politics.

3.3 As resources allow, we are also interested in exploring opportunities to present packaged radio news material on the work of parliamentary committees. Over the coming year this will be considered, along with the exploration of new technologies for distribution of information.

3.4 By increasing community understanding about parliament through information that is provided in an accessible and interesting way, we can ensure that more Australians take an interest in the work of the national parliament and are encouraged to participate in that work.