

SUBMISSION

**TO: THE SECRETARY
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS**

**RE: COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO
CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION**

1. BACK GROUND

- 1.1** Since 1985 the powers and functions of the South Australian Electoral Commissioner have included a 'responsibility for the carrying out of appropriate programs of publicity and public education in order to ensure that the public is adequately informed of their democratic rights and obligations under the Act' [*Electoral Act 1985 sec 8(1) (c)*]. It was at this time that the position of education officer was created to develop and implement an education program for the wider community.
- 1.2** The mediums employed to disseminate information to the wider community have diversified over time. Initial resources developed for secondary schools were hard copy and focused on the mechanics of enrolment and voting, supported by a video of the 1985 election processes titled 'Voting'. Information was sent to schools and members of parliament. During the past twenty years, partnerships for projects have been identified; one of the most significant being the joint History Trust and State Electoral Office (SEO) permanent display in Old Parliament House titled '*It's your vote*'. This display illustrated political and electoral development in South Australia over time and was one of Adelaide's most frequently visited exhibitions. It was not only an excellent education sector resource but also a centrally located community resource to develop and engender civic identity. Unfortunately, in 1991, the exhibition was dismantled and this valuable resource illustrating South Australian social and electoral history was lost and never relocated.
- 1.3** The most recent partnership occurred in 1998 when the Adelaide Electoral Education Centre was established in partnership with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to provide information/education sessions on elections and the electoral system. Other partnerships exist with the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia who facilitate the distribution of electoral information and enrolment forms in all year 12 student's results packs. The AEC and the SEO have since 1998 jointly managed and funded the Adelaide Electoral Education Centre. In addition an Electoral Education Reference Group comprised of representatives from the Department of Education and Children's Services, Parliament House, Local Government Association, AEC and the SEO reviews and evaluates content and direction of education sessions and the development of shared resource materials. This ensures programs support the requirements of the South Australian curriculum framework. Other ventures have included

collaboration with the Local Government Association on behalf of all councils and Parliament House.

- 1.4** The SEO currently has a wide range of hard copy electoral education and information materials. In addition, our web site provides not only election result data but a diverse range of information including an interactive demonstration of three methods of vote counting, including Preferential, Proportional Representation and first Past the Post, acknowledged both nationally and internationally. This program is recommended by the University of Western Australia as a prime resource for all their first year politics students and was recently adapted for Elections Canada. See www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm

Staff from the SEO are available to visit community groups, attend university orientation days, participate in Constitutional Convention Schools programs, speak at students annual conferences, support information stands at the Royal Agricultural show in addition to placing information in a range of ethnic and age specific publications.

- 1.5** Recommendations have been addressed with Terms of Reference.

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2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

2.1 *The current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under the Australian Electoral system*

2.2 Comparative data is provided below to illustrate areas where changes have occurred in young people's knowledge of the electoral and voting processes since 1986.

Initial research undertaken by the SEO in 1986 titled '*An Investigation Into Electoral Knowledge and Attitudes of year 11 and 12 Students in South Australia*' published in 1986 by A K Becker, Electoral Commissioner, provided information that enabled this agency to identify appropriate resources for the education sector.

2.3 The results of the SEO 1986 surveys of school students and the results of a 'Youth and Education and Information Survey' conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2002 reveal interesting data. For example:

Note: many respondents nominated more than one reason or source of information

Question 1	1986	2002	% change
<i>Do you think young people vote:</i>			
1) to support a political party	31%	30%	-1%
2) to avoid a fine	67%	43%	-24%
3) because it is compulsory	69%	51%	-18%
4) to exercise their democratic right	20%	32%	+12%

Question 2	1986	2002	% change
<i>How did you find out about enrolling, voting and your rights and responsibilities?</i>			
1) parents	37%	58%	+21%
2) TV, radio, newspapers	26%	34%	+8%
3) school	20%	31%	+11%
4) electoral brochures	19%	15%	-4%
5) internet	n/a	2%	
6) don't know about it	34%	18%	-16%
4) friends	8%	16%	+8%

2.4 The comparative data for Question 1 indicates that since 1986 there has been a 24% decrease in the number of students who think young people only vote to avoid a fine and a 12% increase in the number who vote to exercise their democratic right indicating an increase in awareness of rights and responsibilities.

2.5 Question 2 indicates that the percentage of students who find out about enrolling and voting from their parents has increased by 21%; information received from school increased by 11%; the number of students who knew nothing about enrolling and voting decreased by 16%. This indicates an overall increase in awareness of the processes associated with enrolling and voting in the wider community.

2.6 The comparative data confirms that young people are increasingly engaged and informed about our Australian democratic processes and receive this information

from a diverse range of sources. Electoral administrations contribute to this positive outcome.

2.7 Recommendations

- 2.7.1** It is recommended that all electoral administrations ensure that information is freely available in a range of formats, both electronic and hard copy and include translations so as to not exclude those in the community from a non English speaking background.
- 2.7.2** Information should be engaging and relevant to the target audience and developed in consultation with stakeholders.
- 2.7.3** Government funding should be provided to ensure recommendations for increased civic participation and electoral awareness can be met and collaboration and partnerships forged to achieve efficiencies and minimise duplication of resources.
- 2.7.4** Develop relevant materials *nationally* for Year 1 – 7 students to assist teachers engender a sense of civics and identity; including acknowledgment and respect of those from a non English speaking background.

3. *The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education*

- 3.1** Electoral education is intrinsically linked with civics education in so much that the act of voting itself is exercising the most fundamental civic right awarded all Australian citizens.
- 3.2** Civics education needs to engender an understanding of our past, how our system of government and society has evolved, our Constitution, our laws and our rights and responsibilities as citizens; acknowledging that, the ‘nature’ of civics can not just be taught it needs to be experienced in day to day living. To engender an understanding of civic responsibilities and rights the Adelaide Electoral Education Centre currently conducts sessions on our electoral and parliamentary systems for new immigrants and provides information translated in seventeen languages. Staff from the SEO and AEC attend outreach community sessions

3.3 Recommendations

- 3.3.1** Reintroduce a mandatory subject for years R-12 such as ‘Australian Studies’ to engender a sense of who we are and our place in the world.
- 3.3.2** Initiatives to compliment and link with electoral education and civics education have been identified. Currently citizenship ceremonies are attended by AEC staff who collect completed enrolment cards and new and re enrolling electors receive an acknowledgment card.
- 3.3.3** Utilise the *captive audience*; the new citizens and those enrolling or re enrolling and add value to the current activities by implementing the following:
- the AEC to liaise with state/territory electoral administrations, local government and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to

jointly develop and distribute a comprehensive pack for all new citizens explaining our electoral systems, structure of government and services in an addition to an overview of our history.

- The AEC and each state/territory electoral administration and local government develop jointly an information brochure to be sent out with all 'acknowledgment cards'.

4 *The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities.*

4.1 Receiving electoral education is every Australian's right.

4.2 It is apparent that there is no compulsion to teach the 'electoral' component of the curriculum framework in South Australian schools. This lack of commitment should be addressed with state education authorities and professional development provided by electoral authorities to teachers currently in the field and a commitment sought from teacher training institutions to include comprehensive electoral, civics education programs.

4.3 This office is committed to supporting the facilitation of a comprehensive and mandated electoral education school based program in consultation with the education sector.

4.4 In South Australia the TAFE citizenship new arrivals program is to be commended.

4.5 Recommendation

4.5.1 State education authorities should address ad hoc teaching of electoral systems and processes and commit to remedying the lack of comprehensive electoral and civic knowledge. This could be achieved by supporting professional development provided by electoral authorities for teachers currently in the field and a commitment from teacher training institutions to include a comprehensive electoral and civics education unit.

5 *The school age at which electoral education should be taught.*

5.1 Again, receiving electoral education is every Australian's right.

5.2 The importance of participating, debating, conferring, making a deliberated choice (voting), accepting responsibility and contributing to decision making at home, at school or in student groups are appropriate for primary level.

5.3 Concepts relating to detailed electoral processes are possibly best taught at a secondary level.

5.4 Recommendation

5.4.1 Introduce electoral education as a mandatory subject in primary school years and reintroduce advanced concepts in the secondary school curriculum.

6 *The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs.*

6.1 Increasing the level of understanding of election processes and representative democracy in the wider community should lead to a decrease in the level of apathy and ignorance that exists in the community. It is however; far more difficult to communicate with this group who are mobile, in the work force, 'time poor' or no longer in the work force.

6.2 The SEO will be looking to identify additional opportunities to communicate with the wider community to promote enrolment and electoral information including university orientation days, agricultural shows, career expos and seniors groups.

6.3 Recommendations

6.3.1 Community organisations for ethnic and /or minority sector groups should be identified and notified of the services that the AEC can offer their client group.

6.3.2 Specific information and programs should be developed for their client group and electoral staff be made available to visit on-site gatherings.

6.3.3 The office web sites should continue to be reviewed as it is recognised that it is an accessible source of information, available 24 hours a day.

7 *The adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities.*

7.1 In 1996, federal funding was withdrawn for the national Aboriginal education program and the task has now fallen to a number of regional Divisional Returning Officers to occasionally visit remote areas.

7.2 Electoral education for indigenous communities is best delivered by indigenous staff with knowledge and sensitivity. The estimated indigenous population in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands is 2 600. This area covers some 103 000 square kilometres in the far north of South Australia. 34% are under the age of fifteen years, 57% are aged between 16 and 54 and 9% are over 55 years. While the level of enrolment is relatively high in the communities, the level of voting is low. It must be noted however, that mobile polling teams visit remote communities for short periods during the 2 weeks prior to polling day.

7.3 In 2005 the SEO sought a partnership with the Anangu education section which resulted in teaching staff on the lands conducting the APY elections on behalf of the SEO.

7.4 Recommendations

7.4.1 Reintroduce the Aboriginal education program of the early 1990's. The program should not only focus on those in the school system but also be made available to the entire community in acknowledgment of the familial nature of Aboriginal culture and respect for the status of elders.

- 7.4.2** This program should be developed by the AEC in consultation with Aboriginal education professionals and delivered by indigenous teachers or field workers.
- 7.4.3** Alternative avenues to disseminate information to remote communities should be considered. The provision of interactive programs on CD and utilisation of Aboriginal community radio should be investigated together with a partnership with the Anangu education section of the Department of Education and Children's Services as a viable option to deliver education programs in remote communities.

8 *The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens*

8.1 The Adelaide Electoral Education Centre provides sessions to English as a Second Language migrant groups identified through the TAFE citizenship and new arrivals programs. Electoral staff also provide training for Multicultural SA volunteers before elections and speak with migrant community groups assisted by a translator. In acknowledging diversity, this office consults with the Interpreting and Translation Centre to identify language translations that reflect the diversity of the South Australian community.

8.2 Recommendation

8.2.1 The provision of translated material must be maintained and funding for translators for information sessions be made available to ensure ongoing education for this disadvantaged group.

9 *The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory electoral agencies in promoting electoral education.*

9.1 All electoral administrations need to continue to contribute to the development of education and communication strategies that engender in youth an understanding of democracy and how their contribution to the process is pivotal in the maintenance of a healthy democracy.

9.2 Our organisations can compliment the school curriculum by making available high quality resources and support teachers by conducting professional development sessions. All states should have an electoral education centre.

9.3 An electoral educator's conference held in Canberra in October 2005 supported the recommendation that all electoral administrations should collaborate to achieve efficiencies and best practice.

9.4 It must also be noted that some electoral administrations place more emphasis on enrolling students than imparting information. One prime example of lost opportunity for distributing electoral information is when acknowledgment of enrolment cards are distributed by the AEC – a brochure of electoral information should be included.
All electoral administrations are constrained by budgetary considerations.

9.5 Recommendations

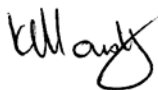
- 9.5.1 Consultation, collaboration and partnerships between federal and state electoral bodies should be encouraged at all levels.
- 9.5.2 Appropriate levels of funding needs to be allocated to support existing programs and develop new ones.
- 9.5.3 The education sector must be consulted on programs and content to ensure relevance of sessions and materials to support the curriculum.
- 9.5.4 All states should have an electoral education centre.

10 *The role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education.*

- 10.1 All electoral administrations endeavour to meet their statutory obligation to provide information and education programs to the wider community.
- 10.2 Due to the diversity that exists in the community, providing appropriate information to the education sector and all eligible electors is something that cannot be achieved unless agencies collaborate. Currently all State/Territory and national electoral agencies contribute to promoting electoral education with individual programs developed in isolation and are in the main, agency specific. As development and production of printed materials and software is costly, agencies need to review current practice.

10.3 Recommendations

- 10.3.1 All agencies should be encouraged to consult and collaborate on the development of support materials. The Electoral Council of Australia information products are an excellent example of national/state/territory co-operation and should be further encouraged and funded.
- 10.3.2 Collaboration will deliver not only cost efficiencies but provide the vehicle for a holistic approach to genuinely contributing to the understanding and growth of civics, the electoral and parliamentary processes and national identity in the community.



K Mousley
Electoral Commissioner (SA)

Date: 16 June 2006