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Ms Sonia Palmieri
Secretary
Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education
Joint Select Committee on Electoral Matters
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Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Palmieri

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Please find attached a submission in respect to the abovementioned inquiry from the NT Electoral Commission.

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to call me on (08) 8999 5814.

Yours sincerely

BILL SHEPHEARD
Electoral Commissioner

6 July 2006



**SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS**

**INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND
ELECTORAL EDUCATION**

Prepared by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC) supports the following:

- The direction of more resources to electoral education by electoral administrations to address the low level of understanding about electoral rights, responsibilities and systems;
- As a general rule, the restriction of the content of electoral education delivered by electoral operations staff to subject matter such as elector rights and responsibilities, broad history of the franchise, community governing structures and the mechanics of our voting systems (with more politically sensitive and subjective topics being picked up by other service providers);
- The maintenance of a highly co-ordinated and integrated system of service delivery for electoral and civics education by the various service providers;
- The inclusion of civics and electoral education in the school curriculum;
- The inclusion of electoral and civics education in the schools as a recurring theme, commencing at senior primary school;
- The greater use of outside school programs to increase public awareness using a customised mix of means to provide both general and targeted information;
- The direction of far greater efforts and resources to address a particularly unacceptable low level of electoral awareness in the indigenous and remote communities;
- The continuing increase in the use of divisional office staff of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) in the delivery of public awareness sessions in schools and the general community;
- The building of even greater co-operation and co-ordination between Commonwealth and State/Territory electoral administrations in respect to delivering electoral education services;
- The establishment of some form of electoral education facility in every capital city (including a very modest form in Alice Springs to cater for all Central Australian communities and the WA and SA remote communities that have Alice Springs as its regional centre);
- The provision of any Commonwealth/State/Territory initiative to generate more visits by schools to State/Territory Parliaments (incorporating a visit to local electoral education facilities where they exist) as a more affordable alternative to visiting the nation's capital; and
- The exploration of new avenues and technological solutions to deliver electoral and civics education, especially in relation to remote areas.

INTRODUCTION

The Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education invited submissions on the adequacy of electoral education focusing on but not limited to:

- Status of Young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system;
- The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education;
- The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non- government school programs;
- The school age at which electoral education should begin;
- The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs;
- The adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities;
- The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens;
- The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State/Territory Commissions in promoting electoral education;
- The access to and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament; and
- Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

This submission systematically comments on all of the matters raised in the terms of reference of the inquiry. As one would expect, however, it will reserve sharpest focus for areas with which the NT Electoral Commission has either direct operational experience or where it is likely to have some unique insights, especially in relation to the special challenges it faces in respect to service delivery where distance and cultural diversity provide special challenges.

BACKGROUND

The Northern Territory Electoral Commission was established in March 2004. Its functions are contained in *Section 309* of the *Electoral Act 2004*. Listed amongst those functions, the Commission is required:

To promote public awareness of matters relating to elections and the Legislative Assembly by conducting education and information programs and in any other way it chooses

Prior to the establishment of the NT Electoral Commission, electoral administration at the Territory level was performed by the NT Electoral Office, a unit of the Department of the Chief Minister. The legislation under which the NT Electoral Office operated did not specify public awareness as a function

and, as a consequence, the office had little involvement with raising public awareness outside the conduct of periodic electoral events.

Since the establishment of the NT Electoral Commission, additional funding has been provided to the agency to meet its new public awareness obligations. A number of initiatives have been undertaken to date to raise public awareness but the agency is still very much in a fledgling state with the establishment of its strategies and working models to raise public awareness in the community.

Whilst there is still much work to be undertaken in relation to program design and implementation, several key strategic directions have already emerged and are underpinning current progress. Most notably these include the adoption of a fully integrated program of electoral services in remote areas, a more collaborative and collegiate approach to service delivery with the Darwin State Office of the Australian Electoral Commission and the establishment of an office in Alice Springs.

Status of Young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

Several studies have taken place over the years that touch on young people's knowledge of the Australian electoral system and their engagement in electoral process. Some of the more noteworthy studies include:

- Youth Electoral Study (Australian Electoral Commission and Australian Research Council)
- Voices and Votes (Queensland Electoral Commission)
- A Qualitative Analysis of Attitudes towards Enrolment and Voting (Australian Electoral Office)

Although the method of testing levels of comprehension and attitudes in these studies have varied and sometimes been criticised, there seems to be little doubt that the current level of understanding and engagement is unacceptably low. Certainly, the anecdotal evidence from those working in the field over the years has strongly supported such an assessment.

Of course, a lack of understanding of electoral systems and responsibilities is not restricted only to the young. Studies and anecdotal evidence also suggest that the wider community also does not have a particularly sound understanding of the fundamental principles and mechanics of our democratic process. In fact, it could be strongly argued that any increased knowledge amongst those in older cohorts may have largely stemmed from the accumulative effect of having more direct involvement as a citizen and a voter over time.

Nevertheless, there is certainly a particular problem with engagement of youth in the electoral process. This is not simply an Australian phenomenon, however, as similar outcomes are being experienced in all comparable international jurisdictions.

Studies and anecdotal evidence as to the reasons for the lack of engagement by the young point not so much to apathy as the root cause but rather to a lack of established connection with governance matters and other commonly held perceptions. These include a perceived inability to have an impact, unfamiliarity with the processes, competing personal priorities, distrust of politicians/political systems, etc.. Furthermore, there is also an undeniable and strong co-relation between the economic, education, numeracy/literacy profile of young eligible electors (and others for that matter) and their propensity to understand and engage in the process.

The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education

By and large, all electoral public awareness programs across the nation seek to produce an informed public on electoral matters which will eventually manifest itself with a high level of meaningful participation at electoral events.

The raising of knowledge (and thereby commitment) in respect to civic responsibilities is potentially one of the most effective means to generate greater interest in understanding a citizen's electoral responsibilities and the electoral systems/processes that are in operation in our democracy . If people can be convinced that good citizenry is both desirable and effective, then more interest will be generated in respect to the machinations of the systems and more meaningful participation in the process should naturally follow.

A number of established bodies have been making a specialised and worthwhile contribution to the education of the public in this country. Primarily, these have included:

- State and Commonwealth electoral administrations
- Parliamentary education and information service providers
- Discovering Democracy and its off shoots
- Schools and other education institutions

Civics education and electoral education are natural extensions of each other and therefore inextricably linked. As a consequence, a co-ordinated, holistic approach from service providers is required.

The NT Electoral Commission believes, however, that, whilst a united approach from the various service providers is highly desirable, some caution needs to be exercised to ensure that those providers do not stray from their own level of expertise and public roles.

For instance, most operative staff of electoral administrations are well placed and probably most appropriate to deliver sessions on some aspects of the history of our democracy, mechanics of current systems, elector's rights and responsibilities, etc.; however, other service providers are better placed and more appropriate to engage in debates and/or political discussions such as the worthiness of legislation, exchanges on philosophical issues, political dynamics, etc.

Apart from of a possible lack of expertise and skills in dealing with the more politically sensitive and subjective issues, staff of electoral administrations need to be particularly conscious of maintaining public confidence in their role as an impartial administrator of the electoral laws of the day.

The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs

With the exception of NSW, it is understood that electoral education is, by and large, discretionary in the school curriculum

The delivery of electoral education through schools will never be really consistent and effective unless it is made mandatory in the school curriculum. At the moment, schools are under a great deal of pressure to include non-core education items in school time and electoral education, whilst undoubtedly deemed important, simply does not currently rate with other competing priorities with many decision makers in the education fraternity.

In the past, there have been several examples where impressive resource kits have been provided to schools by electoral administrations and others but they have failed to produce satisfactory outcomes. Those disappointing results have highlighted the difficulty in achieving success where there is no curriculum compulsion and no widespread groundswell of support by teachers within the school system.

If deemed important enough, civics and electoral education will need to be ongoing and entrenched in our broader education system. Program funding for limited periods such as provided to *Discovering Democracy* will deliver some immediate and noticeable improvement in the short term but a sustained performance is ultimately determined by the take up rate and commitment shown by teachers on the ground.

The school age at which electoral education should begin

To be really effective, electoral education needs to be a recurring theme throughout a child's education. Each stage needs to reinforce earlier learning and move to more complex concepts and issues.

In more recent times, electoral administrations seem to have generally concentrated on secondary schools, especially the latter years of secondary school where students are closer to becoming active in the electoral process. This emphasis on older students has arguably more to do with resource constraints and perhaps may even serve as an indicator as to where electoral education sits in terms of the three fundamental electoral programs (enrolment, election and public awareness).

Senior primary schools provide an ideal target to start building good citizenship and electoral knowledge. Unlike many secondary school students, the pupils of primary schools are more willing participants and it is a less

threatening environment for local presenters such as the AEC's divisional staff who might not have a lot of experience in the education field. Primary school students, in particular, enjoy the conduct of mock elections and annual elections for office on Student Representative Councils invariably provide a great vehicle to engage primary school students in electoral processes and improve their knowledge of them.

Middle schooling will be introduced across the NT in 2008 and the school curriculum and service delivery models will no doubt come under close review in the process. It is therefore perhaps an ideal time for the local educationalists to consider where electoral and citizenship studies sit in the curriculum and how they may best be incorporated. For example, it may have merit for a basic introduction to concepts and mechanics initially in the senior year of primary school, then another wave of reinforcement and introduction of more complex issues in middle school and finally more reinforcement and the introduction of further complex issues in senior high schools.

The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

School children are a large and obvious target in the quest to increase electoral knowledge but there are vast numbers of members of the public contained in other target groups that deserve just as much attention. Relevant also in the NT context, many students do not stay in the school system as long as in other jurisdictions and this limits opportunity to pass on electoral knowledge whilst still at school.

In any case, the mechanics of our electoral system are not well understood by the general public and so further targeting and customising of the public awareness program is required. Each electorate will have its own mix of target groups with each requiring a better understanding of certain aspects of the mechanics of our electoral systems and their elector rights and responsibilities. In the NT, for instance, the following target groups have been identified and receive special attention in the implementation of the NT's public awareness program:

- School students (including School of the Air students)
- New Citizens
- Electors from Non English Speaking backgrounds
- Highly mobile electors
- Indigenous electors
- New Territorians
- Disabled electors
- Remote electors
- Senior Citizens
- Prisoners
- Occupational groups with term postings (e.g. teachers, medical staff, defence forces, etc.)

Obviously, the abovementioned groups have their own set of specific needs in terms of electoral information. For instance, new Territorians need to know that voting is compulsory at all three levels of government in the NT, the occupational groups on term postings need to know they must enrol for their “real place of living”, some senior citizens would be interested in “itinerant” elector registration if they intend embarking on extended travel or registration as a General Postal Voter because of infirmity, remote electors need to be informed about registration as registered postal voters and defence personnel about to be posted overseas need to know that, for NT elections at least, they can apply to be registered as a postal voter for up to three months before an election is announced.

Of course, the program for raising public awareness that is directed at the general public needs to take a more generic approach and there are a number of means that can and have been used to good effect. The program can be advanced productively with a mix of TV advertising (especially the Imparja network in remote Australia), radio advertising (especially on local networks where costs are low and options may exist to deliver in local language in some remote areas), press advertising, media publicity releases, special promotions (e.g. stalls at public events), tailored presentations to interest groups (e.g. University of the Third Age, disabled groups, etc.) and various publications.

The adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities

Nearly 30% of the NT constituency is indigenous. The vast majority of these people live in remote communities and town-camps in regional centres. The provision of face-to-face electoral educational services to indigenous communities therefore poses significant logistical challenges and is very much resource intensive.

In the NT, the remote areas also generally feature at the low end of any scale of measurement in relation to economic, education and numeracy/literacy. Moreover, the age spread of the population in remote areas is also heavily skewed towards the younger cohorts, unlike the more conventional age dispersion pattern of the more urbanised areas.

A recent, small scale, in-house survey of over a hundred non-voters in the NT Legislative Assembly’s Division of Stuart was conducted after the 2005 Legislative Assembly General Election. The Division of Stuart covers a large proportion of the remote areas of Central Australia and has the lowest participation rates of all NT Divisions.

The Division of Stuart survey reported that 85% of the non voters were either illiterate or had a low literacy level. In addition, it also identified 96% of those non voters as having a language other than English as the main language spoken at home.

The general level of participation and informal voting in remote areas provides further insight as to the electoral public awareness needs of these areas. At

the 2005 Legislative Assembly General Election, the turnout figure for urban Divisions was 85% whilst for remote Divisions it was 70%. At those same elections, the informal voting rate was 3.2% for urban Divisions and 4.9% for remote Divisions.

Although participation in remote areas can be influenced by a few factors, it is fair to say that a lack of electoral awareness is having an impact on particularly poor turnout rates. Moreover, the high informal voting level also lends support to this contention. This high informal rate is even more disturbing, bearing in mind that it is greatly mitigated by a particularly high level of assisted voting (for which no reliable figures have been compiled in recent times) and clear evidence from informal vote surveys indicated that electors in remote areas are not wilfully casting informal votes at anywhere near the rate of their metropolitan counterparts.

Through its ATSEIS program (and its predecessor, AEEP), the Australian Electoral Office/Commission provided a face-to-face enrolment and electoral education service to remote areas from the late 1970's through to the late 1990's. At its height, it had 4 full-time field officers operating throughout the NT. This longstanding program was abruptly curtailed and, since that time, the level of face-to-face delivery of education services and application of resources to this task has dropped off appreciably. In addition, the cessation of ATSIC elections in recent times has also meant a significant loss of opportunity to raise electoral education amongst indigenous electors.

In the NT, the Australian Electoral Commission restructured its Darwin State/Divisional office in 2002 and, in doing so, provided some increased staff capacity to provide enrolment and educational services to remote areas. Although the workloads undertaken by its permanent field staff under the new structure have been admirable, it has fallen well short of the resources and field time that was allocated in the days when ATSEIS/AEEP was in full swing and ATSIC elections were being regularly conducted.

Although the recent Division of Stuart participation survey was relatively small, it serves to remind us that the indigenous population in remote areas are very mobile and not very conversant with their rights/responsibilities and the voting options available to them.

Of those surveyed in the Division of Stuart, over 25% reported that they did not attend polling because they were staying in a neighbouring community (believing they couldn't vote there) whilst another 14% said they were travelling. In addition, a further 4% confessed to not participating because they did not understand the voting process.

Recent changes to Commonwealth electoral legislation - much of which directly affects Territory and local government electors in the NT - has significantly heightened the need for a greater level of elector education in the immediate future. This is especially the case in respect to indigenous and remote electors who are rightfully identified to be most affected by the new

provisions that cover Proof of Identity for enrolment and the earlier close of rolls at Commonwealth elections.

In this context, it is pleasing to note that the Commonwealth Government has recognised the need to raise public awareness of these electoral changes by making a substantial appropriation to publicise the new legislation. The final design and implementation of that public awareness program, however, needs to be particularly mindful that raising public awareness on any subject matter in the remote areas of the NT can only be done effectively with generous allocations of time and resources.

Raising public awareness in indigenous communities presents quite a challenge but experience has shown that the best results are achieved where:

- Local people are enlisted to assist;
- A local champion or sponsor for the cause exists;
- Sessions are conducted face-to-face
- Information is delivered when elections are about to be conducted or have recently occurred;
- Hands-on activities are included for participants;
- Written material or oral presentations are made both in English and local dialect and are culturally sensitive;
- Certain sections of the community are specifically targeted (e.g. youth, non voters, etc.) and those particular sessions are customised to suit;
- Educational support material contains a high degree of local content (e.g. local electoral event, local personalities); and
- Graphics and colour is used widely in published material.

Simple messages may be imparted effectively over local radio networks and TV (especially in local language) whilst more detailed presentations need to be organised through established community groups (e.g. schools, women's centre, school excursions to regional centres, etc.)

The costly nature of service provision to remote areas also means that electoral administrations need to provide a fully integrated service whenever they are involved in fieldwork. To ensure cost effectiveness, visits to remote communities should take a multi-pronged attack on all three electoral program areas by conducting enrolment reviews and addressing election planning issues, as well as raising electoral public awareness.

The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens

Electoral education of migrant citizens conducted by NT electoral administrations has been fairly limited. This is perhaps surprising, given Darwin's cosmopolitan profile.

Generally speaking, efforts so far have been restricted to officers attending citizenship ceremonies and meetings of the NT Settlement Planning Committee and a small number of English as a Second Language adult learning classes.

It has been identified that the outreach program to this to the migrant group needs to be bolstered in the NT. A joint working party of both Electoral Commissions in the NT has recently turned its attention to this particular target group and increased efforts to reach it can be expected over the coming year. In particular, the possibility of introducing citizenship sessions as run in other States will be explored with other NT agencies and organisations and, hopefully, these will eventually be conducted, providing sufficient interest can be generated.

The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State/Territory Commissions in promoting electoral education

Both the Australian Electoral Commission and the NT Electoral Commission have important roles to play in electoral education.

Nationally, there is potential to further extend the participation of the Australian Electoral Commission's divisional office network in the delivery of electoral education. Its divisional offices are generally located in every Commonwealth Division and therefore are well situated to generate interest and deliver basic presentations locally, provided Divisional staff are motivated and trained to do so. It is understood the Australian Electoral Commission is currently developing its capacity in that regard.

In the NT, both Commissions enjoy a very collaborative approach to electoral service delivery. Key planks of this approach have been the following:

- The establishment of a joint electoral office that provides a one-stop-shop for electoral services in Alice Springs;
- The establishment of a conjoint working party for Joint Electoral Services and Programs (JESP Working Party) that pools resources and manages the delivery of integrated electoral services to the NT constituency; and
- Using community government elections and other project opportunities as springboards for the delivery of the enrolment, election and public awareness in remote areas

Furthermore, the NT Electoral Commission is fully supportive of the AEC's current initiative to standardise service delivery in remote areas. It particularly supports the use of electoral resources located in Darwin and Alice Springs to service areas of WA, SA and Queensland that immediately adjoin the NT boundaries. The populations of these areas move readily across State boundaries and it is important that service delivery in those areas is consistent with those provided in the NT and vice versa.

The access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament

School visits to Canberra that incorporate a visit to Federal Parliament and the AEC's well-resourced Electoral Education Centre represent an exciting

and effective way for schoolchildren to build their knowledge on civics and electoral matters. The quality of the services provided in Canberra by the service providers are of the highest order and have received widespread acclaim.

Unfortunately though, current subsidies simply do not provide sufficient support for many schools to take advantage of this great opportunity. This is especially true in respect to young people who live in areas outside of the capital cities on the eastern seaboard and particularly those who live in remote areas. Further exacerbating the situation caused by geographical and cost barriers is the fact that, whilst all States and Territories provide a State Parliament visitor program, not all of them have an electoral education centre to compliment their services.

Outside of Canberra, State based education centres are run either by the AEC on its own or in partnership with a State electoral administration in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. For a time, a small resourced facility was also provided at the Sydney State office of the AEC but this is not the case anymore.

With the possible exception of Sydney which is situated relatively close to the outstanding facilities and services provided in the nation's capital, electoral administrations in Brisbane, Hobart and Darwin currently cannot offer locals the same high quality services that are delivered in those capital cities that operate a State based electoral education centre service.

The NTEC would support any move to roll out education centre facilities in all capital cities. In the NT's case, the roll out could be done on a very small scale at an extremely modest cost and the NTEC would be willing to explore sharing responsibility for its running with the AEC. Moreover, given the parlous state of electoral education in remote areas, the NTEC would also contemplate providing another very modest facility as part of its joint office with the AEC in Alice Springs. Provision of facilities in both Darwin and Alice Springs would allow officers stationed there to co-ordinate and deliver sessions to remote electors who periodically visit those regional centres reasonably in the normal course of business or as part of school excursions (e.g. when the Legislative Assembly sits in Alice Springs). Also, in the case of Alice Springs and to a lesser extent Darwin, services could also be extended to visitors from certain locations in WA and SA that use either Darwin or Alice Springs as their regional service hub.

Of course, any electoral education centre facility that would be established would not be restricted to school visitors alone. Other target groups mentioned earlier could also use the facility.

The NTEC would also support any Commonwealth or Territory initiative that might encourage or support more school visits to the Legislative Assembly Parliament (with a complimentary local electoral education facility should one ever be established). Where a trip to Canberra is really cost prohibitive for

schools, visits to Territory offerings represent a worthwhile and affordable alternative.

Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

There is no substitute to face-to-face, interactive presentations for maximum effectiveness; however, there also needs to be a variety of alternative measures available to deliver electoral and civics education where an in-person approach is not possible. This is especially the case in the NT, where logistical constraints limit opportunities to deliver material personally.

Opportunities to introduce creative approaches to electoral education generally lie with the greater use of technology and finding new avenues to access the public. In the NT context, these might currently include:

- Development of new distance learning tools and materials;
- Accessing initiatives of the new NT Distance Learning Service;
- Accessing the 6 hub secondary schools in remote areas that are planned to be established by 2008;
- Availing any opportunity to include electoral and civics education in curriculum changes associated with middle schooling initiative (Years 7-9);
- Establishing and nurturing relationships with schools and teachers (especially re-establishing sponsored teacher-in-service training for remote teachers, provided downstream session delivery is a commitment made by participants);
- Greater customising of presentations and materials for a range of local target groups, especially in electronic form that can be easily updated and transmitted;
- Development and promotion of internet based material, including the establishment of the NTEC's website as a user-friendly and highly customised resource repository;
- Using Continuous Roll Update mail outs to carry public awareness messages/pamphlets; and
- Using the new demand powers under the Commonwealth Electoral Act to access target groups with relevant information.

In relation to the above, the new NT Distance Learning Service deserves particular mention as it potentially opens up some great opportunities for delivery of education in remote areas. Under this initiative, the NT Government has earmarked \$12m a year towards establishing a greatly improved distance learning service. The new service will, amongst other things:

- Bring the Alice Springs School of the Air, Katherine School of the Air and the NT Open Education Centre under one framework;

- Place 10 new Regional Learning Agents to support teachers and students in remote communities;
- Trial a “virtual school” at an urban or regional high school to allow specialist teachers to deliver lessons across the whole Territory;
- Trial the extension of education services to the end of Year 9 by the Katherine School of the Air;
- Provide 60 new Interactive Distance Learning sites complete with satellite dishes and new computer; and
- Produce new Distance Learning Materials and an ICT Innovation Unit which will tailor teaching and learning materials to meet remote Territory and indigenous student’s needs.