

Indigenous Australians

Introduction

- 5.1 In 1984, legislative reforms extended compulsory enrolment requirements to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (herewith referred to as Indigenous Australians or Indigenous people), granting them the same enrolment and voting rights enjoyed by the majority of Australians. Yet a higher than average proportion of Indigenous people remain disenfranchised. This chapter examines some of the factors which are inhibiting Indigenous Australians from participating in Australia's democratic processes, and examines the strategies being developed and implemented in an effort to combat the problem.
- 5.2 It is important to note that this chapter devotes much of its attention to remote dwelling Indigenous people, which overlooks the fact that a majority of the Indigenous population live in major cities or regional areas. However, this is a reflection of the weight of evidence obtained by the Committee which addressed the particular challenges of providing civics and electoral education to Indigenous people in remote communities.
- 5.3 It also reflects the estimation that Indigenous people living in urban centres are more likely to vote than those in regional or remote areas. For example, in the 2005 Northern Territory Legislative Assembly General Election, the turnout figure for urban Divisions was 85 per cent whilst for

remote Divisions it was 70 per cent.¹ Furthermore, evidence suggests a considerable gap in literacy between remote and urban Indigenous communities. The Centre for Independent Studies stated:

There is an alarming educational gap facing remote Aboriginal communities. The gap in literacy between remote and urban Aboriginal children is even bigger than the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children... Literacy levels among children and adults in remote communities are seriously low. Nationally in 2004, 83% of Aboriginal students and 93% of students overall in Year 3 achieved the literacy benchmark for their year. But Northern Territory data tells us that only 20% of Aboriginal students in remote communities in the Northern Territory achieved the benchmark.²

5.4 The chapter is divided into three sections:

- the first section, which concerns Indigenous Australians' civic engagement, looks at factors likely to impact on enrolment levels in Indigenous communities, and examines public awareness activities being undertaken by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and state/territory electoral commissions targeting Indigenous Australians;
- the second section deals with Indigenous Australians' civic knowledge, from students through to school-leavers; and
- the final part of this chapter examines the practical activities associated with the conduct of elections and the appropriateness of these activities in ensuring Indigenous people are equipped to cast a formal vote, particularly during mobile polling in remote communities.

Civic Engagement

Enrolment trends

5.5 As no precise figures are available, the Committee must rely on anecdotal evidence which suggests that Indigenous Australians remain under represented on the electoral roll. The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC submitted

1 Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 98*, p. 9.

2 Storry, K. (2006), *Tackling literacy in remote Aboriginal communities*, The Centre for Independent Studies, Issues Analysis No. 73, 31 August 2006. Available online: <<http://www.cis.org.au/IssueAnalysis/ia73/ia73.pdf>>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

that in her home state of Western Australia, an estimated 15 to 20 per cent of Indigenous citizens in remote communities are not enrolled, compared with an estimated five to seven per cent of unenrolled people across the rest of the state.³

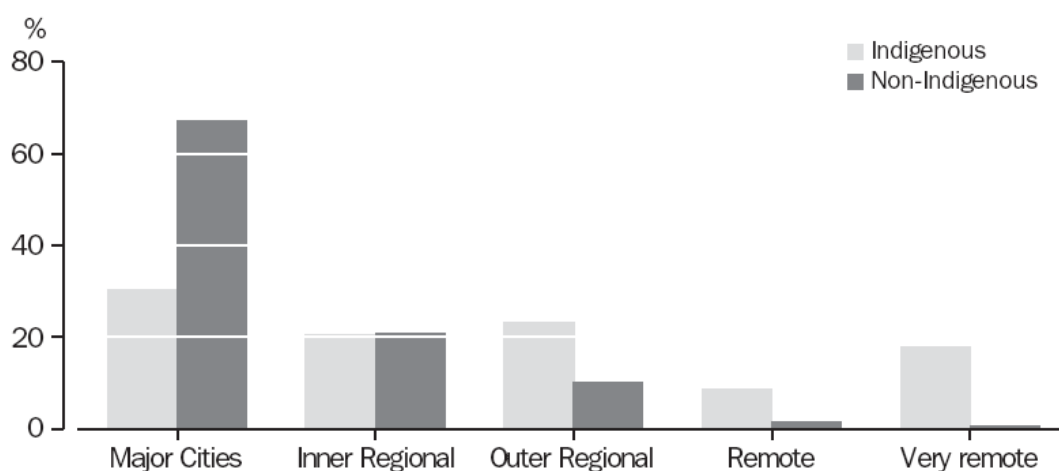
- 5.6 At 30 June 2001 the estimated resident Indigenous population of Australia was 458 520 or 2.4 per cent of the total population (see Table 5.1 below). While many Indigenous Australians live in major cities of Australia, a much greater proportion than in the general population live in remote parts of Australia (see Figure 5.1 below).

Table 5.1 Estimated resident Indigenous population of Australia (as at 30 June 2001)

State/Territory	Estimated Indigenous population	Proportion of the total Australian Indigenous population	
		no.	%
New South Wales	134 888	29.4	2.1
Victoria	27 846	6.1	0.6
Queensland	125 910	27.5	3.5
South Australia	25 544	5.6	1.7
Western Australia	65 931	14.4	3.5
Tasmania	17 384	3.8	3.7
Northern Territory	56 875	12.4	28.8
Australian Capital Territory	3 909	0.9	1.2
Total	458,520	100.0	2.4

Source: ABS, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, 2001*.

Figure 5.1 Estimated resident population by remoteness areas (2001)



Source: ABS, *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, 2001*.

3 Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

5.7 In 2003, the AEC reported on a series of workshops conducted under its service charter in order to gain an insight into its customers' perceptions about enrolment, voting and the services provided by the AEC. As part of this series of workshops, the Commission held workshops in Darwin and Alice Springs which enabled the AEC to gather feedback from Indigenous electors about its services. The AEC reported that one of the main messages from its Indigenous clients was that:

they want information about how they can participate in enrolment and voting.⁴

Barriers to Indigenous electoral participation

5.8 Factors which impact on enrolment levels and voter participation in Indigenous communities include literacy and numeracy levels, cultural activities, school retention rates, health and social conditions, as well as the general remoteness of Indigenous communities and the transient nature of their inhabitants.

5.9 The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) noted in its submission that participation by Indigenous Australians in mainstream democratic processes 'is often viewed with skepticism, anxiety and distrust'.⁵

5.10 In 2002, the then State Secretary of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Ms Trudy Maluga stated that 'many Aborigines do not consider themselves part of the Australian nation and so have deliberately decided not to vote in white elections.'⁶

5.11 The challenge of engaging Indigenous people in the election process is further exacerbated by the act of voting being perceived as 'irrelevant' to their everyday lives. Mr Brian Moore, an experienced remote polling officer, stated that:

'Relevance' is a word which really strikes home when you are dealing with Indigenous communities.⁷

5.12 ISCA concurred that Indigenous people are often not active participants in democratic processes 'unless their own local council or lands governance body is active and promotes that broader participation.'⁸

4 Australian Electoral Commission, 2003, Annual Report 2002-03, p. 104.

5 Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission no. 89*, p. 6.

6 Cited in Sanders, W., 2003, *The Tasmanian electoral roll trial in the 2002 ATSIC Elections*, ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper No. 245/2003, p. 9.

7 Mr Brian Moore, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 14.

- 5.13 WA Electoral Commissioner, Mr Warwick Gately, explained the ongoing difficulties the WA Electoral Commission faced in keeping Indigenous citizens in remote communities involved in electoral processes:

...from the experience that we see in those remote communities, I imagine that because of the transient nature and because of the lack of consideration as to how government and politics affect them they essentially opt out of the electoral process.

Notwithstanding our programs to get them enrolled and to keep them active in the process, they just seem to fall through the net.⁹

The impact of cultural activities

- 5.14 Cultural activities also affect participation rates of Indigenous Australians. The itinerant nature of some in the Indigenous population means that many community members are regularly moving to other settlements, sometimes for months at a time, and often crossing state borders. According to the Hon. Shelley Archer, absences from polling places may be caused by:

...anything from family funerals in other locations, to being in sorry camp, to hunting and fishing.¹⁰

- 5.15 Mourning or 'sorry' camp occurs when a family member has passed away and usually extended family groups will congregate and withdraw from access. Where a prominent elder of a community has died, the entire population of an Indigenous community may form a sorry camp. The unpredictability attached to the timing of sorry camp can add to the logistical difficulties encountered by electoral staff. WA Electoral Commissioner, Mr Warwick Gately, stated:

We are trying to give some formality to a remote and rural strategy where we get into the communities as best we can. That is difficult in itself. Quite often we have turned up to find that there is a sorry camp for different reasons and you cannot get access to talk to them.¹¹

- 5.16 It was acknowledged during the inquiry that the importance attached to some of the cultural activities of Indigenous people meant that there was

8 Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission no. 89*, p. 6.

9 Mr Warwick Gately (WA Electoral Commissioner), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, pp. 4-5.

10 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 3.

11 Mr Warwick Gately (Western Australian Electoral Commissioner), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 5.

no simple solution to addressing some of these issues. The Hon. Shelley Archer noted:

It is unlikely, for example, that voting would be given precedence over sorry business.¹²

- 5.17 Mrs Archer argued that electoral education of Indigenous people was necessary. She noted that many cultural activities would not preclude Indigenous people from submitting an absent or postal vote, if they were aware that such options existed and what those processes involved.¹³ The following section examines electoral education programmes and strategies undertaken by the AEC.

AEC service delivery to Indigenous Australians

Public awareness programmes

- 5.18 In the lead up to federal elections, the AEC conducts public awareness for Indigenous communities through the Community Electoral Information Officer (CEIO) programme. The AEC's submission noted the following activities which were conducted prior to the 2004 election:
- 22 CEIOs visited over 600 Indigenous communities and organisations, encouraging enrolment and conducting public awareness sessions.
 - An 8 minute-long video on enrolling and voting – *Vote, It's Important* – together with a brochure reinforcing the messages contained in the video, was distributed to communities and organisations via CEIOs and AEC State and Divisional Office contacts.
 - A variety of printed materials, also with the *Vote, It's Important* theme, were distributed to Indigenous communities and organisations via CEIOs and AEC State and Divisional Office contacts. Posters were also inserted in 4 editions of the *Koori Mail*.
 - Six 'infomercials' on enrolling and voting were included in the *Beyond their Limits* television program on Imparja Television (broadcast from Alice Springs, NT).¹⁴
- 5.19 The AEC also attends indigenous festivals and sporting carnivals to conduct electoral education. For example, AEC staff deliver education sessions at the Croc Festival, an annual civics related event held in a

12 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLA (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

13 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLA (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

14 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 73*, p. 14.

number of locations around Australia that builds partnerships whilst celebrating youth and culture in rural and remote communities.¹⁵

5.20 The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory acknowledged certain difficulties in conducting public awareness in Indigenous communities. The Association stated:

...raising public awareness on any subject matter (in remote areas) 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.¹⁶

5.21 The importance of the formulation and presentation of electoral education programmes targeting Indigenous people to be culturally sensitive was reinforced throughout the Committee's inquiry. The Hon. Shelley Archer suggested that prior to the development of an electoral education programme, there needs to be a detailed and culturally sensitive examination of the issues impacting on Indigenous communities in conjunction with leaders of those communities. While she acknowledged that the issues are complex, Mrs Archer stated that there is an obligation to develop special programmes to meet the needs of Indigenous Australians, adding that:

Failure to do so disenfranchises a group which is already the most disadvantaged in Australian society.¹⁷

15 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 15.

16 Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 98*, p. 10.

17 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 7.

5.22 While acknowledging the significant efforts being undertaken by the AEC and the WA Electoral Commission, Mrs Archer was critical that education programmes appear to be focused on enrolment and, as a result, there is 'little by way of systematic education about more general electoral matters'.¹⁸ Mrs Archer stated:

...the turnout figures for the remote Aboriginal communities are so poor that the efficacy of these various activities has to be questioned.¹⁹

5.23 Taking into consideration resource availability and logistical challenges, the majority of evidence relating to Indigenous electors suggested that the most effective time in which to conduct electoral education in remote communities was in the lead up to an election. Mr Brian Moore suggested combining the delivery of electoral education with the conducting of roll checks.²⁰

5.24 Mrs Archer questioned whether the delivery of electoral education immediately prior to elections was significant enough to achieve real change. She contended that further research, as well as a significant injection of funds, is required to deliver an ongoing education programme. Mrs Archer stated:

...what is required is a continuing education and training program rather than occasional visits and a flurry of activity prior to elections. Such a program needs to be directed towards ensuring that indigenous electors – particularly those in the remote communities – are made aware of and understand electoral processes generally, and of the options (such as absent, provisional and postal voting) available for other than attendance at a polling place within the electorate in which the elector is registered.²¹

5.25 This view was supported by NT Electoral Commissioner, Mr Bill Shepherd, who stated:

...one thing that comes through pretty loud and clear is that you have to have an ongoing program. And you have to build networks within communities. Those communities operate more on what you might call a congenial basis than a transactional basis.

18 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

19 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

20 Mr Brian Moore, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 15.

21 The Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

So you need to build relationships fairly strongly in those communities.²²

Taking a more comprehensive approach

- 5.26 The AEC acknowledged that it has been investigating ways to improve its service to Indigenous Australians. The Commission is developing a North and Central Australia Regional Electoral Strategy, which takes into account areas of Queensland, Western Australia, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands in South Australia and the western part of New South Wales. The strategy will look at public awareness programmes and enrolment activities with the aim of enhancing electoral knowledge and improving the accuracy of the electoral roll in remote areas.²³ The AEC emphasised that the strategy aimed to target all people in rural and remote areas covered by the strategy, not just Indigenous Australians.²⁴
- 5.27 The AEC has moved towards the delivery of an integrated service for conducting fieldwork in remote areas, where education and information programmes are now being combined with roll checks and other enrolment activities in an effort to target these audiences more effectively.²⁵
- 5.28 For example, a two-year project has commenced in north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory where AEC staff in the Northern Territory are working with traditional elders, community representatives, community councils and resource centres in north-east Arnhem Land. The project links polling, education, and enrolment strategies into an integrated election plan with significant local community involvement and ownership in an effort to increase electoral participation and reduce informal voting.²⁶
- 5.29 The Australian Electoral Commissioner acknowledged that in developing electoral strategies for Indigenous people, sometimes the question of those who reside in urban areas can be 'lost a little bit'.²⁷ The AEC has therefore begun preliminary work focusing on Indigenous people in urban areas

22 Mr William Shephard (Northern Territory Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 November 2006, p. 3.

23 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 14.

24 Mr Ian Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 4.

25 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 14.

26 Australian Electoral Commission, *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 88.

27 Mr Ian Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, pp. 4-5.

which is still in its embryonic stage.²⁸ With respect to the delivery of electoral education to Indigenous Australians in urban areas of the Northern Territory, the AEC has arrangements in place with Indigenous representative organisations. The Commission stated:

The delivery of electoral education to urban indigenous people is co-ordinated within these partnerships, using interpreters from these organisations to assist with delivery of the sessions.²⁹

Committee comment

- 5.30 As is the case with all Australians citizens, Indigenous people are obliged to enrol to vote. While there are no precise figures, the Committee is concerned that many Indigenous Australians may not be enrolled. The Committee also notes that non-voting in federal, state or local elections are considered a legitimate form of 'protest' in certain remote communities.
- 5.31 The Committee appreciates the collaborative efforts being made by federal, state and territory electoral commissions in reaching this target group, and welcomes initiatives which seek to maximise the effectiveness of electoral officers' visits to remote communities. The Committee encourages these commissions to continue with their 'comprehensive' approach in these communities.
- 5.32 It is clear that simple, straightforward messages, with an emphasis on visual material, appear to be the most effective when targeting Indigenous communities. The Committee further encourages electoral commissions to use effective advertising campaigns involving role models such as sportspeople, which carry a simple, yet effective message. The Committee also commends the collaboration evident between the AEC and its Western Australian counterpart in producing the Story Book for electoral awareness purposes and suggests that these story books continue to be produced.
- 5.33 The Committee cautions all electoral commissions to work collaboratively with each other and with Indigenous leaders when timing their visits to remote communities. It should not be the case that field officers arrive in a community only to find that its members are on a 'sorry' camp. Better awareness of the community's activities and an understanding of the community's cultural practices may be required by electoral commission

28 Mr Ian Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, pp. 4-5.

29 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p 15.

staff. The AEC may need to develop a more appropriate training manual for its staff in relation to dealing with Indigenous communities.

Civic Knowledge

Challenges for the provision of civics education to school aged children

- 5.34 Submission argued that learning programmes in civics education need to be developed with special consideration for Indigenous students, having regard for the low literacy and numeracy levels in Indigenous communities.
- 5.35 The Constitution Education Fund-Australia (CEF-A) further argued that civics and electoral education should be taught:
- in a manner which reflects the nature of the indigenous community, while using a model they can educationally support and resource.³⁰
- 5.36 CEF-A explained how it had achieved this in 2005 when it brought Indigenous students from Yirrara College in Kintore – a remote Indigenous community in Central Australia – to Canberra as part of its Democracy in Schools Programme. CEF-A stated:
- The education was provided with great care as to literacy and linguistic needs. Students welcomed the opportunity to present their work in the format of works of art instead of in a more formal written piece of work or oral presentation. This is reflective of the need to teach civics in a range of different media for the benefit of diverse school populations.³¹
- 5.37 The Committee travelled to a remote community to speak informally with teachers from a school with predominantly Indigenous students. During these discussions, the Committee heard that much of the content of the *Discovering Democracy* programme is unsuitable for Indigenous school children given their low literacy levels; English often being a second language. Rather, teachers find themselves having to develop modified programmes with an emphasis on visuals.

30 Constitution Education Fund-Australia, *Submission no. 73*, p. 10.

31 Constitution Education Fund-Australia, *Submission no. 73*, p. 10.

5.38 The Australian Education Union submitted that:

It would be valuable to investigate developing innovative programs which investigate ways of building upon the cultural experiences of young Indigenous people in ways which facilitate their understanding of the legal electoral processes whilst also respecting and facilitating their cultural development within their own communities.

It should also be remembered that it is valuable for all students, whether Indigenous or not, to study other cultures, especially those of our Indigenous people, as part of a wider understanding of different ways decisions can be made and democracy operate.³²

5.39 It was submitted that a key factor in providing civics education in remote communities is the training of teachers working in classrooms with Indigenous students. The Committee was advised that often teachers are posted to remote locations with no specific training in teaching Indigenous people.

5.40 A 1998 Senate Committee report into the status of the teaching profession was critical of the fact that teacher training courses do little to prepare people specifically for teaching in smaller schools in remote areas, or to familiarise students with the particular issues facing Indigenous students.³³

5.41 Young teachers, particularly, are more prevalent in schools in remote areas, and even where they have come from university, they are often ill-equipped to teach civics and electoral education, lacking knowledge about the Australian parliamentary system and preferential voting. The AEC acknowledged that when it conducts school visits in remote areas, often it is the teachers who derive the most benefit.

5.42 The Committee also heard that much of the resource material available to teachers was not pitched at a suitable level for Indigenous students:

Those schools in more isolated settings have particular difficulties in implementing the [*Discovering Democracy*] program, although there are some outstanding examples of how particular teachers in isolated areas have been able to achieve successful outcomes from the program on the strength of their own initiative. Such problems

32 Australian Education Union, *Submission no. 48*, p. 11.

33 Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Committee, 1998, *A Class Act – Inquiry into the status of the teaching profession*, Parliament of Australia. Available online: <http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/completed_inquiries/1996-99/teachers/report/>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

have been exacerbated for some teachers and students by the absence of teaching and learning materials reflecting relevance to local groups such as indigenous populations.³⁴

- 5.43 The Association of Independent Schools of South Australia, cited comments made by a principal of one of its member schools with an Indigenous population of 72 per cent. The principal had indicated that:

...he did not see any major difference in the engagement in the curriculum or in the projects that the school has in connecting to the community between the Indigenous students in the school and other students. Secondly, contrary to some other advice that we have received from other schools, he indicated that often the Indigenous students were more passionate and had a better understanding of some of the major social issues, such as social justice issues, and were engaging more in debates on those issues than other students.³⁵

- 5.44 During informal discussions with teachers from a remote Indigenous school, the Committee was told that reading levels are not necessarily a good indication of academic ability. Teachers from the school explained that reading levels purely measure students' English reading, and does not reflect their ability to engage in discussions on complex issues, and offer their own opinions.

Targeting school-leavers

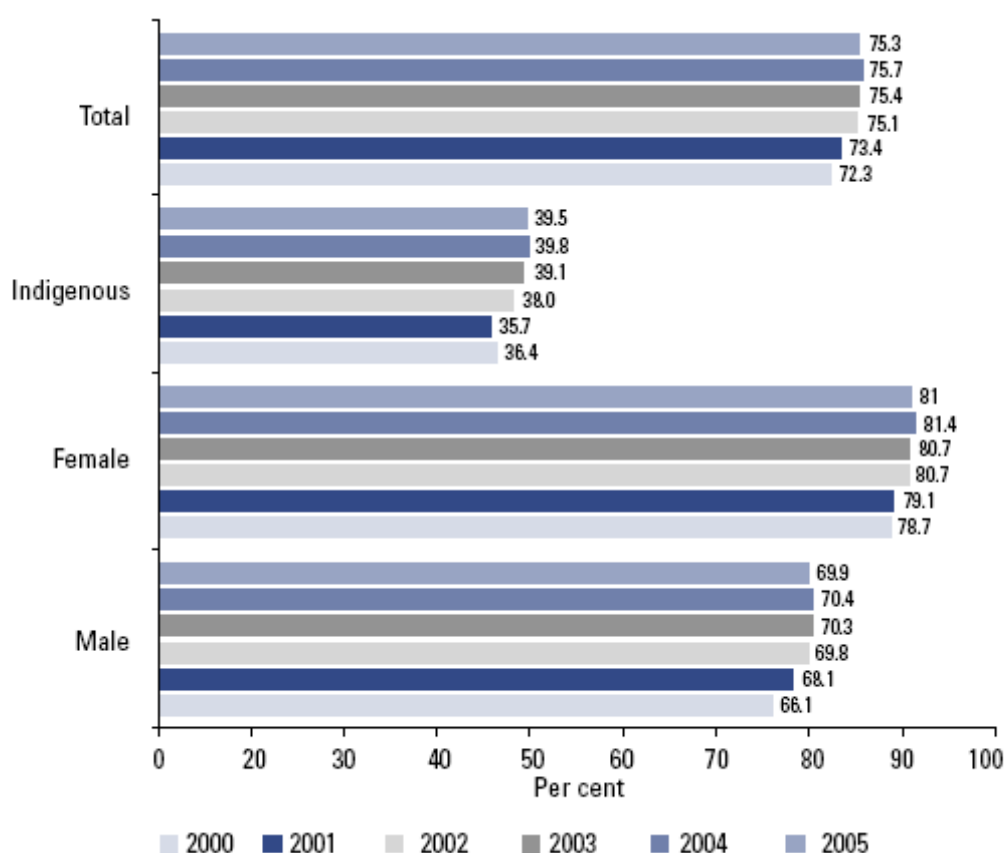
- 5.45 Indigenous teenagers experience social and cultural changes which impact on their likelihood to continue their education up to secondary school leaving age. The apparent retention rates of Indigenous students from the commencement of their secondary schooling through to Years 10, 11 and 12 remains at levels which are significantly below those of non-Indigenous students (see Figure 5.2, p.98). These statistics reinforce the need for a mechanism to engage school-leavers who miss out on civics education taught in the classroom.
- 5.46 During its visit to a remote community, the Committee noted that there was a particular emphasis on youth services, and that this was a reflection of the lower life expectancy rates in Indigenous communities which yield a relatively young demographic compared to the rest of Australia.

34 Department of Education, Science and Training, *Submission no. 100*, Attachment B, p. 9.

35 Mr Gary Le Duff (Association of Independent Schools of South Australia), *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 3.

5.47 In informal discussions with the Committee, the AEC identified that young people in Indigenous communities tend to rely heavily on mentors or community leaders. It is therefore important that mentors and community leaders are identified and targeted in both promoting civic engagement and in assisting with electoral awareness programmes. The AEC acknowledged that this is one of the challenges it faces – to build networks with Indigenous communities to the extent that it is able to identify these leaders, so that they can assist in delivering electoral education.

Figure 5.2 Apparent retention rate of full-time students from Year 7/8 to Year 12



Source: Department of Education, Science and Training, Annual Report 2005-06, p. 31.

The 'tyranny of distance'

The tyranny of distance affects so much of what we are able to do – for example, when we look at very remote communities that are inaccessible by car in the wet season and may have interrupted

or irregular flights. So the cost of delivering any educational services in remote areas is enormous.³⁶

- 5.48 Access to broadband and telecommunications services in regional areas of Australia is a key factor in the delivery of electoral education. A 2003-04 survey of 274 Indigenous communities in Western Australia revealed that only 14 per cent had access to the Internet, with 18 per cent having access to computers,³⁷ although evidence to this inquiry suggested that the situation was improving.
- 5.49 For example, some of Western Australia's most remote communities are soon to benefit from access to broadband and telecommunication facilities. Broadband will be extended to the remote desert communities of Warburton, Jameson, Blackstone, Wingellina, Wanarn and Warakurna within the Ngaanyatjarraku Shire which has invested heavily in information-technology infrastructure.³⁸ Work is also underway to provide broadband to regional towns and communities in the Kimberley region under a \$1.8 million joint initiative between the WA State Government and the Commonwealth Government.³⁹
- 5.50 During informal discussions with the Committee, the AEC acknowledged that the provision of resources for teachers in remote areas was an area where there was room for improvement. The AEC noted that while it has generally sent out resource kits to a mail address on the assumption that technology had not reached remote areas, it now recognised that an increasing number of schools in remote communities do have access to broadband. One community visited by the Committee during this inquiry had invested significantly in fibre optic cables and broadband.
- 5.51 While investment in broadband in remote communities has begun, its impact on the delivery of civics and electoral education has not yet been great. During a roundtable hearing in Darwin, the Committee asked a group of civics and electoral educators from the Northern Territory

36 Ms Debra Liddiard-Taruminggi (NT Department of Employment, Education and Training), *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 November 2006, p. 25.

37 Department of Industry and Resources (WA), Response to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Discussion Paper on Backing Australia's Ability, May 2006, p. 2. Available online: <http://www.dcita.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/40914/Western_Australian_Department_of_Industry_and_Resources.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

38 F. Logan MLA (WA), Minister for Energy; Resources; Industry and Enterprise, *Broadband access for desert communities*, media release, 22 June 2006.

39 Office of Science, Technology and Innovation (WA), *State of the Future*, Edition 1, September 2006. Available online: <http://www.doir.wa.gov.au/documents/businessandindustry/State_of_the_Future_Sep_06.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

whether the distance barrier had been broken down by the internet and the various facilities available through the internet. The consensus was that it had not. Ms Debra Liddiard-Taruminggi from the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training, stated:

We have a lot of bandwidth delivery issues – those basic technological bugs that stop things happening the way they would happen in an ideal situation.⁴⁰

5.52 In addition to accessibility to internet facilities, the South Australian Electoral Office suggested that the provision of interactive programmes on CD and the utilisation of community radio in remote Indigenous communities should be investigated.⁴¹

5.53 As discussed in Chapter Four, many young people in remote communities in Australia do not have the opportunity to benefit from the positive educational experiences in civics and electoral matters that a visit to Canberra offers. Nor do many have access to state parliaments or electoral education centres. It was therefore submitted that alternative methods of disseminating information to remote communities should be pursued.

5.54 The NT Electoral Commission stated that it would support a move to roll out electoral education centre facilities in all capital cities. In the case of the Northern Territory, the NT Electoral Commission added that it would contemplate providing an additional modest facility in Alice Springs. The Commission stated:

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).⁴²

5.55 The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT) also supported the provision of electoral education facilities in the Northern Territory. In its submission, LGANT stated:

The Association considers that the Commonwealth Government must address the manner and frequency of electoral education (and for that matter civics education as well) for adult indigenous

40 Ms Debra Liddiard-Taruminggi (NT Department of Employment, Education and Training), *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 November 2006, p. 25.

41 South Australian Electoral Office, *Submission no. 84*, p. 6.

42 Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 98*, p. 12.

Australians. The Association would like to see not only education taking place, and more often, but also to see resources such as an 'Electoral Education Centre' established in the Northern Territory to help accelerate learning outcomes. Considering the large number of indigenous persons living in the Northern Territory and their need for electoral education the Association believes such a facility would be a great boost.⁴³

Committee conclusions and recommendations

- 5.56 Education is clearly important in increasing levels of civic knowledge and thereby, civic participation, amongst young Indigenous Australians. The Committee is therefore concerned that school retention rates are significantly lower for this group than amongst non-Indigenous Australians.
- 5.57 The Committee is of the view that Indigenous communities should actively encourage younger members to attend school and remain at school for longer periods of time. The Committee believes that increasing school retention rates would improve literacy and numeracy levels, and in that process, improve levels of civic knowledge and engagement. Indigenous community leaders, in tandem with local government leaders, should share responsibility in working to this end.
- 5.58 Teachers also need appropriate training in teaching Indigenous Australians. On the basis of Indigenous students' current literacy and numeracy levels, it is obvious that primary school trained teachers are more appropriately sent to remote communities. However, it is important that even primary school teachers receive specialised training in working with Indigenous students.

Recommendation 9

- 5.59 **The Committee recommends that State and Territory education authorities develop induction strategies incorporating the delivery of civics education for pre-service teachers bound for regional and remote communities.**

43 Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, *Submission no. 94*, p. 6.

- 5.60 The Committee acknowledges the improving reach of information and communication technologies in rural and remote Australia. The Committee believes there is scope for capitalising on the opportunities available due to the increasing distribution of broadband Internet into remote Indigenous communities. The Committee believes that the creation of a website which specifically targets Indigenous students, using basic English with an emphasis on visuals rather than text, would provide an effective tool for learning about civics.

Recommendation 10

- 5.61 **The Committee recommends that a modified civics education website be created for an Indigenous audience.**

The website should be established through collaboration between the Office of Indigenous Affairs and the Department of Education, Science and Training, and should be developed in consultation with local governments in remote and regional areas.

Participating in democracy

Not every vote counts: Informal voting by Indigenous electors

- 5.62 High rates of informal voting, where unintentional, are usually influenced by low literacy/numeracy levels or a lack of understanding of voting processes. This chapter has canvassed the public awareness initiatives being conducted by the AEC for Indigenous Australians. Evidence to the inquiry, particularly from the NT Electoral Commission, noted that informal voting levels in remote areas highlighted the electoral public awareness needs of these areas. At the 2005 Legislative Assembly General Election in the Northern Territory, the informal voting rate was 3.2 per cent for urban Divisions and 4.9 per cent for remote Divisions. The NT Electoral Commission stated:

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.⁴⁴

- 5.63 In the 2006 Legislative Assembly By-Election for the Division of Stuart in the Northern Territory, the informal vote rate was 13.6 per cent. In response to these statistics, NT Electoral Commissioner, Mr Bill Shephard, stated:

What we can say, although we still have to put an internal report together, is that one-third of the electors in Stuart either failed to fill in their ballot paper formally or required assistance to fill in their ballot paper. I think that is an important statistic to know in terms of the service delivery and the philosophical argument about what our obligations are.⁴⁵

Qualifications and experience of polling staff

- 5.64 Questions were raised during the inquiry as to who should be responsible for conducting remote polling, given that the AEC is adopting an integrated approach when conducting fieldwork in remote areas (combining electoral education with roll checks and other electoral activities). Mr Brian Moore argued that the employment of temporary electoral officials should cease if the intention is to conduct electoral education at the same time, and that trained Electoral Commission staff should be used in their place.⁴⁶ Mr Moore stated:

...there is a big difference between being employed for a day and receiving some money and going out there with a genuine interest to want to help.⁴⁷

Use of interpreters

- 5.65 The Committee notes that the three field officers in the AEC's Northern Territory office are assisted by Indigenous interpreters when delivering electoral awareness programmes.⁴⁸
- 5.66 At the 2005 Northern Territory Legislative Assembly Election, the NT Government provided Indigenous interpreters at polling places.

44 Northern Territory Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 98*, p. 9.

45 Mr William Shephard (Northern Territory Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 20 November 2006, p. 4.

46 Mr Brian Moore, *Submission no. 6*, p. 3.

47 Mr Brian Moore, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 19.

48 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 13.

According to the Hon. Shelley Archer, this is something which is not done for state or federal elections in Western Australia, even in communities where remote polling is conducted. Mrs Archer suggested that the use of interpreters at remote polling booths may be one way to alleviate the confusion experienced by Indigenous voters in remote communities. She briefly described the process which occurred during the NT election:

In Alice Springs, some of the elders came in – and English is their third or fourth language – and the electoral manager of the polling booth spoke to the leader of that community and then that leader interpreted. The elders were given copies of the voting slips from all of the parties who were at that polling booth. They then went off to fill in their form. If they called for assistance, the manager of that polling booth and the interpreter provided them with assistance. It will be a process of ironing out any problems that come up. But it is a very good way. As I have said, they think that if you do not live in Kununurra you cannot vote. That is because they do not understand English. If they had an interpreter there, they might be told, ‘If you live in Kalumburu, then you have the right to vote here.’ It will cover those sorts of issues.⁴⁹

‘Are you enrolled in this area?’ Asking the right questions

5.67 Anecdotal feedback from scrutineers at polling booths suggests that Indigenous electors are failing to comprehend questions put to them by electoral officials. The Hon. Shelley Archer, whose state electorate includes 60 remote polling places, stated:

In my travels throughout my electorate, there has been an absolute wealth of anecdotal evidence as well as hard data to indicate that the turnout rates are affected by a number of administrative and systemic factors during election time.

5.68 Mrs Archer elaborated on the confusion that can arise if the right questions are not asked by polling officials:

The question “*Have you already voted here or elsewhere at this election*” is sometimes misinterpreted as relating to previous elections – provoking a ‘yes’ response. “*Do you live in the electoral district of Xxxxx?*” simply causes confusion to itinerant people and may provoke a ‘no’ response if the elector is temporarily away from home...The sensitivity of poll officials or the intervention of alert scrutineers to have the questions reworded is all that

49 Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 26.

prevents the elector from being disenfranchised in such circumstances.⁵⁰

- 5.69 Similarly, the failure to differentiate between state and federal government elections and a lack of awareness of electoral boundaries can cause confusion and disenchantment amongst Indigenous people when they turn up at a polling booth and are not permitted to vote. The WA Electoral Commission noted feedback from an assistant remote polling place manager, who stated:

I had some people try to vote who were from across the border, and they felt there was something wrong with them when they were told they could not vote.⁵¹

Challenges with remote mobile polling

- 5.70 Many remote townships and communities across Australia are visited by mobile polling teams. Remote mobile teams travel along set routes, usually comprising a number of days, to collect votes. All votes collected along a particular route are considered to have been cast at a single poll. Remote mobile polling may take place up to 12 days before polling day.
- 5.71 At the last federal election there were 43 remote polling booths compared to 7 729 ordinary booths. Remote mobile polling booths were used in only five electorates and two electorates accounted for 80 per cent of the mobile booths (Lingiari, NT had 20; Kalgoorlie, WA had 14).⁵²
- 5.72 The Committee was advised that there is little, if any, awareness amongst electors in remote communities of the alternatives to casting a vote at a polling place on Election Day. It was suggested that the 'itinerant voter' enrolment could be promoted as a solution to the needs of Indigenous electors with no fixed address.⁵³
- 5.73 While there has been an increase in postal voting, the Committee understands that for some remote communities, complications concerning literacy and numeracy issues as well as the requirement to provide an address for the lawful delivery of a postal vote, means that a reliance on mobile polling services is likely to remain for some time. In addition, the AEC noted that that part of its North and Central Australia Regional

50 Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 4.

51 Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 12*, p. 10.

52 Australian Electoral Commission submission to JSCEM inquiry into the conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and matters related thereto.

53 Hon. Shelley Archer MLC (WA), *Submission no. 24*, p. 8.

Electoral Strategy 'may include the expansion of remote mobile polling services'.⁵⁴

Committee's conclusions and recommendations

- 5.74 Given the frequency of assisted voting, the high rates of informal voting found in remote Indigenous communities are alarming. The Committee notes that on face value, the use of interpreters appears to offer an effective solution to a difficult problem. However, the Committee also acknowledges that there is potential for further difficulties to arise under this scenario, given that officials would be unable to monitor whether the interpreter is fulfilling their obligations appropriately. The Committee believes instead that funds would be better allocated to the recruitment and training of appropriate, polling officials, aware of some of the challenges faced in remote mobile polling booths.
- 5.75 While the AEC's website states that persons expressing interest in remote mobile polling 'must be able to demonstrate cross cultural awareness and sensitivity', evidence suggested that there was scope for polling officers to be better equipped for working with Indigenous voters.

Recommendation 11

- 5.76 **The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission provide adequate training and guidelines for polling officials in communicating with Indigenous Australians.**

54 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 14.