



**Supplementary submission to JSCEM inquiry into
Civics and Electoral Education**

21 August 2006

Democratic Audit of Australia
Australian National University
Canberra, ACT 0200
Australia
<http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>
Tel: +61 2 6125 0696

Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

We were asked to provide a supplementary submission to the Committee on how an interactive website might be set up for the purposes of electoral education.

Currently, the websites of most or all of Australia's nine electoral management bodies include some electoral education—for example (and possibly the best) the Victorian Electoral Commission's 'Your Opinion Counts'¹. However there are strong arguments for a national 'one-stop' website, with links to the AEC, the State Commissions/Offices and to other bodies. This national website could explain in a hands-on way how elections work today, as well as providing some illustrated history, as the Victorian Electoral Commission does.

As part of its citizenship as well as electoral education, the website would emphasise the important role the Australian colonies played in the development of electoral practices now adopted around the world. There is a great, although neglected, story to tell of early Australian electoral innovations, beginning with Adelaide's 1840 Council elections, said to be the world's first using proportional representation, and later reforms such as the Australian ballot, Saturday elections and postal voting. These innovations contributed in significant ways to the history of democracy around the world. The Australian ballot is both an important part of Australia's history as a nation and something that is still unfolding, as blind people for the first time are able to cast secret votes.

The national website should explain the mechanics of today's elections in an interesting and reasonably informal manner. Emphasis would be on forming a 'connection' with people, one possibility being through mobiles, via SMS. Perhaps 'practice' votes can be taken and results relayed by SMS. The feasibility or otherwise of this would depend largely on IT logistics.

¹ <http://www.vec.vic.gov.au/yoc.html>

The main point we wish to make is that it should be willing to experiment, particularly—but not only—in terms of technology.

Crucially, the site would need to be interesting, even alluring. It should be engaging, assessable and light in tone. It might be updated at least weekly, with running commentary and interaction and participation. Something of the possible tone can be found in Audit member Peter Brent's Enrolling the People website devoted to his thesis topic.²

Much of the content would be provided by the various electoral authorities mentioned above, as well as electoral and parliamentary educators and possible others, for example curriculum bodies. Some would be generated by the person/people running the central site. Outcomes of any electoral educators' conferences, such as that hosted by the ACT Electoral Commission in 2005, could be incorporated. A steering committee would be needed to oversight the website and uphold basic principles, such as ensuring content was not misleading or partisan in any way.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is not the right body to run an interactive electoral education website. For one thing it is just one (albeit the biggest) of Australia's electoral management bodies. More importantly, the manner of communication described above, which is necessary for effective electoral education, makes it inappropriate. The AEC is by nature large, cautious and relatively inflexible. Informality, which should be a hallmark of an interactive electoral education site, does not fit readily into the culture of a body such as the AEC.

However, the site should be run nationally and we suggest the best body to oversight it would be the Electoral Council of Australia (ECA), the umbrella group of all Australian election management bodies. The ECA currently has just one (full-time) staff member, who facilitates coordination between all Australian electoral management bodies. We have not discussed with the ECA the possibility of overseeing an interactive electoral education initiative, but we feel that it would be the appropriate body, providing resources can be found for the

² <http://www.enrollingthepeople.com>

project. Oversight by a Commonwealth/State body would help address the problem identified in our original submission, of the lack of attention given by some electoral commissions to alerting voters that they need to do different things when voting in different elections. In a federal system such as Australia's, with layers of different electoral systems, special attention needs to be paid to the differing requirements for a formal vote.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to expand our comments on this matter.

Yours sincerely



Marian Sawer
Leader, Democratic Audit of Australia



Peter Brent
Member, Democratic Audit of Australia