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

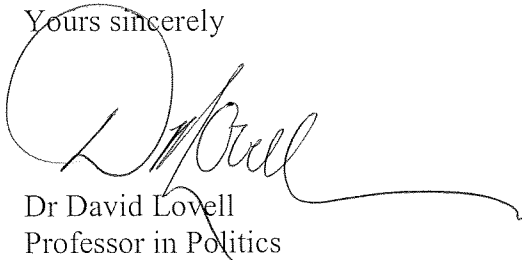
Dear Ms Palmieri

I refer to your letter of 7 April 2006 advising of your Committee's *Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education* and inviting a submission from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Attached please find a submission to the inquiry which I have prepared with my colleague Dr Linda Botterill. The submission is based on our experience of teaching first year politics students over a number of years and also draws on a small survey of this year's first year students concerning their civics education experience and general level of engagement with the Australian political system.

If you require any further information, please contact me by email at d.lovell@adfa.edu.au or by telephone on 6268 8844.

Yours sincerely



Dr David Lovell
Professor in Politics

2 June 2006

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES



Submission to Parliament of Australia
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

Prof David Lovell and Dr Linda Botterill
University of New South Wales at ADFA, Canberra

1. Introduction

We are academic political scientists who teach politics at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy. Although we have different fields of research interest (Dr Botterill studies the formation of public policy and has a particular interest in drought policy; Prof Lovell studies democratic polities, and has a particular interest in the promotion of democracy in developing states), we are joined by our teaching in a tertiary level first-year introductory political science course that focuses on Australian democracy. Lovell was the chief author of a tertiary level political science textbook, *The Australian Political System* (Melbourne: Longman, 1995 and 1998), which emerged from his teaching experiences.

This submission draws on our experience of teaching young Australians some of whom have been exposed to civics education at secondary schools around Australia. Because of the nature of the subject matter we teach, we gain a good insight into the level of understanding our students have of factual aspects of Australian political life and also their level of identification with the process as citizens. This experience has been supplemented by a small-scale survey of our students this year, the results of which have been incorporated into this submission. Our contribution to this Inquiry, however, is not specifically addressed to curriculum issues but rather to issues about the practice of politics in Australia, which we see as central to the engagement of young people in understanding and participating in their political system. Our central view is that success in civics education is connected not just to good curriculum and course materials, and informed teachers, but is related to trust in the political system as a whole.

We make this submission in a private capacity. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the University of New South Wales.

2. Australian democracy and the importance of civics education

Australian democracy is a major achievement. To resolve disputes without recourse to excessive violence, to allow interests to be represented in decision-making, and to aspire to freedom and justice, even though they may be deeply contested concepts in themselves, is a signal historical achievement. Freedom of speech, religion and association, the rule of law and the right to vote to hold governments to account for their actions are also fundamental strengths in Australia's democracy. Our teaching and research, even when highly critical of particular aspects of Australian democracy, is dedicated to better understanding and improving its processes.

The importance of civics education is a topic much rehearsed; we do not want to add much to the chorus of support except, perhaps, to put on record our view that active, informed citizens are the lifeblood of a democracy. This is supported by research that finds that 'the knowledgeable citizen is also the more politically literate citizen' (McAllister 1996: 18). The ability to participate as active and informed citizens is a basic part of being a member of our society and complements the participation by citizens in society's many other aspects. We

would like to see young Australians enrolling to vote immediately after their 18th birthday with the same enthusiasm they demonstrate when reaching the age that entitles them to a learner driver's permit. On this point we are concerned that provisions of the recent *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005* relating to enrolment are a retrograde step in terms of young people's participation in the political process.

What are the key skills that should be developed by civics education? We see the following as central:

- The ability to understand the benefits and responsibilities of democratic participation.
- An understanding of the Australian political system as a liberal democracy and the rights and obligations that confers on its citizens.
- The ability to see beyond the advertising jingles and slogans of election campaigns to policies and arguments of substance.
- The ability to see beyond personalities to the realities of decision making.
- The need to demand good governance, but also to understand the limits of what government can deliver.
- The ability to see beyond their own interests to some notion of the general interest (however contested).
- The ability to accept robust debate as part of, and a benefit of, a free society
- The ability to continue to learn in matters political.

To be an active citizen also means participating in the associations of civil society, especially voluntary organisations such as professional associations, social movements, and interest and lobby groups. The importance of civil society lies in developing a spirit of public involvement, both in making informed demands on government and in checking its power. This type of participation is central to a successful democracy.

We are concerned that lack of understanding of the fundamental attributes and practices of a democratic society is likely to lead to greater cynicism and consequently to incivility in relations between people, which would be a major loss to our way of life. Reduced participation by citizens also has the potential to undermine democratic institutions and diminish the accountability of those in power.

3. Encouraging civics education: the experience so far

Confronted by evidence of poor knowledge about Australia's basic political institutions and processes, public officials have made a number of proposals for civics education over the past two decades. In 1988 the Senate's Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training conducted an inquiry into 'education for active citizenship'. Its 1989 report, *Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations*, and subsequent 1991 report, *Active Citizenship Revisited* represent important steps in this process. The notion of 'active citizenship' had an applied focus: it meant both knowledge and the ability to participate in Australia's democracy. In 1994, the Civics Expert Group presented to the Federal Government its report, *Whereas the people*, which set out a program for civics education for all Australians, a program that eventually became 'Discovering Democracy'. This program, announced by the then Minister, the Hon Dr David Kemp MP, in 1997, was rolled out across a range of education sectors, and included curriculum materials specially developed for the program, training for teachers and specific learning strategies, all in support of clear aims and intended outcomes.

Other programs, sponsored by DIMIA, have quite properly focused on the importance of informing those who migrate to Australia about Australian democracy. The current Governor-General, in his Australia Day address in 2005, identified the informed teaching of Civics and Citizenship as a key means of addressing complacency and a ‘worrying trend of disengagement from our democratic process’, particularly amongst students (Jeffery 2005).

Despite many inquiries and many years of civics education, the general knowledge of Australian politics among the young remains poor. Any rise in knowledge seems partial, and can probably be correlated to specific political events, including the Centenary of Federation but especially the convention and constitutional referendum in 1999 surrounding the issue of whether Australia should formally become a republic. Such issues stir interest, but like many partisan disputes, individual decisions often turn less on consideration of complex arguments than on simplistic slogans. In the case of the republic issue, the contest was reduced to the competing slogans: ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’, and ‘An Australian for Head of State’. *Pace* former Attorney-General the Hon. Daryl Williams AM QC MP, who argued in 2001 that ‘lack of understanding of existing constitutional arrangements has been identified as an important factor in the defeat of the referendum’, the causes for the outcome should be sought largely in the failure of the major parties to agree, and in simplification and sloganeering. Indeed, the lowest common denominator approach seems to prevail in political advertising; and while it prevails, the level of knowledge is unlikely to increase substantially. The content of the issue—whether it is about the republic, or something else—matters less than that citizens have the ability to make an informed judgement about the arguments and options put to them.

The ‘Discovering Democracy’ program, funded by the Commonwealth, brought new life and organisation to an area that had long been neglected in pre-tertiary education. It provided a highly useful website (www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy/index.htm), and a range of professional resources for teachers and students. The 2003 review of the ‘Discovering Democracy’ program concluded that

it can be said that all of [the Australian Government’s] policy goals in relation to Discovering Democracy and for Civics and Citizenship education more broadly, have been achieved to a considerable extent. Civics and Citizenship Education has a clear place among the National Goals for Schooling, and an identifiable presence in the curriculum in all states and territories. (Erebus 2003: xx)

The review also found that

The evidence is clear that all states and territories have provided avenues through which civics and citizenship can be incorporated into the intended curriculum during the compulsory years of schooling. Across all jurisdictions there is also a commitment, often with federal support, to properly resource the area with specially designed units and modules linked to professional development. (Erebus 2003: 20)

While civics education is important, it faces significant problems that are independent of curriculum issues. There is some debate whether education for citizenship, which we all support, should or can be provided by a formal part of the curriculum called ‘Civics Education’, ie, the road down which Australia has travelled since 1997. There is also a risk that too much is expected of ‘Civics Education’. The lack of engagement that young Australians feel with their political system cannot be addressed simply through a necessarily limited civics education program at school. Increased knowledge of the political process does not influence the way citizens view that process (McAllister 1996: 13)—those opinions are shaped by the actions of the players within the political system, not the particular features of the process itself.

4. Attitudes towards civic engagement amongst young people

Over nearly twenty years, the Parliament of Australia has conducted or sponsored a number of inquiries into the condition of knowledge about civics in Australia. These have concluded that young Australians know very little about the fundamental institutions and processes of their political system. A 1987 study, for example, showed that only about 54 per cent of Australians knew that Australia has a constitution (quite apart from what it might contain). In the 18 to 24 age group, only 30 per cent were aware of the Constitution's existence. In 2004, the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, reported a 'considerable amount of evidence of a general lack of understanding in the Australian community of our Constitution and system of government.' (Senate 2004:133). As Vromen has noted, however, it is important to consider that political engagement extends beyond understanding the formal institutions and process of the political system, which is the focus of civics education, to include 'community, campaigning and protest activities' (Vromen 2003: 82), activities in which young people are more likely to be involved.

In spite of the generally positive findings of the 'Discovering Democracy' review about civics education in schools, our survey evidence suggests a low level of engagement with the political system. Our survey did not seek 'factual' political knowledge but rather elicited opinions about the political system and also sought an overview of the types of civics education which our students received before entering tertiary study. A factual survey undertaken as part of the preparation of this submission would have been as much a measure of our success in teaching Politics 1A in 2006 as of the existing knowledge students brought with them to our class. We have therefore not attempted to 'test' basic knowledge of the Australian political system.

The results of our survey

Our sample

Our sample was small (n=136) and disproportionately male (76%), disproportionately from Queensland and around 57% of the survey respondents attended private high schools. In terms of their exposure to civics-type education, 57% responded 'yes' to the question, *Did you undertake any civics education, politics, legal studies or similar at school?*. Exposure to civics education was slightly higher at State schools (59.6%) than private schools (55.5%).

The limitations of the survey should be noted. This is both a small sample in terms of absolute numbers, and a rather selective sample, including only those young people who went on to university and around two-thirds of the sample have opted to study politics.

Political engagement

We were pleasantly surprised to learn that over 80% of our sample is enrolled to vote, however this appears to have been facilitated by the provision of electoral enrolment forms on the students' arrival at ADFA.. We only have 5 student in the sample over 25 and the majority are school leavers.

Table 1 sets out activities in which our students have been engaged which we broadly define as 'political'

Table 1: Participation in political activity

Watched a leaders' debate in the run up to an election	71 (52%)
Read a political biography	41 (30%)
Attended Question Time in State or Federal Parliament	34 (25%)
Written to an MP (state or federal)	24 (18%)
Participated in a demonstration	15 (11%)
Written a letter to a newspaper about a political issue	7 (5%)
Joined a political party	6 (4%)
Handed out 'how to vote' cards	3 (2%)
Counted ballots in a State or Federal election	3 (2%)

These results are broadly congruent with Vromen's findings in her 2001 survey of political activity among 18-34 year old Australians (Vromen 2003; 86).

We also asked our students a series of questions designed to elicit their day to day interest in politics, in terms of seeking out information and discussing political issues with family and friends. These results (Table 2) suggest some level of engagement:

Table 2: Day to day interest in politics

	Rarely or Never	Sometimes	Regularly or frequently
I initiate discussions about politics with my family	43 (32%)	49 (36%)	39 (29%)
I initiate discussions about politics with my friends	45 (33%)	59 (43%)	29 (21%)
I watch news and current affairs programs on television	14 (10%)	45 (33%)	74 (54%)
I read newspapers either in print or on line	9 (7%)	42 (31%)	82 (60%)

These results clearly need to be treated with some caution given the small sample size and the general nature of the questions, for example students may be reading newspapers for sports results and only paying passing attention to the political reporting. However, this provides some indication of the level of daily interest among our sample.

Civics education experience

As indicated above, 57% of our sample undertook civics education, politics, legal studies or similar at school. Of these students 44, or just over half, were exposed to civics-type education in more than one year of school. Of our sample, 20 students undertook some civics-type subjects in primary school, 27 in lower (pre-Year10) secondary school, 46 in Year 10 and 41 in years 11 or 12. Not unexpectedly, perceptions of the value of these courses was mixed ranging from "cant remember most of it" to "I found it beneficial in regards to understanding the basics of politics and in terms of how I as a citizen fit into the big picture". Because of the small size of our sample we cannot meaningfully examine our sample in any further detail, for example by State.

Our students overwhelmingly support civics education. 68% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *Civics education should be compulsory for all Australian students at some stage during high school*. Support was slightly higher among those who had experienced civics education (72%) than those who had not (62%).

What we see in many of our own classes is that despite the general political disengagement among our students, there is widespread support for Australian democracy. This was reinforced in our survey with 106 out of the 136 responses agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement *Australia is democratic*. Lack of knowledge does not necessarily lead to disaffection. There are two reasons why this result may be so. The first is that we are dealing with Australian youth, and a certain amount of nationalism—perhaps spurred on by sporting and other events—is to be expected; the second reason, peculiar to our survey group, is that these young Australians have agreed to put themselves in harm's way in the service of our country. Under the latter circumstances, one would naturally expect a large degree of commitment to the political system they have sworn to defend. This patriotism expresses itself in peculiar ways when Australian democracy is analysed in detail: in particular, where criticism is accepted the shortcoming is often rationalised as being 'the best we can do'. This attitude rather blunts the critical faculty required of tertiary level political science, not least because it closes down lines of inquiry, and pretends to a knowledge the students are unlikely to have.

There is a number of factors that influence political knowledge, and age, place of birth (especially overseas or in Australia) and labour force participation are major factors (McAllister 1996). We would expect that as young people continue to age and develop, they will grasp more and more of the political system, and the basics of political knowledge. That development, however, should not simply be supporting a political party as one might barrack for a football team; nor should it be simply about pursuing self-interest and judging at each election which party promises the most give-aways. It needs to be educated, and it needs a proper foundation in a good civics education experience. As McAllister argued following his survey of political knowledge within the Australian electorate in 1996, 'The main problem with any form of civic education designed to improve political knowledge is that it concentrates on increasing the factual base of knowledge within the electorate, rather than inculcating an awareness of how and why the democratic system works in the way that it does' (McAllister 1996: 12). This is an important point. Discussing 'participatory citizenship' (Vromen 2003: 95) as well as the mechanics of how to vote and how Parliament functions will contribute to the active citizenship we referred to above which is an important component of democracy.

Civics and electoral education, if done properly, is not easy. It is not just about describing and explaining what is there; it is also about describing alternatives, and their potential effects. For primary and even secondary students, that questioning and the comparison of reality against ideals, can be unsettling. It is also potentially difficult for teachers engaged in encouraging debate and analysis of a political system to avoid perceptions of bias in presentation of material to students.

5. Engagement and trust as the keys to success

This submission has not focused primarily on *whether* there is currently a high level of ignorance amongst Australian youth about their political system. Most surveys agree that there is. Our concern, rather, is with the disengagement of young people from the formal political process, and how this might be addressed by educators and public officials.

There is an onus on educators to make their courses relevant and lively; but equally there is an onus on public officials whose office is a trust. It is hardly surprising that students fail to engage with politics when they feel remote from the decisions made by representatives. It is the general slipperiness of politicians that disengages ordinary voters: the ability to speak without making any genuine commitments; the ability to answer questions without confronting the real issues.

Promise-breaking is one of the reasons advanced to explain an apparent decline in trust in politicians. Politicians have made the understanding of the issues surrounding promises more difficult because of their relentless and partisan determination to insist—when out of government—that promises are binding, and—when in government—that fulfilling promises is contingent. The political rhetoric that emphasises the breaking of promises contributes to the disrepute in which politics is nowadays held. Perceptions that promises are routinely broken—however inaccurate—diminish governmental authority. The discussion of promise-breaking is a sub-set of the more general field of political ethics, given salience by the reported decline, across most liberal democracies, of trust by citizens in politicians and the political system. The behaviour of politicians has increasingly come under the ethical microscope (Fleming and Holland 2001), and politicians are demonstrably concerned about their own standing and the esteem of political institutions among the wider community (Odgers 2002, 6.13; Office of the Ethics Counsellor 1994). Among other evidence, an Australian federal parliamentary committee released its report *A Framework of Ethical Principles for Members and Senators* in 1995. Except in so far as it is an issue of ‘integrity’—and it is not simply that—the injunction to keep promises did not appear under the general headings of an ethical standard (Barlin 1997, 163).

Promise-keeping is often conflated with ‘honesty’, and on this point the public perception of politicians is damning. In our small sample, 26% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *Politicians are generally trustworthy* while 32% had no opinion and 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is hardly a ringing endorsement of our elected representatives. In analysing the 1996 Australian Election Study, Ian McAllister found that public confidence in politicians was low, with 78 per cent of respondents believing that most federal politicians would ‘tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically’; in 1994, 87 per cent of British respondents shared the same view (McAllister 2000, 24). Citizens of electoral democracies are highly sceptical about the intention or determination of politicians to deliver on the promises they make during election campaigns. An opinion poll in Australia in 1990 found that 60.3 per cent of respondents agreed with the view that ‘Politicians make promises in election campaigns which, on the whole, they don’t intend to keep’ (Saulwick 1990). A poll taken early in the 1996 election campaign showed, according to an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that ‘more than half of voters do not believe the parties will keep their promises if elected’ (cited Warhurst 1997, 6).

There are many demands on the school curriculum. Civics education has to compete against education increasingly geared to producing highly skilled workers for a technological workplace. It is perhaps appropriate that curriculum materials continue to be developed, that the major public institutions such as Parliament, continue to support the educational activities of their sections, and that the Australian Electoral Commission continue to promote electoral awareness, including—in all these cases—through high quality web-based information. It is important that teachers in these areas are well educated, and that a substantial amount of professional development is spent keeping them up-to-date about information and teaching methods.

However, as we have argued in this submission, the real key to increased involvement by young people as engaged citizens lies with the present players in the political process whose

actions determine whether Australia's democracy is seen as worthy of effort and commitment by the next generation.

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