



Department of the Premier and Cabinet
Government of Western Australia

Office of Multicultural Interests

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
Submission No.	92
Date Received	3/7/06
Secretary	<i>J. Palmer</i>

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Palmieri

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

The Office of Multicultural Interests appreciates the opportunity to comment on the state of civics and electoral education in Australia.

While electoral participation is a right afforded to all Australian citizens, the relationship between intention and implementation of this right is sometimes not as strong as it could be. "Rights" do not exist in a vacuum. Education, encouragement, innovation and initiative, coupled with personal responsibility and individual capacity, are necessary to ensure citizens can exercise their rights to the best of their ability.

Mitigating factors, however, often influence the extent to which some citizens are able to do so within the context of the electoral process. This applies particularly to some of Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) citizens.

Some members of CaLD communities, for example, may find it difficult to participate in the electoral process as a result of their level of English language proficiency. This applies especially to Australia's humanitarian migrants from African and Middle Eastern countries, almost 14,000 of whom arrive in Australia every year.

The Australian Electoral Commission provides voting information in languages other than English, including Greek, Italian, Arabic and Macedonian. However, there does not appear to be any voter information available in languages spoken by members of some of Australia's new and emerging communities, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Burundi and Afghanistan. It is imperative that these gaps are addressed so that these groups are able to participate effectively in the democratic process.

Attention to the media is generally the primary method of information gathering for voters before an election. This further affects the capacity for CaLD Australians to participate effectively in the electoral process, since they may experience linguistic problems accessing information resources. Clearly, the effects of language barriers on the democratic process

are relevant not only at the polling booth, but to the broader experience of information gathering in the lead up to an election.

It is also necessary to consider that many of Australia's humanitarian migrants have little or no personal experience of democracy, having previously lived under despotic regimes, totalitarian governments and failed states. The democratic process is unfamiliar to many migrants who enter Australia through the humanitarian stream. As such, it is unlikely that they will be able to exercise their democratic rights without considerable assistance in the form of electoral education.

If these needs are not addressed, it is far less likely that humanitarian migrants will register to vote, or be motivated to take an active interest in their citizenship.

In order for these migrants to become active and contributing members of Australian society, they must be engaged as actors in the democratic process. They need assistance, however, to achieve this.

The Office of Multicultural Interests therefore suggests that electoral education be broadened in scope to address the needs of Australia's new and emerging communities, and to attempt to narrow the gap that exists between aspiration and implementation of full electoral participation. Addressing the language barrier is the natural first step in this process, which should be followed by attempts to increase migrants' awareness of their rights and responsibilities under a democratic government.

Yours sincerely



Ellis Griffiths
A/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

27 June 2006