

Ms Sonia Palmieri  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

19 June 2006

Dear Ms Palmieri

Please find attached the ALP submission to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education.

If you require further information concerning the submission, please do not hesitate to contact my office on the details below.

Yours sincerely



Tim Gartrell  
National Secretary

# **Response to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, from the Australian Labor Party, National Secretariat**

## **Introduction**

The Australian Labor Party welcomes the opportunity to comment on the terms of reference to the current inquiry into civics and electoral education.

Australia's stable two-party political system has delivered economic prosperity, peace and good governance since the extension of the franchise to all people of voting age. Despite this, levels of awareness about our political system, the role of political parties and the importance of democratic elections remain distant from many young Australians and older Australians.

The Australian Labor Party believes that the current inquiry should investigate three central areas:

- Continuing civics, governance and political education in schools.
- Increased emphasis from the AEC on generalised political education and enrolment to vote.
- An appropriate role for political stakeholders, including political parties, in generalised political education.

## **Recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1:** The *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* provides an agreed framework for the teaching of values for all students in all schools. Labor sees this framework and other collaborative initiatives between the states and commonwealth as continuing to address this issue effectively and in the best interests of students. Labor believes decisions about a national curriculum in civics are best addressed at ministerial level between the states, territories and commonwealth governments.

**Recommendation 2:** Labor believes that more should be done in the following areas to ensure that people are registered to vote:

- Targeting young people in the crucial 16-18 year old group, with reminder material that they have to register to vote.
- Ensuring that individuals and communities at risk of homelessness are provided with information on updating their details on the electoral roll.

- Ensuring that the AEC visits clubs and social groups linked to non-English speaking communities to encourage all eligible citizens to be correctly enrolled.
- Providing direct, mobile voter registration services to remote indigenous communities.

**Recommendation 3:** That this Inquiry canvass the following issues:

- Opportunities for electoral education programs which include government, civil society and political party representatives.
- The roll of political education conducted by political parties independent of government agencies.
- The role of the AEC or another oversight body in any such electoral education.

## **Civics education**

Civics education has a long history in Australia. As early as 1904 NSW included in its primary school syllabus a 'Civics and Morals' course which covered imperial history, duty and patriotism.<sup>1</sup> Social studies courses arose in the 1970s as part of the curriculum in some states to address the need for civics education. It was only with action by the Keating Labor Government in 1988, however, that a national approach was first developed. The Keating Government established a 'Civics Experts Group' to promote "public education on civics issues".

During the centenary of Federation year in 2001 there was renewed interest in political or 'civics' style education in Australia. All states and territories have incorporated civics education into the curriculum and discussion continues on the best way to communicate to younger Australians the democratic values which contribute to Australian nationhood. These efforts have resulted in an increased awareness of the political system, democratic governance and also important nation building events in Australia's history.

The ALP supports increased emphasis on education which develops an understanding of the complex roots of Australian society, our system of government and values. The ALP believes that decisions on the content of national curriculum in civics should be based on empirical evidence of what works, rather than on ideological views on 'values' and 'culture'.

The *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* provides an agreed framework for the teaching of values in all Australian schools. Labor sees this framework and other collaborative initiatives between the states and commonwealth as continuing to address this issue effectively and in the best interests of students. Decisions about a national curriculum in civics are best addressed at ministerial level between the states, territories and commonwealth governments. MCEETYA plays an

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McAllister, 2001; 'Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia', *Senate Occasional lecture*, Parliament House.

active role in monitoring civics education through the agreed framework. We support discussion on civics education in Australia being continued through this forum.

## Education to improve the democratic process and integrity of the vote

Australia's electoral systems are different and complex. Voters in some Australian jurisdictions are asked to vote using four separate voting systems, with local, state and federal tiers having different voting methods, including differences in upper and lower house voting. Clearly if the democratic franchise is to be meaningful for the greatest number of people, then political education must be a continuing component of all levels of government and across political parties.

The *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006*, currently before the parliament, has the potential to exclude 280,000 Australians from the vote. The concerns of the ALP in relation to this bill have been put on the public record, and through our submissions to JSCEM. Commentators have listed young people, the homeless and indigenous Australians as groups who may be deterred from enrolling or voting.<sup>2</sup> The ALP shares the view that these groups may be deterred from exercising a valid vote and supports moves which will increase the funds available to target these groups with voter education.

The ALP notes that the *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006* also included increased funding for the AEC, detailed in table 1. This funding is cited in the Explanatory Memorandum as being for the purposes of "advertising and public awareness activities and systems development." Labor looks forward to the AEC detailing how this money will be expended.

TABLE 1

Budget Year	Amount
2006-07	\$9.5 million
2007-08	\$8.2 million
2008-09	\$2.9 million
2009-10	\$5.5 million

Labor believes that this funding increase must be spent on the direct delivery of voter education to the target groups identified above. The AEC has conducted significant research on youth voting and the impact of homelessness on voting. These reports provide a sound basis for future action by the AEC. The ALP believes that the AEC should, on passage of the Bill through the Senate, conduct a continuing educational program, including a specific 'get-on-the-roll' drive. This should be complemented by continuing roll renewal activity.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Submission 97, *Democratic Audit of Australia* and Submission 144, *PIAC*, JSCEM Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election.

While the AEC's existing educational resources are of great assistance to particularly school age future voters, the ALP believes that more should be done in the following areas to ensure that people are registered to vote:

- Targeting young people in the crucial 16-18 year old group, with reminder material that they have to register to vote.
- Ensuring that individuals and communities at risk of homelessness are provided with information on updating their details on the electoral roll.
- Ensuring that the AEC visits clubs and social groups linked to non-English speaking communities to encourage all eligible citizens to be correctly enrolled.
- Providing direct, mobile voter registration services to remote indigenous communities.

## **The involvement of political parties in electoral education**

Australian political parties have direct experience in electoral education. Through our membership development programs, and involvement within the democratic workings of political parties, members experience democracy in action firsthand. The development of skills such as scrutineering and vote counting make active political party members some of the best examples of civic engagement. Encouraging people to be active in the civic affairs of the nation has a natural corollary with involvement with organised politics.

Encouraging people to take an active interest at election time involves convincing people that they should take an interest in political affairs more generally. The ALP believes that political engagement is improved when people can identify the aims and objectives of Australia's democratic political parties, and are able to question and engage with them. Labor supports the increased involvement of political parties, in an unbiased manner, in electoral education programs. Differing perspectives can assist in generating interest among people and making the act of voting much more relevant.

The terms of reference for the Inquiry asked submissions to canvass innovative models from the overseas experience. While the ALP offers no opinion on the models in-force overseas, we do offer the following commentary on the international experience.

The international experience does support greater involvement of political parties in electoral education. In the United Kingdom, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy places political party work at the centre of its activities in promoting democracy to a world-wide audience. The German political foundations, *Stiftungen*, play an active role in promoting the 'civil society' aspect of political party work. While maintaining a formal separation from party structures, these funds are party organisations. Similar structures are in place in the Netherlands, Sweden, Austria and France. In 2004, the funding for all European political foundations was Euro \$400 million (approximately AU\$674,000,000).<sup>3</sup> In Canada, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (*Lortie Commission*) urged the creation of

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<sup>3</sup> Jos van Wersch and Jeroen de Zeeuw, 2005; *Mapping European Democracy Assistance*, Working Paper 36, Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

political foundations to improve the integrity of “primary political organisations”, namely political parties.<sup>4</sup>

All these organisational models have potential application to Australia’s national political arena, and could assist the development of a more informed and active citizenry. Labor believes that the current inquiry should take advantage of this opportunity to properly evaluate and determine an appropriate role for political parties in generalised electoral education. The ALP believes that the inquiry should fully investigate electoral education organisations from across the globe and evaluate their efficiency in promoting electoral education.

Some issues which the inquiry should consider canvassing are†

- Opportunities for political education programs which include government, civil society and political party representatives.
- The roll of political education conducted by political parties independent of government agencies.
- The role of the AEC or another oversight body in such electoral education.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Baier and Herman Bakvis, 2001; ‘Think Tanks and Political Parties: Competitors or Collaborators?’, *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, Volume 2, Number 1.