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Ms Sonia Palmieri
The Inquiry Secretary
Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Ms Palmieri

Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

I am pleased to provide the Victorian Electoral Commission's (VEC's) submission to the abovementioned Inquiry being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

The VEC considers electoral education to be as important as its research and operational functions, and the attached paper sets out some perspectives in response to three of the Inquiry's specific terms of reference.

I would be pleased to discuss any matters contained in the submission at a Public Hearing and can be contacted on (03) 9299 0540.

Yours sincerely

Steve Tully
Electoral Commissioner

VICTORIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

Executive summary

Introduction – the challenge of effective electoral participation

There are thousands of Australians who are not participating in the democratic process. This is of concern for electoral commissions that are charged with maximising electoral participation. Electoral commissions are not alone in this responsibility. Parliaments, political parties and individual politicians also have important contributions to make.

Encouraging enrolment and voting requires diverse approaches, including education programs to provide a more enduring understanding of why electoral participation is important.

The groups that are believed to be under-represented in enrolment and voting include young people aged 18 to 25 years; communities with low incomes, high unemployment and a high proportion of people born overseas; and communities where there is high mobility. Special efforts are needed to increase electoral participation among these groups.

There are also significant numbers of people who vote informally at elections. Through information and education campaigns, electoral commissions can reduce informal voting. However, there are also practical options that Parliaments might consider, such as changing from full preferential to optional preferential voting.

In its submission to the Inquiry, the VEC addresses the following three specific terms of reference.

The current status of young people’s knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

There has been considerable Australian research demonstrating that young people’s interest in politics and understanding of the Australian electoral system is low.

It is estimated that some 300,000 young Australians aged 18 - 25 do not enrol to vote. The take-up rate for young people enrolling is clearly far from instantaneous when they turn 18. Demonstrating the importance of democratic participation to young people will potentially have an impact for the rest of their lives, as well as an impact on their parents, friends and community. Education programs are needed to support the various other programs and campaigns conducted by electoral commissions that encourage young people to enrol and vote.

The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as TAFE colleges and universities

Beyond families and communities, schools are the starting point for understanding and engagement in the democratic system.

In the Victorian curriculum, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) has a Civics and Citizenship domain organised into two dimensions: one exploring concepts of democracy, and the other on the skills needed to participate as citizens. Both dimensions are integral to the effective engagement of young people in democratic participation, and both are incorporated into the VEC’s education programs.

The availability of curriculum resources is not enough to ensure the take-up of Civics and Citizenship curriculum in schools. Factors that impede the take up include competing school priorities; difficulty integrating resources into the curriculum; and the lack of opportunities for professional development.

The VEC believes that its priority in relation to electoral education in schools is to help make the teaching of civics and citizenship less daunting in the face of other competing curriculum demands.

The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral commissions in promoting electoral education.

High voter participation at elections is underpinned by legislation, and electoral commissions must do all they can to maximise effective electoral participation.

Enrolment is encouraged by the VEC in the lead-up to elections and through a range of ongoing enrolment update activities, and voting is strongly encouraged at elections. However, electoral commissions must also encourage a stronger understanding of the importance of enrolment and voting.

In 2003 the VEC began a joint approach to electoral education with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), with a business plan implemented under the direction of a joint VEC/AEC steering group. The business plan expired in March 2006, and discussions are currently taking place to consider continuation of the joint approach. The VEC is keen to continue in this arrangement.

The VEC strongly believes that its electoral education function must continue to be integrated within the VEC's structure. From here it can influence real program improvements. The VEC has grown to regard electoral education as being at least as important as its other functions. Future priorities are.

- a continued focus on groups that are under-represented in enrolment and voting;
- programs that encourage democratic engagement;
- programs that make the teaching of civics and citizenship more accessible to teachers; and
- a stronger visibility of education resources and materials in the community.

Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education, taking into account approaches used internationally.

The recent Power Inquiry in the UK noted that many people do not understand the political system and this is a block to participation.

In relation to young people, it recommended that the voting age be lowered to 16 years. This would improve the interest and involvement of young people in politics and democratic engagement. The VEC believes this approach would encourage a stronger take-up of electoral education in schools.

It also recommended that citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification. The VEC believes a short course in schools encouraging future electoral participation is worth considering. Although such a course may not be mandated, electoral commissions might assist by promoting "contract" arrangements with secondary schools. For example, in return for teaching a short course covering the essential curriculum for being able to effectively enrol and vote at Federal, State and local government elections, the VEC would provide resource materials, practical assistance, and a certificate to all students taking part.

VICTORIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education

1. Introduction – the challenge of effective electoral participation

Australia has eligible voter participation rates that are in a range above 90% and are amongst the highest in the world. These compare extremely well with those in the United Kingdom (61.3% at the election of 5 May 2005), the USA (56.2% at the presidential election of 2 November 2004) and New Zealand (80% at the general election at 17 September 2005).

However, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is not complacent about these figures. There are thousands of Australians who are not participating in the democratic process. This is of particular concern for electoral commissions which are charged with maximising enrolment and voting within the context of a legal environment where enrolment and voting are compulsory.

The VEC has a range of initiatives to encourage enrolment and voting and is always seeking new ways to increase the participation of eligible electors. The VEC recognizes, however, that this requires diverse approaches. These include making enrolment as practically accessible as possible and providing effective communication and information campaigns. They also include providing education programs to provide a more enduring understanding of the democratic system and why participation is important. In this sense the VEC rates its education responsibilities as at least equally important as the conduct of elections and electoral research.

As a result, the VEC is diverting more resources to electoral education outside election campaigns. The plan for the future is to be much more visible in the community and to have a presence where large numbers of Victorians gather, such as in shopping centres, and at popular exhibitions and events. Currently, the VEC has two full-time staff allocated to ongoing education activities.

The VEC also recognizes that it is not alone in its responsibility to encourage democratic participation. Parliaments, political parties and individual politicians must also assist in making the democratic system as engaging and accessible to voters as possible. This has been particularly noted in the recent *Power Inquiry in Britain*¹ that considered the means by which people can be given stronger influence over the issues that affect their lives.

Groups that are under-represented in enrolment and voting

Despite the legal requirements of compulsory enrolment and voting and the concerted efforts of electoral authorities to encourage participation, it is clear that a large number of people are not enrolled and voting in accordance with their civic and legal obligations. The groups that are believed to be under-represented in enrolment and voting are described briefly below.

¹ Power Commission. *Power to the People – the report of the Power Commission inquiry into Britain's democracy* March 2006

Young people aged 18 to 25. The most evident group of people who are under-represented in enrolment and voting is young people. The table below shows the extent to which 18 to 25 year-olds are under-represented on the electoral roll.

Table 1 - Electoral enrolment of eligible Australians for 2004-05

% enrolled	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
18 -25 year-olds	78.47	86.08	77.20	83.46	80.92	86.61	86.78	68.06	80.99
Eligible population	91.69	94.53	89.88	93.20	94.15	95.01	97.74	84.81	92.51

Source – Australian Electoral Commission report on key performance indicators, March 2006.

The situation is worse for 18 year-olds than for the 18-25 year-old cohort as a whole. For example, it is estimated that some 60,000 young Victorians become eligible to enrol each year, but that only 73% of these enrol within a year of turning 18 years of age.

The VEC conducted an analysis of voter participation at the 2002 Victorian State election that suggests that low rates of participation also correlate with certain social characteristics. Electorates with the lowest rates of eligible citizen participation were identified as containing either of the following two communities:

- (i) **Communities where incomes are low, unemployment is high and a high proportion of the eligible population was born overseas.**

People who are socio-economically disadvantaged are often characterised as having poor education and few life experiences where their actions have impacted positively on their circumstances. Perceptions of powerlessness can exist, and confidence in the value of democratic participation by these people is therefore often low. Some special categories within this group include:

- Homeless people. Some 33-90% of homeless people were not enrolled to vote at the 2002 State election (Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic). This amounts to some 5,000 to 12,000 eligible Victorians. These people are understood to be amongst the most powerless and disenfranchised in our community,
- Indigenous Victorians. There is currently no information available on the participation of indigenous Victorians in the electoral system, but it is known that indigenous people are overly represented as having low income and high unemployment, and these are characteristics of electorates with low electoral participation. The VEC has made efforts to provide information and education programs to these people, but the uptake has been slow. The VEC sees Aboriginal Victorians as a priority for its future efforts to increase electoral participation.
- Prisoners as a group generally have a low participation at elections. That legislation provides for prisoners serving a sentence of five years or less to vote is an expression by the Parliament that electoral participation has the capacity to provide prisoners with a meaningful contribution to the outside world that may make a positive contribution towards their personal development. The VEC is keen to develop specific initiatives to encourage this group of people to vote at future elections, and is communicating with

Corrections Victoria to find ways to increase prisoner participation in voting at elections.

People who were born outside Australia may be influenced by negative experiences of political processes and systems overseas, and also by not having a personal or family history of electoral participation in Australia. Lack of English language skills is a barrier to effective participation. Evaluation research following the 2002 Victorian State election found that these people wanted more information on the voting system, including the levels of government, how voting determines seats in Parliament, and how preferential voting works.

- (ii) **Communities where there is a high level of mobility, even when incomes are high and unemployment is low.** These communities can have significant information linkages (as evidenced with high Internet usage). Maintaining enrolment details and voting are not priorities for these people. Their mobility may act to reduce their connection with their local and broader communities, and their perception of the relevance of voting to their lives. Areas where this occurs include Melbourne’s South Eastern suburbs and regional areas of the State where work is seasonal (e.g. Mildura). Low voter turnout rates in the inner suburbs are partly the result of electors changing address and not bothering to update their enrolment.

The special challenge of informal voting

When voters cast informal votes they waste the value of their vote in influencing the outcome of an election. It is difficult to differentiate between those who deliberately vote informally (for instance, as a form of protest) and those who are making a legitimate attempt but who misunderstand the requirements for formal voting. Those who vote informally represent significant numbers of voters (approx 115,000 voters at the 2002 Victorian State election).

Informality varies considerably across jurisdictions according to a range of factors, including the voting system used and the number of candidates contesting the election:

Table 2 – Informal voting rates at Australian State/Territory and Federal elections

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Fed
% informality in Lower House election ²	2.6	3.4	2.0	5.2	3.1	4.9	2.7	4.0	5.2

Note that optional preferential voting is used in single member electorates at elections in NSW and Queensland, and informal voting is lower in these jurisdictions.

Within Victoria, the rate of informal voting ranges from 1.9% in a regional electorate to 7.1% in a metropolitan multi-cultural electorate. At local government elections, where the number of candidates is usually greater, the rate of informal voting can be as high as 16.2% (Brimbank Council election, November 2005).

Through information and education campaigns, electoral commissions can reduce informal voting. However, there are a number of practical steps that Parliaments might also consider, viz:

² Victorian Electoral Commission *Annual Report 2004-05* p. 44

- Informal voting would reduce if there was optional preferential voting (as demonstrated in the table above) or through the use of savings provisions (for example, a “1” being the only figure on a ballot paper in South Australia is deemed to be a formal vote, with the other preferences deemed to be in accordance with party tickets).
- The VEC is about to pilot touch screen voting for voters with vision impairment. This might one day be extended to include those who don’t speak English or who are illiterate.

It is recognised that many people vote at elections without understanding the electoral system. Many of these people cast informal votes. In addition, voters who do not understand the preferential voting system may be unaware of the importance of how they allocate their preferences.

The VEC acknowledges its responsibility for assisting voters to understand how to cast a formal vote at elections. For example, the VEC will conduct a strong information and education campaign at the November 2006 State election when a new structure and system of voting will be introduced in the Legislative Council. The VEC will be concerned to see the rate of informal voting for the new Legislative Council compared with other States, as well as whether the method of voting in the Legislative Council (either a “1” above the line or at least 1 to 5 below the line) will affect the formality of voting in the Legislative Assembly (where all candidates must be numbered).

RESPONSES TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

2. The current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

There has been considerable Australian research in recent years demonstrating that young people's interest in politics and understanding of the Australian electoral system is low.

Focus group research conducted on behalf of the VEC during the development of enrolment and State election advertising campaigns has shown that:

- few young people have an interest in politics. There is a general feeling that politicians don't represent the views of their constituents and that only votes in marginal seats really count;
- interest in politics among non-enrollers appears more likely to be triggered by topical issues such as rising petrol prices, rather than politics or policy generally; and
- the level of interest in politics is not the key predictor of enrolment compliance. The more important factor appears to be a person's general tendency to comply with civic obligations.

Further insights can be found in the Youth Electoral Study (YES), a four year research study of youth participation in the electoral process by researchers from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University working in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). This study is seeking to determine why so many young people do not register on the Australian electoral roll.

The Study has shown that about half the young people in a national survey of Year 12 students felt prepared to vote. While preparedness to vote is a multi-dimensional concept, an important aspect relates to the mechanics of voting. Apart from numbering boxes on a ballot paper, few students understood voting and what happened to their vote when counted.³

The Study has also reported that "few students had a glowing view of politicians or political institutions and a majority did not really consider that voting was an effective way of expressing their political views"⁴. The Study found evidence of political disengagement by young people. For example, the study found that only 50% would vote in a Federal election at 18, if it wasn't compulsory⁵. This finding is supported in the experience of the VEC in providing electoral education services to schools, where it has often been reported that young people feel that they are not heard in politics, and that their issues are not represented.

YES estimated that some 300,000 young Australians aged 18 - 25 do not enrol to vote, and noted that these large numbers have implications for the effectiveness and future of the Australian democratic political system. The take-up rate for young people enrolling is clearly far from instantaneous when they turn 18.

Demonstrating the importance of democratic participation to young people will potentially have an impact for the rest of their lives, as well as an impact on their parents, friends and community. Clearly, education programs are needed to support the various other programs and campaigns conducted by electoral commissions that encourage young people to enrol and vote. Electoral

³ Print M, Saha L, Edwards K, *Youth Electoral Study Report No 1: Enrolment and Voting*. ANU and University of Sydney, 2004 p. 11

⁴ Edwards K *Force us to be Free! Has voting lost its value? The motivations of Australian school students for enrolling and voting* University of Sydney 2005 p15

⁵ Saha L J, Print M, Edwards K, *Youth Electoral Study Report No 2: Youth, political engagement and voting*, ANU and University of Sydney 2005 p5

commissions cannot change the underlying causes of young people's apathy and alienation, but they can conduct education programs to try to engage young people.

3. The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as TAFE colleges and universities

There is ample evidence that to increase electoral participation amongst young people, they need to be convinced that conventional forms of democratic engagement are worthwhile.

Beyond the influence of families and communities, it is clear that schools are the starting point for understanding and engagement in the democratic system.

Each Australian State and Territory has its own structure and guidelines for school curriculum. In Victoria, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) have recently been developed as the basis for curriculum planning and assessment from Prep to Year 10 in all Victorian schools.

The Civics and Citizenship domain within VELS is organised into six sections, one for each level of achievement from Level 1 (prep) to Level 6 (Years 9 and 10). From Level 3, the set of standards is organised into two dimensions:

- *Civic knowledge and understanding* focusing on the principles and practices that underpin civic institutions and civic life in communities and societies. Students explore concepts of democracy and the key features of Australian and other democracies.
- *Community engagement* focusing on the development of skills and behaviours students need to interact with the community and to engage with organisations and groups. Students participate in processes associated with citizenship such as decision making, voting and leadership, using their knowledge of rules and laws of governance, and concepts such as human rights and social justice.

The VEC believes that both these dimensions are integral to the effective engagement of young people in democratic participation, and the VEC encourages the incorporation of these dimensions in its own education programs.

The main resources available to schools in the teaching of Civics and Citizenship in Victoria come via the *Discovering Democracy* program from Curriculum Corporation. These are supplemented by resources provided by the AEC and the VEC, and there are also many commercial publications available.

Discovering Democracy was an Australian Government initiative designed to embed civics and citizenship education in Australian schools. A range of print, audiovisual and electronic resources was produced, which related to State and Territory curriculum frameworks and these were distributed free to all Australian schools.

However, it was acknowledged that the availability of these curriculum materials was not enough to ensure substantial improvements in the take-up of Civics and Citizenship curriculum in schools. An evaluation of the program undertaken for the Department of Education, Science and Training in 2003⁶ showed that the uptake of *Discovering Democracy* was limited. The evaluation showed that about one half of schools surveyed had fairly limited implementation of *Discovering Democracy*

⁶ Erabus Consulting, *Evaluation of the Discovering Democracy Programme* Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra, 2003 p. 39

within a broader program of Civics and Citizenship, and only 10% of schools reported teaching a comprehensive program for Civics and Citizenship education.

The evaluation revealed a list of factors that impacted negatively on the implementation of *Discovering Democracy* in their school. The most significant of these were:

- “competing school priorities”, with 82.3% of respondents noting this factor to at least a moderate extent;
- “integrating into existing curriculum” with 56.2% noting this factor; and
- “opportunities for professional development”, with 49.2% noting this factor.⁷

Both the AEC and the VEC have also produced resource materials to assist teachers in the teaching of Civics and Citizenship. There is some evidence that these have been very favourably received by some teachers. However, as with *Discovering Democracy*, their uptake in schools has not been strong. The VEC has identified similar reasons to those identified in the *Discovering Democracy* evaluation for this low uptake, in particular that:

- civics and citizenship curriculum is broadly described and requires a good deal of preparation to make relevant to students’ interests and needs;
- teachers have a crowded curriculum and there are many competing demands for class time and preparation time;
- teachers themselves are not always confident in their understanding of the Australian democratic system as it applies to the three levels of government;
- while there are ample resources available to help, it would take teachers considerable time to research these to put together lesson materials that they can effectively use with their classes; and
- there is uncertainty amongst teachers of what has been taught to their students in their previous schooling.

As a result of this, the VEC believes that its priority in relation to electoral education in schools must be to provide practical assistance to teachers to help make the teaching of civics and citizenship less daunting in the face of other competing curriculum demands. The VEC believes it can assist in this aim through such means as:

- further professional development programs for teachers;
- taking materials to teachers in schools to assist with their use;
- conducting programs that demonstrate materials and resources that can be easily implemented by teachers in schools;
- providing clear demonstrations of the linkages between excellent available resources and State/Territory curriculum requirements;
- continuing to support the development of demonstration projects in schools that can provide useful models of best practice to other schools; and
- providing specialist educators to conduct sessions in schools on the structure of the electoral systems at the Federal, State and local government levels.

4. The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory electoral commissions in promoting electoral education.

High voter participation at elections is underpinned by legislation, with compulsory enrolment and voting a legal requirement at the Federal, State and local government levels. Electoral

⁷ Erabus Consulting, *Evaluation of the Discovering Democracy Programme* Department of Education, Science and Training, Canberra. 2003 p. xix

commissions, therefore, must do all they can within their functions to maximise enrolment and voting participation.

Enrolment is encouraged by the VEC in the lead-up to elections when there is significant advertising to encourage people to ensure that they are enrolled. Enrolment is also encouraged through a range of ongoing “continuous enrolment update” activities. The VEC has initiated a number of highly innovative continuous programs inviting people to enrol or update their enrolment. These include:

- birthday cards sent to all young people attending secondary schools in Victoria when they turn 17, inviting them to provisionally enrol so they can vote at elections when they turn 18. The success of this mailout program is demonstrated in Table 1 of this submission (p. 2) where Victoria is shown to have higher participation of young people in enrolment than other mainland States;
- an enrolment invitation sent to students applying to a tertiary education institution and who have not previously enrolled;
- an enrolment invitation to new drivers licence holders who have not previously enrolled or who have changed address;
- young people applying for Proof of Age card through the Victorian Liquor Licensing Commission are also encouraged to enrol to vote;
- increased availability of enrolment forms through a variety of convenient locations such as supermarkets and council offices, in addition to post offices.
- an enrolment invitation to new tenants in rented accommodation; and
- an enrolment invitation to people who have notified utility companies of their change of address.

Voter participation at elections is also strongly supported by electoral commissions through the availability and accessibility of voting services, as well as through comprehensive information campaigns to motivate voters to participate and inform them of voting arrangements.

For example, legislation provides a range of opportunities for people who have difficulty attending a voting centre on election day to vote. Options such as postal and early voting, using mobile voting services or becoming a general postal voter are well entrenched in electoral practice and used by many voters at elections.

The VEC has initiated many services to make voting more accessible through improvements to its operations and its information campaigns. Operational initiatives include, for example, the provision of interpreters and translated materials at voting centres, as well as facilities to enable people with vision impairment the opportunity for a secret ballot. Special information campaigns include advertising in ethnic radio and press, and producing publicity and information in alternative formats for those with visual impairment and those with cognitive or intellectual disability.

However, full participation in enrolment and voting will not be achieved through these means alone. Electoral commissions must also encourage an understanding of the purpose and structure of the democratic system, and of the relationship between voting and democratic representation. These circumstances are acknowledged in Victorian legislation, where the VEC has a responsibility “to promote public awareness of electoral matters that are in the general public interest by means of the conduct of education and information programs”(section 8(2)(e) of the *Electoral Act 2002*).

4.1 The VEC's electoral education program

The VEC's involvement in electoral education began in earnest in 1999 with the development and production of a teacher resource book, *Your Opinion Counts*, created in consultation with teachers and specialist curriculum consultants. This resource book emphasised a human rights perspective, and provided activities to promote both civic knowledge and community engagement. It was revised prior to the 2002 State election to include activities developed by teachers and found to be effective in practice.

More recently the VEC sought to provide a more comprehensive education program in partnership with the AEC. In 2003, the VEC and the AEC developed a joint approach to the provision of electoral education in Victoria. It aimed to be seamless by dovetailing State and Commonwealth activities designed to increase participation of Victorians in Federal, State and local government elections. It was also recognized that there were administrative efficiencies possible through a joint and seamless approach, a matter of considerable importance to both organisations in attempting to maximise the value of the investment in this field.

A joint Business Plan was developed that ran from March 2004 until March 2006. The plan was implemented under the direction of a joint VEC/AEC steering group, and an electoral education facilitator was engaged to support and implement Victoria's contribution to the plan. The joint Business Plan expired in March 2006, and discussions are currently taking place between the VEC and AEC to consider the continuation of such an arrangement for the future.

The VEC's contribution to the plan is given in more detail below:

- (i) **For young people** there has been collaboration with the Department of Education and Training (DE&T) and the Catholic Education Office to introduce the Secondary Schools Democratic Engagement Grants Program.

The aim of the initiative is to increase the enrolment and voting participation rates of young people in communities having the social characteristics of low electoral participation. Grants were awarded to support a range of formal and informal curriculum developments at the following schools:

- North Geelong Secondary College for a whole-school curriculum redesign to promote Civics and Citizenship education, as well as student leadership programs to foster active involvement in democratic processes;
- Braybrook College for programs to create visual displays in a variety of languages that will promote enrolment and voting in municipal and State elections;
- Wodonga High School for a Civics and Citizenship professional development program for teachers as well as a combined local schools' youth leadership program;
- Kalianna Special School Bendigo for programs to train senior students to be "election officials" at the school and in the community;
- Wangaratta High School for programs to support student and staff training and involvement in a regional Student Parliament activity;
- Robinvale Secondary College for programs to support Civics and Citizenship teacher professional development at the school as well as updating Civics and Citizenship class resources; and
- St Monica's College Epping for programs to support a student-mentoring program involving community leaders as well as assistance with a regional schools' Civics and Citizenship conference.

These programs are accessible and transferable to other schools throughout Victoria.

The program at Geelong North Secondary College is a whole-school approach to citizenship that the JSCEM Inquiry may wish to see first hand.

Programs have also been conducted with Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) students in inner Melbourne. Classes on electoral education and the role of positive democratic practices have been delivered to 62 students in five class groups. These students have also been supported in developing media resources promoting appropriate civic behaviour for use with similar VCAL students. In addition, VCAL teachers participated in a professional development activity to promote the teaching of electoral education material to VCAL students.

The joint electoral education project with the AEC has seen an increased VEC involvement with the AEC's Electoral Education Centre (EEC). Both VEC staff and AEC staff from the EEC have been facilitators at professional development programs for teachers. Under the joint program, the EEC is engaging in a more targeted approach to schools in metropolitan areas characterised by research as being lower than average in terms of voter participation.

The VEC has recently been represented at the Melbourne Age Careers Expo, the Victorian Commerce Teachers' Association Conferences and the *Herald Sun* VCE Expo. Over 7,000 students and 500 teachers from a range of government and non-government schools participated in these events. At the two VCE Expos over 700 enrolments were completed. This was a 12 % increase over the enrolments completed in the previous year.

Monash University's Orientation Week in February 2006 provided a two-day window through which first-year university students were encouraged to enrol to vote through the VEC's manned enrolment booth. Some 110 new enrolments were gained through this initiative aimed at raising electoral awareness among tertiary students. More orientation days are planned, targeting other major universities.

The VEC is currently developing an interactive website for students, teachers and first time voters. The site will, among other things, demonstrate a context for why young people should vote. It will feature characters with whom young people can identify through their appearance and views, and the messages to young people will reflect the positive reasons for voting provided by young people in the YES study.

- (ii) **For people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD)**, a program has been conducted at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) since 2005. It has involved developing and using electoral education material for English as a Second Language (ESL) and adult literacy classes. Evaluation of the program at this stage has shown:
- an increase in the enrolment status of the students involved in the classes from 66% enrolled to 81% enrolled;
 - a 23% increase in the proportion of students highly valuing the electoral system; and
 - a 16% increase in the proportion of students highly valuing the importance of voting.

The teaching materials developed and delivered at the CAE are in the process of being compiled into a new electoral education resource. This will be further trialled at the CAE before being made available to other adult education settings to support teachers in raising the electoral education awareness level of their CALD students.

In regard to new arrivals to Australia, it is acknowledged that the AEC has a strong presence at citizenship ceremonies and has resource materials for these people. The VEC does not duplicate this work.

- (iii) **For Aboriginal people.** Victoria has a dispersed Aboriginal community, without large numbers of Aboriginal people on defined lands as in some other States and Territories. Nonetheless, the VEC has undertaken some efforts to improve the electoral participation of Aboriginal people. One of the VEC's grants schools, Robinvale Secondary College, has a significant Aboriginal enrolment. The VEC has also written to all cultural heritage co-ordinators around Victoria offering assistance with electoral education.

Most significantly, the VEC is working closely with the Indigenous Issues Unit of the Department of Justice to encourage Aboriginal people to become election officials at the November 2006 Victorian State election.

- (iv) **For people experiencing homelessness.** A partnership with the Council for Homeless Persons provided practical assistance to homeless persons to enrol and vote formally at municipal elections in November 2005. The VEC produced a brochure to assist Melbourne City Mission (Footscray) to help homeless persons with enrolment and voting information in the lead up to the Maribyrnong City Council election. There was positive interest by Mission staff, but further work is needed to make voting easier for homeless people
- (v) **Public events.** The VEC was a key contributor at the 2005 State Parliament Open Day. Over 3,500 people visited the VEC display. A voting centre was established to encourage young people to cast votes for a Best Exhibit Poll, and 480 young people cast votes and assisted in the vote count. Other displays focused on new enrolments, assisted in enrolment enquiries, highlighted the Legislative Council redivision, and promoted participation at the November 2005 round of municipal elections.

4.2 Future priorities

The VEC is keen to continue its collaborative arrangement with the AEC in providing electoral education services. We will strive to continue to improve co-ordination and avoid duplication, and to increase the reach of our electoral services through the joint arrangement. We will also continue to value add to each other's programs. We look forward to a productive future to electoral education in Victoria through the evolution of this collaboration.

The VEC strongly believes that electoral education must continue to be integrated within the structure of its organisation. Electoral commissions are largely operational agencies. They have, at various stages and to varying degrees, built up electoral education programs and services as an adjunct to their operational roles. This has been true of the VEC, and there is now evidence to suggest that electoral researchers and educators should have greater influence on the VEC's technical and operational functions.

The research and education functions of the VEC provide an invaluable perspective that can lead to real program improvements. Similarly, there are real benefits from the VEC's operations being well understood by its educators. They in turn can see opportunities to work with electoral practitioners to provide electoral education services related to actual electoral events.

This collaboration has been important in informing the VEC's enrolment initiatives such as the VEC's birthday card initiative. It also features in the VEC's current efforts to minimise informal voting at the next State election. This is involving the VEC's education, information and operations staff working collaboratively to ensure that all eligible Victorians understand what is required to effectively participate in voting for Victoria's new Legislative Council.

A specific recent example of the collaboration of the VEC's research and education staff with its operational staff has been the development of a Disability Action Plan for the next State election. The Plan will provide for a number of service improvements for voters, ranging from information and education services, to operational improvements that will have a significant impact at the next State election.

In summary, the VEC has, in time, grown to regard electoral education as being at least as important as its other functions. The VEC believes that it is necessary to have a range of dedicated programs using its education staff in relation to working in schools etc, but that it is also important that the VEC's education program continues to be integrated structurally with other VEC functions.

The result of the VEC's experience to date is reflected in its electoral education priorities for the foreseeable future. These are outlined below.

(i) A continued focus on groups that are under-represented in enrolment and voting

The VEC's electoral education programs will continue to have their focus on groups that are under-represented in enrolment and voting, and in particular on programs for young people in schools that are located within communities characterized by low participation at elections. This best complements the AEC's electoral education program that has at its core the more broadly targetted Electoral Education Centre in Melbourne. The VEC has the opportunity to continue its work with those groups who need to be more proactively engaged to encourage participation.

(ii) Programs that encourage democratic engagement

The VEC will continue to focus on the development of programs of democratic engagement as the means to increase participation amongst under-represented groups. The VEC believes that to successfully encourage those not currently participating in the electoral system requires encouraging an interest and understanding beyond the details of a particular electoral system or electoral event. This is in line with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) broadly-based curriculum approach to the teaching of civics and citizenship.

(iii) Commitment to programs that make the teaching of civics and citizenship more accessible to teachers

Clearly, from the experience of *Discovering Democracy*, a priority for the VEC is to increase its activities to help make the teaching of civics and citizenship more accessible and less daunting to teachers. The VEC is making a priority commitment to this purpose through the means described in the previous section (pp 7-8).

(iv) A stronger visibility of education resources and materials in the community.

The VEC will also develop a stronger presence and visibility of its electoral education information, materials and resources in the general community. It acknowledges that all Victorians are in need of the information they require to participate meaningfully, and that there have been missed opportunities to have a visible presence at major public events such as the Royal Melbourne Show, shopping centres, sporting events and festivals. This is a particular priority with the introduction of the new Legislative Council at the November 2006 Victorian State election.

In addition, our efforts to provide electoral education services at election times are not being diminished. This includes the provision of explanatory materials, and the briefing of the media in relation to all aspects of the Victorian electoral system.

5. Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education, taking into account approaches used internationally.

The recent Power Inquiry in the United Kingdom noted that many people feel they do not have adequate information or knowledge about the political system and that this is a block to participation.

In relation to young people, the Inquiry noted that when they are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility. It made two specific recommendations with respect to young people that may have some relevance to the future provision of electoral education in Australia:

One is that the voting age in Britain be lowered to 16 years⁸. It was considered that this would improve the interest and involvement of young people in politics and democratic engagement. Clearly if considered on purely electoral educational grounds, this recommendation would have a number of advantages. It would encourage more effective education programs that are more relevant to students' immediate rights and circumstances. It would also provide an incentive for the take-up of civics and citizenship curriculum by schools to ensure that their students have the necessary skills to prepare them for voting.

⁸ Power Commission. *Power to the People – the report of the Power Commission inquiry into Britain's democracy* March 2006. p. 199

The second is that citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification. It was felt by the Inquiry that citizenship education needed a sharper focus on engagement and a more attractive appeal to students and teachers⁹.

The concept of all Australian students undertaking a short course to encourage future electoral participation is worth considering. Ideally, every student in Australia would have experienced at some time in their schooling an educational program that encouraged their future participation in the democratic process, and provided them with the necessary knowledge and skills to feel prepared to enrol and vote as soon as they are legally able. This, however, is not the current situation.

Although such a course may not be mandated in Australian schools, electoral commissions might have an important role in developing, marketing and supporting such a course. For example, the VEC might consider promoting “contract” arrangements with secondary schools along the following lines. If a secondary school will undertake to teach a package of curriculum at the middle school level that covers the essential curriculum for being able to effectively vote at Federal, State and local government elections, the VEC will provide support in the form of materials and assistance, and will provide certification to all students taking part. This certification might be a “Passport to Democracy”, certifying each student’s readiness to enrol when they are 17 and vote when they are 18.

The VEC will consider this matter further after the November 2006 State election.

Steve Tully
Electoral Commissioner for Victoria

1 June 2006

⁹ Power Commission. *Power to the People – the report of the Power Commission inquiry into Britain’s democracy* March 2006. p. 204