

SUBMISSION 67

Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

1 June 2006

Local Government Association of Queensland Submission 2

Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education – Migrant & Refugee Australians

Introduction

Further to the submission by our Association on this matter in relation to young people, we also wish to add some additional feedback to you regarding engagement of migrant and refugee communities in the processes of civics and electoral education in Queensland.

This feedback is not based upon extensive consultation but rather an initial focus group including fourteen full-time Council staff who form most of the current Local Area Multicultural Partnership (LAMP) Program team from across Queensland. Councils involved in this partnership arrangement include Brisbane, Logan, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Caboolture, Maroochy, Hervey Bay, Maryborough, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Livingstone, Mackay, Townsville, Johnstone (Innisfail), Cairns.

The Association (funded through the Queensland State Government Department of the Premier & Cabinet) has been the coordinating agency of LAMP, at the Local Government level, for the past seven years. The twin goals of the program are to increase the organisational capacity of Queensland Councils to better represent and respond to their multicultural communities across the full spectrum of Council business; and to increase the understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity across whole communities, through the activities and leadership of Local Government.

Therefore, the focus of this enquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is relevant to the goals of the program. It is of course, of interest more generally to Local Government, particularly as almost all Councils are involved (as in other States) with the processes of granting citizenship. However, as noted above, no extensive consultation with local government in Queensland has been undertaken to this date.

Please see below the responses of the focus group made up of LAMP workers from across the State to the question of what needs to be done to improve the electoral awareness and civic knowledge of migrant (and refugee) Australians:

- 1) LAMP workers who were part of this focus group all believed that the culturally & linguistically diverse communities in their regions were largely

unaware of electoral processes and other matters related to civic knowledge. They noted that many community members are too busy dealing with the challenges of settlement to spend much time learning about these matters soon after their arrival. However, once they had settled and were ready to play a more significant role in the life of the community, many had lost contact with settlement and other support agencies that may act as conductors of civics and electoral education.

- 2) However, it was noted by those in the focus group that migrants (and particularly refugees) that they were in contact with wanted to vote and that it meant a great deal to those who came from countries where this right had been denied.
- 3) Participants felt that Councils could do more, if supported by the Electoral Commission, through the processes of granting citizenship, when many new arrivals are ready to take in a greater understanding of these matters. However, it was noted that many Councils were under great pressure do to the current legislative and other requirements they have to deal with. The outcomes of the Cost Shifting Enquiry would suggest that Local Government's role in increased electoral and civics education would need to be strongly supported by the Electoral Commission, particularly in Councils where there are no LAMP team members.
- 4) More outreach can be done through the Electoral Commission Offices throughout the State. LAMP workers have close links with culturally and linguistically diverse communities in their regions. Information could be channeled to these communities through regular newsletters, ethnic community meetings, public celebrations, other information sessions and citizenship ceremonies.
- 5) As an example, we have been working closely with the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the past year to assist in engaging members of CALD communities in filling out the Census. We have been able to inform many community groups through all of the above processes, by closely working with the ABS team. The role of local government has not been to deliver information but rather to provide a link to CALD communities.
- 6) Many felt that the best way to educate on electoral matters and civics education would be to integrate the information into English Language (AMEP) courses, mostly in Queensland delivered through TAFE. However, there was some query by those who saw the time for English training as being too early in the settlement process.
- 7) There was some doubt as to whether special civics education courses would attract migrants or refugees. Members of this focus group agreed that it would

be more effective to go to where members of migrant and refugee communities were already engaging in information sharing or education.

- 8) Councils that do not have LAMP workers may require most assistance in this process, particularly through their involvement in granting citizenship, which is seen as an important Local Government role.
- 9) The highest languages other than English spoken at home differ significantly from LG area to area. Translated information packs are needed for many groups – and need to be carefully targeted so that the right language packs go to the correct Local Government.
- 10) It was suggested that there should be special efforts made prior to major elections as many migrants and refugees are not aware of the spheres of government in Australia and the roles they play.
- 11) It was also suggested that young people within migrant and refugee communities were the best group to focus on, through youth Councils and schools.

The Association is pleased to see that further consultation will be undertaken by the Joint Standing Committee.
