



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

THURSDAY, 31 AUGUST 2006

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS
Thursday, 31 August 2006**

Members: Mr Lindsay (*Chair*), Mr Danby (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Brandis, Carr, Hogg, Mason and Murray and Mr Ciobo, Mr Griffin and Mrs Mirabella

Members in attendance: Senators Hogg and Mason and Mr Ciobo and Mr Lindsay

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The adequacy of electoral education focusing on but not limited to:

- the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system;
- the nature of civics education and its links with electoral education;
- the content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities;
- the school age at which electoral education should begin;
- the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs;
- the adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities;
- the adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens;
- the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education;
- the role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education;
- the access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament; and
- opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

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Committee met at 12.33 pm

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education. I thank everybody for coming along today. We are looking forward to hearing some great evidence here in Hobart. Today's hearing is a very special occasion for the committee: for the first time a public hearing is being held at a school, and the committee thanks the teachers and the students of Rosetta Primary School for hosting this hearing. The inquiry was referred by the Special Minister of State, the Hon Gary Nairn, on 24 March this year.

We have received over 100 submissions, including a number from Tasmania. We have received those submissions from a broad range of groups, and Tasmania is no exception. We received one from this particular primary school. The inquiry will focus on the quality of education provided to young, Indigenous and migrant Australians. We are quite concerned about the Australian Electoral Commission reports that indicate that young and Indigenous Australians are more likely to be underenrolled, while higher levels of informal voting are often evident among culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

Today we will be hearing from representatives of the United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Youth Government Association and the Multicultural Council of Tasmania. The committee will then hold a school forum with some of the students and teachers from Rosetta Primary School.

I remind all witnesses that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and warrants the same respect as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege. That means you can say what you want! Before introducing the witnesses, I refer any members of the media who may be present at the hearing to the need to fairly and accurately report the proceedings of the committee.

[12.35 pm]

CORDOVER, Mr Michael, Education Officer, United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania

McCONVILLE, Mr Patrick, President, United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania

CHAIR—Welcome. If my memory serves me right, Michael, you actually wrote the submission. Are you going to appear on behalf of the Youth Government Association as well?

Mr Cordover—That is correct, yes.

CHAIR—Do you want to present any additional submissions?

Mr McConville—No.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr McConville—I suppose it would be in order just to talk a little bit about what UNYA Tasmania does. UNYA Tasmania is a division of the United Nations Youth Association of Australia. We have a division in every state and territory. Our state and territory divisions are responsible for running conferences and various day forums and performing various educational functions which inform young people about the United Nations and international affairs. Implicit in a lot of that is civics education, and implicit in civics education obviously is electoral education.

Hopefully, you have received our voters handbook that we produced at the start of this year for the state government election—yes, that is the one. That is an example of what a lot of our divisions are doing. At a national level, we have various policy platforms which advocate various things, among which are things to do with electoral reform and advocacy for young people. So a lot of our work is involved in advocating the United Nations. Another important element of our work is advocating youth participation and empowerment throughout the country.

Senator HOGG—I will just go to the recommendations you made, in particular to recommendation 2: ‘AEC to provide better practical information about voting’. What exactly do you mean by better information about voting? I will get you to come to that in the moment. Part of the problem—and the real problem—is to get people to enrol in the first place. It does not matter how much information people have about voting; if they are not on the electoral roll, whatever the AEC might do there is pretty much a waste of time. So how do you firstly get young people to enrol? What is the incentive? We have heard about the disincentive—people use the threat, ‘You’ll be fined,’ which is not a good path to go down, we feel. What incentives do you think should be put there? How do you get the young people to enrol? Then, having addressed that: how do you think the AEC should provide better information?

Mr McConville—You are looking at two separate problems there. One is the issue of how to get people enrolled. A lot of that is actually informing people on how they can be enrolled. That

is one of our recommendations. Various electoral commissions around the country—the Victorian Electoral Commission and the Western Australian Electoral Commission—have taken steps to provide birthday cards to people when they turn 17 or 18, saying: ‘You’re now eligible to enrol.’ That seems to be a very valuable initiative. That is certainly what our membership noted would be very useful for them: to know when they are allowed to enrol and to be given the means to do so.

CHAIR—You said Victoria and who else?

Mr McConville—The Western Australian Electoral Commission trialled it in 2005 as well. Recommendation 2 relates to more of the practical aspects of voting. If you look at surveys—

Senator HOGG—Before we get on to that, what about getting people on the roll? I know the birthday cards is one way in which that can be done, but what about, whilst people are still enrolled—and I understand not all students go to year 12, but at least in the last two years of school there is still a reasonably significant number of people at school—using the school system itself to enrol people? Is there anything advantageous or disadvantageous in that?

Mr Cordover—I think that is a good idea, because schools are, after all, where a large number of young people are. Although, as you say, not everybody attends year 11 and 12, there is a very large percentage—the majority of people go through grades 11 and 12. It would be very useful to be able to get to those people through the schools. The difficulty is in ensuring that when you go through the schools you are actually getting to the students. It is something which UNYA has experienced as a youth organisation trying to talk to schools and which other organisations—such as councils and the state government—experience trying to get information out to schools. It will get as far as the principal, it might get as far as the student representative council or there might be posters put on boards, but it is very difficult to get information disseminated to actual students themselves.

Mr McConville—I suppose something you will hear a lot from the two organisations that I am aware are coming to the hearing today, UNYA and TYGA—the Tasmanian Youth Government Association—is that we are very much in support of ‘by youth, for youth’ organisations. We think that is very valuable. I am well aware that the AEC does a lot of electoral enrolments through schools. A lot of schools have schemes where, say, somebody fills out their enrolment form and they get a chocolate frog in return. That is a fairly common scheme that you see in schools in Tasmania. That works to a degree, but what we would like to see is the AEC get involved with non-government organisations. I can understand that the AEC is generally reluctant to do that, because they do not want to be seen to be partisan. Certainly UNYA, while non-partisan, is a political organisation, but we also think that we have a role to play in enrolling people in that first instance.

Senator HOGG—Okay. Now, what about the ‘better practical information’ that you were leading on to?

Mr McConville—As I started to say, when you look at things like the youth electoral study that was undertaken over the last couple of years—I think you have heard evidence from the authors of that study—one of the common things that comes up that is a disincentive for young people to be involved in the political process is that they do not feel that they know enough

about either the parties or the process—all the practical stuff that goes with voting: how group ticket voting works and that kind of thing. More practical information about how votes are transferred in Senate elections and how above-the-line voting works is going to be valuable for the broader spectrum of the population, not just for young people.

There also needs to more practical information about what political parties stand for. There is a difficulty in that you do not want to have teachers come at things from a partisan basis, but you can get around that by inviting members of the community from political parties or organisations to be involved in students' learning. I think that is very important. Certainly what we sought to do with the *First Time Voters Information Handbook* was to get a balanced view by consulting a broad range of political parties and Independents who were running in the last election. That sort of practical experience of politics is going to be very valuable in equipping people with the skills that they think are necessary to get involved in the process.

Senator HOGG—Whom exactly do you see the AEC distributing this information to and how would they get it out? Are these new enrollees or are they people that might have been on the roll for some time?

Mr McConville—Are you speaking of practical information?

Senator HOGG—Yes.

Mr McConville—I think practical information needs to be introduced into schools as part of civic education processes, as part of the formal education process.

Senator HOGG—Would you see it as being part of the first year of a university degree when people are more likely and more prone to be confronted with an election?

Mr McConville—The difficulty you have there is that a lot of the people that you are trying to target to get involved in politics and in the civic process are already involved by the time that they have got to university. What you want to be targeting is the broad range of young people.

Mr Cordover—Because this information needs to be disseminated as close to universally as possible, we need to do that while education remains universal. In grades 9 and 10 students study SOSE and they discuss voting matters and electoral matters and hot topic issues, but there is never a time when students are able to look at what the different parties stand for and what the different candidates stand for. That is what would equip them to make an informed decision when voting. That is what they lack.

CHAIR—How do you think teachers would warm to a suggestion that they should somehow or other try to even-handedly guide students through the policies of various political parties?

Mr McConville—You certainly face a difficulty with that. I think a lot of teachers would acknowledge that they do not feel comfortable trying to teach on an impartial basis. But I think that is when you need to engage other community groups and organisations or, indeed, political parties in that learning process.

CHAIR—Then think about this. Do you give equal time to the various political parties even though one may be a really way out, off the field type of party? Do you give that party time equal to that of the major parties? What do you do?

Mr McConville—I think you would have to.

CHAIR—But then you could have a party of one wanting equal time.

Mr Cordover—Absolutely.

CHAIR—It is a hard problem, isn't it?

Mr Cordover—It is a very difficult problem. But when you consider that you are dealing at an electorate level, there are only so many candidates who are going to be standing. If you are going to ask for one representative from each party—because a party shares a common policy and therefore only one representative is required—and for each of the Independents who are standing and allocate them five minutes each and then have a group discussion at the end, you are still not looking at much more than maybe an hour and a half at each school. I believe that is the length of some of the longer lessons, so I think it is feasible.

CHAIR—Is there perhaps another model: picking key issues and discussing what political parties are talking about in the community? Would that be a reasonable model?

Mr McConville—I think that would be a reasonable model. That is the kind of critical analysis that curriculums have been trying to put in place. The problem is that that very rarely takes the next step to actually say that these are the policies and these are the people who hold those policies. Too often it is just about the issues and the different standpoints on the issues and it is never linked back to something in reality.

Mr CIOBO—Mr McConville, I congratulate you in broad terms on what you are doing particularly with respect to the voters handbook. I think that is a good initiative. I have some questions on the genesis of this handbook, its potential rollout and its application elsewhere in the country and also some broad questions on the issues that you have been touching upon in terms of motivating young people to become politically active. Dealing with the first of those, is this booklet an initiative of UNYA or is it specifically an initiative of UNYA's Tasmanian division? Is it something that is being rolled out internationally or nationally?

Mr McConville—UNYA nationally produced a first time voters guide for the last federal election. UNYA South Australia produced a first time voters guide at the start of the year for their general state election, which was on the same day as the Tasmanian election, as it happened. That takes a very different approach to what UNYA Tasmania did in that it is a series of questions that were put to the political parties and independent representatives running in the election. UNYA Tasmania's guide was just a request to each political party registered in Tasmania for a 400-word policy statement, and independents were asked for a 200-word policy statement.

Mr CIOBO—Could you characterise for the committee the distribution of this booklet and the reception to it?

Mr McConville—We were disappointed that we did not get it out to as many people as we could have.

Mr CIOBO—What sorts of numbers are you looking at?

Mr McConville—We printed about 300 handbooks for our societies day, which is the day that UNYA Tasmania markets itself to—

Mr CIOBO—A societies day at the university?

Mr McConville—Yes, because we are a society of the University of Tasmania Union, as well. We were probably left with about 150. The handbooks we printed for the north of the state, especially Braddon and Bass, were the ones that went the quickest. People on the southern campus of the university, which is where we were, snapped up these handbooks to inform them about the candidates in the electorates where they were not then located. That is interesting.

Mr CIOBO—You talk about the need for the AEC to involve NGOs and work collaboratively to try to broaden the appeal of political involvement. In particular, I put this proposition to you: is there really an absence of information and an inability of people to track down information on voting systems, party politics, political leaders and political philosophy or ideology, or is it a case of young people just not being engaged? Perhaps it is more of a cultural cringe. My general observation of Australian society is one where politics is ridiculed, politicians are ridiculed and there is a general disengagement from a cultural perspective. It is not that I am necessarily disagreeing with your assertion, but I am wondering whether you have looked at that issue and thought about that. Is the problem a lack of information or is it something more systemic than that? Is it perhaps of more interest to young people to show them the way in which their opinions can make a difference in the system?

Mr McConville—When we are talking about young people being politically or civically minded, it is very important to recognise that they can be politically active without going through the mainstream processes, that is, being enrolled to vote, being a member of a political party and that kind of thing. Although that sort of formal participation is important and it is certainly what the organisations we are involved with encourage, I do not think it is fair to say that young people are disengaged or apathetic about political issues because they are not involved in that sort of participation. The onus is really on the formal structure of civic involvement to make itself known and to make itself attractive to young people and indeed to the broader population.

Mr CIOBO—Are you saying that you believe young people are civically active but perhaps just not as we know it?

Mr McConville—Yes.

Mr Cordover—That is a result that the youth electoral study produced. Young people are active but not in the formal political mechanisms. You inquire whether it is a lack of information or disengagement; it is disengagement due to a lack of information. There is no one place young people can go and see a brief summary of the political opinions of various parties. There is no

place anyone can go and see very briefly and very quickly the stances of all the people who are standing in their electorate.

Mr CIOBO—As put forward by those people?

Mr Cordover—Yes, as put forward by those people.

Mr CIOBO—There is one thing I would draw to your attention with respect to your voters handbook. I will read you this paragraph because I notice you made reference to the fact that you wanted to be objective and not partisan. You say: ‘The replacement of ministerial attention to young people by the National Youth Roundtable has proven to be inadequate, especially for Tasmania. Membership and scope of the roundtable’s consultation are seriously limited and the exclusion of Tasmania in the most recent round is unacceptable. The introduction of the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005 similarly alienates young people from decision making by making it more difficult to enrol to vote in the lead up to an election.’

Without getting into the pedantics of that, I would take great exception to that assertion because I do not believe it is objective at all; I think it is rather partisan. I am not actually trying to delve into a partisan debate as to the merits of this or otherwise, but I just highlight that I do not believe that is an objective point of view. Isn’t there a real danger that by involving oneself in policy and the outlining of policy we overstep the mark and what you may consider objective someone else may not, and this is a case in point? So in reality we are not providing a service that young people are looking for because all these things inherently become flavoured with one’s opinion?

Mr McConville—I would agree that that is not objective. I do not think we ever intended to be apolitical in that book, but instead apartisan; and that is the point we are trying to make.

Mr CIOBO—So this is purposely partisan?

Mr McConville—No; that is political but it is not partisan. We certainly do not support any political party. That is an important point to make. We certainly advocate things that we think are important to young people.

Mr CIOBO—I see.

Senator MASON—So you are activists?

Mr McConville—Yes, we are.

Senator MASON—Senator Hogg loves activists.

Senator HOGG—Yes, I like activists.

Mr McConville—I do not think that necessarily devalues the educative merit of the handbook and I do not think it needs to be a large impediment to practical political education.

Mr CIOBO—Do you think this turns people on to politics and being active?

Mr McConville—I think identifying issues is important, and they can read the policy statements and see where they lie on the political spectrum.

Mr Cordover—It is also important to note that the statement that was made was in reference to federal matters and the handbook was produced for a state election. There is a very substantial difference, as I am sure you are aware.

Senator MASON—I have quick question of clarification arising from Mr Ciobo's question. I am sorry I missed your opening presentation but I will read it with great interest later on. You spoke about civic structure and civic activity. I want to make sure I get this right: I think you said that young people are active but they are active in less formal ways. Is that what you are arguing?

Mr McConville—Yes.

Senator MASON—In what ways are they active?

Mr Cordover—Young people are involved in policy based organisations like Amnesty International, which advocate a specific single issue.

Senator MASON—It could be Greenpeace or the Wilderness Society.

Mr Cordover—Absolutely; all those sorts of organisations. That is what the youth electoral study said—that these organisations are seen as the way to instigate change in Australia and it is seen that politicians and the political system are not a way to instigate change. That is a problem, and that is what needs to be addressed.

Senator MASON—That is a good point.

Mr McConville—Quite apart from political participation, youth participation generally tends to be judged by traditional measures; that is, involvement in groups—still important groups but groups that are not necessarily involved in young people's lives as much today as they used to be, like Scouts, Guides or the Farmers Federation.

Senator MASON—That is a very good point because often people say that young people are not interested in politics. What they mean is that they may not be interested in, to use your words, partisan politics but they are active in politics more generally through environmental, religious and other groups. You also mentioned civic structure. Your argument is that young people do not know much about civic structure per se.

Mr McConville—In some cases, yes.

Senator HOGG—In terms of the electoral enrolment process itself, does that alienate young people in the sense that they have to fill out a form and lodge it? Firstly, they have to find where to get the form from. In this modern era of electronic communication, whether it be email, SMS

or whatever—and I do not know how it would be achieved—are there more youth-friendly ways in which people could be encouraged to get themselves on the electoral roll?

Mr Cordover—Yes, basically.

Senator HOGG—Can you give us some sort of insight?

Mr Cordover—Absolutely. It needs to be easier to enrol than to not enrol. It needs to be the same process that we have with compulsory voting. The idea is that it is easier to vote than to not vote, and that is how people participate.

Mr CIOBO—Should that come at the expense of electoral integrity, though?

Mr Cordover—The question of electoral integrity and enrolment during the close of rolls period—

Mr CIOBO—But it is a fundamental issue. You say that it should be easier to be enrolled than to not be enrolled. This committee has looked previously at getting the balance right between enrolment and integrity.

Mr Cordover—It should not be at the cost of the integrity of the electoral roll, which is very important. But the verification is done by the Australian Electoral Commission and that is where the burden should lie. The burden should not lie on people having to fill out 17 pages. It is not a passport application, where you have to get your mother's maiden name and your grandmother's father's signature. The point is that it should be easy to enrol. One of the recommendations made by a Queensland committee that has just reported is that there be automatic provisional enrolment, which is then verified by the commission, and I think that is a good idea. That report came from the *Voices and votes* inquiry. The idea is that it is very easy to get on the roll.

I think the point made by Senator Hogg is a good one: it is not easy for young people to get on the roll. It is a process of having to go and find a form and actively try to do it. Firstly, there is the birthday card system, where it is simply a matter of signing your name, ticking a few boxes and putting in your address, and there is a reply paid envelope. It is a fantastic idea. Again a good idea is where at the very least provisional and perhaps absolute enrolment could occur over the internet, because the internet is very widely used, is easy to use and does not even require the same amount of effort as going to the post office.

CHAIR—But the internet is also used for fraudulent purposes.

Mr Cordover—Absolutely, and so is the mail. I think that is a key point. The things that you cannot do on the internet are signatures. There are technological measures for that, but their implementation—at least on a broad enough scale—is far off in the future. But, using the internet, you can put in the details, and I think that needs to be done. People can put in their name, their address and their intention to enrol. Then whatever verification needs to be done can be done, with the burden being placed on the Electoral Commission rather than on the enrolee.

CHAIR—We have run out of time, unfortunately, but I want to ask about your recommendation in relation to the broadcasting of parliament on television. In addition, because

parliament is also broadcast on the internet, you have indicated that you feel the internet is an effective way of ensuring that young people know what is what. I am surprised at your comment about the live minutes of the House of Representatives, for example. Probably 90 per cent of members of the House of Representatives do not know about the live minutes that are available. I am not so certain that would attract young people, although it might attract people of your organisation. I am thinking about the CS band in the United States, which is available all the time. Do you think the Australian parliament should be broadcast on television all the time?

Mr McConville—I think you are probably getting outside of the scope of the kind of people that we want to reach with civic and electoral education, but I certainly think that would be valuable.

Senator MASON—Reruns of Senate question time?

Mr McConville—On a rainy day there is nothing better.

CHAIR—So would you broadcast the House or the Senate?

Senator HOGG—You would not broadcast the House.

CHAIR—My advice is to answer ‘House’. So you think that would be useful?

Mr McConville—Yes.

Mr Cordover—I think the broadcast of question time is especially useful, and that already goes on. Question time is exciting and quite a bit of fun. Many people sit down and watch it. It is good to see because it addresses the big issues of the day and it is entertaining. That probably is not its purpose, but that it is certainly how it comes out.

Mr CIOBO—But that is part of the inherent difficulty. You say that it is entertaining and fun and there is colour and movement. I would say that, if I did a straw poll of my constituents—and this is only anecdotal—the vast majority would probably say that question time is a disgrace, it reflects poorly on parliamentary behaviour and it turns people off. I suppose I raise this because it is part of the balancing act that is required. There is a chance, is there not, that we would alienate as many people through broadcasting of question time as we would attract? You can disagree with me, if you would prefer.

Mr Cordover—The broadcast of question time is strides ahead of the broadcasting of much of the rest of parliament. Question time is often described by those who like it as ‘robust debate’ and I think that is valid. However, I agree that there are issues primarily with lots of people being thrown out of the House during question time.

Senator HOGG—That occurs only in the lower house.

Mr Cordover—Yes, only in the lower house.

Senator HOGG—They are not thrown out of the Senate, I can assure you.

Mr Cordover—I recognise that in the Senate it is much calmer.

Senator HOGG—In the Senate it is far more—

Mr McConville—Refined.

Senator HOGG—refined; thank you.

Senator MASON—It is much more polite.

Mr McConville—When reading a transcript of your hearings in Alice Springs, I did note that some of the students said, ‘Politicians acting like a pack of flaming galahs’—I believe that was the term used. Question time is a bit of useful political theatre, but I think you have to counterbalance it with issues that are bit more measured. I think a program like *Order in the House* can do that by summarising the events of the week. I also think it is particularly valuable to broadcast things that clearly are big issues to the electorate, such as the Work Choices legislation. When that was on the radio, I certainly tuned into that entire debate. The debate on RU486 I think was another that I tuned in for.

CHAIR—Are you both at the University of Tasmania?

Mr Cordover—Yes.

Mr McConville—Yes.

CHAIR—How would you, as university students, feel about adopting the University of New South Wales model? That is the only uni in the Commonwealth that has a six-point course on civics type matters that is mandated for every student?

Mr McConville—That would be great, but I think you need to shift it down to secondary or senior secondary schools.

CHAIR—You do not agree with it in universities?

Mr McConville—I do agree with it in universities and I think it is very valuable. However, with that sort of course, I still think you are missing out on a large section of your target audience. That needs to be shifted down to grades 9 and 10. You do not just need to be taught about the boring elements of the civic process. You do not need to be taught about the structure of parliament. You need to be taught about how democracy works and what positions each party and candidate has so that you can be informed. I think that is what came out of the youth electoral study—that people do not participate because they do not feel that they are at a level of knowledge that allows them to do so. I think it is very important to shift that down.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, thank you for your evidence. Patrick, you have filled in well. Mr Monk has just arrived just a little late—and I will have some more to say on that in a minute, Mr Monk, and you will understand when I say it. Gentlemen, you will be sent a copy of the transcript from the committee, to which you can make corrections of grammar and fact, if necessary. We really appreciate your giving evidence today and thank you for your attendance.

[1.09 pm]

CORDOVER, Mr Michael, Treasurer, Tasmanian Youth Government Association

MONK, Mr Stephen, President, Tasmanian Youth Government Association

CHAIR—Welcome. The committee does not require you to give evidence under oath but these are legal proceedings of the parliament and you need to understand the respect that you should give them. We have received a written submission from you. Do you want to present any additional submission, or do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Monk—I will just make an opening statement.

CHAIR—Thank you. Please proceed.

Mr Monk—Firstly, please accept my apologies for my tardiness. The main message from our submission is that we have found that one of the most effective ways to increase knowledge and awareness of electoral processes is through hands-on participation in those processes. As an organisation, we strive to put that into practice through the Youth Parliament program and the more recent addition of the Youth Local Government program. Both programs seek to allow young people to participate in the processes of either parliament or a local council by having them sit in the chambers and debate legislation or by-laws. It is obviously about taking them through the whole process of developing legislation or by-laws by brainstorming, seeking the opinions of their peers on it, developing that into formal legislation, taking it through caucus, debating it in the chambers, voting on it and other associated processes. We found that to be an effective way of building up awareness of those institutions and the processes which underlie them and that it aids in giving them enthusiasm about the process, increasing their knowledge and making them want to continue to participate in the process.

Mr Cordover—The sorts of programs that TYGA runs ensure that young people believe correctly that the political system—the parliamentary system and the local government system—is able to make active change to important issues. Young people come into the programs with some issues which they feel are important. They draft legislation or by-laws to make changes to fix those issues, they debate them and they see how that process works.

CHAIR—Mr Monk, as to your being late and in the context of all levels of government legislation that have been produced, I want to propose a piece of legislation for you to consider: the Hobart City Council should coordinate the traffic lights on the main road down here. None of us could get to the hearing. It is an awful road.

Mr Cordover—It is—and it is actually Glenorchy council.

CHAIR—You made a key point in your submission that, when dealing with young people, having them run the process assists this greatly. Would you like to expand on that?

Mr Monk—It is an important point and one that we have tried to emphasise in our submission. Our whole purpose is about empowering young people to not only understand but want to continue to participate throughout their lives in the process. The process begins when they start as participants at youth parliament or youth local government and that continues as they become involved as leaders in the process. Throughout it, they are gaining skills and knowledge about not only the electoral system and the institutions which underlie our system of government but also organisational and leadership skills which will assist them into the future. In that way, it is good for them individually. Also, it assists in developing their knowledge of the system and the institutions which underlie it. In the context of electoral education, I think for a young person to be able to not only participate but also act as a leader and a teacher of other young people is an effective way of reinforcing education and that passion for the system.

CHAIR—This may a difficult question to answer, but, understanding that Tasmania and the ACT have the Hare-Clark system and that other states do not, do you think that is an impediment for Tasmanian youth in relation to understanding the electoral system?

Mr Monk—From my point of view, our experience has shown that it is more difficult to understand certain elements of the electoral system. Hare-Clark is reasonably complicated as far as electoral systems go. I guess ensuring that knowledge of different electoral systems across areas where Tasmanian youth do not necessarily have that experience is important when teaching that sort of information.

CHAIR—Do you detect a conflict in the minds of youth in Tasmania when state-wise they vote this way and federally they vote that way?

Mr Cordover—I do not think it is that big an issue because effectively the way most people think about it is that with Hare-Clark five people get elected. The issues of vote redistribution, quotas and all of that are not as important as the fact that the five people who get the most votes, however that is figured out, get elected. I think that is what young people tend to understand—and that six people get elected in each half Senate election. That is understood. I think the difference to which you refer is not such an issue, because the ballot papers across all elections are reasonably similar—you number from one to N, where N is some minimum number, and that is that. I would like to, if I could, go back to your previous question, Mr Chair, on the catchphrase of ‘by youth, for youth’. I think one of the problems with programs run by older people, and they do not have to be much older, is that there is a clear power difference and that makes it intimidating for the young people. It is something that I have seen a lot. There are cross-generational forums which are fairly popular where old people and young people come together to discuss issues, and then the old people leave and the young people come together with a youth facilitator. I have been in the position of being a youth facilitator at one of those events. Even when the facilitator is present, the fact that they are all young makes it a much more informal atmosphere and things are discussed far more freely. I am sure you will appreciate that an environment similar to this, or any parliamentary or similar environment, is very formal and can be very intimidating. One of the great advantages of having a ‘by youth, for youth’ program or set of programs is that it is not intimidating. Certainly parliamentary chambers are intimidating, but when the young people at youth parliament take their first steps into parliamentary chambers they have already gone through the process of debate in a very informal setting. They know everybody there and they like everybody there, mostly.

CHAIR—You have just addressed the cross-generational issue. What about the cross-sex issue? If all of the participants are of the same age, have you detected any difference between having both sexes there or not?

Mr Cordover—I do not think so at all. I think that gender-wise it makes no difference.

Senator MASON—Mr Monk, in your opening statement you mentioned that this program assists in the future engagement of young people in civics and politics. How do you know that? Have you tested for that years later? How have you tested for these outcomes?

Mr Monk—That is a good point. We obviously have not done any sort of longitudinal studies or a lot of detailed statistical analysis of it. The program has been in place for at least 17 years continuously. It is more than 20 years since the first one was held in Tasmania and more than 25 years since the first one was held in Victoria, which I think was the first in Australia. Looking at the ad hoc relationships that we maintain with people who have gone through the program, I would assert that their participation is higher than it is among those people who have not.

Senator MASON—That is anecdotal evidence you have received over the years from people?

Mr Monk—Yes, absolutely. We have always had good feedback. A number of people are working in politics or for politicians in various capacities, having done the program, and I would expect that that is a larger percentage than would typically be found otherwise.

Senator MASON—Eighteen schools—nine public and nine private schools—from all three regions of Tasmania are represented in the program. How do you decide which 18 schools will be represented in the program?

Mr Monk—We have recently moved to a process where individuals can apply to be participants in the program.

Senator MASON—Can I just interrupt. There is a reason I ask this, and the chairman raised this the other day and it was appropriate. Let me give you a bit of background. We went to Melbourne High School, which is a selective state school, and we had very bright, very engaging students. It was a good afternoon. But in a sense they are not necessarily the target audience. Our target audience is the average person in the average school. So I am asking: are we just hitting the elite schools here, or are we hitting right across the spectrum?

Mr Monk—I think it is a good point, and one of the limitations of our program is that we have a capacity which is limited by the size of parliament and number of people that we can cater for, and typically the sorts of students who do participate in our program are already more engaged than average. That is something that I think could be improved. We obviously have a bit of an agenda to say that these sorts of programs are effective and we have found that they are particularly good at increasing people's knowledge. It would be really good from our point of view if there were more support for extending the sorts of programs that we run across a wider audience, ensuring that we or other organisations or schools could deliver similar programs to a wider audience.

Senator MASON—How were the schools selected?

Mr Cordover—Schools are not selected per se. We put out a notice to all of the schools with eligible students. For Youth Parliament that is all of the colleges, as they are called in this state—year 11 and 12 schools—and for youth local government we put out a notice to all high schools which have grade 9 and 10 students. We send them a letter, we give them a call and we say, ‘We’d like for some of your pupils to come.’ The difficulty we have is that we are mostly getting contact with debating coordinators, because that is who it tends to be. They tend to selectively distribute this information to their high-achieving debating students. One of the things that happened with the last Youth Local Government program, which was run at the end of July this year, was that we got in touch with councils as well. All the local councils were contacted and some of those disseminated information to students, so we had students who were not necessarily part of that high-end, high-achieving debating culture. This goes back to a problem which I raised as a representative of UNYA: yes, you can get to the schools, but that does not mean you can get to the students.

Senator HOGG—You raised something that I was going to raise with you, and that is the fact that you would have a fairly select target group. You would have a very skewed group of people that come along and participate. This is not a criticism, but I have witnessed an International Youth Parliament and it was more a debating society than looking at the practical application of civics for many younger people. How do you guard against that? How do you ensure that you do engage right across the spectrum? How have you achieved that thus far?

Mr Cordover—We run a system in which applications are not based on any actual application process. They are first come, first served. We try to keep costs low to ensure that there is no barrier to entry there, so we are not just getting people who can afford it.

Senator HOGG—Is that in terms of travel?

Mr Cordover—The maximum cost of travel for any student is 50c due to an arrangement with the state government for travel subsidies. The cost of the program for Youth Parliament is \$170 for this year and that can be subsidised if a student has financial difficulties. So we do that. Our problem is that we get through schools and that the schools then go off and find the students that they want. Sometimes, though, schools do not just give us their best debaters. As I was saying earlier, with the Youth Local Government program, councils did not give us debaters; they gave us young people. One of the things that I was interested to see, because I have been involved in Youth Parliament since 2003 as a participant and a member of the task force, is that even when we had people who were not top-notch debaters, even if they could not stand up and give a speech, they were still interested. They still cared about the issues. They still discussed the issues especially in caucus groups. They would stand up and actually give a speech even if it were not perhaps the best public speaking and they still went away with a much greater knowledge of the system. They still went away thinking: ‘Wow! We could actually use that system to make some change.’ I think that is the aim we have.

Senator HOGG—Do they see that only though with respect to the parliamentary process as opposed to participating in the broader political process out there in the community, whether it be in their local branch of Amnesty or whatever it might be? There are techniques for being involved in organisations in the community that are as much political, in a sense, as party politics and parliament itself.

Mr Cordover—We focus on parliamentary style systems, so local government, aldermanic systems and also state parliament.

Senator HOGG—So you are not trying to give them broad skills that can be translated into the broader community?

Mr Cordover—The skills that we provide are fairly broad-ranging. We do spend all our time discussing issues. That is what that non-party political engagement is. But we note how these issues can be solved through a parliamentary process. That notes that you have to be involved in that political system in order to make that sort of change. We encourage people to enrol to vote, and young people who participate do because they realise that if they are enrolled then they can vote and if they can vote then they can impact on the make-up of parliament and if they can impact on the make-up of parliament then they can impact on how these decisions are being made. The government really has more power than any lobby or community organisation by far. They begin to recognise that when they see that the government can actually do something other than hurl insults at each other during question time or charge taxes.

Mr CIOBO—Mr Monk, earlier on in your testimony you made the remark that the people who attend the Tasmanian Youth Government Association probably are comprised of those that may be already active participants or actively interested. Mr Cordover made some comments on this too. The question I want to ask is: do you believe that basically you are attracting or facilitating those that are already attracted and interested in politics or do you see this as actually facilitating buy in from the group that otherwise would not be touched upon?

Mr Monk—I think it is twofold. There certainly are elements of our program, as it is at the moment, which limit it to people who are already more engaged, but it does not necessarily have to be that way.

Mr CIOBO—It does not preclude others, but what I am asking is: just by the process, does it tend to only be those who already seeking to take part in it?

Mr Monk—I guess because we are a community organisation our programs are voluntary and we rely on people essentially nominating—

Mr CIOBO—You rely on a certain degree of activism already.

Mr Monk—Yes.

Mr CIOBO—I note that Mr Cordover made reference to the fact that you had examples where councils had put forward students who were not necessarily the debaters. Is that a key plank that you are incorporating going forward or is it just an interesting aside that took place one year?

Mr Monk—No, we are always trying to broaden the scope of students who are participating in our programs. We recognise that it is important to get a good cross-section of different views, geographical locations, backgrounds and people with diverse attributes into our programs. We are always looking at different ways in which we can attract those students. The YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament, as an example, runs on an electoral model where one

representative is selected from every electorate in Queensland so that they can then make sure that they have the geographical locations covered. Within that pool they try to ensure that ethnic minorities, Indigenous people and people of different socioeconomic backgrounds are selected to participate in the program. We are in communication with other youth parliament programs across Australia and internationally to always strive to include more people and get a diverse mix of participants into our programs, not only so that we can get a representative view but so that the sorts of things that we try to teach are spread throughout the community.

Mr Cordover—I think it is also important to note that, while we attract people who are already interested in the issues, those people generally are not interested in the parliamentary political system.

Mr CIOBO—Why do you say that?

Mr Cordover—Because, as the *Youth electoral study* showed and as we have been saying, people tend to see the means of changing things as being not through the parliamentary system. They tend to see that voting is not a way of participating in the system to a sufficient degree.

Mr CIOBO—Including those who are already active.

Mr Cordover—Including many of those who are already at our program, because we start with issues. We say: ‘What do you care about? What do you think should be changed?’ Then we show them how that can be changed through the parliamentary political process.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, I will finish with this question: in your view, which level of government are young people most interested in, and is that necessarily the level of government that they actually know the most about? Be careful!

Mr Monk—That is a good question.

CHAIR—The reason I am asking you is that we have some evidence about this, but I do not want to lead you. Let us hear what you say.

Mr Monk—From our experience, it obviously depends on their experiences to date. A lot of people are engaged with their local council, but I think that, typically, most people associate best with the state level of government. I do not know how to answer the second part of your question because from our point of view all levels of government are important.

CHAIR—Not from your point of view; from young people’s point of view. Which one do they know the most about?

Mr Cordover—I am going to go with the answer that they do not differentiate. If you ask: ‘Who is the Premier?’ many people will answer: ‘John Howard.’ If you ask: ‘Who’s the Prime Minister?’ there are people who will say, ‘Paul Lennon.’ There is not a sufficient knowledge of where the levels of government are divided. So people, if asked to name the cabinet—a question which is quite difficult for almost anyone—will name mixtures of both state and federal. I think they mix up those two systems because it is very difficult to see where they divide unless you

happen to be familiar with the Constitution, which, unfortunately, most people under 18 are not. It just happens that way.

CHAIR—I wonder why. Gentlemen, thank you. I appreciate you appearing before the committee this afternoon. Thanks indeed. We really appreciate your evidence.

[1.35 pm]

MEADOWS, Ms Elida Catherine, Office Administrator, Multicultural Council of Tasmania Inc.

SCHLUTER, Mr Albert Christian, Chairperson, Multicultural Council of Tasmania Inc.

SUMAR, Mrs Sajini, Vice Chair, Multicultural Council of Tasmania Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for coming along. Do you have any additional information about the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Sumar—I am an observer today because I did not have any information prior and have not provided the submission paper.

CHAIR—Do you have an additional submission or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Schluter—You have probably read our submission.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Schluter—I think education has to be extended not just by the federal government but also state and local governments so that people that come into this country know exactly how this country is governed and how it operates. These people come from very different democracies all over the world. They are governed by dictators, benevolent or otherwise, and therefore we have to demonstrate that our democracy is different to those in other countries. For instance, what are the goals of members of parliament? How much input do they have in the governing of this country, not just state but also federal and local? What are their goals as far as parliament is concerned? Our Prime Minister does almost everything, although we have ministers who should speak on their portfolios, which I do not think is the case very often.

Before people become Australian citizens, it is essential that they are educated about how this democracy works. That is a very important aspect which we have to follow very closely. For instance, if a refugee buys a car it guarantees that he can drive a car but he does not know that he has to have a licence. That is one of the very basic things that we have to tell these people about to make them understand how this country is run, and it is not always the case. This is very important for life in our community. This information has to be translated into many different languages, and I think we should make an effort to do that. That is all I have to say.

Ms Meadows—It is not in the submission but, of course, the major issue is a lack of knowledge of English. People within the Multicultural Council of Tasmania have often stated that there is not enough teaching of English to people when they come into this country. If they come in as humanitarian entrants, they get six months funded English teaching at TAFE. During that period, of course, they are taught something about our electoral system. But during that period they are not citizens and are more concerned with other issues. When they finally become

citizens, if they choose to do so, that sort of information is no longer in their minds. Also, often two years down the track they still do not know much more English than they did in that first six-month period. So more English teaching has to be looked at as a basic essential.

CHAIR—You will understand that Australia is the most culturally diverse country in the world. Do you know how many countries are represented in Australia?

Mr Schluter—I would think it is quite a number.

Mrs Sumar—I would say definitely more than 100.

CHAIR—I will tell you because it leads into my next question: it is 208. It is a very significant number. Your submission says that you want to see more languages in the materials produced by the AEC. You say:

... translated information as listed on the AEC website does not include many of the languages of the most recent citizens.

Could you tell me who you think are the most recent citizens?

Mr Schluter—As you probably know, if migrants or newcomers come into this country with no English knowledge, how would they be able to read the website?

CHAIR—Yes, I understand that.

Mr Schluter—This is the problem.

CHAIR—But you must have picked up a problem here in Tasmania. Where are the problems?

Mrs Sumar—In the past five years we have had more Africans, mostly from Sudan and Ethiopia. That is where the majority are from. People from Sierra Leone are also coming in, but that is no problem at all. They speak better English than Australians.

CHAIR—That is often the way. And we speak better English than Englishmen! In Tasmania have you had recent arrivals from places like Iraq and Iran?

Mrs Sumar—Yes.

Ms Meadows—Now we have Burmese coming in.

Mrs Sumar—Yes, we are expecting more Burmese for Tasmania this year.

Senator HOGG—Do they have their own ethnic organisation that represents them here or are there too few of them to have a peak organisation to represent them?

Mrs Sumar—What happens is that, once they come, their main need is to settle in on a personal level. They experience trauma because they all suffer in the camps and in their own countries. The main problem that we know of is trauma. There are facilities for them to get help

for that. As Elida was saying, once they are settled for two years, they will become citizens. Then they will form their own organisations.

Senator HOGG—What I am trying to find out, though, is whether the AEC reaches these organisations and educates these people through their organisations.

Ms Meadows—We have only recently had two Africans organisations formed. Is that right, Sajini?

Mrs Sumar—Yes.

Ms Meadows—A Sudanese and an Ethiopia organisation.

Senator HOGG—You see, it appears to me that, if these people do not have an organisation around their own native culture, they have nowhere in particular to turn.

Ms Meadows—They have the migrant resource centre.

Mrs Sumar—They have formed their own organisations—incorporated bodies. Only two African communities are ready for that. As I say, they have problems settling. Generally they want to start their own organisations, so two organisations are already formed: for Sudanese and Ethiopians.

Senator HOGG—Is the migrant resource centre sufficiently instructed by the AEC and like organisations about civics, the need to enrol and the purpose of being an enrolled citizen?

Ms Meadows—As far as the Australian Electoral Commission goes, we are not sure. They should be. Probably what we were trying to say in the submission is that particularly in Tasmania, with a very small population of dispersed communities and new communities, the AEC should work with grassroots organisations, with multicultural organisations like the MRC and MCoT and, in the north, the Ethnic Communities Council. And we have still got Good Neighbour Councils in Tasmania. As far as the work of the AEC is concerned, I come from a migrant background—this is older migrants—and I never knew that you were allowed to go into a polling booth with someone to help you vote. We only found that out when we asked someone from the local office of the AEC to come and speak to us at a council meeting. The people at the council meeting did not know that either. So there is some breakdown in communication there if people are not aware that they can actually have someone walk in with them and help them when they are voting.

CHAIR—Given that MRCs are funded by the Australian government, should the Australian government mandate as part of its funding that MRCs have a role in delivering electoral and civics information to their client base?

Ms Meadows—I think so.

CHAIR—You would support that?

Ms Meadows—Yes, because they are the front line and they are in touch with these people and work with them, particularly new communities.

CHAIR—So they would be an appropriate organisation to deliver that information to ethnic groups?

Mrs Sumar—Yes. This is more or less a new problem for us because we did not have this type of migrant or refugee before. At the moment they are looking into those needs. They have client workers, interpreters and social workers. They work together and they know about this issue.

CHAIR—Our settlement programs might not be delivered by MRCs. They might be delivered by other groups.

Mrs Sumar—Yes.

CHAIR—Should they be required, as part of their services, to provide this information?

Mrs Sumar—Yes.

CHAIR—You would not see any difficulty with that?

Ms Meadows—Providing that they provide impartial, objective information, of course.

CHAIR—Yes. You said in your evidence that multilingual voting materials must be provided. What materials were you thinking about?

Mr Schluter—I think that that material should be giving information for the people who want to be Australian on how this country is governed, what are the responsibilities of a citizen and how far, for instance, can members of parliament help. We have a different view of that here.

CHAIR—Okay, but I want to clarify that. Your evidence talked about voting materials. From what you were saying then you were not referring to voting materials, you were referring to a wider sense. Is that the situation?

Ms Meadows—Probably both. If you are talking about voting materials, if someone cannot bring someone into a polling booth with them then perhaps they should be able to access something in their own language that describes the ballot paper and the process on the day.

Mr Schluter—I became an Australian citizen in 1956, so about 50 years ago. In all the years before that—I came in 1951—there was no material available. And it has not changed. We have to have some information so we can educate the newcomers about this country and tell them that the democracy in Australia is different than the one they experienced where they came from. This is where the problem lies. At the moment if there is good or bad news from the federal government it is the Prime Minister who is on the television. They thought they were in a similar situation to the one they left—not that that is the case—because that gives the impression that it is one man, not democracy, and that it is not the members of parliament that have an input into how they formalise their policies or the migration policy.

The last thing we heard was about Mr Georgiou, who was game enough to stand up and say, 'We don't go along with that.' But that was unusual. These people come from a country where there is a dictatorship, and yet they have to learn how this country works. It is different, so they say. Looking back over the last so many months, we have seen that a handful of people can decide if this country has to go to war. If that is the input parliamentarians can make, that is not adequate, I think.

Mr CIOBO—I am mindful of your comments, and I am interested in gauging your reaction to the concept that in order to obtain citizenship there should be some kind of civics test that requires the applicant to demonstrate at least a basic understanding of the institutions that govern Australia, be it the courts or the parliament, and that provides a basis for an in-built incentive for people to learn about these aspects—that is, they have to in order to obtain their citizenship. What would be your reaction to that?

Mr Schluter—People must be properly informed about their responsibilities as well as their benefits before they become Australian citizens and face the ballot box. That, in my estimation, is most important. If we educate these people in this particular fashion then we should also be putting it in practice—the members of parliament bringing different views. That is what it is all about, but it does not seem to be like that. I watch parliament very closely—question time, for instance. I watch it and I feel that there is not much input or output.

Mr CIOBO—We are probably digressing a little bit from the central thrust, though. If people want to become citizens, don't we provide in-built incentive for them to have to learn those basic features by requiring that they satisfactorily demonstrate an understanding of our electoral system and our court system in order to become citizens?

Ms Meadows—In what language would they have to do that?

Mr CIOBO—I am very mindful of the points you have made. I think they are valid points, but the point is that it would be a requirement to demonstrate knowledge. I am not saying it has to be in the Queen's English—

Ms Meadows—My parents would not have been citizens if that had been the case back then.

Senator HOGG—There would be a lot of Australians—

Mr CIOBO—I am not advocating; I am asking your reaction to that.

Ms Meadows—That is a very controversial question, I believe—

Mr CIOBO—That is why I am asking your opinion.

Ms Meadows—and it is very hard for us to give an opinion on behalf of the Multicultural Council or the multicultural communities—and I stress 'communities'—of Tasmania. I think they are dangerous waters that we probably do not want to go into.

Mr CIOBO—Why is that? If you want to talk about the role of parliamentarians, these are the kinds of issues that we deal with. If we are talking about people not having an adequate

understanding of the institutions that govern this country, we cannot shy away from asking hard questions, and the hard question is: is there an in-built incentive for someone to have to have this knowledge to get citizenship?

Ms Meadows—I think there should be incentive for the government to provide the education in the people's languages so that they can understand it, rather than for people who have come here from war torn countries and all sorts of other traumas—refugee camps et cetera—having to worry about an incentive to become a citizen when they have so many other things to worry about. It is true that they should learn all of that and know about these things, but I think you have put it around the wrong way. I think the onus is on the government to help educate these people, to help them learn English and to provide them with the information they need to become active citizens.

Senator MASON—But, surely, isn't it a responsibility of citizens—of any citizen—to know about civics?

Ms Meadows—As you heard from previous submissions, they do not, not even if they were born here.

Senator MASON—Yes, but they should.

Ms Meadows—I know, but if you are talking about the people that we are representing today then there are even more difficulties there. Of course they should, but we should help them do that.

Mr CIOBO—Just for clarification: do you only represent refugees, or do you represent—

Ms Meadows—No, we represent migrants and refugees, but our submission was addressing—

Mr CIOBO—The vast bulk of migrants are not refugees, though, are they?

Ms Meadows—No, but we feel that they are the most disadvantaged.

Mr CIOBO—Sure.

CHAIR—To follow Mr Ciobo's question: in the ACT, the government invites all new citizens to the legislative assembly for a presentation and a tour. Does that happen in Tasmania?

Mr Schluter—I do not think so. No, not yet.

CHAIR—Should it happen?

Mr Schluter—It could. We can prompt the state government to do that. It is not just the responsibility of the federal government to educate people but also that of the state government—and also, I think, the local government—because it is a different set-up here. You do not need to vote in local government elections, but that is where it really lies down—for instance, we know how many people vote in local government elections. They are compelled to

vote at state and federal elections. If they do not, they are probably fined \$5 or whatever, but it is a no-no. Most of them are expected to go and vote. But then, of course, if I do that, I want to know what the roll is, and this has to be translated for many of those people coming into this country from different countries with different languages.

I would expect that the government would put its effort there and say, 'Look, we have a booklet here, written for you people coming from such-and-such a country. Read it, try to understand it, and when you understand it then you can also become an Australian citizen.' This is important. It is not just going there and getting it over and done with; you have to understand your commitment to this country. I think that is very important.

CHAIR—The committee has no further questions. Mr Schluter, thank you for your passion. We have got a couple of really good points out of this session this afternoon, and we really appreciate that you have engaged with us in that. We have had to come to Tasmania to get these really good ideas, so thank you very much. We will send you a copy of the transcript of what you have said. If you need to make any corrections to the grammar or the fact, let us know, but normally Hansard is pretty good.

Proceedings suspended from 1.58 pm to 2.17 pm

LINTON, Mr Bill, Principal, Rosetta Primary School

MILLHOUSE, Ms Shelley, Teacher, Rosetta Primary School

POYNTER, Mr Tony, Teacher, Rosetta Primary School

Ben, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Brendan, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Brianna, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Georgia, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Jacob, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Jenna, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Nathan, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Romanie, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Thomas, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Tim, Student, Rosetta Primary School

Zacharie, Student, Rosetta Primary School

CHAIR—Committee, and students and staff of Rosetta Primary School: I declare open this school forum in the meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in its inquiry into civics and electoral education. Thank you all for being with us. We are very pleased to have come down here. We are all from Queensland, so we do not own jumpers. We are from a great part of this country. Senator John Hogg is from Brisbane. Mr Steve Ciobo, a member of the House of Representatives, is from the Gold Coast and Senator Mason is also from the southern part of the state. Of course, the two senators represent the whole of the state of Queensland. Tasmania fits into Queensland 7,952 times—well, something like that!

Four students will be our first witnesses at this school forum. I understand you have a submission to make to us and I now invite you to do so.

Thomas—Welcome to Rosetta Primary School.

Zacharie—Rosetta has been involved in a wide range of classroom and community programs where we have learned about civics and electoral education. Through doing these programs we have learned about rights and responsibilities, democracy, current affairs, Australia's history,

local community service and leadership. We would like to share with you today more information about these areas.

Romanie—We learn to be good leaders through our SRC, mediators and daily PE leaders programs. I was voted into the SRC by giving a speech and then the class voted for the people they thought would represent the class and school well. We have meetings once every week. We organise fundraisers, free dress days and school events. I like being on the SRC because I like representing the school, helping other people and organising events.

Zacharie—We have mediators, who have the responsibility of helping others by solving and listening to problems in the playground. Mediators wear an easily recognised red hat while in the playground. Mediators are selected through their good behaviour and must complete a four-week course.

Georgia—One role that I take part in is being a daily PE leader. It involves older students helping out the early childhoods to get involved in fun activities every day. We learn about current affairs through being on the school debating team and talking about news stories like the ones we see on *BTN*. By doing this we are getting better at putting across our views and arguing a case.

Thomas—We learn about Australia's history, democracy and values in class and Anzac Day. On Anzac Day our school marched with a special banner to the Hobart cenotaph and we also laid wreaths at the Glenorchy council chambers. We participate to remember the Anzacs, who showed extraordinary courage. Our school was assigned the banner of the 3rd Division.

Georgia—We also celebrate Harmony Day and promote acceptance and belonging throughout the school. Many students dressed up for the day and the school choir performed a special song.

Thomas—This term, grade 5 have been doing work on the Eureka Stockade. We looked at when the Ballarat miners stood up against the Victorian government and defied their ill-treatment. We studied why the Eureka miners did not want their gold licences, the various governors we had, what the early settlers and convicts did and what they did and did not agree on, and what happened to the Aboriginals when the white settlers came.

Georgia—In class earlier this year we learnt about the Tasmanian state election. By doing this we learnt how a real election is held and what types of things are used to make it successful and functional. We also looked at how Aboriginals and women fought for their right to vote in elections. We then had to write a speech of our own pretending we were back in their day fighting for voting rights.

Romanie—Last year the work of Rosetta students was recognised with a national award and a presentation to the Governor-General in Canberra. As a part of the Democracy in Schools project, the students presented a drama item to Michael Jeffery about the changes they thought should be made to the Constitution in 1931 as Australia headed towards full independence. The students presented a mock radio talkback show with the Prime Minister and a cast of characters inspired by real events.

Thomas—We have learned about rights and democracy in other countries. In 2004, as part of Celebrating Democracy Week, students learned about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The learning culminated with a model United Nations Assembly, where the students voiced their concerns about whether countries around the world were meeting their UN obligation on children's rights.

Zacharie—Six students from our school went to 'Education: a global right for all children', a workshop with Colin Power from UNESCO. We made speeches about education around the globe and how it can be improved. We learnt that in some countries less than the half the children go to school. UNESCO is aiming for every child in the world to get a full primary education by 2015.

Romanie—We also attended the World Vision global leadership conference, where we learnt about the problems of poverty in poorer countries and what we can do to prevent this. We have a World Vision sponsored child who lives in Swaziland.

Georgia—We have learnt about service and belonging to our local community through a number of environmental and service projects. In May this year we had a visit from an old Rosetta Primary School scholar, Mr Terry Martin, for back-to-school day. Mr Martin is now a state politician. He talked to us about how much things had changed at Rosetta but also about how some things had stayed the same.

Thomas—We have also been involved in a number of programs for the Glenorchy City Council. These have included Rosetta precinct meetings, where we have pushed to improve parking availability around our school and at the proposed developments near a creek close to the school. We also participated in the Glenorchy council's Works Festival. The festival celebrated everything in the municipality on wheels. We made billycarts. The class that was involved enjoyed being able to ride their billycarts in front of the large crowd on the day and being on the TV news. On National Tree Day students participated in cleaning up rubbish and planted a variety of native trees on the nature strip on the main road near the school. We have participated in Clean Up Australia Day for a number of years and this year cleaned up the school and local streets and worked in partnership with the local high school to clean up the Derwent River foreshore.

Georgia—We have worked with the Rotary Club and the Junior Neighbourhood Watch program and have had guest speakers and citizenship certificates presented in assembly. We have also raised money on Sunnies for Sight Day, for poorer countries, for juvenile diabetes, on Jelly Bean Day and for the National Heart Foundation by skipping on Jump Rope for Heart Day and have provided Easter and Christmas hampers to the Red Cross.

Zacharie—In conclusion, we have done a lot over the last few years to learn about our community and make a positive contribution to it. We thank you for inviting our school to host the public hearing on civics and electoral education. We would be happy to answer any questions you have.

CHAIR—Thank you. That was a great presentation and a very good PowerPoint presentation as well.

Senator HOGG—I move that the PowerPoint presentation be tabled and included as part of the record.

CHAIR—There being no objection, it is so ordered. Ladies and Gentlemen, are any of you class captains? Do you have class captains? Is there an SRC?

Zacharie—Yes.

CHAIR—So there is a student representative council. Are you all on the council?

Zacharie—No.

CHAIR—Hands up those of you who are on the student representative council. There are three of you. Was there an election for those positions?

Thomas—Yes.

CHAIR—How was it conducted?

Thomas—Every class needs two elected people on the SRC. We vote by using a ballot box.

CHAIR—Is it a first-past-the-post system?

Thomas—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that like the Australian electoral system?

Thomas—No.

CHAIR—What is the Australian federal electoral system?

Thomas—Everyone who has land has to vote.

CHAIR—No. That sounds like England! For the representatives of the Australian Electoral Commission who are here today, there is a suggestion down the front that the criterion for voting is that everybody who has land votes. You might take that on board. What I meant was that the federal voting system is not a first-past-the-post system. Do you know what sort of system it is?

Zacharie—A democracy.

CHAIR—It is a democracy, but I am trying to get you to say that it is a preferential system. Do you understand ‘preferential’?

Zacharie—Yes.

CHAIR—Your SRC election is not preferential. Is that right?

Zacharie—Yes.

CHAIR—Why is it important to have an election for the SRC?

Zacharie—So you can see who people think would best represent that class on the council.

CHAIR—That is a very good answer. Well done.

Senator HOGG—At the election for your SRC, do the teachers also get a say as to who might be on the SRC, or is it just the students?

Thomas—It is just the students.

CHAIR—Is it held in secret so that nobody knows how people vote?

Zacharie—Yes.

Senator HOGG—Does anyone offer inducements like, ‘You vote for me and I’ll give you a chocolate frog,’ or something like that?

Zacharie—Not that I know of.

Senator HOGG—Is it not allowed?

Senator MASON—That is only the Labor Party, John!

Senator HOGG—That is not the Labor Party. We gave up chocolate frogs!

CHAIR—It should be in secret. Do students campaign to be on the SRC?

Zacharie—We make a speech, but that is about it.

CHAIR—So a number of people put their names up and then the school votes?

Zacharie—Just the class votes for their two representatives.

CHAIR—Does everyone always agree with the result?

Zacharie—No.

CHAIR—What responsibilities does the SRC have?

Thomas—Organising events and fundraisers for the school.

CHAIR—Why is that important?

Zacharie—The school needs money to keep running. The fundraisers can keep the school going.

CHAIR—If you have important issues in the school, how do you raise them?

Senator HOGG—Firstly, how do they get raised at the SRC?

Zacharie—Someone tells us or asks us and then we take that to our meetings. We bring that up with the teacher and then we can try to sort that out.

CHAIR—Then do you report back to whoever raised the issue?

Zacharie—Yes, and then tell them what happened.

CHAIR—Is there a local city council here?

Zacharie—Yes.

CHAIR—What is it called?

Zacharie—Glenorchy City Council.

CHAIR—Do you know who the mayor is?

Thomas—Adrianna Taylor.

CHAIR—A girl.

Senator HOGG—You say that with surprise—you shouldn't!

CHAIR—We have a number of female members of the Australian parliament in both the House of Representatives and the Senate so that is good. Do you know who the mayor of Hobart City Council is?

Zacharie—No.

CHAIR—You know more about local government here than about the whole of Hobart?

Zacharie—I would say so.

CHAIR—Do you know who the state member of parliament is? Perhaps that is not—

Senator HOGG—No.

CHAIR—Do you know who the federal member of parliament is?

Thomas—Paul Lennon.

CHAIR—No. Does anyone down the back know who the federal member of parliament is for this area? That is interesting.

Interjector—Harry Quick?

CHAIR—No. Did the AEC get it wrong?

Interjector—Duncan Kerr.

CHAIR—Well done! 10 out of 10; go to the top of the class. Duncan Kerr is the federal member for this particular area.

Senator HOGG—Arising out of what you said to us, I understand you made a presentation for the Governor-General in Canberra. Is that correct?

Zacharie—Yes, that was last—

Senator HOGG—Have the students at this school visited Canberra to participate in the parliament program in Canberra?

Zacharie—I am not sure, because it was last year's grade 6 that went over, not this year's.

Senator HOGG—What year are you?

Zacharie—Grade 6.

Thomas—I am grade 5.

Zacharie—Some are half six, half five.

Senator HOGG—How many students have been to Canberra?

Zacharie—I think it was three.

CHAIR—Has anyone down the back been to Canberra?

Senator HOGG—No. How many students in the group before us who have ever been to Canberra have visited Parliament House?

CHAIR—Who has been to Canberra? Hands up. One.

Senator HOGG—We did this straw poll elsewhere. That is interesting.

Senator MASON—This committee has gone to several other schools throughout Australia and we have been told that by some students that they do not find civics education very interesting at all. They find it boring. But you don't; you find it interesting. Why do you find civics education so interesting?

Zacharie—It just educates us; it is fun.

Senator MASON—What is the fun part of it?

Zacharie—I do not know—it just makes you aware of things and you just know stuff.

Senator MASON—I think you mentioned in the presentation before about *BTN*. There was also *Behind the News* when I was your age. It is a long time ago, and things have changed. Is *BTN* a good show?

Zacharie—Yes.

Thomas—Yes.

Romanie—Yes.

Georgia—Yes.

Senator MASON—Do you find the subjects mentioned on that program interesting?

Romanie—Yes, some of it.

Senator MASON—With respect to civics education what else do you find interesting? When your teachers teach you about engaging in the community do you find that interesting? Someone mentioned fundraising before, being involved in the SRC. Do you find that an interesting part of civics?

Zacharie—Yes.

Senator MASON—How much do you learn about Australian history?

Thomas—A lot.

Senator MASON—Who was the first Prime Minister?

Zacharie—Edmund Barton.

CHAIR—Two at the top of the class!

Senator MASON—That is good. So you learn about Federation and the gold rush—

Zacharie—Yes.

Senator MASON—but you also learn about what we call civic engagement—about how to be involved as a citizen in the community. It is a mix. I will your ask your teachers about that in a minute. Thank you.

CHAIR—I would like to now see a little bit of involvement from everybody, if that is okay. Anyone can answer the questions I will ask. To break the ice, this is a question for those at the back of the room. What is the most interesting thing that you have learnt about our Australian democracy? Who will start? Do not look at each other! Who will answer? If no-one answers, I will nominate somebody. I think the girls would know before the boys would know, so we had better ask a girl.

Jenna—That women and Aboriginals have the right to vote.

CHAIR—Fantastic—that is really good.

Senator HOGG—What are the issues that you raise at the SRC? What do you ask your representatives to do for you? Do you have issues?

Jenna—No.

Senator HOGG—Who has raised an issue with the SRC? Anyone? You are pretty quiet. Is it a pretty good school?

CHAIR—We need a boy to answer now for balance. Jenna, you can nominate who will answer this question. Jacob, come on up.

Senator HOGG—This is your chance to be on the parliamentary record.

CHAIR—The question is that Jacob answer the question. All of those of that opinion say aye, against say no. I think the ayes have it, Jacob, so come on up and we will ask you a question. How important is it for you to be involved in your community?

Jacob—In sport.

CHAIR—Sport is good. What other things does the school do to involve itself in the community?

Jacob—Australia Day.

CHAIR—Anzac Day?

Jacob—Yes.

Senator MASON—Do you enjoy history as a subject?

Jacob—Yes—it is all right.

Senator MASON—In particular, I am thinking about stories. For primary school students, stories are very important in teaching lessons about our country. Do you find the story of the Anzacs interesting?

Jacob—Yes, it is very interesting.

Senator MASON—Is that perhaps the most interesting story?

Jacob—No, I do not think so.

Senator MASON—What are the other interesting stories about Australia's history that you can think of?

Jacob—The Port Arthur story.

Mr CIOBO—Do you like the Port Arthur story because it is local?

Jacob—Yes, it is local.

Senator MASON—That is good. Are there are any other historical stories? I mentioned Federation. That is an interesting story. The Anzacs; Port Arthur. Are there any other historical stories that you find interesting?

Romanie—Eureka.

Senator MASON—Eureka. That is a good example. Anything else? We are interested in that.

CHAIR—Who from down the back would like to tell me of something else that the school is involved with in the community? Who can tell me? You must know of something.

Brendan—The Heart Foundation.

CHAIR—What did you do for the Heart Foundation? Was it Jump Rope for Heart?

Brendan—Yes. We did some skipping.

Brianna—National Tree Day planting and Clean Up Australia.

CHAIR—Where did you clean up?

Brianna—Around the precinct and around the school.

CHAIR—Where did you plant the trees?

Brianna—Down by the creek and around the school—that sort of thing.

Senator HOGG—Brianna, it is good to do things like plant trees and to clean up on special days. How, though, do you go about providing ongoing protection for the places that you clean up and preserving the trees that you have planted? Do you look after those as well?

Brianna—They get watered. With the cleaning thing, people can volunteer to go around at lunch and recess and pick up rubbish with tongs and a bucket.

Senator HOGG—That is good.

CHAIR—We are running out of time, so we have another question before we talk to your teachers. Who can tell me how a member is elected to the federal parliament? Who can tell me how that happens? How is a member elected?

Ben—They have a vote.

CHAIR—Yes.

Ben—Everybody votes. It depends. They give a speech to try and win more votes.

CHAIR—The Australian parliament has two houses of parliament. Do you know the names of the two houses?

Ben—Liberal and—

CHAIR—No. The names of the houses of parliament. Can someone assist Ben?

Nathan—The Senate.

CHAIR—The Senate is one, yes. Another person?

Tim—The House of Representatives.

CHAIR—Yes, the House of Representatives. Well done. In the Tasmanian parliament, there are two houses of parliament. What are they called? I do not know the answer; you are going to have to tell me. Are there two houses of parliament?

Nathan—One is the House of Assembly. I do not know the other one.

CHAIR—Tony, what is the upper house?

Mr Poynter—It is called the Legislative Council.

CHAIR—That was a hard question.

Senator HOGG—How many students have visited the Tasmanian parliament?

CHAIR—So no-one here has visited the Tasmanian parliament?

Senator HOGG—Is it part of the curriculum for students to visit the Tasmanian parliament?

Mr Poynter—Yes, it is. But this year's group has not been there yet.

CHAIR—How many students have visited the local council? A few more; okay. Students, we have to stop asking questions now because we have run out of time. I thank you all for coming today. Those of you who gave answers, your answers will be recorded on the *Hansard* of the parliament of Australia and will be on the website of the parliament. We will send the school a copy of the transcript of the *Hansard* so those of you who gave evidence today will have their names on the Australian parliamentary record for every generation to see in the years ahead. Thank you to our witnesses. You did very well. I do not believe that you are in grade 5. You are too knowledgeable to be in grade 5. Well done. Thank you very much. We do appreciate it. Congratulations.

Tony, you heard the students speak here this afternoon. What were your observations? Did you expect what they said? Were you puzzled by some of their answers? What have you got to contribute?

Mr Poynter—I was very pleased with their presentation. The speakers had prepared really well, I think. In terms of the student forum, it was interesting to hear what they knew and what they did not know. They are 12 years old and their knowledge of the world around them is really developing. Some students, like the ones we saw on the panel, would have an excellent general knowledge, whereas others are slightly behind. Some of the precise factual questions that you asked—like: what is the name of your federal member?—showed there were some gaps in their knowledge. It is interesting to see that some students know the name of the first Prime Minister and they know all about the gold rushes and Eureka, whereas their knowledge of some of the other things is slightly patchy. You must remember that they are grade 6 and some of them have only had experience of learning history for maybe two or three years and they may have looked at other topics.

CHAIR—Did it surprise you that none of them have been to the Tasmanian parliament and only one student had been to Canberra?

Mr Poynter—It did not surprise me about Canberra, but it surprised me about the Tasmanian parliament. I know that over the last two or three years we have taken students there. For some reason with this group we have not quite got there this year. In previous years I know that the members of Tasmania's parliament have been very welcoming and very helpful. We take the students every year to the Premier's morning tea so there are at least three or four that get to see around parliament. Last year my teaching colleague Shelley Millhouse took a group of students all around parliament as part of the work that she did with some grade 5s.

CHAIR—Are you aware of the PACER program which gives a subsidy for students to go to Canberra?

Mr Poynter—Yes, I am aware of the program.

CHAIR—Has the school not taken that up?

Mr Poynter—As I understand it, it is quite a new program and there is still a considerable financial burden on parents to be able to afford the travel to get to Canberra. I am not sure about the exact details. The logistics of physically getting there—the flights and all that—take a considerable amount of time. Teachers are very busy people, and organising camps and things

like that is something that is maybe not as popular as it was 15 or 20 years ago. We were very keen to go, but it is one of those situations where you need lots of time and energy from a core group of people who are really keen to go. All of the incentives that have been offered are fantastic and it is something that I looked at this year, but, because of timing and the sheer logistics of it, it was very difficult to get there. It is something that we would like to look at in the next couple of years.

CHAIR—We have a new witness. Are you a teacher here?

Ms Millhouse—Yes.

Mr CIOBO—Mr Poynter, the committee heard some evidence in previous hearings that for some teachers it is a little intimidating to teach civics education, in trying to stay clear of the minefield that is politics. I am interested in your experiences about what it is that children want to know. As a lay person, I sometimes wonder, given that the popular media focuses so very much on party politicisation and the conflicts between the two political parties, how you then go about translating a lesson in civics education devoid of what is, for all intents and purposes, the primary focus of media. I am interested in your thoughts on that.

Mr Poynter—Obviously, the whole area is very open to accusing the teacher of being biased. So I am certainly very conscious that, whenever we are talking about any civic issue, particularly a current controversial issue, we always put as many sides and viewpoints as fairly as we can. So, if we are looking at something current and controversial, I always say to the students: ‘That’s only one view. What are some other viewpoints that you have heard?’ We talked about the program *BTN* earlier. I always find that that is a really useful starting point because it tends to present lots of different viewpoints. It is a really good springboard for students to talk about the issues and the fact that people have different viewpoints. That is one answer to your question.

In terms of what engages students, from what we saw in the presentation, students are really interested in the history of our country. The grade 5 students who presented were really interested in miners’ rights and what happened in the days of Eureka. Students are really interested in, as I said, our history. They are also interested in current controversial issues, particularly local issues—ones that are close to home. It was interesting that somebody asked a question about stories. I think that students find narratives, stories, about particular individuals really engaging, particularly if there is a little bit of a problem or an issue within the story that they can think about. I have found that those sorts of approaches tend to really engage students.

Ms Millhouse—You are talking about the point of view of stories. Often children will not see another point of view and, as the teacher, you have a responsibility to say: ‘Hang on, I’m going to be the devil’s advocate here. Even though this isn’t my personal view, this is the view of some people, and even though it’s not a particularly popular one, we will discuss it and put it out there for thought.’ We need to make the children understand that people have opposing views to us, because of their background or the things they face in their everyday life, such as poverty, a lack of education and things like that.

Senator HOGG—Is it the case that there is too much information available these days, so it is very hard to put a simple argument to the children as to what the issues of a particular subject might be?

Ms Millhouse—There is a lot of information and they often find the wrong information through the internet. When we start a unit like this in order to teach them about an issue or a topic, we need to start with what they know and filter what we tell them. Then, when they have the right background information and the right links in their brain, then we can let them be exposed to all the other information, so that they have the capacity to process it properly.

Senator HOGG—So you have to teach them related skills as well?

Ms Millhouse—Yes.

CHAIR—Does the Australian Electoral Commission offer this school any assistance in teaching electoral matters?

Mr Poynter—As I said, at the start of the year we focused on the Tasmanian state election. I was not aware that there was an electoral education officer, although in recent times I became aware.

CHAIR—Is that state or federal?

Mr Poynter—I think it is a state role. I have become aware that there is a state education officer, which is terrific. I would have used that person. In previous years, when I taught about elections, I contacted the Australian Electoral Commission. They have been incredibly helpful and ran some terrific sessions with students about the process of voting, enrolling to vote and all those sorts of things. So in previous years I have used them, but because of the timing of this year's state election—it was pretty much at the start of the school year and then we went straight into the state election—I did not contact them.

CHAIR—But they have not contacted you; you have contacted them.

Mr Poynter—I have in previous years and, as I said, they have been fantastic.

CHAIR—They have contacted you?

Mr Poynter—I think I saw a flyer recently that was sent out to schools about the Australian Electoral Commission.

CHAIR—So you are aware of them?

Mr Poynter—Yes, I am aware of them and their help has always been fantastic.

Senator HOGG—One of the things that have been said to us is that sometimes the information gets to the principal's desk and that is about as far as it gets. I am not asking if that is the case here, but is that something you are aware of in other places?

Mr Poynter—I think the transfer of information within our system has greatly improved with the introduction of email for all teachers. Now every teacher gets what is called an info stream, which are emails from any organisation that wants to send information to schools. It goes directly to every Tasmanian government teacher. So our access to information is not being

filtered by a principal; we get direct access to any opportunities and anything that is available. I would say that that has greatly improved in the last three years. It does not really rely on the principal to hand things on any more; it goes direct to all teachers.

Mr CIOBO—I asked a question previously about the preparedness of teachers for teaching civics education. I am interested to know—whether you have a graduate diploma of education, a bachelor of education or whatever—if that has provided you with the skills set necessary to delve into this issue.

Mr Poynter—I am sorry, I do not understand your question. Is your question: what was my training?

Mr CIOBO—I am going back to your professional training. I am asking, from a professional training point of view, do you feel—whether you leave university, TAFE or whatever; and even with continuing professional education—that you have the skills set necessary to teach this area?

Mr Poynter—There have been a lot of opportunities in recent years for teachers to gain an understanding of civics and citizenship through the discovering democracy professional learning program which was run around the state. The electoral education people have also periodically run professional learning sessions for teachers. Those are probably the two main opportunities that teachers have to access understanding around civics and citizenship education currently. I do not think that my university training is that relevant now—it was probably 15 years ago. Teachers are always looking, particularly if there is a new area within our Tasmanian curriculum that we need to be prepared for, for professional learning opportunities that might come up. They are either provided by the government or by outside providers like the Electoral Commission.

Mr CIOBO—So, basically, you feel that it is there.

Mr Poynter—It is there, but again there are always more opportunities that could be provided. I think there are some people who feel that they are not necessarily up to speed in certain areas. Again, I am only speaking personally; I feel confident in that area, but we could do a straw poll of staff and find out what they feel.

Ms Millhouse—I feel quite confident. I thought my training was more than adequate for this. Particularly in my early years, I have been teaching for 10 years now, we were offered a lot of opportunities—I was in a rural school—for rural children to come down to the Tasmanian parliament and be put in-role. They took on the roles on the floor of the parliament there. Someone played the role of the Speaker and we had different leaders. They were offered morning tea and they had a lovely day at parliament. That was fantastic. Tony and I have also taken our classes there. It is unfortunate that you asked us about this year because other years we have done a lot and we have done the United Nations mock assembly.

Senator MASON—Mr Poynter, I would like to congratulate you on your submission.

Mr Poynter—Thank you.

Senator MASON—It is excellent. It combines civic knowledge with civic participation for people who are 12 years old, and that cannot be easy; so, well done. You mentioned stories

before. What is the secret to your success? A lot of kids are not interested in history. They find it boring. How do you teach it and why are you so successful?

Mr Poynter—I resist very strongly the idea that civics and history are boring.

Senator MASON—All the members of this committee would agree with you, but my point is more about how you sell that message to a 12-year-old. What is the secret of your success?

Mr Poynter—It is a complicated answer. It goes back to what Shelley and I said before. In a word the answer is ‘dialogue’. As Shelley said before, when we have an issue where there is a lot of conflicting information and perhaps misinformation, it is really important that we open up discussion with students. Being a skilled teacher and being able to run discussion with students is something that is really important if you are going to be an effective civics educator. It is about being able to get information from kids and to talk about: ‘Whose perspective is that? What values are behind what you are saying?’ All those sorts of questions are really important and I think dialogue is at the heart of it.

It is also really important to have stories and narratives that are particularly powerful and engaging for kids. I like the *Discovering Democracy Readers* because they have stories that are not just straight-fact based. They contain many things that are open to discussion and where you can ask: ‘Would you do that? Would you defy a law that you thought was unfair?’—philosophical sorts of questions. I think kids are really engaged where they can feel a little bit of ‘prickle’ or ‘tension’—or whatever word you want to use—in the story; they like to explore that. I am just thinking of the story of William Tell. He was forced to bow down before the emperor’s hat and he said, ‘No, I’m not going to.’ The kids really get quite interested in those sorts of stories where they can see that there are two sides and they can think of it this way or that way. Kids find those sorts of stories, which can be found in the media and also in those readers, really interesting because they represent lots of different viewpoints and they can have a bit of an argument about them. They like voicing their opinions and concerns, as we heard today, and they like having a debate and listening to different viewpoints. I suppose, in a nutshell, dialogue and narratives with a bit of tension really engage students, particularly if they are current or topical.

Senator MASON—I am so pleased to hear you say that. It is great to have an enthusiast in any profession. My favourite subject at senior high school was history; I always loved history. However, the Prime Minister is right when he says that history has fallen into difficult times. Hopefully history will have a renaissance in this country. Honestly, it is not that the stories are not there; it is the capacity to teach it in a fascinating and interesting way to people, whether they are 12- or 17-year-olds. That is the challenge for this country, because it has not been done well perhaps right across the country. It has been done extremely well in pockets, and you are an example of that. However, this committee is concerned that it has not been done well across the continent.

CHAIR—Does the Tasmanian Department of Education set the curriculum on what you teach in civics and electoral matters? How flexible do you as teachers find that curriculum?

Mr Poynter—Until a few weeks ago, we had a curriculum in Tasmania called Essential Learnings; that has had a name change and it is now called the Tasmanian curriculum. Within the old Essential Learnings—I can probably only speak about that because that is what I

understand—there is an area called ‘social responsibility’ and, within that, there is ‘acting democratically’, which is civics and citizenship by another name. Within the new curriculum, which is coming in next year, there is an area called ‘society and history’, so the word ‘history’ features there very prominently. As I said, ‘acting democratically’ is very strong in Essential Learnings and it is an area to be assessed this year. Our school will report on ‘acting democratically’, with a comment to parents. In the next year and the year after, we will teach and assess in the area of ‘society and history’. So it is part of our curriculum and will be taught from kindergarten through to year 10.

CHAIR—Bill, what kinds of challenges have you found in teaching civics and electoral education?

Mr Linton—Before I came to Rosetta Primary School, my experience in teaching electoral education was through a student council, which I ran, at a school I was at previously. That was very much about what it is to be part of a democracy, to be part of a group and to be fair and that sort of thing. We used a preferential voting system for people to come onto the student council.

CHAIR—We have evidence otherwise; is that right?

Senator HOGG—No, that was at the last group.

CHAIR—Yes, it was. I am sorry.

Mr Linton—For the children, it was a forum, which obviously all student councils are, where they could bring issues that were raised in their classrooms and so on to be discussed and an action plan could be put in place to address them. The other important thing about the student council was that it was acting socially and responsibly either within the school or within our community, so we always had a community outreach to work with community groups within our school.

CHAIR—Shelley, do you have adequate course materials to teach this? Would you like something else? Would something else be better? Talk to me about the resources you have got.

Ms Millhouse—We have plenty of community groups that we can contact or they can contact us. In the past, we have had a strong Red Cross group and we raised money for the Red Cross and learnt about what they do. There is plenty available on the internet and, as Tony said, it is about getting the students engaged with a story, taking their enthusiasm and going with the interest. I was thinking of Ned Kelly and telling them the story and the history and getting them into role play. They seem to be very interested in taking on roles and feeling what the characters felt at the time. I think there is plenty with the *Discovering Democracy Readers*.

CHAIR—So you are happy with those?

Mr Linton—I was thinking about that question as stories are such a powerful thing to use with children. We have absolutely amazing resources in terms of picture books and storybooks for children. They often send powerful messages. If I were to think of one extra resource that could make my day easier or my planning time more efficient, it would be if someone said, ‘These picture book titles are terrific for exploring these elements.’ I can quite happily go

through and read the books but if somebody could do that in advance and say, 'The picture books published this year were terrific for exploring truth, honesty, fairness and acting within your local community,' that would be terrific.

CHAIR—Shelley, I thought I heard you say earlier that some of the material on the internet could not be trusted.

Ms Millhouse—That is right.

CHAIR—You did not actually say those words but that is what I got—is that right? From a teacher's perspective, how careful have you got to be?

Ms Millhouse—We have to be very careful when we allow children to do a search on the internet. We have to teach them: 'This is the website you've found. You like the information you've found. It seems to fit with what you're looking for, but who has put this information onto the internet? What are their qualifications? How long has it been there? Is it up to date? Can you back that up with something that is published in a book?' We need to tell them that anybody can put something on the internet. It does not necessarily have to be correct, so we need to look at the source and whether it is up to date.

CHAIR—Tony, as a student of civics and electoral education, where else could we recommend it be taught or shouldn't it be necessary? Who else could be teaching this sort of stuff?

Mr Poynter—In terms of?

CHAIR—Getting the message across to the young people coming through.

Mr Poynter—I think there is a whole range of organisations that could work more collaboratively and cooperatively. There has been some mention made of the fact that our state parliament does not have an education officer. That would be terrific. I think we are the only parliament in the country that does not have one. There could be more resourcing in terms of kids understanding what their institutions are: first of all, what their local councils actually do and making it more open for students. There could be more work with those organisations working together so that it is not such a burden on teachers to make that initial link. There could be some more work with our own state parliament and our local councils so they can be more student focused. That would be a wonderful starting point. I know, in particular, of work with the law courts and they are always terrifically helpful but, again, making them more accessible for students would be a wonderful initiative.

CHAIR—I am going to finish with this question. Both of you gave evidence that you felt empowered to teach in this area. We received evidence in other parts of the country from teachers who said they did not think they were qualified to teach in this area and they were quite afraid that they were teaching the wrong information. Why do you think that would be the case—or is that a hard question to answer? In other words, I am asking you what the processes of other state education departments are like compared to the processes that you go through—or don't you know?

Mr Poynter—I would only be second-guessing. I am not sure what their main concerns are. Maybe they feel intimidated.

CHAIR—It surprised me.

Senator HOGG—I could follow up that question, Chair.

CHAIR—Yes, please.

Senator HOGG—I have a question that flows directly into that. This seems to be a fairly healthy environment in terms of civics teaching and the like but in your experience is this replicated with your peers across the state? You must have seminars that you go to when you meet with other teachers and you find that they all have varying degrees of experience in this area. It might be that a particular school is underresourced or differently resourced or that there are different focuses. Are we looking at something here that is the piece de resistance in the sense that this is the top of the range, whereas others are struggling for varying reasons?

Ms Millhouse—There are two things. We are very lucky with the students that we have. They are encouraged at home to have opinions and to express their opinions. They are told that they have the right to be listened to. That is very strong here. So when we start with civics and citizenship in the classroom and we ask them their opinion or we ask them to state their beliefs or we ask them to be a leader or we ask them if they know what we are talking about, they respond. If you say, ‘We’re going out for a game,’ and there is an argument about what is going to be played, they love nothing more than having a vote. Everybody is happy then. Even when there are trivial issues like that, as to what the game is going to be, they want to vote. They see that as the way to solve the problem: ‘Let’s have a vote.’

Senator HOGG—So you are saying that an influential part here is the parents themselves and their attitudes?

Ms Millhouse—Yes.

Senator HOGG—I presume that is not replicated right across the state. Do you have any knowledge or understanding of the experiences of other school staff? Do they talk to you about this? If so, what are the problems?

Mr Linton—I can probably answer that. I have had five schools in the last 2½ years and I would have to say that, because of the ‘acting democratically’ element of our Essential Learnings, along with the notion of social responsibility, there is a really strong community connection focus by the education department. That can be through environmental education and that can be through working with community groups. The department likes schools to make strong links with their communities. All the schools that I have been to in the last 2½ years have certainly connected with their communities in some way. If you are thinking about civic responsibility, that is a really strong theme that would run through most primary schools.

Senator HOGG—Is it fair to say there is a reasonable direction coming out of the state education department that drives the agenda for the schools?

Mr Linton—Yes, and I would say that for some of the projects there is money that backs it up. As I said, with environmental education involving working with local community organisations, money was provided to the school to run a project with a community organisation. All the schools that I have been in have always had a focus on community groups—having them come into your school or having you going out of the school to work with them—so that the children develop some sense of civic duty. I really think that an important part of primary school is to develop trust in our social fabric. We might say that there are going to be bad eggs along the way, but we must develop trust in our social fabric, because that is what glues our society together. I think that is a really strong message.

CHAIR—In moving from Essential Learnings to the Tasmanian curriculum, do you think any of these elements are going to be lost? No? Okay. Finally, what percentage of your students would read a newspaper regularly?

Mr Poynter—I did a poll on that at the start of the year with my class. I asked them—and it was one of the first things they did at the start of the year—what stories have been making news. It amazed me that I could fill the board with about 50 stories that had made news during January and February, during the holidays. I am not sure how many read newspapers, but they are certainly very media savvy. Not only were they aware of things that are happening locally and in the state, but they are certainly very aware of stories that are happening around the world as well.

CHAIR—I was going to follow that up by asking what percentage watch the television news, but really it is a generic question: what percentage of students take in the news from whatever source? It is sounding like a fair percentage.

Mr Poynter—They are very aware. As I said, I started teaching about 15 years ago, and I think I used to struggle to get 10 stories. Now, with the grade 6 class, I can fill the board with things that they are aware of. So, in terms of their exposure to information and to stories, it has almost reached saturation point, I suppose. It is incredible.

CHAIR—Is there anything else that you want to tell us that you think would be valuable to our inquiry?

Ms Millhouse—I would just like to say that I feel empowered to teach this, and I do not feel intimidated at all, because I know I can rely on my local member in our parliament here to come out and help and give me information if I am lacking in some way. Graeme Sturges has been very good, coming in and talking to the students. Tony, in his role as Discovering Democracy leader a couple of years ago, came to my class. He ran an election and showed them the preferential voting system. We had a big whiteboard, and he showed them where all the votes go. It was just fantastic. I know there are people whom I can call on, and I feel confident in asking them their opinion if I am stuck.

CHAIR—I think we might wrap it up there. Thank you for your evidence this afternoon, but particularly thank you for clearing a way to allow us to have our inquiry here at the school. It has been really good for us, and I hope it has been good for you and your students as well. We have certainly enjoyed being with you. We have got some good information. We will send you a copy of the *Hansard*, and you will be able to distribute that among the students as well.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Hogg**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 3.22 pm