



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

TUESDAY, 22 AUGUST 2006

MELBOURNE

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS**

Tuesday, 22 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 Lindsay and Mrs Mirabella

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.

WITNESSES

GRAHAM, Ms Sue, Teacher/Librarian, Monbulk Primary School 1
MARTIN, Mr Ray, Teacher of Grade 4/5, Monbulk Primary School 1
SILIS, Ms Gina, Assistant Principal and Teacher of Grade 6, Monbulk Primary School..... 1
SMITH, Mr Anthony, Member for Casey, Commonwealth Parliament 1
YATES, Mr Ray, Principal, Monbulk Primary School 1

Committee met at 9.35 am

GRAHAM, Ms Sue, Teacher/Librarian, Monbulk Primary School

MARTIN, Mr Ray, Teacher of Grade 4/5, Monbulk Primary School

SILIS, Ms Gina, Assistant Principal and Teacher of Grade 6, Monbulk Primary School

YATES, Mr Ray, Principal, Monbulk Primary School

SMITH, Mr Anthony, Member for Casey, Commonwealth Parliament

Mr Anthony Smith—Mr Chair, for the benefit of committee members, as a bit of a backdrop to your inquiry—I know that you are travelling all over the nation—I thought I would give a bit of a run-down on my involvement with the school and its teaching of history. In the four or five years that I have been the member for Casey, I have had a lot to do with Monbulk primary. It is a school that makes a great effort to teach the local history of the Monbulk town and of the Monbulk Primary School and, in that way, teaches our national story. The best example of that is its involvement on key days such as Anzac Day, where the school is intimately involved with the RSL and the Anzac Day service. The school ran the service itself for Long Tan Day last Friday and I was out here for that. But, more than that, as part of its curriculum, it makes sure that the students are aware of Monbulk's history and, through that, tells the Australian story over the last century or so and have that as a way in to civics and democracy and all those sorts of things. I am sure that Mr Ray Yates can give a run-down on some of the key priorities that are being taught at the moment and some of the history of the school itself.

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—Mr Yates, thank you for welcoming us here this morning—although I do not understand what Mr Martin is wearing, as I do not own one of those!

Mr Martin—It is a jumper.

Senator HOGG—I do not have one either. We are both Queenslanders.

CHAIR—Mr Yates, over to you, please.

Mr Yates—A warm welcome to you, Mr Lindsay, and to your group. Mr Tony Smith is a long-time friend of the school and of the community. Our involvement with Mr Tony Smith goes back throughout the duration of his service as a member of parliament.

The Monbulk primary school is about trying to ensure that there are positive links between the historical aspect of Monbulk society and how those links can build on a climate of change so that the history is not deemed to be just a cycle of events but a vehicle for us to improve and enhance society.

The school, through a major project, is really involved with the community. I will just display this for you. I will introduce Sue Graham, because this is where she comes in. The school decided that it would do a living and learning centre, which was to be integrated only within the school. However, through constant lobbying of the school and the local council, which the

school itself lobbied—and Peter, being an ex-councillor, will appreciate this—the school and the local council have now embraced a whole community project, which is the living and learning centre.

The living and learning centre involves the car park where you have parked and the demolishing of all the buildings that you would have seen there. It also involves a library; we will transfer and integrate our library with the local government library. There will be a place for the senior citizens. There will be a university of the third age. We will bring the kindergarten and the maternal health and welfare across. The shire will bring their service centre there. This is the amphitheatre illustration, which obviously cannot be seen in *Hansard*. A music council will be involved in delivering outreach music programs and there will be counselling rooms and so on. The school has actually led the community in the development of this community hub. As a result of that, Sue Graham, whom I call Madam Librarian, has won a major scholarship of \$24,000. On Sunday, Sue is off on a world tour for six weeks to look at world's best practice in community hubs. So I thought it appropriate, Mr Lindsay, for Sue to sit in on this particular meeting.

Mr Tony Smith has mentioned our involvement with the Anzacs. On Friday at the school, Mrs Silis's grade 6 class together with Mr Tony Smith hosted what we call a renewal and healing process for four former students of Monbulk Primary School. One is deceased; he passed away in a car accident 12 months after returning from Vietnam. The other three attended, one coming from as far away as Albury. This is only a copy of the certificate; Tony may take the other one to Canberra. Each of the grade 6 students has signed the certificate and so did the shire. Our involvement with the shire was rather unique, because the shire also unveiled a Vision 2020 Tree with the local RSL. That again was the school just leading itself into the community.

I hold the strong view that, although schools talk about community involvement and being part of the community, in many cases it is superficial, whereas we have tried to embrace it in a real, practical sense. History is not only a series of events; it is the connection of those events and how society's beliefs, values, thinking and creativity have changed as a result of those historical aspects. If we as a society believed that the laws and the instrument of parliament were non-changeable, we would not have politics at all. So there has to be the realisation that we can change things—and change them for the better.

A unique part of the Australian character is the linking of events in a positive and forward direction. We have a strong view that beliefs drive values and values drive behaviour. If we really want to change children's or adults' behaviour, we have to look at belief systems—and that is strongly what the school is about. We also believe that, if children are safe, valued and listened to, they will be very much engaged at school. Those social aspects of education are not linked specifically with any civics program; they are all integrated.

We are unashamedly about literacy and numeracy, but all aspects of civics are important. It is my strong view—and I know that Ms Silis and Mr Martin agree—that numeracy and literacy form the core aspects of education and that others flow in and out from them. The school is really quite traditional. Chair, you commented previously on our fire refuge. Behind that, you will see a bell tower. On Friday, that bell was rung 40 times for the 40 years that have passed since the Battle of Long Tan. We have an assembly every day, which is called together by the ringing of that bell, and the national anthem is sung. In doing so, we engage the children with

intrinsic values of the Australian ethos and character. We are very proud not only of our children but also of our teachers and the way in which they engage. We are also very proud of Sue Graham, who is going to give Monbulk community a world-class living and learning centre.

CHAIR—This is being recorded for the *Hansard*, so what you say attracts parliamentary privilege. Do not let that daunt you; just be yourselves. Clearly, your school has been very proactive in civics education. Is that the norm in the Victorian education system? Does the Victorian education system allow you, as an individual school, to choose to do that? What is the position in Victoria?

Ms Silis—It is hard to tell what other schools are doing, because you are at your workplace and what you are doing here is your focus. You do not have the time to go and see what others are doing. But I know that it is a very strong focus here right from the way we expect the children to behave with each other. It is an ethos that goes right through the school and is part of the building stones that make up the school's culture.

CHAIR—But the department does not direct you to do it; you choose to do it.

Ms Silis—Yes, it is part of the culture, but the civics and citizenship part of the new curriculum has brought this much more into focus. It is much more defined as an area of the curriculum. I have been using it this year with my 6s.

CHAIR—Within the civics area, you seem to have a local focus rather than a wider focus; is that right?

Ms Silis—It comes in at different levels for different purposes. It has a very local focus to help the children with their connectedness to their own community. It also has a historical vein. Our 6s for the past 25 years have gone to Sovereign Hill, where they are in the school and dress up. That is the historical context, which does have relationships to the development out here. So it has its different layers and its different purposes.

CHAIR—Mr Martin, how do you find that the children engage?

Mr Martin—It really depends on the issue. I feel that some of the initial concepts in the civics component in the primary school area are difficult, such as trying to teach Federation and the levels of government. For children who are just starting off in the early level 4, which would be grade 5, those particular concepts are very difficult for them to link with perhaps what they already know. The whole nature of what Mr Yates was referring to this morning about our particular job here as educators is to try to make that learning really meaningful for them. One of those aspects is to try to link it to what the children already know. Sometimes just the gathering of facts and ideas is very difficult for them.

CHAIR—What are the impediments to teaching civics?

Mr Martin—I think that much of it is just its relative newness and the way that it now is expected to be taught in the schools. We are all going to live and die by our resources. That relates to the textbooks to be used and just how you are going to run a civics program in the

grade. Hopefully, it will not be just an isolated or empty learning experience; it must encompass reading, mathematics, history and geography.

A major concern of mine would be the study of civics as a vastly separate part of the curriculum. In this primary school, it is essential that students build up their knowledge over a gradual period of time.

Ms Silis—I agree with Mr Martin. I have the 6s, so it is easier for me. I am approaching some of that area now in this latter half of the year in that they are now ready to understand some of those concepts. Talking about democracy represents a high-level thought process, yet in our new curriculum I think it comes in at level 3. That is a very hard concept for children in grades 3 and 4. I think sometimes you can damage their understanding in the long term by introducing complex thoughts and concepts that they are not ready for. But my 6s are ready for it in this half of their year.

CHAIR—How empowered are teachers generally? Is further professional development needed to be able to teach this subject? Do teachers feel confident in teaching this subject?

Ms Silis—Resources have been mentioned. I have been using a resource that I have my concerns about. It is a fantastic resource; it is a big black box and is called the parliamentary pack. I am very careful in using it, as I know it was produced a while ago and some of its elements are not up to date. Yet I find it very good because it is all there. I could go and look it up on the web, but then everything must be functioning well and flowing nicely. It is far more convenient for a teacher to go to a good resource, like that parliamentary pack that explains it so nicely. But, again, I am aware that it could have out-of-date concepts.

Mr Yates—What Gina is saying is relevant, but there is another concern. The parliamentary pack will have some validity about it, while too often internet stuff is not valid.

CHAIR—Are you saying that you do not trust internet content?

Mr Yates—No, I do not; that is correct. You have to be very careful.

Mr Martin—It really has to be monitored.

CHAIR—You do not take it as read.

Mr Martin—No, you do not take it as read, which is one of the things that we have to talk to the children about.

Ms Graham—Obviously, we teach civics at different levels. At the lower end, we start off by engaging the kids with local government. I was thinking of activities that have happened. The skate park was built a few years ago and the kids were engaged in making decisions about that particular project and had involvement with it. It is not necessarily just how government works, although that is something that we lead to; they have to start off earlier.

Mr Yates—Just to return to the aspect of the internet, there is one thing that both Tony and I are very keen on, which relates to one of the challenges we have. While we can go back and look

at written documentary evidence of the happenings of historical events, the challenge for us on the internet and through email is how to retain all of that information in a historical context for future generations, because a lot of it will be lost. Most of my emails are deleted, although I do keep a few. Think of teaching civics to children who will be sitting here in 50 years time. Can we ensure that the children of today will have the same documentary evidence of events that have happened as we have?

Senator HOGG—The answer to that is no. Previously, documents regarding what might have happened in cabinet or elsewhere have been released after the 30-year period and have had handwritten notations on them. However, I would be surprised if today those sorts of handwritten notations, which give some background, remain. So the point you make is a valid one.

Mr Anthony Smith—That is probably the example we were talking about on Friday.

Mr Yates—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you find that parents are supportive of their children in the area of civics, or do you find that the children, after coming to school, go home and support the parents? Which way does it go?

Ms Silis—One comment I would make is that I was surprised to find that only two households of children in my grade get the newspaper.

Senator HOGG—How many households are represented in your grade?

Ms Silis—Twenty-four. In addition, none of them watched the news. Therefore, I feel that the school now has to fill a big void in the children's understanding and knowledge of the wider community. They were just two but probably very pointed questions that I innocently asked and I was quite surprised by the answers. So we have been doing quite a bit of work this year and one of the girls now stops and buys the newspaper on the way to school, which is quite a difference.

CHAIR—What about the role now of children teaching the parents?

Ms Silis—I do not know.

Mr Martin—It is really hard to ascertain that.

Ms Silis—I have not had any angry parents phoning up. I have not upset anybody—and I think you have to watch very carefully for that sort of thing.

CHAIR—We run a program up north called Reef Guardian Schools. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, with a whole lot of resources, goes into schools and talks to children about protecting the environment. Children go home and say to their parents, 'Don't put that down there; it will end up in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.' It is very effective.

Senator MASON—Much of the evidence we heard yesterday was about the best way to teach civics education. One argument was that to teach civics education well, to impart knowledge about civics, it helped to engage kids by talking about civic participation. In other words, you can explain how the Constitution works and how Federation—which Ms Silis has mentioned—the Senate and the parliament might work and so forth. For kids to get a real understanding of civics, it is important that they themselves know how they as an individual can participate. Do you think that is right and how do you do that?

Ms Graham—Absolutely.

Mr Martin—It is the way you impart learning. The object is that you are trying to teach kids how to learn. Learning how to learn is really significant, when they take ownership of it and when they see basically how things will unfold and how things happen. It is very difficult just to talk about levels of government, if the children have no direct involvement in that area. You have to talk about concrete experiences relating to where they live and where they can have some ownership or be able to see how decisions are actually made.

Senator MASON—For example, you would say, ‘If your family has a problem with roads, it would be a local government matter and you would go there.’ You would explain it like that rather than give—

Mr Martin—Yes, it would be a wonderful lesson about ‘This is how it unfolds; this is how it happens.’

Ms Graham—There are a million examples of that happening in a primary school. We see it happening here all the time when we start to break it down in talking about environmental issues. Those things are happening all the time here. We do lots of recycling. The kids take that home and nag their parents and say, ‘We have a worm farm at school and we should have one at home.’

You asked before about which way it is going. I think we do have a large impact on what is happening in the family by what we do with the kids at the school. You mentioned before our teaching the different levels of government, which probably does not really come into the grade 5/6 area anyway. So all of those stepping-stones along the way are happening continually with environmental education—things like what is happening in our local community, tree planting on the local reserve the other week, looking at different streetscapes in our town and where local government comes into play.

Senator MASON—And how you as a citizen can participate in the life of the community.

Ms Graham—Yes, those things are happening here all the time. But, in terms of teaching them how parliament works, sometimes it happens and sometimes it does not.

Ms Silis—The new curriculum brings that very much in.

Mr Anthony Smith—As a federal member who sees 40 schools across the electorate, going to the point about involvement of the students, you might want to run through how you involved each of the students when you unveiled the honour board out the front on Anzac Day.

Senator MASON—I saw that board as we came in.

Ms Silis—Two boys had that specific job working with Ray in getting the archives out and going through them. I think this is where we are also unusual: our school has archives; it has a roll system that still operates so that children can flick through the big book—and we have visitors who come from overseas. That is where the local history level is so important.

Mr Anthony Smith—Perhaps it would help us if you were to take us through the lead-up to that and just the amount of work involved in what was, from memory, a twilight service. I know that you had a couple of students working on it for a long time but, from memory, many more with flowers were involved on the night.

Mr Yates—Yes. We devolve responsibility for the children to do things. They organised that activity out the front and did a PowerPoint presentation. They went through the old handwritten registers and tracked every child that had been to school here and contacted their families. They checked the honour board and checked with the RSL. They did lots of integration and they did the night. For instance, that certificate was designed not by the school but by one of our parents and it was the same last year, so the parents are very much involved.

Perhaps I can make two further comments. I believe strongly that you cannot make people responsible for the outcomes if you dictate the methods. So no matter what resources we have, I have to trust that the teachers will deliver the program in the room and they will be responsible for the outcomes. You just give them the framework and they do it.

In addition, there is another aspect that is of extreme relevance to the children. I think we are an information-rich society, but I do not know whether we are a knowledge-rich society yet. I think that is one of the key things we have to talk about in civics. I believe that I can give you information but I cannot give you knowledge. You have to internalise the information I give you and turn it into your own knowledge.

Senator MASON—An argument from yesterday is that participation in civic life and knowledge of civic life, in a sense, were parts of the same thing. Kids have to have experience in democracy and how they can be involved in community life and in politics. That sounds boring at one level, but it is not boring when they themselves engage in those things. That is the important part and I think it came out strongly yesterday, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR—It did.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I must say that I am extremely impressed by the appearance of your school, from the open fire to what you teach and how you teach it. Congratulations. I am sure there would be many envious parents across the state who would like to send their children to Monbulk Primary School. Regarding the teaching of civics and citizenship, your school seems to be very connected to and engaged with the community. Do you access other community organisations in actively teaching—by example or otherwise—civics and citizenship?

Ms Silis—We have a very firm and natural link with the RSL, because we have students with parents who are in it. There is not a big age gap and there is still a connectedness that happens.

That has evolved over time. We have a very good relationship with them and are very involved in things they do and vice versa.

Mr Martin—There are the local and state governments.

Ms Silis—Yes, there is linkage with local government with projects such as this. We are involved in a weed board jigsaw, which is funded. We are working there with the Yellingbo helmeted honeyeater group. The children are involved in using GPS to plot and control weeds. We have set up sample plots in the Yellingbo Reserve. We will be going back in two weeks to photograph and observe the results obtained from different control mechanisms as well as enjoying a nice day in our local environment.

Ms Graham—There are collaborative planting projects with the shire too. We have worked as a team; their workers and our kids have worked together in the process of planting.

Mr Yates—Mr Neil Andrew, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, has also done a session.

Mr Anthony Smith—He came out and did a mock parliament.

Mr Yates—That was a couple of years ago. We did that with grades 3 and 4.

Ms Graham—We had a teacher, who is not here now, who involved the kids in a whole-class whole-year type situation. He would set his classroom up as a government. They had it all happening, including having their own money.

Mr Yates—It was very cultured, I can assure you.

Ms Graham—We were all very impressed.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Does your electoral education include trips to the state parliament and the federal parliament?

Mr Yates—James Molina has taken some but not recently; that was a few years ago.

Ms Silis—We are sitting on the outer suburbs. One of our major issues is that, for us to get there, it costs us nearly \$400 for a bus. We cannot take the bus until quarter past nine and we have to have the bus back by quarter past three. That does not leave you with a lot of the day to get to places like that. It is a real issue for us.

Senator HOGG—What about the federal parliament? Do you visit Canberra?

Ms Silis—No.

Mr Martin—No.

Ms Graham—I noticed in the papers that I read yesterday that your committee is looking at the issue of remote access and getting kids actually visiting Canberra. I noticed that one of your objectives was to look at funding for remote areas, particularly Western Australia and those sorts of places. We are just on the outskirts, so we are not even what you would class as remote, but it is difficult to get there.

Mr Anthony Smith—We have all spoken in the past about the subsidy and how it could be upped.

Ms Graham—I just wonder whether there could be some sort of resource in terms of a DVD type recording of how it all works. Perhaps it could be animated, which would help to engage the kids and make it interesting for them and not quite so—I do not want to use the word ‘boring’, but kids can sometimes see it that way.

CHAIR—We have already found that the kids never forget the hands-on experience, such as being there and doing mock parliaments and that sort of stuff.

Ms Silis—I can get three or four DVDs placed in my locker every week. So that is not continuing to be an effective way of communicating, because I do not have the time to look at four DVDs and decide which one would be best to use. It comes back again to that pack. We do get a bus subsidy for grade 6 students to go to the Scienceworks Museum once a year and we go every year, because that makes it viable.

Mr Yates—I think there is an essential thing that Tony has in his mind. I believe that, just as we have to take the library to the people, you have to take the parliament to the people. In terms of the disengagement of families, this school has 35 families on supporting pensions and they just cannot afford to go to Canberra. In order to make Canberra not so remote, we would love to be able to give them the experience, but it would be just an exclusive group of parents who could afford it. One issue that I have with education is that the investment you put into education now benefits us in the future. Too often education is seen as a cost when it ought to be seen as an investment.

Senator MASON—Teaching about Federation was mentioned previously.

Ms Silis—We are working into it. Again, we go up to Sovereign Hill. Preparing the children, going on that camping experience and following up afterwards consumes approximately three months of work. It is a matter of balancing it. We have discussed our involvement on Friday. Interestingly, the children wrote their personal response to Friday’s luncheon and a couple of them noticed that the politicians left before dessert—they must be looking after their waistlines! But that is the way it goes and each year it may be a different combination of things that you are able to fit in.

Senator MASON—In a sense, you are telling stories about Federation. One of the complaints we heard earlier is that the Federation of Australia is not like the American Revolution; it is not as exciting. There are not the stories like those about General Washington.

Ms Silis—No. The closest you get to that is the Eureka Stockade.

Senator MASON—But there are still stories and Federation can be an exciting tale.

Ms Silis—Australian history can be very exciting. One of the saddest days I had was when they withdrew it from the secondary schools; Australian history moved out with the VCE. It was so sad. Australia does have an interesting history; it is a current history.

CHAIR—We will conclude now and go to Ms Silis's classroom to talk to the students.

Mr Yates—Thank you all for coming to Monbulk.

Proceedings suspended from 10.10 am to 10.15 am

Mr Anthony Smith—Didn't we have a good day on Friday?

Children—Yes.

Mr Anthony Smith—You are used to seeing me as your federal member of parliament and you are used to seeing your state member of parliament. With me today are some other members of parliament with whom I work in Canberra. They are here today to have a look at Monbulk Primary School and to talk to you about the sorts of things you study to do with the history of the school, the sorts of things we talked about on Friday and the things we did on Anzac Day and other important days to do with Monbulk Primary School. Sophie Mirabella, like me, is a member of the House of Representatives; she is from an electorate in country Victoria. Peter Lindsay is the chairman of this parliamentary committee. He is a member of the House of Representatives and comes from Townsville, right up the top of Australia. Has anybody been to Townsville? Peter will tell you all about it. We have two senators here who are members of the committee. The Senate is the other house of parliament. You have the House of Representatives and the Senate. Senator Hogg and Senator Mason are both from Queensland and are members of parliament as well. The reason they are here is because Monbulk is a fantastic school and the sorts of things you do in the community have drawn a lot of attention to it. The committee is doing some investigations into the teaching of history and has come here because Monbulk does that very well. The committee members will ask you some questions and then we will have a bit of a discussion. Please welcome all our guests.

Children—Good morning.

CHAIR—Students, thank you for having us in your classroom. We are very pleased to be here. We have come a long way and we are interested to hear what you have to tell us this morning. Just be yourselves and say what you think. Over here we have what is called parliamentary Hansard and we are recording every word that is being said. It is quite extraordinary that a few key strokes like this actually record every word I am saying and will record every word you say. That will go in the parliamentary record of the Commonwealth of Australia. We have to make sure that everybody says something this morning so that you can all be on the parliamentary record. I will direct my first question over here. Young lady, what is your name?

Chloe—Chloe.

CHAIR—What is on your badge, Chloe?

Chloe—It is for ‘captain’. We have four different houses and each one has a captain.

CHAIR—Why is it important to have a captain?

Chloe—When you have sports days, the captains help out with the younger students. They also take part in ceremonies, like the one we had on Friday.

CHAIR—There is another captain next to you. What is your name?

Demi—Demi. I am captain of Nathaniel House.

CHAIR—How was that named derived? Do you know the history of that name?

Demi—No.

Cameron—Isn’t there a Nathania Springs?

Ms Silis—Yes. It is a local spring on the Dandenongs.

Senator HOGG—Were you elected or picked to be captain?

Cameron—The teachers got together and chose people to be captains.

Senator HOGG—So the students did not get to vote for their captains. Would you like to have voted for your captains?

Children—Yes.

CHAIR—If you would like to be involved in voting for your captains, how would you go about telling your teachers? How should the class go about saying to the teachers, ‘We want to elect our captains’?

Dylan W—I don’t know. I’m not sure.

CHAIR—Does anyone have a view?

Bryce L—I think we should all get a vote in it.

CHAIR—But how would you tell your teachers that you think you should have a vote?

Bryce L—I think it would be fair for all of us to get an opportunity to choose who our captains are.

Justin—In my opinion, we should have a couple of people that we could choose from. We should know about their qualities and about what they are really good at that would make them a really good captain.

Senator HOGG—Could it be a combined vote for captain, where the teachers have a vote and you have a vote and you then put them all together; or do you just want to have the vote yourself?

Justin—I don't know.

Mrs MIRABELLA—It is not surprising that, if people—whether school children or adults—were asked whether they wanted to have a choice about something, most would say yes. Do you think that sometimes your teachers have the authority to direct you to do something or to make decisions for you because they have had more experience and are there to give you some direction? Do you find that direction valuable?

Rachel—Yes, because Chloe or someone else could vote for me because I am her friend and I might be a poor leader. I might say, 'I don't want to lead you; I am just in it for the credit, the popularity and that sort of thing.' So the teachers would make their choice on your strengths and what you are good at and everything—whether you would be a good leader and confident and so on.

Nathan G—And well behaved and not always in trouble.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So you do not have a problem with the teachers selecting the captains.

Nathan G—No.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do you like the captains they have chosen for you?

Nathan G—Yes.

Senator MASON—When I was in primary school I was a house captain, but I had to resign after a scandal. I was elected by popular vote, by my classmates.

CHAIR—Who can tell me some of the important things that have happened in the history of our country?

Lachlan—The Eureka Stockade.

CHAIR—Yes. Why was that important?

Lachlan—To show that Australians—I have forgotten.

CHAIR—Can someone help Lachlan?

Dylan C—To help show that we could be free.

CHAIR—Thank you. That is a good answer. Who can tell us of another important happening?

Hagan—In 1901 they decided that they wanted to have Australia as one country and not as lots of little countries.

CHAIR—You are talking about Federation. When did that happen?

Dylan C—In 1901.

CHAIR—Where was the first parliament held?

Dylan C—In Melbourne.

CHAIR—Can anyone think of some other important milestones?

Justin—World War I and World War II and the part that Australia played in them.

CHAIR—What are some of the important things that we have done overseas as a country when we have gone to war?

Cameron—Sometimes, when we are losing, we get dropped in the wrong places but end up fighting and winning.

CHAIR—There are some famous places that Australians have gone to; can anyone name one of them?

Sean—Gallipoli.

CHAIR—Where is that?

Sean—Isn't it in Turkey?

CHAIR—Yes, it is. There was a very famous battle there. Can anyone name any other famous battles?

Nathan G—The Vietnam War.

CHAIR—Yes. What have we just celebrated?

Nathan G—The three veterans who survived the war.

CHAIR—What was the name of that battle?

Nathan G—Long Tan.

CHAIR—Well done. It was the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, which is why the school rang its bell 40 times.

Jessica—The school rang its bell 40 times to represent the 40 years that have passed since the war ended.

CHAIR—Yes. Does anybody know of any other famous places where Australians have fought?

Justin—The Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea.

CHAIR—Yes, that is a very good answer. Where are those sorts of things happening at the moment?

Rachel—Afghanistan, East Timor and Iraq.

CHAIR—Yes, well done.

Senator HOGG—Hands up those who read the newspaper.

CHAIR—That is about half the class.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Which newspaper do you read?

Justin—The *Age*.

CHAIR—I heard someone say the *Herald Sun*.

Mr Anthony Smith—Then there are the local newspapers—the *Ranges Trader Mail*, which would not be delivered at home, and the *Leader*.

CHAIR—Who knows the name of the mayor of the council in this area?

Ms Silis—They could tell you the name of a local dignitary they met on Friday.

Chloe—Mr Alan Fincher.

Mr Anthony Smith—He is a former mayor.

Mrs MIRABELLA—If you were going to school in the morning and walking along the footpath outside your home and came across a really bad bit of footpath and tripped over and a little old lady behind you tripped over too and, when you got to school, you said to your teacher, ‘Part of the footpath is quite dangerous,’ which level of government would you write to to fix that?

Bryce S—The local government.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Yes. Some people might think that the federal member, Tony Smith, does such a good job that he could tell the council what to do, so some people might write to Mr Smith.

Mr Anthony Smith—Some people do.

CHAIR—Hands up those who have been to Canberra. It looks as though six of you have been to Canberra. Of the six who have been to Canberra, who has been to the national parliament? Three of you have raised your hand. What does the national parliament do?

Cameron—It makes decisions regarding our country.

CHAIR—Why is it important that we have a parliament in Canberra?

Nathan G—Because it is the Australian Capital Territory, the capital of Australia. It is important for that reason.

CHAIR—I do not think that is a reason to have a parliament. Why do you think we have a parliament, Katelyn?

Katelyn—I don't know.

CHAIR—Darcy, do you know?

Darcy—I don't really know.

Senator HOGG—Should you know, Darcy? Should we be helping you to know?

Darcy—Yes.

Dylan W—It is because we are a democratic country and we need a leader to help us to be and remain a democratic country.

CHAIR—Yes, thank you.

Hagan—If we did not have parliament, it would mean that Australia could be a mess, because people would be trashing everything and wouldn't be looking after everything and Monbulk could just be destroyed. Some places in the world, like Russia, do not have very good environments and in some places, like Indonesia, the kids are suffering from poverty and it is because they do not have good governments to help them.

CHAIR—Who can tell me what the word 'democracy' means?

Bryce S—It is where everyone gets a vote.

Cameron—And it is where everybody has their say.

CHAIR—That is right; everybody has an equal say.

Senator MASON—Cameron, how old do you have to be to vote?

Cameron—You have to be 18.

CHAIR—Do you intend to enrol to vote as soon as you can?

Cameron—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you see voting as a responsibility that you have?

Cameron—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have a comment to make, Alistair?

Alistair—I was going to say the same—that you get the right to vote for a person who is running, including locally or anything like that.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Please do not be embarrassed by this question, but who does not think it is important to vote—and why don't you think it is important? Some people think it is not important to vote and it does not matter because all politicians are the same; therefore, it does not matter what they do or who they vote for. Do you think that is right? Does anyone want to comment on that?

Dylan C—Some people think they do not have to vote because some politicians have lied and they do not keep their promises. They think that all the politicians are the same and they will just keep doing the same.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Fair enough.

CHAIR—So far you have been a very good class and we thank you very much for that. Later today we are going to a high school in the centre of Melbourne. We have been all around Australia talking to students and getting feedback and so far you are doing very well. It is a credit to you, your teachers and your parents that you do have a lot of knowledge about the subject that we are interested in.

Just for a moment we will pretend that the teachers are not here. Are there any issues here in the school that you are unhappy about? Is there anything that troubles you or that you would like to see improved?

Justin—Commonly, as with a lot of other schools around the nation, bikes are ridden to school but there is nowhere to keep them, like a shelter. We asked our principal, Ray Yates, if we could have one and he said that we weren't getting enough funding to do that. I just wonder why we have not got enough funding to get a bike ramp type of thing so that we can ride our bikes to school—

CHAIR—And have them sheltered.

Justin—Yes.

Senator HOGG—I am a bike rider too, so I sympathise with you.

CHAIR—Just watch how we handle that. Mr Federal Member, what do we do? We should get a program going to raise funds for a bicycle shed.

Mr Anthony Smith—We should.

Justin—Yes.

CHAIR—But the school is also doing things in relation to some other projects that we heard about this morning from the teacher/librarian, which are pretty good as well. That was a good issue.

Senator HOGG—I am interested in how you raise those sorts of issues. That is a very good issue indeed. I own and ride a bike and I know the importance of having it protected. How do you raise those sorts of issues?

Jessica—You tell the principal or your teacher that you want a bike shed or something like that.

Senator HOGG—Do you think the principal or your teacher listen when you talk to them about those sorts of issues? Listening is very important and that is what we are doing.

Jessica—Yes, they do.

Mr Anthony Smith—Do you tell your school captains?

Jessica—I haven't, but I think you can.

CHAIR—Nathan, do you have a comment?

Nathan L—Maybe with the principal, the vice-principal and all the captains and so on you could think of a way to raise the money for that sort of thing—such as by having a fair or something like that.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So you could be coming up with ideas to help the situation instead of just asking someone else to fix the problem.

Nathan L—Yes.

Hagan—I have a different sort of problem. Each year parents have to pay for grade 6 camp. At other schools I have been to, we have fundraised for camp to make it better for parents. Usually we have a fun run or other ways of raising money for the camp. I have been on one camp that four or five kids couldn't go to because their parents could not afford it. So maybe we could raise money for camps instead of having to pay for them.

CHAIR—Does everybody agree with that issue?

Children—Yes.

CHAIR—Is there a student council here?

Ms Silis—No.

CHAIR—But there is a house system.

Ms Silis—Yes.

CHAIR—Can that issue be raised through the house system or through the class captains?

Ms Silis—It would be raised and then it would go to the school council, as did the bike shelter issue. One of my students last year wrote to the school council about the bike issue, which the council then investigated and came down with a ruling that they were not prepared to go forward with it. That is the procedure.

Senator HOGG—Does the school council spend money that has been allocated to it for the general running of the school and prioritise where the money will be spent?

Ms Silis—Yes.

CHAIR—Does Monbulk have any Indigenous students?

Justin—No.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Justin—Because we do not have many Indigenous people populating this type of area.

CHAIR—Australia is the most culturally diverse nation in the world. We have people from 208 different countries living in our country, but they are not here. Why is that?

Cameron—Because people from other countries want to be with their own races. So Indigenous people would go to Healesville, because there are lots of them there. There are hardly any here, so they do not stay here.

CHAIR—Justin, do you have a comment to make?

Justin—Because in Monbulk we have generations of certain families that live on and on and we do not have many new people coming in and breaking that up.

CHAIR—Hagan?

Hagan—Because we live really close to the city, but Aboriginal people are used to living in different environments. In Western Australia, there are not many Aboriginal people in Perth because it is too civilised; they like to be out bush.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Mr Lindsay has spoken of people coming to Australia from many different countries right around the world. Bryce I think talked about democracy and people having the vote. We generally accept that in a democracy everyone should have an equal vote; is that correct?

Children—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do we accept that in a democracy it does not matter where you come from and that not only do you have an equal vote but also the law should apply equally to everyone? Is part of democracy that no-one is different or special and that the law of Australia should apply to everyone, it does not matter how rich or poor you are or whether you come from a different background? Do you accept that?

Children—Yes.

Hagan—Australian citizens only should be allowed to vote in Australia. If people come to Australia from Asia, they should be Australian citizens before they get to vote.

Mrs MIRABELLA—That is the situation now. Only Australian citizens can vote.

CHAIR—We heard earlier about Indigenous people living in Healesville. Don't you think it does not matter which ethnic background you come from; we are all Australians together? Perhaps we should not just have a community of one group here and a community of another group there. Do you think that is reasonable, or do you think it is okay that all of the Vietnamese, Lebanese or whatever live together? What do you think?

Bryce—I think Aboriginals are probably more Australian than we are—that social group.

Chloe—With people who live in group communities, it is good if they move around. Some people might be in Healesville and then move to Monbulk, but I think it depends on where they like living and who they like living with.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So you say that people should have a choice about where they live.

Chloe—Yes.

Senator HOGG—Hands up those who have visited the Victorian state parliament in Melbourne. Only three; that is interesting.

CHAIR—What is the population of Australia? You will see the reason for that question in a moment.

Danny—It is 20 million or something like that.

CHAIR—Just up a little bit.

Darcy—I think it is 22 million.

CHAIR—Yes, close enough. It is 23 million. Of those 23 million Australians, how many do you think have come from overseas?

Sean—About a quarter of them.

CHAIR—Sean, you are spot on. The number of Australians who were born overseas and came here is 6½ million. That just goes to show what a diverse country we are. Do you have a comment, Justin?

Justin—I have a really large question that is about our actual country. I have thought for a while now about how everyone lives on the edge of Australia and not in its centre. To my knowledge, we have a really large water storage up in the Northern Territory, because it is all tropical and so on. Why doesn't the Australian federal parliament start bringing water into the centre of Australia so that it is okay to live in and we can hold a bigger population? It is kind of getting packed now.

Senator HOGG—That is a good way to describe it.

Senator MASON—Obviously you have not been to Hong Kong, Justin.

Mrs MIRABELLA—My electorate or area is in the country and it is always an interesting debate—particularly in a drought—to try to work out where water should be used. Whenever we think about a resource, like water, there are different ways we can use it and there are different costs to using it in different ways. For example, if we were to take the water that is underground in Northern Australia and pipe it or take it to a desert area and make it all green and give people water, that represents a very big cost and the government has to ask itself whether that is the best use of taxpayers' dollars. Governments do not make any money; they only take it in taxes from people who work. They have the responsibility of making decisions to use that money in the best way possible.

A couple of reasons for the government not having done that are probably, firstly, it is very expensive and no-one knows whether the rest of the population would agree; and, secondly, in terms of the environmental impact, a decision would have to be made as to whether that would be the best thing to do—to take the water that is underground—because that is very ancient water. There is a lot of debate in Queensland at the moment about trying to get that underground water.

Justin—I think that is a really big priority. The government is spending money on smaller projects; but I reckon they should be focusing all taxpayers' money on that instead of spreading the money out and spending it on small things.

Mrs MIRABELLA—There is another thing that governments have to ask themselves: is that what most Australians would want us to spend the money on? You have obviously thought about this quite a lot and you feel quite strongly about it. A lot of other Australians would have their own particular ideas about what would be good for Australia—and they could be very expensive ideas—to fix specific problems. But it is a matter of: is that the best way to spend the money? If governments do not make decisions that most people agree with, they get voted out of office.

Hagan—Maybe if there were another problem somewhere in Australia, like the one Justin referred to, perhaps with the Great Barrier Reef getting destroyed, Australians could have a vote about which they would rather the government spend their money on. If they have paid the money through their taxes, they should get their say on what they want to have it spent on.

Mrs MIRABELLA—That is interesting, because now you have gone to the very centre of what government is about. Everyone in this area is part of an electorate. What is the name of the electorate?

Justin—Casey.

Mrs MIRABELLA—For the federal parliament, all of Australia is divided into 150 areas and the way our system works is called representative democracy; we have a representative for every area. For this area it is Mr Tony Smith.

Mr Anthony Smith—Perhaps I could comment here. You have said that this electorate is called Casey and it is one of 150 electorates. Just to explain it on the map of Australia, all of the electorates are different sizes but they have the same number of voters, so there is an equal say. Our electorate of Casey starts back in Croydon, runs up the Dandenongs and includes part of Olinda and all of Monbulk. The Patch is the boundary and then it runs up through the Yarra Valley. Sophie's electorate is named Indi, which is in central Victoria and is bigger than Casey. Why is it bigger?

Dylan W—Because the people are spread out more.

Mr Anthony Smith—That is right; very good. The biggest electorate in Australia is named Kalgoorlie, which is in Western Australia. Think of the map of Australia and think of Western Australia. Perth is right at the bottom. The electorate of Kalgoorlie is everything north of Perth. It is as big as Europe.

CHAIR—And east.

Mr Anthony Smith—And east; that is right. In town the electorates will be much smaller, but they will still have the same number of people.

Mrs MIRABELLA—The reason why we do not have votes on specific issues is because everyone in this area voted for Tony Smith; everyone in my area voted for Sophie Mirabella. When you have a particular issue or problem, you go to your local member and they are supposed to represent your concerns and your problems. Imagine that we had to have a vote every time the government had to make an important decision; we would be voting all the time. That is why we do not have votes on things like the Great Barrier Reef or whether we should have a water canal, because we voted for representatives to go to Canberra to represent our issues and concerns.

Senator MASON—That is right. Hagan's question was about how your taxes are spent. Most people in the seat of Casey voted for Mr Smith, so Mr Smith then represents you and your parents. Mr Smith then goes to Canberra and tells the government how the taxes here should be spent.

CHAIR—Would Lachlan like to make a comment?

Lachlan—Justin asked whether money could be spent on a big program. I am against that and for small programs because I play soccer and our soccer field is really boggy and I want a new one.

CHAIR—We call that the politics of self-interest!

Bryce S—I have asked most kids, like all of my friends, ‘Shouldn’t kids have a vote about whether they get homework or not?’ Home is a time to relax and have fun, not to get stressed out doing homework.

Mrs MIRABELLA—This is what we talked about before. I asked students whether they agreed that teachers are best able to make certain decisions about the classroom and what happens at school and everyone said yes. That is the same issue. Maybe parents and teachers are best able to make decisions about what is in your best interests. If you say you should have a vote on everything, where does it stop? Should infants when they are aged three or four and able to speak have the ability to vote?

CHAIR—There is some language shown up here, which I think is Indonesian. Are you studying Indonesian and, if so, why?

Josham—We were studying it last term, but we have stopped now.

Lisa-Marie—We were studying it because high schools do not want us to be taught in the lower grades what we will be taught at high school, so at primary school a completely different subject is chosen.

CHAIR—Tell me what you know about Indonesia.

Ross—We just learned how to say hello and a few basic sentences.

CHAIR—What do you know about Indonesia though? How many islands does it have, how big is it, what is its population and who is its president? How close is Indonesia to Australia?

Ross—I don’t know.

CHAIR—Those questions were a bit hard. Who has been to Indonesia?

Justin—I have, on the way to the Philippines.

CHAIR—Do you have any questions of us?

Nathan L—A water fountain could be built in Monbulk so that people would not have to keep going to the Safeway to buy drinks; you could get a drink here.

Lachlan—I have a question. Is it hard to use that Hansard machine?

Hansard Reporter—No, it is not hard when you have been doing it for 30 years.

CHAIR—Senator Hogg will leave us now, as he has to go to the airport. Thank you, Senator Hogg, for your participation. We will now get a group photograph. We will send you a copy of the transcript of what has been said and you will all see your names on the official record.

Committee adjourned at 10.55 am