COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

THURSDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2006

PERTH

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Thursday, 21 September 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 Brandis, Hogg and Murray 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.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 9.03 am

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education. The inquiry was referred by the Special Minister of State on 24 March 2006. We have received over 100 submissions, including yours, and they have been very valuable. We are focusing on the quality of education provided to young, Indigenous and migrant Australians. We have been quite concerned about Australian Electoral Commission reports that indicate that young and Indigenous Australians are more likely to be underenrolled. You will know about that. Given these studies, the committee is interested in finding better ways of inspiring and engaging these groups in Australia's electoral processes.

Today we are hearing from a wide range of representatives here in Western Australia. We appreciate their attendance at the hearing today. 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 the proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege.

[9.04 am]

BECKINGHAM, Ms Vanessa, Policy Officer, Western Australian Electoral Commission

GATELY, Mr Warwick, Electoral Commissioner, Western Australian Electoral Commission

GORDON, Mr Brian, Policy and Strategy Coordinator, Western Australian Electoral Commission

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Western Australian Electoral Commission to today's hearing. Thank you for attending. Mr Gately, do you wish to present any additional submissions or make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Gately—I would like to make a short opening statement, if I may.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Mr Gately—I welcome the opportunity to appear before this joint standing committee and offer my views on the adequacy of electoral education. I offer these views from my personal perspective as the Electoral Commissioner for Western Australia. One statutory function required of me as Electoral Commissioner is to promote public awareness of electoral and parliamentary matters by means of the conduct of education and information programs and by other means. The cornerstone of this activity in Western Australia is the Electoral Education Centre located adjacent to the Constitution Centre and within the Western Australian Parliament House precinct. The centre was established in 1992 and makes contact with over 19,000 individuals each year.

Western Australia is one of only four states and territories with a specific centre with the purpose of providing educational and community awareness programs. Our programs are delivered principally to primary and high schools as well as tertiary and community groups throughout the state. The centre has a focus on state government matters, yet provides comprehensive information on federal and local government processes. The centre, which it is hoped the committee can visit this afternoon, offers interactive programs to our target groups, where the origins of democracy are explained and the mechanics of preferential voting are revealed in a hands-on demonstration. An audiovisual presentation of which we are particularly proud brings the election process alive. As a snapshot of the reach of the Western Australian Electoral Education Centre in delivering an informative first look at our democratic process, the performance figures in the financial year 2005-06 are relevant. Presentations were given within the Electoral Education Centre to nearly 7,500 school students and adults. A further 2,500 primary and secondary students received a presentation at their school. Nearly 600 TAFE and adult migration students received presentations and 47 school council elections were coordinated involving over 11,000 students. At this point I acknowledge the contribution made by the Australian Electoral Commission in supporting activities at the education centre.

Through the education centre, a youth enrolment program is also managed based on the Victorian 17-year-old enrolment program. Each year a birthday card is sent to all year 12 students in Western Australia in the August-September period encouraging enrolment. The birthday card, which is in a pack that I will provide to the committee shortly, aims to capture the imagination of young people using humour and to solicit their enrolment. On the birthday card the recurring state theme—'it's best to be involved in the decision process'—is employed. This year, over 18,000 cards have been sent and I anticipate a 30 per cent return. Education centre staff also speak with the year 12 students at schools in order to make the enrolment and voting process more clear and relevant to them. In expanding the initiative, I intend to examine a process to follow up the 70 per cent of non-replying students and will look at the Victorian concept of including an informative brochure on government and electoral processes.

As a recent development the Electoral Education Centre has participated in a joint civics outreach program, teaming with the parliament of Western Australia and the Constitutional Centre to deliver civics education to country areas. The program was first delivered in the south-west of the state and has recently been expanded into the Pilbara and Kimberley with activities in Kununurra, Newman, Port Hedland, Broome, Karratha and Carnarvon embracing nearly 900 year 6 and year 7 children. The program is taken into schools and is well received as an education supplement. This year nearly 16,000 students in total across the state have had access to this outreach program. The program covers the state and Commonwealth constitutions, the electoral system and parliament. It is an interactive program of about two hours duration where students take part in a life-sized board game to develop an understanding of the separation of powers between state and Commonwealth. They gain an understanding of the electoral system by taking part in an election, discover the processes involved in passing legislation and debate an actual bill.

Another challenge, one referred to in the terms of reference for this inquiry, is the inadequacy of electoral education in Indigenous communities. There are issues firstly in educating as to the importance of voting and its relevance to life and community and thereafter in getting Indigenous people to enrol and vote. In addressing these challenges in Western Australia a collaborative approach has been taken with the Australian Electoral Commission, which jointly funds a rural and remote area strategy that supports field trips to remote communities, attendance at various cultural and significant festivals, liaison with community officials and advertising in Indigenous media. The strategy has a dual purpose—advancing public awareness of electoral processes and checking and encouraging enrolment. This year, eight field trips across the state have been undertaken, covering 67 communities.

As another initiative, an Indigenous reference group has been formed between the Australian Electoral Commission, the Western Australian Electoral Commission and the state Department of Local Government and Regional Development. This group assessed strategies for improving penetration in rural and remote communities. As one outcome, in February this year a storyboard for Indigenous electors was devised and produced to assist field officers in showing electors the difference between federal, state and local government elections in easy-to-understand language and with culturally significant colours and drawings. I have a copy of that storyboard here for you to look at. The success of this storyboard is still being gauged. Acknowledging that more can be done, I will continue to work with the Australian Electoral Commission in this regard.

CHAIR—Thank you. I appreciate that opening statement. In your evidence you wrote to us and said that the commission was of the view that there were significant gaps in civics and electoral knowledge in many sections of the population. I guess you meant by that that it was not just youth or Indigenous people. Could you expand on that for us? Could you identify some of those significant gaps? Can you tell us what you think we can do to narrow those gaps?

Mr Gately—Certainly. In terms of the programs that we deliver through our education centre, they are essentially targeting the year 6 and year 7 primary school individuals. We provide that program I guess on a pool basis. Schools use the opportunity to come to the education centre as a resource and take that information from us. Of course, not all schools take it up. We do not have a restricted client base but we have a regular client base. The same schools tend to appear all the time. That would indicate to me that, for some schools, either their curriculum does not allow it or it is not seen as sufficiently important that they would utilise that resource. All they really need to do is deliver the children on the day and they are given a total program, which you will see this afternoon. So there is little effort required of the school other than making themselves available to the centre to use our resources.

We have done a survey recently of our client base of schools. It is a small sample survey. The indications there from the teachers involved in those schools are that what we provide through the education centre is an important resource and one which they do appreciate, given ultimately that it would appear that they do not have the time necessarily to do the preparation beforehand for the civics education subjects that they provide.

Also in my submission you will see the comment that, whilst we do provide a service to migrant groups, that is very small. Potentially, we need to do some more work on that. But, of course, that comes down to resources as well. I would say that there would appear to be evidence that there are gaps in civics education, particularly in the primary school area, but, again, that is drawing from the small client base that I have. Also, migrant groups potentially require some attention. We might explore Indigenous areas as a separate matter because that is quite complex. Again, our experience is that education there is lacking.

CHAIR—Do you liaise with the Department of Education here in Western Australia in relation to—

Mr Gately—Indeed, we do. We work very closely with them in terms of their curriculum and the scope we have to input into that curriculum.

Mr CIOBO—I will invite you at this stage, Mr Gately, to make some comments with respect to Indigenous education. You said you want to deal with that issue separately. I imagine that there are a host of challenges that perhaps are unique, but I could be wrong with that preconception. I am just interested in your comments about the adequacy of education, cultural differences, barriers or any special initiatives et cetera that you may take.

Mr Gately—It is probably quite clear to the committee in terms of the inquiries that you have made and what you have seen as well that involving Indigenous communities in the election process is difficult and demanding. I guess, in the daily context, politics and elections and government do not necessarily impact them in the same way that they appear to impact us. Again, from the experience that we see in those remote communities, I imagine that because of

the transient nature and because of the lack of consideration as to how government and politics affect them they essentially opt out of the electoral process. Notwithstanding our programs to get them enrolled and to keep them active in the process, they just seem to fall through the net. As I indicated in my opening statement and also in the response, we do work closely with the AEC. We are trying to give some formality to a remote and rural strategy where we get into the communities as best we can. That is difficult in itself. Quite often we have turned up to find that there is a sorry camp for different reasons and you cannot get access to talk to them.

Mr CIOBO—What is a 'sorry camp'?

Mr Gately—I believe it is when a family member has passed away and they withdraw and go away from access.

Mr CIOBO—The family or the whole community?

Mr Gately—The community, essentially. We have experienced that as well. I know that your next speaker, Mr Brian Moore, who was in charge of my remote polling in the last state election, may have particular views on this and you may want to explore that issue with him.

Mr CIOBO—I want to congratulate you on the initiative you have outlined to us with respect to the birthday cards that you send out. To the best of my knowledge that is something unique to your processes. In terms of feedback and the follow-up that you do, I think you mentioned that you get a 30 per cent return rate. Have you done any qualitative analysis as to why you do not get a higher return rate than that?

Mr Gately—We did take that initiative from Victoria. It works successfully there and we thought we would roll it out here. We had a bounty arrangement in Western Australia prior to the birthday card where we went into the schools and provided the schools with $2.50 per enrolment form that they provided for their year 12 students. That was very administratively intensive. It required a lot of effort on behalf of the school and also the commission as well. We trialled the birthday card initiative and I guess the return on the investment was about the same, although it did not take up as much administrative time. I have not yet trialled a follow-up—and I believe that Victoria do that—and it is something that I would like to explore: to go back to that 70 per cent group that do not respond and say: 'Hey, we sent you a card. Is there any problem? Here is another form. Please come on board and give us your enrolment details.' That is one that I want to explore.

CHAIR—How do you get the names and addresses of the students to whom you send the birthday cards?

Mr Gately—We get that from the Curriculum Council in Western Australia. We work closely with them. We have done a lot of filtering of that data—

CHAIR—There are no privacy issues involved in your having that information?

Mr Gately—No, and as I said, it is done through the Curriculum Council and we have their full support in terms of this initiative.

Mr CIOBO—You send it to the school itself and not to—

Mr Gately—No, it goes to the individual.

Mr CIOBO—At their home address?

Mr Gately—Yes.

Senator HOGG—To follow up on this because it interests me; it is an initiative I have raised with others. Is the means by which you are doing this outmoded? In other words, you are posting them a birthday card; if you were to SMS them—and I know that there are difficulties associated with that—or email them, do you think your response might be a lot better, seeing that that is the way these young people communicate?

Mr Gately—Potentially. I do not know that we have mobile phone data and/or SMS or email data. We certainly do have the residential address of the individual from the Curriculum Council. That is something that we may wish to explore but I do not know that that data is available.

Senator HOGG—I understand that, but my point is that the method by which you are trying to communicate with these people is a method that really has passed them by, or was never with them in the first place—filling in copious amounts of forms. They are used to going to a website and logging on and filling in a form by that means or they are used to doing it by email or some other means of communication such as SMS. All these kids have a mobile phone—I reckon if you found one of them without one you would be lucky—and they are on it all the time communicating with one another. That is why I am raising this. I am trying to tease out whether or not you think that somehow or in some way in the future it may be an alternative that needs to be pursued.

Mr Gately—Surprisingly, I raised that matter with the Electoral Council of Australia two meetings ago when we met in Canberra. I am working with the AEC to look at the potential for SMS messaging not only in terms of youth enrolment but also to remind people of their obligation to vote on polling day. So that matter is being explored. It may well have relevance in terms of this birthday card, and perhaps the birthday card is outdated at this point.

Senator BRANDIS—Mr Gately, is the education in which you engage purely about process or do you also talk about democratic values and explain democratic values to students?

Mr Gately—It is centred principally on process, and you will see that at our ed centre this afternoon when you go through the presentation that we provide. There are democratic principles as part of that, particularly when you see the audiovisual presentation which will walk through the first settlement in Australia and the establishment of parliament and those sorts of issues and how they led to the system of government that we have in the Commonwealth and the states at the moment. But in terms of outlining democratic values, it is probably less so. It is more the principles of voting than what is behind them.

Senator BRANDIS—I can understand the electoral commissioners being mainly concerned about process because that is what you do, but I think that it is very important that children be given a sense, when they are first introduced to Australian democratic practices, to appreciate

just how unusual Australia is, that the Commonwealth of Australia at least has been a democracy for as long as it has been a nation and there are very few countries that can say that. I suppose we are having this so-called values debate in this country and I would like to think—and I do not think this is a particularly conservative thing to say—that one of the outcomes of any form of electoral education, whether by you, or I suppose more particularly by schools, is to give students a solid, though not uncritical, grounding and appreciation of the value and importance, near to uniqueness, of the Australian historical experience with democracy.

Mr Gately—I go back to the submission—and I have been reminded by Mr Brian Gordon. Our interactive program actually picks up the history and structure of Australia's democracy, the importance of keeping informed about public issues and activities, involving critical thinking in decision-making, learning about the system of government and how it affects all citizens, participating in and understanding preferential voting and a citizen's rights and responsibilities. So it is explored in some fashion, albeit in a very short period of time. You do not get a lot of time with these primary age students to get all those messages across. But I accept the point you are making.

Senator MURRAY—Mr Gately, thank you for your submission. I want to draw an analogy between parenting and civic education. We assumed for decades that ordinary people in their daily lives understood parenting. Then we discovered they did not and we had to educate them, and there are many programs to assist people with understanding parenting. I think the same has been true of civic life. We thought that people would know and aspire to and understand how to engage in civic life at all its various levels, and of course they do not. I see programs like this not just directed towards an understanding of our political processes and outcomes but actually teaching people how to engage in civic life.

So, if that is the case—and it is a question of resources, which are always scarce for governments of any stripe—do you think that these sorts of programs should be developed laterally, as it were? I am thinking of the sort of civic interest that people have in the broad in the community. There is a great involvement in sporting groups and associations, for instance, and inevitably there is the election of officials, administrators and so on which attaches to that, whether it is little league soccer or supporting the Dockers. Workplaces are covered, because the union election system is well established. There are business organisations. There are community organisations of various sorts. I wonder whether, as you have developed your experience and understanding of what you are doing and the outcomes from this, you have seen that there are mechanisms to engage people more in what I would call civil society at large?

Mr Gately—It is probably a matter that I have not necessarily considered in a wider context, other than the school-aged target group that we are particularly focusing on at the moment. I think, to come back to that first point about parenting and civic education, there certainly is a role to play, but that gives me a whole new target group to get into. We did some survey work after the Victoria Park by-election as to why we had a low turnout there and, surprisingly, one of the points that the consultant raised was the role of the parent in stimulating the individual to go and vote on polling day. That apparently did appear in the survey. So it is not only parenting and civic education; it is also, through our experiences, embracing the need to be involved in that as part of this commitment to society.

I believe that Professor Print might have spoken to this body as well. We met him about a week and a half ago, and he was of the same view as to the role of families in that. In my own experience with my son, who finished year 12 last year, until I placed an enrolment form in front of him where all he needed to do was sign it, that enrolment form was probably not going to be submitted.

Senator HOGG—And you had to walk it down to the postbox too!

Mr Gately—I posted that for him. But in his focus and what he was dealing with in his life—and it comes back to messaging—it was not a priority. Again in my own experience, when I was at that age we sat around a family table—we did not have a TV—and we spent the evening discussing, inevitably, politics. That was my father's interest. I guess that does not occur so much in the family environment now.

Can I take my programs to a wider group? Potentially, yes. Whilst we do TAFE and some senior groups there, it would be a significant ask to expand that in some much wider sense to take it away from the school-age programs that I am providing at the moment.

Senator MURRAY—Education is one thing, which is understanding and retaining a memory of what you are being taught, but application is the real outcome that you want—that is, the engagement of our citizens and indeed our residents in our society at all levels to make it more productive, more fertile and more fulfilling. To use the example of your son—and every one of us who has children has walked in your shoes—it is a question of making it relevant. I do not know your son, but let us assume that he is engaged in a sporting group and so on. He would be interested in who was elected as the administrator or whatever.

Is there a capacity and an ability to take process, as opposed to education, into areas where people find that it is relevant to them? You have done that with the schools. The school election is relevant to those kids. I am sure they get very actively involved and interested because it is a contest and they know the personalities and the characters. It is not theoretical. That is really my broader question. I recognise the limits to this, but already electoral commissions throughout the country engage in university elections, student elections and union elections, and other community organisations ask them to do elections. I think that is all productive to the outcomes we are looking for.

Mr Gately—In the submission I indicated that we did about 48 school elections. But the Western Australia Electoral Commission, just as you have mentioned, conducts about 40 non-parliamentary elections per year, which include student guilds, the RSPCA, credit societies and union elections. We go into the community in that way. When any organisation or body requires an impartial election we do that on a fee-for-service basis. We are doing all the student guilds in Western Australia at this point, I think, other than at Murdoch.

Senator BRANDIS—Mr Gately, are there any limitations? Could any community organisation come to you and say, 'We want you to conduct our election for your scheduled fee'?

Mr Gately—I am empowered under my electoral act to do such elections. On a case-by-case basis we look at the organisation, how it is run, its constitution and its rules before we take it on. But it is a fee-for-service activity.

Senator BRANDIS—What if the Western Australian branch of the Liberal Party, for example, come along to you and say, 'We want you to run this preselection'?

Mr Gately—They may choose to approach us, but whether we would choose to take it on would be another matter.

Senator BRANDIS—Is there any in-principle reason why you could not conduct the internal elections, or indeed preselections, of a political party?

Mr Gately—There is no legislative requirement necessarily that would prevent me from doing that.

Senator BRANDIS—That is interesting.

Senator MURRAY—Given that you have your toe in this water already, the question is whether you get value out of it. When you conduct your school exercises, their exams and tests and feedback, there is some way in which the school, or the teachers at least, can assess outcomes. Do you do any sample research after the event? I do not mean for every election you cover, but do you do a before and after examination of the effects and value of these things?

Mr Gordon—We get feedback in a number of ways. Firstly, there is an evaluation from the teachers of the class that has been taken. Secondly, there is more often than not a brief test of the students' knowledge at the end of the session so that we can tell to what level it has been absorbed. An issue raised by one of the teachers in our surveys is that it is all well and good at that point, but unless it is repeated as an exercise as students move through the years it can still be lost fairly quickly if it is a one-off. So our imperative is to meet them as they move through the school system and refresh their knowledge at a higher level.

Senator MURRAY—What about migrants? My impression of many migrant groups—it is not universal but it is an impression—is that when substantial numbers of migrants come in they form clubs or societies, essentially a support system. Years after they have come in as waves of migrants you see those things continuing—for instance, the Italian Club. Italians have been in Western Australia for many decades, but that club survives as an ethnic focus and its origin was the migrant population. That is so for Somalis or any other group in the community. Are there opportunities to access the migrant community through their clubs, associations and support groups to provide in a meaningful way civics education, political education and understanding of our system and how it operates?

Mr Gately—There possibly are opportunities there, but it is not an avenue that we have explored at this point. The work that we do with migrant groups is limited to those who attend TAFE courses and I imagine they are more language related TAFE courses, and that, at this point in time, is only a small number. I have not explored taking that any wider. It is something that we may well wish to look at but, at this point in time, I have no further information on that, unless Mr Gordon can offer a view.

Mr Gordon—No, due to lack of resources, we are fairly well confined to tertiary groups such as TAFE.

Mr CIOBO—We have been discussing at some length what you do, but I am interested to discuss in more detail why you do what you do. My next remark is not directed specifically at the WA Electoral Commission but rather is an observation. If I were to stand at a shopping centre booth, I estimate that probably 70 per cent of constituents would not know whether I was council, state government or federal government or indeed be able to identify what the differences are. Just reflecting on that, are we just going through the process unaware of what the destination actually is or are we achieving success in educating Australians about our tiers of government? That really underscores the 'why' part of the question. You can have outreach, you can run 48 school elections, but is it achieving the purpose? What is the purpose as you see it? What qualitative and quantitative analyses are you doing to underscore and drive the kind of education that you are doing?

Mr Gately—I believe we are achieving. We may not be at the forefront, I guess, in terms of civics education. But I think the challenge that all electoral authorities face is that of the youths who choose to disengage. It is about getting them back into the process. It is about trying to get the right message across and trying to get that engagement in what is, I think, an increasingly complex society. There are so many pressures on time nowadays that it comes down certainly to priorities and what is important to the individual. In terms of the work that Professor Print has done and in terms of the various generations, we do face a disengaging youth population at the moment not only in politics and electoral matters but in matters to do with other parts of society as well. I believe driver's licence numbers, for example, are declining as people choose not to do that.

It is a challenge that we all face. Are we doing things as well as we can? Certainly we could make, I think, incremental improvements and one of those is possibly how we communicate and make contact. It comes down to the individuals themselves ultimately wanting to be involved in it, wanting to have their say, wanting to make a difference to the way their lives are conducted. We can only put out certain messages at certain times to spark that call to action to get them involved in the process. I think what we are doing on the whole is correct.

A whole new matter, of course, is compulsory and voluntary voting. In my own view, we need to keep it compulsory. I did not necessarily want to introduce that into this discussion, but for a variety of reasons that is the right thing to do. We have to keep working on getting our message across. We have to endeavour to keep them engaged. We have to think smarter and how to do that. We are not losing the battle at this point.

Mr CIOBO—You made the remark that it comes down to the individual wanting to make a different and to have their say. I do not say this out of any actual knowledge—I say it anecdotally—but I would suggest to you that, if you asked Australians whether they want to make a difference and want to have their say, the vast majority would say yes. I think if you were then to ask the questions, 'How do you go about doing that?' and 'Do you feel that you can do it through the ballot box, so to speak?' that the vast majority would say either 'I don't know' or 'no'. It gets back to the central thrust that I asked about—again, this is not aimed directly at you or at the WAEC—which is that I cannot help but wonder whether we are just on a rote-learning method, that we keep undertaking the same kind of education because that has always been the way that we have undertaken the same kind of education. There are people employed to do this and therefore that is what they do. I am trying to ascertain, given that you are the peak body for electoral education in this state, what it is that drives the agenda that you undertake when it

comes to education, because I am not hearing from you the reason why you do what you do. I also highlight that you say it is a young Australians thing. Is it? What evidence is there of that? I find that people aged 30, 40 and 50 are as ignorant of the electoral processes as someone who is 18. I am wonder again whether that is just perception or a statistical knowledge.

Mr Gately—Certainly as a statutory officer, and I guess as a public minded citizen, what I think drives the education agenda is that society to some extent requires individuals to be involved in the selection of people who represent them in government and make the decisions that affect their lives. That is the principle of why we are all here, so that drives me to try and get that message across in a format that they can absorb and then involve and inject themselves into the process. It disappoints me when I get to the point of issuing non-voter penalties to the community. Why do I need to do this when the individuals themselves should be so civically minded that they get involved in the process? That drives the agenda of what we do in the commission. We provide a service that we feel the public should embrace and take up. Also, as I read in my statement, I am required by legislation to deliver programs to educate and to involve the community. But, as I said, as a statutory office holder and an individual committed to the process, I would say that it is important that they get involved in it.

Mr CIOBO—Do you think you know your customer, though? You are marketing a product; do you know your customer?

Mr Gately—Do you ever know your customer? In the lead-up to our state election we did some focus group work with an advertising agency, and I am happy to provide that information to you. From that—and Mr Gordon might correct me—there were the pro voters, the marginals and the apathetics. The marginals were the big group that we wanted to get to, so our messages went out particularly to engage that group and to commit them to vote on the day.

Mr CIOBO—That is what I am interested in.

Mr Gately—As I said, I can make that available to the committee and you might find those motivators interesting.

Senator BRANDIS—I cannot help thinking that your aspiration is rather high-minded. It sounds to me as if you think that it is your job to inculcate an elementary level of civic virtue—that people are not good citizens unless they fully participate in civic life, which is a noble thing to think. But surely your aspiration should be a little more modest than that—merely to teach people how they may discharge an obligation imposed on them by law. In other words, my point is that there is nothing wrong with citizens being apathetic about public issues—people are perfectly entitled to be apathetic about public issues—but the law requires them to vote and it is your job to ensure that they are sufficiently aware of that obligation and of the mode of its fulfilment in order to stay on the right side of that law.

Mr Gately—That is certainly the obligation that is placed on me as the Electoral Commissioner, but I would hope that all of us and the community at large were generally civically minded so that they would involve themselves in the process and that we did not have to enforce the law to the extent that we do. It is a personal view.

CHAIR—We are running out of time, but I would like to hear from Ms Beckingham, if I may. Committee, she has practical, on-the-ground experience in remote Indigenous communities, about the electoral process. I just thought it might be instructive to hear from a younger person—no disrespect to you, Mr Gately—

Mr Gately—I wasn't there!

CHAIR—about what you found and about how you might suggest to the committee that the process could be improved—how we might engage more with people in more remote communities. Would you like to talk to us about that, please.

Ms Beckingham—Okay. I will just say that I have done the remote polling only the one time. We stayed out there for a week, based in Warburton, and we travelled to a lot of communities. Over that week I had a lot of different experiences. I think the biggest thing for Indigenous people is relevance. They need to see that the way they vote is relevant to their lives on a daily basis. Education of course is a huge thing, in which people encounter obstacles—a lot of people have minimum skills in reading and writing. I suppose that education is really the big thing, as is the relevance to them.

But, in saying that, when we went to the communities they were all very keen to come and vote. It was not as though they did not want to. It was probably just lack of awareness, but once we were there and we had set up the polling booth they were all keen to line up. Some of them lined up in the sun for quite a while. I had the experience a few times where they did not have a lot of knowledge of electorates. Some of them had come from across the border, so they did not realise that they were not entitled to vote in a WA election. When you told them that, they were a little disappointed, feeling, 'Oh, is there something wrong with me compared to all the others who can vote?' We did a lot of enrolment on the spot there, which was great. I was with Brian Moore, who is sitting behind me, so he will also tell you a bit more about that. I think the initiatives that the commission is taking at the moment—the storyboard and the reference group—are all really good, really positive steps towards educating the people and encouraging them to be a part of the process.

CHAIR—Knowing that the level of government that remote Australians seem to be most closely associated with is local government, does local government have a role in assisting the Electoral Commission, either state or federal, in better education when elections come along?

Ms Beckingham—Yes, I guess it would be useful. We did have a person from the department of local government with us when we did the remote polling. He is an Indigenous person who works with those communities a lot, outside the electoral stuff, and he was fantastic. It was really good to have someone like that along, across departments, with a bit of a different view. He was very helpful to me, as someone who maybe did not have as much knowledge about Indigenous culture, protocol and that sort of thing. It was great. Yes, I think that is something that we should continue.

Senator HOGG—Mr Gately, my question goes to one of the three recommendations in your submission—that is, recommendation (b). I do not want you to necessarily expand on that now, but could you take it on notice. You mention there:

That research is funded to determine the causes for disengagement by young people in the Australian political process.

I am interested in knowing, firstly: research by whom? Is that at all three levels of government to see whether the level of disengagement is different at the three levels? Also, what are the key aspects that you are looking at in the research to get to the cause of the disengagement? If you could just take that on notice and supply us with an answer there, I would be pleased.

Mr Gately—I will take that on notice, if you do not mind, rather than trying to answer that now.

Senator HOGG—Yes, it is too long.

CHAIR—Witnesses, the time that we have allowed for this has expired. I thank you very much for your attendance here today. We would also appreciate receiving that research—the advertising agency survey information—that you alluded to. I think we will find that very interesting. We appreciate you giving us your time today. Thank you.

[9.51 am]

MOORE, Mr Brian James, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for coming along today. You seem to be very highly regarded by the Western Australian Electoral Commission. We are looking forward to your evidence.

Mr Moore—I appear as a private individual having had considerable experience in electoral matters and, probably, remote polling.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Moore. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as the proceedings of the prospective houses. We have received a written submission from you. Thank you. It was a very good submission. Do you want to present any additional submissions or to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Moore—That initial submission was a very basic submission really on the practical aspects of remote polling. Looking at some of the others, it certainly does not have that quality. It was a matter that I came back from with very passionate feelings after the last election, seeing the obvious need that the Indigenous people had in the communities for education and assistance when it came to voting time. Having given some thought recently and having heard somebody on the local ABC radio yesterday—it may have been you, Sir—on polling I did make another couple of notes. Would you like me to read those out?

CHAIR—Please do.

Mr Moore—Electoral education is important. However, the relevance of such education must not be overlooked. 'Relevance' is a word I have heard here today, and it is a word which really strikes home when you are dealing with Indigenous communities. At the present time there is a need to put the cart before the horse, so to speak, and teach community members how to vote. This is what I ensured my team undertook the last state election.

Community members know they have a legal responsibility to vote and have their name crossed off the roll. How to meaningfully complete their responsibility causes some difficulty for most. In some cases this is brought about by being given how to vote literature before receiving their ballot papers. In the voting booth they are confronted with a number of papers. Some, like the Senate and the legislative council papers, look very confusing to them. You only have to watch the attempt to sort these papers to know that assistance must be given if the elector is to record a formal vote.

There is one other possibility in conjunction with the above. If you remember, in my initial submission, I suggested that we conduct electoral education at the time that we did the poll. After listening to the radio yesterday afternoon, I have thought more about it. Cost is a significant factor when you are talking about remote communities. I understand the committee went to Warburton. Warburton is a large community by community standards within Western Australia. Once you get east of Warburton, communities reduce in size significantly. You are

going out there to see maybe 40 or 50 people, if there has not been a funeral or they are not away on law. So cost is a big factor.

One other possibility I was thinking of is that you could conduct a joint education roll check and enrolment prior to an impending election. There is not enough time between the time an election is announced and the time that the roll is closed for this to be meaningful. We all know that, unfortunately, we do not have fixed dates here in Western Australia, unlike New South Wales and the Commonwealth. But we know roughly when an election is coming. That would be a good time from my point of view, if you are going to conduct a roll check, to do some electoral education.

You have got the costs. I was looking initially at simply the cost of going out there once, but I think that roll checks conducted by the AEC—how accurate and how complete those roll checks are—depend on who is in the community at the time and how well versed they are. Normally the community health nurse is. Normally that person would keep all the records for these people.

It is the practice of electoral commissioners to employ a local person in most communities for two to three hours to assist polling officials identify and perhaps translate names of electors for roll marking. From my personal observation, this should not extend to assistance in the voting booth. Political parties will invariably use a respected member of the community to hand out how to vote cards and the emphasis placed on what to do by these people does have a bearing on the result. I can tell you from experience that I have seen Indigenous members of the community handing out how to vote literature and virtually saying to people, 'This is one. This is what to do.' When you have a very shy person—and the community people are shy—confronted by a stranger who is a person who has some official status, they are very reluctant to open up. Even so, my staff and I had a number of occasions when that how to vote card that was on top was put to one side and they say, 'No, this is who I want; how do I do it?' So I do not recommend community residents assisting as officials other than to identify and maybe give the names of staff so that people can be struck off the roll.

Senator BRANDIS—Are you saying that on occasions in these communities the electors believe the how to vote card to be an effective instruction?

Mr Moore—Yes. Envisage a remote polling booth which is not in the best conditions like the primary schools and the facilities we have in the metropolitan area. Once you get inside one of those you have got cramped conditions with people lined up and how to votes just outside. Once a person gets inside that polling booth they have got all this information in their small cubicle and the number of people that actually want to make their mark on the how to vote literature is quite high.

Senator BRANDIS—Would you go so far as to say that in your experience there are people who do not appreciate that in voting they are exercising a choice but merely filling out a form, for example, another sort of government form like a census form or a Medicare form?

Mr Moore—That would be fair to say and that is not peculiar to remote polling either. A lot of people simply attend a polling booth so they do not get fined for not voting.

Senator BRANDIS—Sure, but my point is slightly different. The whole difference between voting and filling out any other sort government form is that you are exercising a choice. My question is: do you think that there are some people so unsophisticated about the system that they do not even understand that they are exercising a choice?

Mr Moore—I do, simply because the choices that they have on the ballot paper are choices about which they know very little. To expand on that, if you look at a ballot paper—and I think that on the last one I had here there were four names of the ballot paper—of those four names there were two party representatives following us in another plane and handing out how to votes. For the third and fourth names—one was a party and the other an independent—there was no information other than one party providing information by post. That normally does not get to the hands of the elector. When the individual gets into the voting booth they have four names there on the ballot paper. They do not know who they are and they have only the how to vote to look at. The third and fourth people do not have a chance. Irrespective of that, the elector really does not know what is best for them.

Senator BRANDIS—Do party names appear on Western Australian ballot papers?

Mr Moore—Yes.

CHAIR—In your evidence that you gave us you added:

I am not sure that electoral education other than on a 'one-to-one' basis would be worthwhile.

Could you expand on that in relation to remote communities? How would you do that?

Mr Moore—It is virtually an impossible thing to do. But what I was really emphasising is that, if you have ever attended a meeting in a remote community to do with voting or even to try to seek candidates for a local government election and if you look at the instruction and the talks given by the Department of Regional Development and Local Government, the Electoral Commission employees, the local government staff themselves from the council, and the elders, it is not something that really interests the community people. It comes back to the relevant questions: why should they learn it and what is in it for them? The only time really when I see that it is relevant is when they must do it. I do not see that you are going to get the attention of a person otherwise.

It is the same when we talk about electoral education for schools and so on. If you look at the schools, how many of the students when they go to those electoral education courses in West Perth really take in what is there? Are they listening or are their minds on other things or do they want to skylark? It is the same in communities. We provided a lunch for the meeting that was held in Wiluna and that was a primary cause of those people attending that meeting—the lunch. It was not for the information that was being imparted to them.

CHAIR—You heard me ask the previous witnesses about the role of local government in the electoral process, state and federal. Do you have any advice to the committee as to whether you think there should be an increased role or a different role?

Mr Moore—I have not given that a lot of thought but I did take the question in when you were asking it. I think that possibly local government should have a greater role in electoral education, because they are the closest to the people. You visited Warburton in the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku. If you talked to many of the community members within the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku, you would find that they do not know who their local member is. They cannot recall the last time they saw their local member. They would not know whether he was Legislative Council, Legislative Assembly, Senate or House of Representatives. It is a situation where the local government is there.

CHAIR—But they do have a greater understanding of who their local councillors are? Is that right?

Mr Moore—They do, simply because they see the local councillors and their local councillors in a lot of cases come from within community.

Senator BRANDIS—On the first page of your submission, last paragraph, you say:

In collecting the votes, a conscious effort was made, with the overview of Party scrutineers, to teach Community members how to vote instead of simply assisting them to complete their ballot papers.

I want to ask a broad and a more specific question. The broad question is: how does that work in real life? What are the limits of what you feel you can or should say to an elector in explaining to them how to vote? I take for granted that it would not involve a recommendation of one candidate over another. Are there protocols about the limits to which you can go? To take a very practical example, what if the elector is so ignorant that he says to you, 'Who do I vote for?' What protocols govern your officers? The more particular question is: if there are protocols or if there are settled practices at least, are they developed in consultation with the political parties?

Mr Moore—When you have a person in the voting booth and they need assistance, what I ensured that my team did was to act impartially. This is why I mentioned party scrutineers, because you need somebody not affected to oversee and make sure that what you are doing is compliant with what the elector wants. You need to ensure quite clearly that you are conducting that vote in an impartial manner and that you have no say in who they vote for.

What happens in practice is that a person will come in and have their how-to-vote literature and their ballot papers. They will try to work out what to do. First of all, what we would do is say to them: 'Those are the examples; those are the papers. You tell me who you want to vote for.' In the case of Kalgoorlie, they had four names on the paper but only two how-to-vote cards. They would look at one party or the other party and then say, 'This one.' I would say—

Senator BRANDIS—Pausing there, even at that point you are privileging the parties over the independents.

Mr Moore—You have to indicate to them that there are other parties. As an official representative of an electoral commission, you cannot give information about those other parties. I can say to them, 'Party C and party D are on that paper.' But it is not up to me to turn around and espouse their principles or their policies.

Senator BRANDIS—Of course not. I am not suggesting that.

Mr Moore—This is what makes it very difficult, and this is what people do not understand when you get into a community. You are not there with the full information for the community to relate to. It is not the practice of electoral commissions to carry how-to-vote cards for parties or independents, because quite clearly you are there in an impartial capacity. If we did that, someone would say, 'Why was that party at the top?' It is biased, because it is usually out of the two that they have in their hand.

Senator BRANDIS—I can understand how it would work once they tell you, even though the choice might on occasions be almost random. But what if somebody says to one of your officers, 'Who do I vote for?' What is the protocol there?

Mr Moore—We had a similar situation with the referendum. There was a referendum at the last state election that was asking the people of Western Australia whether the shops in Perth should stay open until nine o'clock at night. Many people east of Kalgoorlie have only ever been to Perth to visit the Royal Perth Hospital. It had no relevance to them at all. So they would ask, 'What do I do?' Quite clearly, the instruction to staff—

Senator BRANDIS—That is what I am interested in. What do you do when they say that to you?

Mr Moore—It is their decision. If they cannot make a decision, they do not fill it out. That is all you can tell them. You cannot force them to put in a vote, because that would be putting your will on them, and that cannot happen. If I can digress, in the referendum there would have been a high percentage of none returns—blank papers—on the first question, which was, 'Should the shops stay open in Perth until nine o'clock on Monday to Friday.' But the influence of missionaries in those communities was evident in the voting on the question, 'Should the shops stay open on a Sunday?' There was a high percentage of 'no' returns on that question.

Senator BRANDIS—Going to an example of a vote in an election rather than in a referendum, what an elector were to say to you, 'I want to vote for Mr Carpenter,' do you think that your officers would maintain their neutrality sufficiently if they indicated the Labor candidate?

Mr Moore—If someone indicates who they want to vote for, and that person represents a party, I see no problem in the staff saying, 'He is a member of that party.' You are informing the elector.

Senator BRANDIS—That is fair enough. On my specific question, is there a prior consultation process with the political parties to work out what the acceptable protocols are for this practice?

Mr Moore—In the case of the last election there was not. But we made it quite clear to the scrutineers on each occasion that we were there to assist. We actively asked them to watch and there were no complaints. In fact, the staff who went with me received a letter of thanks from the member, who is now the Minister for Local Government and Regional Development.

CHAIR—You said that you hold a view that the practice of employing temporary electoral officials to conduct remote polling should cease if electoral education is to be conducted at the same time as polling and that trained commission staff should be used in their place. Could you expand on that, please?

Mr Moore—In the past, in the state election at least, it has been the practice for a returning officer to engage staff specifically to conduct remote polling. These staff are engaged the same as you would have a staff member in a polling place in the metropolitan area. These people have had minimal training sufficient to get them through in, say, a metropolitan polling place as against being in a remote area where you do not have the luxuries of convenience—you cannot just get on the mobile phone and ask a question if there is a problem. My view was that it is so important in communities that we look to a system of ensuring that staff or experienced electoral people should be utilised to conduct remote polling such that they go out there with an interest in polling. I think there is a big difference between being employed for a day and receiving some money and going out there with a genuine interest to want to help. This is what I was looking at. An employee in, say, the Electoral Commission should have a genuine interest in the area and, as such, would see the need and assist more greatly than someone who was simply there for an hour or two to collect the votes and then get to the next remote community.

CHAIR—In your experience, do the Australian Electoral Commission do the job for the Commonwealth of Australia that you expect them to do? Are there any improvements that you could suggest in the way they conduct business? Or are they a top-class professional organisation?

Mr Moore—Sorry, I cannot agree with your last statement, but the Australian Electoral Commission conduct their elections in a very fair manner. My role with the Australian Electoral Commission in remote communities has only been to assist in the conduct of a roll check. I have worked for the Australian Electoral Commission in metropolitan elections, but I think that, like all agencies and like the Western Australian Electoral Commission, funding is the big issue. It was evident when I did the remote poll check that, first and foremost, we were out there at the expense of another department, not the AEC, and it was a convenience that we went out there. What we did was good, but it was not a thorough roll check.

CHAIR—I think you have satisfied us. We appreciate your attendance and thank you for the additional information that you provided us.

Proceedings suspended from 10.12 am to 10.33 am

ARCHER, The Hon. Shelley Frances, Private capacity

CHAIR—I welcome the Hon. Mrs Shelley Archer, member for Mining and Pastoral Region in the Western Australian Legislative Council. I think you have come all the way from Broome this morning to be with us.

Mrs Archer—Yesterday.

CHAIR—Thank you for your attendance. Would you like to add anything about the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Archer—I appear as a member of parliament for Western Australia.

CHAIR—Mrs Archer, we do not require you to give evidence under oath, but you are aware more than anybody that these are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as the proceedings of the respective houses. We have received a written submission from you. Thank you very much. It was a great submission. You have put some time into that. Do you want to present any additional submissions or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mrs Archer—I will make a short opening statement.

CHAIR—Thank you. Please proceed.

Mrs Archer—The Mining and Pastoral Region, which I represent, is an area that is approximately 2½ million square kilometres. Other than the federal seat of Kalgoorlie, it is the biggest seat in Australia. At the last state election there were 68,500 electors in that electorate. In that electorate we have 60 remote polling places, with approximately 2,700 persons enrolled. I want to emphasise that, even though it says that 2,700 electors are enrolled, that is not indicative of the number of people who actually live there and are eligible to be on the roll in those communities. In those communities, people are predominantly of Indigenous descent. You may find a number of white people who are managers of those communities. Incorporated in the Mining and Pastoral Region are the assembly seats of Kimberley, Central Kimberley-Pilbara and Murchison-Eyre. They currently have the lowest overall elector turnout in both state and federal elections, especially in the remote areas, where the number is under 50 per cent.

The three matters that primarily concern me are: the need for identification for enrolment purposes, especially in how that affects the Indigenous population; the lack of education of those who live in the remote and rural areas of WA, especially regarding their right to be on the electoral roll and their right to vote; and the way that the Electoral Commission purges the roll on a regular basis. In my travels throughout my electorate, there has been an absolute wealth of anecdotal evidence as well as hard data to indicate that the turnout rates are affected by a number of administrative and systemic factors during election time.

Some of the evidence collected indicates that elections are mostly held in the wet season in the north-west. I understand that some of you are from Queensland. If you live at the top of

Queensland, you will know what I am talking about. When the wet season hits, the remote communities are inaccessible other than by plane. Also, during the wet season a lot of the Indigenous people actually leave the communities and live in the bigger towns of Kununurra, Wyndham, Port Hedland, Broome and Derby because they do not want to be water-locked in some of the communities. When you go to the communities on election day or polling day, which can sometimes be a week before the actual election, you will find that the communities are probably only half-full because people have gone to the other areas.

Further evidence was collected that, when organising the arrival of polling booths, the Australian Electoral Commission did not take into account the cultural matters that may have been underway. There is a plethora of men's business, women's business and sorry business that occurs in those communities, and it would seem that no regard has been given to what actually happens in those communities on polling days. They go out there and, if you are not there, then tough—you just do not get to vote, even though there is quite a substantial amount of business going on and people are out in country.

There were observations by some that Indigenous electors failed to understand the questions put to them by electoral officials when attempting to vote. For example, if someone normally lives in Kalumburu and is in Kununurra on a visit, they might be asked, 'Do you live in the town of Kununurra?' and give the answer, 'No, I don't.' They then think that they have no right to vote, so they do not vote. They should be asked: 'Where do you live?' The questions that need to be put to the Indigenous people are completely different to questions put to white people.

To me, the Electoral Commission needs to provide more visits to remote and regional areas for the purposes of enrolment and education, especially in relation to the options of postal, absent and provisional voting. Indigenous people in quite a number of the remote communities are unaware of their rights in terms of postal, absent and provisional voting. We need to undertake an extensive educational program in those remote communities to ensure that those people know their rights.

In purging the rolls, the AEC removed 1,638 electors from the roll in the federal seat of Kalgoorlie in the eight weeks before the 2004 election. The anecdotal evidence is that three-quarters of those were Indigenous people. By doing that we have disenfranchised a raft of people. Some Indigenous people who live in remote areas not only would not be aware that they had been removed but would be less aware of how to re-enrol. The current legislation requires them to provide identification. If you go to the remote communities, you will find that people do not have driver's licences, they do not have passports and they do not have birth certificates, and that finding two people who can verify who they are is nearly impossible. What happens up there currently is that, if people want to get unemployment benefits, their EFTPOS card is their only form of identification, and the CEO, who is usually a white person, verifies who they are. These are the only forms of identification you will find in a lot of those remote areas. With the changes to the legislation, there is an absolute disenfranchisement of these voters.

I think there are two real challenges that need to be addressed. Those are the voting and enrolment issues for remote and regional areas. I am concentrating mostly on the voting and enrolment rights of the Indigenous population up there. The submission I provided to the committee some time ago provided some suggestions that should be taken into account regarding the challenges that face the federal government and, later on, I would expect, the state

government with regard to the changes. Those are that electoral education needs to be properly researched and financed and that education needs to be culturally sensitive and appropriate for those remote and regional areas. I think it was last year that the Northern Territory provided interpreters to all the remote polling places. I think that we need to look at providing interpreters for these remote polling places.

The electoral commissions, both state and federal, need to work collaboratively on policy planning for and delivery of any educational programs that are provided. There is no use in the state going off and doing a program and then the federal Electoral Commission coming along and doing another program. If they work collaboratively and go out into those communities they can save themselves money and do a better job. And we really need to look at the removal of the need to provide any form of identification. I am not quite sure how you are going to overcome the problem with identification for these Indigenous people in remote and regional areas who only have their EFTPOS cards.

CHAIR—Identification brings to mind some evidence that we received earlier in this inquiry in relation to Western Australia and the mandatory penalties the Western Australian government has. The claim was that people, particularly the Indigenous community, lose their driver's licences for all sorts of things and they lose their only form of identification. So they feel disempowered in relation to enrolling to vote. Do you have a comment on that? Does that factor, in your view, impact on Indigenous communities?

Mrs Archer—Yes, it does. Our laws over here on not paying fines means you lose your driver's licence. Therefore you lose your only form of identification. But out in the remote communities most people do not go for a driver's licence; they just drive. They do not feel the need to have a driver's licence. Quite often, when they are picked up in Newman or Port Hedland or Broome or Derby for speeding or drink-driving, the police find that they do not have a driver's licence at all. And that is because they have grown up in the remote communities. There is nowhere for them to get a driver's licence; nor do they understand that they actually need this driver's licence. It is not until they come to the larger towns that they understand they need it. Considering that they spend most of their time in their remote communities, they really do not feel the need to have a driver's licence at all. If I took you out to Balgo, you would probably find 70 per cent of the people out there do not have a driver's licence.

Senator BRANDIS—I want to pursue with you your remarks about the roll-cleansing that is engaged in by the AEC. Unless I am mistaken, the same principles are applied to roll-cleansing by the AEC everywhere in Australia. Are you saying that a different principle is applied in remote communities?

Mrs Archer—What we have found over here—and this is anecdotal evidence—is that, for instance, the member for Kalgoorlie sends a letter—and I have received one of the letters that was sent—to all the people in a remote community whose names are on the electoral roll. If those letters are sent back to his office, as they quite often are, with a 'Please return to sender; this person no longer lives here,' he forwards those on to the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission then goes through a process of writing to those people three times and if there is no response then they are purged from the electoral roll.

Senator BRANDIS—Well, they should be purged.

Mrs Archer—You need to understand—and so does the Electoral Commission—that there is no post office, there is no address, in those remote communities and that most of the time the Indigenous people in those remote communities do not go and collect mail. They have absolutely no interest in anything from me or you or anyone else. So that mail will sit in the community's offices forever or until the CEO crosses it out and sends the mail back to the return address. It does not necessarily mean that those people no longer live in those communities. Or it may be that those people have moved from that community to the community next door or just down the road, so they are still within that electorate; they are just being purged because they do not respond as we do to letters sent to us by the Electoral Commission. I would respond to such letters; Indigenous people do not. I think that is what we need to understand and try and overcome.

Senator BRANDIS—Are you saying that Indigenous people should be more conscientious about fulfilling their legal obligations? Or are you saying that an exception should be created for them? Or are you saying something else?

Mrs Archer—I think an exception should be made for them.

Senator BRANDIS—Why?

Mrs Archer—And I think that we should provide some educational facilities and some information, as I have said, on voting and enrolment rights and go out to those communities and explain that to them—and I do not say we should be on either side of the fence, in terms of parties. But I also think that we need to take into account that in those communities they operate in a completely different manner from the way that we do.

Senator BRANDIS—If I may say so, Ms Archer, this sort of paternalistic approach to Aborigines leaves me very unimpressed, as do the observations you seem to be making on pages 3 and 4 of your submission. Can I take you, in particular, to the second paragraph on page 4, where you say:

> It may not be possible to address some of these issues given the cultural importance of some activities to Aboriginal people. It is unlikely, for example, that voting would be given precedence over sorry business.

We have been told what that means by an earlier witness. Why is it that, in a multicultural society, the particular cultural sensitivities and practices of one group of Australians should be privileged over all others? Why, for example, should the 'sorry business' of Aboriginal people be treated differently from the cultural practices of, let us say for example, an enclosed order of monks or nuns, which also involves withdrawal from day-to-day community life? You need to explain to me what it is, in a multicultural society, that makes one particular ethnicity different from other ethnicities to the point at which the laws are relaxed in their favour.

Mrs Archer—I am not suggesting that the laws should be relaxed in any way. What I am suggesting is that, when the Electoral Commission make the arrangements to go out to those remote communities, they take into consideration that those remote communities might be involved in sorry business, women's business or men's business, and then provide a polling booth at an appropriate time. That does not happen. The polling booth is sometimes sent there a

week before election day because of the remoteness et cetera, and no consideration is given to the fact that, at that time, there might be sorry business happening.

Senator BRANDIS—But no consideration is given for anyone else. Why should it be given for Aborigines?

Mrs Archer—I am afraid that, in saying that no consideration is given to anyone else—

Senator BRANDIS—It is not.

Mrs Archer—We do not involve ourselves in sorry business, and if we actually—

Senator BRANDIS—No, but we do have different cultural practices.

Mrs Archer—Can I please finish?

Senator BRANDIS—Yes.

Mrs Archer—Thank you very much. When you go out to remote communities—and it is the Western Australian Electoral Commission, as well, that goes out there—when you or the commission are making the arrangements to go out to remote communities, the first question they should be asked is, 'We were thinking of coming on this date or this date; are they acceptable to you?' rather than ringing those communities and saying, 'We're coming out on this date,' only to go out there and find that three-quarters of the people are not there because there is some other matter that was already organised on that day. For me, it is incredibly inappropriate that you go out to a community for a voting day when some other matter is being dealt with. If you can make arrangements to go out there a week or two weeks before the actual election day, why can't you make it so that the people who want to vote can vote at a time that is appropriate for them rather than a time that is appropriate for the Electoral Commission?

Senator BRANDIS—If you are saying that we should conduct our elections at a time that is most convenient to the citizens then that is a perfectly logical proposition. It might be impractical, but it is not wanting in logic. But you seem to be saying that we should do this for Aborigines, but we do not do it for anyone else. And I am saying to you: why should we look after Aborigines in a different way than the way in which we respect the cultural practices of Muslims, Jews, Christians or people of any other definable group in our community who have cultural practices that matter to them?

Mrs Archer—Senator Brandis, we already do it by providing a polling booth a week, two weeks or sometimes three weeks before the election date, so we actually do it already for the Indigenous people in my region. We already take into consideration that they cannot get out of their communities to vote, so we already treat them differently by going up there a week, two weeks or three weeks before election day.

Senator BRANDIS—But we do prepoll voting for everyone, Mrs Archer.

Mrs Archer—And that is fine. Prepolling in Perth is open for a number of days before it is closed. In remote communities, you provide them with half a day if they are lucky, or sometimes an hour and a half, if they are very lucky.

Senator BRANDIS—I am sure you would find that in remote white communities—for example, a pastoralist on a homestead—there would be even less provision made to meet their convenience, simply because of the physical impossibility of reaching everyone in the course of an election who lives in remote Australia. But you still have not addressed my question: why do the cultural practices of Aboriginal people matter more than the cultural practices of other Australians?

Mrs Archer—I am not saying that the cultural practices of the Indigenous people are more important than your practices. I am saying that we should take those into consideration when we want Indigenous people to vote. If you do not want to take that into consideration then you are just addressing the issue of disenfranchising the entire population of the Indigenous people in the mining and pastoral region.

Senator BRANDIS—No, all I am saying is that everybody should be treated the same.

Mrs Archer—That is fine. If we are going to treat everybody the same then we will have the election on the day that it is held and we will not provide any sort of polling two, three or four weeks beforehand. We will not provide them with any remote polling facilities. We will not fly in there. We will not fly out. We will fly in there on the day of the election and treat them the same as everybody else in Australia—because that is what you are saying. And, if we do that, that means that the remote communities in the north-west, during the wet season when elections are called, will not get to vote because they cannot get out of their communities other than by plane.

Senator BRANDIS—Do you say that the Aboriginal people in remote communities should be treated differently from white people in remote communities?

Mrs Archer—I am saying that the electoral commissions should take into consideration that people may have some other business happening when we are doing our voting. If you want to go out there in week 1, week 2 or week 3, there is a window of opportunity for both electoral commissions to go out and negotiate that with those communities, instead of them sitting there and saying, 'I will be there on that day.'

Senator BRANDIS—The local pastoralist might have other business too. He might be in town visiting his bank manager—I do not know. Why does—

Mrs Archer—And the pastoralist will be able to vote in Broome because he has an understanding of how to do that. I do not think that you are getting the point.

Senator BRANDIS—That is an education issue.

Mrs Archer—The Indigenous people are not aware of how they can vote. As I have said in my submission, and as I have said here, go into Kununurra and watch them tick people off. They

ask, 'Do you live in Kununurra?' and people answer, 'No, I don't.' They are not asked: 'Do you live in this electorate? What does "this electorate" mean?'

Senator BRANDIS—You are now addressing the issue of electoral education, and I do not disagree with anything that you have said about electoral education. We heard from the previous witnesses some very impressive evidence. But it will be clear enough that I am a bit affronted by the notion, which does seem to be explicit in your submission, that there is something about Aboriginal cultural practices which ought to be privileged over the cultural practices of other Australians.

Mrs Archer—I am not saying that it should be privileged at all. What I am saying is that it should be taken into consideration. In terms of a remote community, if there is no available date then the Electoral Commission chooses a date and says: 'That's when we'll be there, sorry. You've got three weeks of sorry business or three weeks of women's business but we cannot take that into consideration. We'll be there on that day and we'll take the votes of the people who are there.'

Senator BRANDIS—As they do for everyone else.

CHAIR—We have probably had enough airing of that issue and a good robust exchange. Thank you for that, Mrs Archer and Senator Brandis. I want to ask about your evidence in relation to the confusion experienced by voters in remote communities. We have seen evidence that English may be a third or fourth or fifth language for these people. You have suggested that this problem could be alleviated by interpreters at remote polling stations. Would that be a robust process? How would the officials know that the interpreter was doing whatever the interpreter should be doing? Talk to me about that.

Mrs Archer—I looked at the way that the Northern Territory provided interpreters at the last state election. It is in its infancy, so there will be a few things that we need to iron out. The Indigenous groupings in the Mining and Pastoral area, that I am responsible for, certainly do not suggest an elder, because the elders usually have less English than some of the kids at school. But we would be looking for a leader in the community who would be able to interpret for the old people. I have no idea how we would judge what they are saying, what evidence they are providing and what statements they are making. I have no idea how we would deal with that.

In Alice Springs, some of the elders came in—and English is their third or fourth language—and the electoral manager of the polling booth spoke to the leader of that community and then that leader interpreted. The elders were given copies of the voting slips from all of the parties who were at that polling booth. They then went off to fill in their form. If they called for assistance, the manager of that polling booth and the interpreter provided them with assistance. It will be a process of ironing out any problems that come up. But it is a very good way. As I have said, they think that if you do not live in Kununurra you cannot vote. That is because they do not understand English. If they had an interpreter there, they might be told, 'If you live in Kalumburu, then you have the right to vote here.' It will cover those sorts of issues.

CHAIR—Mrs Archer, why is it that less than half of eligible young people enrol to vote in your electorate?

Mrs Archer—The main issue up there is that they—especially the Indigenous people—do not have any form of identification. You have your 15-year-olds and your 17-year-olds leaving school. They do not have driver's licences; they do not travel overseas, so they do not have passports; and they do not have birth certificates. For them it just becomes too hard.

CHAIR—The AEC in the Northern Territory explained to us in their evidence that they were not having any difficulty in identifying voters. If someone did not have a driver's licence they would have a Medicare card or people would know them in the community and certify. The evidence of the AEC in the Northern Territory to us was that they were having no difficulty in identifying voters. Are you saying that that is not the case in Western Australia?

Mrs Archer—If you actually got the AEC to go to those remote communities and sit down with them and enrol them, you would probably find that you would get 95 per cent enrolled. It is when there is no AEC out in those communities and you try and get them to enrol it is very difficult.

CHAIR—Good point. Okay. Coming back to young people other than Indigenous young people, why are they not enrolling?

Mrs Archer—They are disenfranchised—young people are not interested in politics. This is all personal stuff here, because I have quite a number of family up in the area. They are simply not interested in politics. As long as they have a job and they have sufficient money for a house and a car they really do not care about what happens in government.

CHAIR—Is that appalling?

Mrs Archer—Absolutely appalling, and I spend a lot of time with young people in my communities convincing them that they should be involved in the process.

CHAIR—Is that all levels of government, do you think?

Mrs Archer—Yes, it is. Yes, we definitely have it in local government in the communities where there is no participation at all by the young people—and state government and federal government. We do not suffer as badly as the local government, but we certainly do.

Senator MURRAY—Ms Archer, thank you for your evidence—and I am aware of your experience in the areas we are covering. On the interpreters issue, I was privileged to meet some people who run an interpreter service up north. Of course, they have been heavily used because of issues like native title, mining issues, court issues, interaction with welfare and that sort of thing. One of the big problems is the number of languages. I was told that in the two northern administrative regions—the one from Broome out and the one from Derby out—there were 15 Indigenous languages in the one area and 30 in another. So there are 45 languages in a vast area but with quite a small population. Your recommendation is a desirable one, but I doubt we could cover off all the languages. Would that be right?

Mrs Archer—You cannot cover all the languages, but there is something you can do. There is an interpreter service there. I am not quite sure whether you went to the same one in Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing. We have a number of Indigenous people who work in those interpreter

centres. They are the ones that we use when we go out into those remote communities. They can usually cover the languages in those communities. They cannot speak all of them down to a tee, but they can provide an interpreter service for us. They usually use—and you have probably seen it up there—a bit of English and a bit of their language, so it ends up being a shemozzle of English and Indigenous language.

When we need to go in and negotiate with the Indigenous people in those communities, we usually do quite well by using the services from Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek. I think it is June Oscar who runs both of those, and does a fantastic job. But, as I said, there are going to be some problems with it and it will take us a while to iron them out. One of those problems is that in Fitzroy Crossing you have five different language groups. It is the same in Halls Creek. Those interpretive centres are currently putting those languages in writing and educating people about those languages, so there are people coming in and learning them. Hopefully, in years to come we will have a number of schools up there who have these languages so that we can use more interpreters in those communities. It is a long, long process.

Senator MURRAY—But it is a matter of resource funding as well, as I understand it. Probably if this committee were to consider it a valuable area to examine, it would need a fair bit of additional funds for those services. But a good interpretive system does have consequential benefits, because it does affect the court system, the welfare system and everything else.

My next question comes back to the issue of taking regard of a particular community's needs. My impression is that whilst, for instance, the AEC in Canberra might not be sensitive to what goes on in each constituency, the local divisional office is. Whether it is the divisional office running Western Sydney, where you get huge numbers of non-English-speaking migrants and real problems of understanding our system, or remote and regional Australia, that seems to apply. I would have thought that the divisional officer running the federal electorate of Kalgoorlie, for instance, would be alert to issues surrounding sorry business, men's business, women's business, and that they would be aware of who they should contact and when they should go out with polling booths and so on. And yet your evidence seems to indicate they are not, and that is unusual in my experience. I have got quite high opinion of most divisional electorate officers.

Mrs Archer—It is not just a problem with the Australian Electoral Commission; it is also a problem with the Western Australian Electoral Commission. At times it works, and at other times it does not. It just seems to me to be a breakdown in communication between the Electoral Commission and the CEOs in those remote communities, who are predominantly white, and the elders in the community. I have found the times when the Electoral Commission has gone out there and there are other matters being dealt with, there was a breakdown in communications between those three parties.

Senator MURRAY—It seems to me that the law does not need to be adjusted; just the process does. The law is that you have to have regard to the particular needs of every community within the framework of the law. Do you think an appropriate protocol or process or some sort of mechanism—if it were developed and ticked off between the WAEC and the AEC, for instance, and the members who represent these areas—would improve the situation that you have described to us?

Mrs Archer—Absolutely, and when I talk about education, it is not just education for the Indigenous people; it is education for the electoral commissions about how they can deal with the difficult issue of going out to those remote communities during sorry business.

Senator MURRAY—At the heart of my question is that I think this matter can be resolved through administrative means, not through legislative changes. It does not seem to me to involve a lot of money either. It just means changing the process.

Mrs Archer—If some protocol could be prepared that all electoral officers followed, it would be very beneficial to those communities.

Senator HOGG—Are there any difficulties in relation to communities where they cross the border between Western Australia and Northern Territory and/or South Australia?

Mrs Archer—At the last federal election we had a number of problems with that because, when Indigenous people came into Kununurra to vote—and it was during the wet season—they left their remote communities on the Northern Territory border and came into Western Australia. They were unsure of where they lived—and this is about providing interpreters at polling places. A lot of them could not tell us what communities they lived in or what family groupings they were in. Because they did not have that information, they were unable to vote.

Senator HOGG—Were they on the electoral roll, as such?

Mrs Archer—We would be able to find their name, but next to their name was a different community to the one they were telling us they lived in, so the Electoral Commission would not allow them to vote. Of course, they had very little identification on them which said, 'This is me,' so they were unable to vote. There is a huge problem just on the border of Western Australia and the Northern Territory—I am not quite sure about South Australia—for Indigenous populations.

CHAIR—Can't they do a declaration vote?

Mrs Archer—Most of the time when Indigenous people are told, 'You can do a provisional vote'—it is a provisional vote, isn't it?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mrs Archer—they are not interested because they do not understand what a provisional vote is.

Senator HOGG—So that is part of the education process?

Mrs Archer—Yes. The education process explains to them what a provisional vote is. They have no idea what it is. With English being their third or fourth language, they are not quite sure what you are trying to tell them to do.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence today. We appreciate that and hope you get well soon.

Mrs Archer—Thank you very much.

[11.12 am]

GRAY, Mrs Jane, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome, Mrs Gray. I appreciate your being here. We understand that you appear here in a private capacity but we understand your professional role. The written submission that you have given us is outstanding—thank you for that. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Gray—I am appearing as an experienced educator in Western Australia.

CHAIR—You have probably heard me say this before, but I will say it again. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these are legal proceedings of the parliament and have the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. I alluded to the fact that we have received a submission from you. Do you want to present an additional submission or do you want to make a short opening statement?

Mrs Gray—I will just make a short statement.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Mrs Gray—I would like to make it really clear that anything I say here and anything that was in my written submission to you is my view only and not the view of the parliament of Western Australia. However, my submission is based on my experience as the manager of the Parliamentary Education Office, so there is a little bit of conflict there, if you like. It is my personal submission, but it is my experience.

CHAIR—We understand and accept that, thank you.

Mrs Gray—I expressed in my submission that I believe that young people in Western Australia, which is the only state that I can give any evidence about, are in fact very interested in civics education and electoral education. I believe, in the main, young people are very concerned about social and civic issues. It may not come out in some of the testing or the styles of testing or surveys that are conducted but, if you went into schools in Western Australia and asked the right questions, you would get good responses from students. I have a problem with the style and perhaps the mechanisms used in the surveys that have been conducted to get an accurate picture of what young people really do value and how that translates into active participation.

Mr CIOBO—Do you mean it is overrepresented or underrepresented when you say you have a problem with the style?

Mrs Gray—It is the way the surveys are constructed that I have a problem with.

Mr CIOBO—Is that leading to—

Mrs Gray—I am concerned that a lot of these surveys are looking for answers to specific questions. They are knowledge based. They do not really get a true picture of a student's ability or desire to participate in civics.

Mr CIOBO—Do you believe that civics education has an impact on that student's desire to participate?

Mrs Gray—Obviously it can. Our whole premise, our assumption, is that students require knowledge about the processes in order to be active. My point is that I believe it can work the other way—that students who have an interest in an issue will then have an interest in finding out what the political processes are in order for those issues to be addressed.

Mr CIOBO—A question that I have asked previous witnesses—and you are ideally placed to answer this more than other witnesses—is how do we go about knowing who our customer is and what drives them when it comes to civics education? You have touched on it. You say that if there are specific issues that are of interest to them they will often be a precursor or a catalyst to them wanting to participate in democracy. However, much education seems to be built around saying, 'This is how you participate in democracy and we will leave the why you should up to you.' I am just wondering, is it part of your observation that you get a better reaction and a greater level of knowledge of civics education when you hit some of those triggers, such as why someone would want to participate, and therefore you almost reverse the underlying rationale as to how you go about educating people on civics education?

Mrs Gray—Precisely. I think that education across the nation has been evolving over the last 10 to 15 years from a teacher directed style of delivery to something that is more student focused.

Mr CIOBO—Is that a revolution? The fact is that so few people seem to really have an understanding—and certainly not a sophisticated understanding—of our parliamentary system and their role in it. So is it your experience that the bulk of teachers are still using the methods, and even electoral commissions are still using the methods, that you are alluding to? Is it the case that we need that revolution to say: 'Hang on. That's not the way to go about it; this is the way to go about it'?

Mrs Gray—I think there is a missing link there. We have students who are interested and can be hooked in and engaged quite easily, but we also have to give them the mechanisms for that. A lot of times there is not always a depth of knowledge amongst the teachers who are planning, developing or delivering curriculum for students. We have a curriculum framework in Western Australia which is mandated. So it is compulsory in that sense for all students in Western Australia, whether they are in state schools, non-government schools or home schooling, to address the outcomes in the curriculum framework. The problem is that it is left up to the teachers and schools to develop the curriculum in order for those students to have an opportunity to achieve the outcomes.

All of this stuff about civics education and electoral education is represented in that framework from K to 12, but there is this missing thing, which is like a mechanism for them to translate the issues and concerns into needing the knowledge that we are concerned about and that we survey students about to see what their level is.

Mr CIOBO—Your testimony in this regard is quite contrary to that of previous witnesses, who have said to us, 'The great problem is that there is a disconnect between young people today who don't really have a desire to participate in politics.' What you are saying is quite to the contrary. You are saying that there is a desire to participate but we are not pushing those buttons.

Mrs Gray—That is my strong belief. After nearly 30 years of teaching in Western Australian schools, I believe the problem is in the approach that is taken.

Mr CIOBO—I suspect you may be correct.

Mrs Gray—Given the right opportunities, the right sorts of learning structures and a selection of the correct or most appropriate teaching and learning methods for the group, you will get students responding.

Mr CIOBO—Permit me to be a bit gratuitous, Chair, but I cannot help but I think that a lot of what we hear are people saying that the problem is the customer.

Mrs Gray—I think that is passing the buck a lot.

Mr CIOBO—I am relieved to hear you say that the problem may not be the customer; the problem is perhaps the marketing that we use to get to the customer. I thank you for that.

Senator BRANDIS—I want to follow on from where Mr Ciobo left off. I am particularly drawn to what you say at the top of page 5 of your submission. If I can summarise it without oversimplification, you seem to be saying—and I suspect you are right—that students think that parliamentary democracy is good but politics is bad. And the media sometimes convey unflattering appraisals of the political process and of its participants. I invite you to elaborate further on the extent to which civics education and education about the democratic system can be meaningful in the absence of education about politics. Further to that, do you think that it is part of the role of an educator in this field to convey to students an understanding that, notwithstanding its sometimes unattractive manifestations, politics is a good thing and a worthy activity?

Mrs Gray—So your question is—

Senator BRANDIS—I was inviting you to elaborate further on what you say on page 5 of your submission—and, as I say, I think you are right—and on the relationship between educating about the democratic system and educating students about politics and the extent to which you think educators in this field should go in educating students about and giving a favourable view to students of the activity of which politics consists.

Mrs Gray—I do not know that you can separate them.

Senator BRANDIS—That is my point. I suspect you cannot, but I think some people—

Mrs Gray—I did not mean to convey that in—

Senator BRANDIS—I am not saying that you are separating them, but some do. We seem to be in furious agreement that you cannot separate them. If you care to, I would like you to explain or elaborate on the way in which teaching kids about politics, including political parties and what politicians do and how politicians come to be chosen, is an aspect of the broader topic of civics education.

Mrs Gray—Any civics education is tailored to meet the needs and the developmental learning level of the group that you are dealing with. As I said before, we are looking at civics education from K to 12. Knowledge about specific political processes, political parties and that sort of thing I do not think is going to be terribly useful to early childhood.

Senator BRANDIS—I agree with that. Take it toward the top of the age range.

Mrs Gray—As they develop in their conceptual understanding then you can relate these things to students at a higher level. You can show them how important it is and how they have a part to play in it. I am not sure if that has quite answered your question.

Senator BRANDIS—I think that this issue you identified that people have a favourable view of the system but an unfavourable view of politics as an activity—which is really the workings of the system—does seem to be a discrepant pair of notions. I wonder if it is part of the role of civics education to make them less discrepant.

Mrs Gray—I think it definitely is. One of the problems we face, of course, is the role of the media and its influence on not just students but all of us and our perceptions of politics, civics and so on. But that in itself can be part of the overall civics and electoral education and should be drawn into it and made use of. It is all the sorts of things like getting students to critically think about it and to take a value stance. It is all about cooperative learning, learning in groups, problem solving, group decision making and all of those things.

Senator BRANDIS—To give one very practical example and I will finish on this: everybody who has come before this committee has, in one way or another, said this ought to be about encouraging people to participate in the process, whether it is just at the electoral level or being more aware of the way the process works. The social good of participation is I think almost universally what every witness we have had before us has celebrated. Do you think it is a good thing for educators to say: 'It's a good thing to join a political party. If you are interested in politics, you should join a political party and become an actual participant rather than merely an alert citizen or a law-abiding voter'?

Mrs Gray—I certainly would not say you should not—

Senator BRANDIS—Do you say you should? Do you actually think you should positively recommend involvement in this process?

Mrs Gray—It certainly is one of the activities, if you like, one of the ways that people can actively participate. I do not know that I would go as far encouraging it. It is not that long ago that teachers in schools were asked not to talk about politics, religion and contentious issues. We probably would not have people feeling terribly comfortable about actively encouraging the joining of political parties in schools.

Senator BRANDIS—I wonder why not though. It would obviously not be appropriate for a teacher to say, 'You ought to join the Liberal Party or the Labor Party or a particular political party.' As our colleague Senator Ray said scathingly about his own party yesterday, political parties are notoriously thin on the ground for new and idealistic people coming into them. Don't you think it would be a good thing if we took the notion of civics education further to encourage people on the verge of adulthood to get involved in political parties?

Mrs Gray—Sure. Could I say here that in our system in Western Australia—you may have heard of it—we have a community service program that is being launched probably at the end of this year. It is going to start with a year 10 cohort. It will be compulsory for students in year 10 to do active community service, which can include all sorts of things both in school and out of school. I think it is a good beginning for students in upper school to start getting involved in those sorts of things.

Senator BRANDIS—Very Kennedyesque.

Senator HOGG—This is not a criticism of you, but in your role in the Parliamentary Education Office wouldn't you see those schools that are predisposed to civics and not see those that are not? Let me put it this way: one of the problems that we are confronted with as a committee—if anyone wants to correct me, they can—is that, when it comes to seeing schools and involving them in our process, it is quite easy to see the students that are disposed to civics at the latter end of high school or the students at schools where there is a teacher who is very interested in civics and in teaching the basics of civics to their students. But it is very hard indeed to get a school where this is not the case to come before us so that we can get an appreciation of why civics is not important to them or why it does not play a role. Do you have that dilemma? You only see the converted, in a sense.

Mrs Gray—Yes, but we can help convert them by showing them—

Senator HOGG—How do you go about that?

Mrs Gray—We show them where it fits into the mandated curriculum framework. This is something that they need to do—

Senator HOGG—Is a mandated curriculum framework enough?

Mrs Gray—Not for everyone, no.

Senator HOGG—You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink; that is the problem, isn't it?

Mrs Gray—Exactly. We do get a fair view of what it is like in the regions when we take a regional parliament, say, out to Geraldton, as we did recently. We had 1,600 students booked to come through to view the regional parliament. That is a fair indication that there is an interest.

Senator HOGG—But that is not an everyday opportunity, and I am picking up on something that I think is in your submission about the remoteness of people from what they see as being the democratic—

Mrs Gray—Yes, there is a problem with the remote communities. Western Australia, of course, is a very big state and we have similar problems to Queensland with getting our program out.

Senator HOGG—You hit a chord with four out of five up here when you say Queensland—but that is another thing.

CHAIR—I am from regional Australia. I see all sorts of facilities and services being provided to metropolitan Australia in what we are talking about today, the PEO programs. For example, we have had evidence of the value of Australian students visiting Parliament House in Canberra and how that engages them and how the experience of visiting educational centres engages them. You can do that easily here in Perth at the centre that is here. What about students who do not live in Perth? Do you think there is discrimination against them in that they do not easily have access to the centre? Should there be a subsidy for students to come to Perth? Should there be an increased subsidy for students to go to Canberra? What is your personal view on that?

Mrs Gray—I do believe that there is a problem. We have tried to address that with what we call our 'joint outreach' civics education program, which we do jointly with the Constitutional Centre and the Western Australian Electoral Commission. We take a civics program out to the regions and we visit schools in the school environment and run a program for them. That has become very popular.

CHAIR—In organising the program, do you find resistance from teachers to allowing their students to participate in the program?

Mrs Gray—No, generally it is—

CHAIR—Welcome?

Mrs Gray—Very, yes. In fact it is so sought after that we have trouble getting enough presenters to cover the demand. We have recruited presenters who live in the region and they come to Perth and are trained in the delivery of the program. It has been very successful.

CHAIR—One of the recommendations in your evidence was:

Civics and electoral education should form a compulsory part of migrant education courses.

That is pretty topical at the moment.

Mrs Gray—Yes, but it was not when I wrote that though.

CHAIR—You must have a vision. What sorts of courses would you do? How do you see that in practice?

Mrs Gray—I notice that the TAFE colleges have English as a second language courses and they often come and visit us in Parliament House. But it is on an ad hoc basis and I think it would be very useful for all migrants to have that same opportunity.

CHAIR—At what stage in their migration would you suggest that courses should happen.

Mrs Gray—They obviously need to have some English. They do not need a high level of English but they do need to be able to understand simple English.

CHAIR—You also recommend or observe:

Civics education should be mandatory for all schools in Australia.

We have had some evidence that it works in higher education, at university, and that the University of New South Wales has a mandatory six-point subject which is basically civics education. How do you feel about that being mandatory in all universities?

Mrs Gray—Very good. It would be great.

CHAIR—You do not have any objection to that?

Mrs Gray—No.

CHAIR—In relation to the young people that you see, do you ever get a feeling about how many are enrolled to vote when they come through your centre—and we are talking about the year 12s, I guess.

Mrs Gray—No, we do not.

CHAIR—You get the younger grades, do you?

Mrs Gray—Year 12 students are 17 in Western Australia.

CHAIR—But they can enrol at 17.

Mrs Gray—We do not ask them.

CHAIR—You do not have to answer this, but the Electoral Commissioner talked about his son who was about to enrol to vote and he said, 'I have got to put the form in front of him and get him to sign it and then I go and post it.' Do you have children of that age?

Mrs Gray—My children are considerably older than that.

Senator HOGG—We did visit the community of Warburton. Does the Parliamentary Education Office have any relationship with the students at Warburton, as an example?

Mrs Gray—No, we do not.

Senator HOGG—How do you assist particularly students at a place like Warburton—given the fact that we have been there today—

Mrs Gray—What we are looking at doing—we have run into some difficulties, and I noticed that the Hon. Shelley Archer alluded to some of the problems we have in remote communities—as part of our joint outreach program is taking or developing something that we can use in remote community schools. At the moment, we are looking at developing a big book and activities around a big book—that would be for younger students. It is difficult. The cost is a factor. It is not an excuse, but it is a factor. The isolation of these places is a factor. There is the language barrier and there are cultural things that we need to take into consideration. At the moment, we are having a fair job keeping up with the demand of the closer regions—

Senator HOGG—So—not unfairly to you—the more remote a community is, whether it is an Indigenous community or another community, the more difficult it is for it to access the facilities that you offer.

Mrs Gray—Of course.

Senator HOGG—And that is not a criticism.

Mrs Gray—No. And that is recognised. As I say, it is not excusing but it is a consideration and cost is a consideration.

Senator HOGG—So funding therefore becomes a fundamental problem for that outreach that you need.

Mrs Gray—Yes.

CHAIR—Committee, we have about five minutes left.

Senator MURRAY—It is a good thing I only want to focus on one topic. The reference in the terms of reference is to migrant citizens, not migrant residents, temporary or otherwise. That is specific because migrant citizens are going to be, by law, participants in the political process through the compulsory voting process. There are special difficulties if someone does not have a good command of English, but, if someone does have a reasonable command of English, how much time do you think needs to be given for them to grasp, understand, or have a working or practical knowledge of the actual electoral framework and political framework in this country?

Mrs Gray—That is a difficult one to answer, because I think it would be an individual thing.

Senator MURRAY—You said:

Civics and electoral education should form a compulsory part of migrant education courses.

I do not know what that means, how long migrant education courses run for, how many hours of study relate to them or whether it varies.

Mrs Gray—I would imagine that there might be a component that perhaps lasted one semester.

Senator MURRAY—Let me help you as to where I am going. There is debate right now in the political community and in the community at large as to whether new citizens should be required to have certain basic understandings and abilities such as English, and there is discussion about the values that they should be prepared to sign up to. My question is: if you could not become a migrant citizen unless you had attended a course which covered a civics curriculum, what sort of onus would that put on a migrant citizen? Could you cover it off in a day seminar, an afternoon seminar or a few hours? You are an educator. You are experienced in these areas. What I am looking for is this: what sort of onus would it be to put that on somebody? Do you want to think about it and perhaps write to us?

Mrs Gray—I do, actually. I would appreciate that, because I think it needs some consideration.

Senator MURRAY—Would you mind? We can accept a supplementary submission. I would be interested to know what that means. And, of course, I am aware that some migrant citizens end up being employed in remote parts of Western Australia. Doctors come in and they end up being placed in country Western Australia, and there are the mining people and all sorts of others.

CHAIR—Mrs Gray, thank you for your evidence today. We would appreciate receiving that additional information. That will be very valuable. We wish you well in the organisation that you participate in.

Mrs Gray—Thank you very much.

[11.45 am]

PHILLIPS, Dr Harry Charles John, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome, Dr Phillips.

Dr Phillips—Thank you, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR—Thank you for joining us this afternoon and thank you for your submission. Is there anything you would like to say about the capacity in which you appear?

Dr Phillips—I am a parliamentary fellow and an adjunct professor at Edith Cowan University and Curtin University of Technology, but I am not representing any specific organisation. I also chair the Civics Education Reference Group of Western Australia, which includes members from the parliament of Western Australia, the Western Australian Electoral Commission, the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia and other interested civic education bodies. But that is an informal organisation.

CHAIR—Thank you. We do not require you to give evidence under oath but I think you have probably heard me say that these are legal proceedings of the parliament and should attract the same respect as proceedings of the respective houses themselves. We have received a written submission from you. Did you have any other additional submissions, or did you want to make a short opening statement?

Dr Phillips—I will just make a short opening statement. I suppose this submission is part of a lifelong quest, one of about 40 years. I was lucky enough in second year high school to have had a civics course. In fact, I have the text book here: Walter Murdoch's book, *The Australian Citizen*. It was a one-year course and for the rest of my life I have felt that everybody should have some introduction to the rudiments of government, the electoral system, the judicial system and our rights and responsibilities. You do not have to have comprehensive detail. But I suppose that, for the rest of my educational career and later as a lecturer and teacher, I hoped—I have always hoped—that students would get that sort of introduction. It should be mandatory, but it has been a very hard battle to make it mandatory. Everybody else has other interests. I also believe in the process of putting in submissions because, after many submissions and many representations, we successfully got the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia up, and that did not just start from nowhere.

I am very experienced in the field, though that does not mean that I get it all right. I have been on the syllabus committee for politics and political and legal studies in Western Australia since, I think, 1978. I have been on the examining panel since 1983 and have been chief examiner for about 20 years. So I am very conscious of the level of civic literacy and what the boundaries are that you can perhaps push.

CHAIR—Thank you. I saw your words about the concept of a voluntary Civics (Citizenship) Certificate. I just found myself, as I read that, thinking: 'Golly! Kids these days get a plethora of certificates; do they mean anything anymore?' What is your view on that?

Dr Phillips—It is an interesting point that you raise. I wrote this submission in the climate of Andrew Robb's preliminary discussion paper. I was not too sure where that was heading. I was not sure whether this was some national citizenship or civics test for immigrants or how it was going to relate to what was required of our own population. It seemed to me that it would be a little bit difficult if we were going to require immigrants to satisfy this test but we did not require it in our own educational system.

What I had was an idea that our Constitutional Centre could have occasional civics/citizenship courses which people could voluntarily attend and which would have some sort of recognition at the end. It was not really a major thrust in my quest for basic civic education for everybody in the community. Over the last 30 to 40 years—and we must not forget this—there has been substantial progress in the role of the parliaments and the role of the Electoral Commission. We have a Constitutional Centre in Western Australia. We had Discovering Democracy. We have the resources and we have had a very interested group of people who have worked on this endeavour.

If you look at the Western Australian education syllabus for schools, you see it is all there. The problem is that too many students slip through the system and they never get exposed to it. In fact, I have three surveys which were done over 15 years that suggest that 45 per cent—and, almost every time, the results are the same—of students or respondents in the public, when asked about what civic education or political education they had at school, say they had none. That underestimates the hidden curriculum. I think everybody has some sort of ideas about what democracy is.

You asked a question earlier about what happened with Jane's children. My two daughters went through a very good school. They had not one minute of civic education. I feel some exposure to it is needed, and that is the problem. Nobody ever—or very rarely these days—questions its merit. They did 40 years ago. In fact, it was a real battle to get politics on the high school certificate.

CHAIR—You are saying, quite correctly, that the resources that are out there have just got better and better, but fewer and fewer young people are enrolling to vote. Why the disconnection?

Dr Phillips—That is very difficult to answer. I would make it easier rather than harder, to be honest.

CHAIR—We have heard that the Western Australia Electoral Commission sends out a birthday card to all 17-year-olds. It is really easy, saying, 'Here is your application; fill it out,' and they only get 30 per cent back. How much easier can you get?

Dr Phillips—I feel that a great percentage of those students who do not enrol have had no exposure to civic education through the schools, although it is there. You have to be awakened to some extent, because it is a tremendously interesting and relevant area for everybody in life. If you can just have a short time with young people and immigrants, I do not think it is that hard to get them clicked in.

CHAIR—You are an educationalist. Do you think teachers are really equipped to give this education?

Dr Phillips—I know dozens, perhaps hundreds, of teachers. The great problem is that so few have been exposed to a sufficient background to be able to teach it. It is sort of the chicken and the egg. Very few teachers have the background. It is there in the syllabus for everybody to take, but they do not have the background so they take other areas. That is understandable.

CHAIR—Yes. They feel uncomfortable.

Dr Phillips—They feel very uncomfortable.

CHAIR—You said that consideration should be given to extending voting rights to 16-year-olds. We have had evidence that says absolutely the reverse—that the voting age should be put up to 21. The evidence says that 18-year-olds are disengaged, that they could not care less, that it does not touch their lives and that they do not want to enrol to vote. Why do you say that consideration should be given to 16-year-olds who would perhaps be less likely to know anything about the system?

Dr Phillips—My ideal model is that they get exposed to this as 15-year-olds at school. It would be my model that they get some mandatory civics. It would not be for weeks but a six-week course with the rudiments of civics. They would more or less do the enrolment process there, and then they would be eligible to vote. That came from the Power commission, which produced a massive report in the United Kingdom. I have noticed that the Queensland—

Senator BRANDIS—Which commission was that?

Dr Phillips—It was the Power report. It was a massive report into youth public engagement with the political system.

Senator BRANDIS—How long ago was that?

Dr Phillips—Three months ago.

Senator BRANDIS—Is that in your bibliography?

Dr Phillips—Is it in the bibliography? No, I do not think it is.

Senator BRANDIS—Can you give us a reference to that, please?

Dr Phillips—I can, yes. I noticed that the Queensland inquiry that reported in August 2006 did not advocate lowering it to 16. And I would not like to get side-tracked on the issue of advocating for 16-year-olds and get caught up in that debate. First things first. It would be something I would favour but I could see resistance and it would not be something I would be firm about.

CHAIR—All right. I accept that.

Senator MURRAY—It seems to me that one of the easiest ways to get young people enrolled on the register is to do it when they are at school. Do you think it is possible to do it as part of the school leaving process? There are school leaving ceremonies and there are certificates people need to complete. In answering that question perhaps you would give some thought as to whether it needs to be trialled first to see what its efficacy is, before it is introduced generally?

Dr Phillips—On the face of it, I would strongly support that as an idea. But, like all these good ideas, it would have to be trialled. The teachers have to know a little and the officials who are coming and doing this need to be well prepared. They need to be interesting in themselves. It should not be something that is done as the last thing before they leave school at 3 o'clock when they are gone at 4 o'clock. I think it has to be carefully planned, but I would very strongly favour it as a step to getting young people engaged.

Senator MURRAY—If it were to be trialled, does that need to be a direction from a minister or do you think it is possible to find a volunteer principal in a school somewhere who would trial it?

Dr Phillips—I suppose the way I would do it—it is nice to see these people who are prominent in public life here—would be to seek some volunteer schools and volunteer principals in various states and in metropolitan and country areas—as well as north and west, as the Hon. Shelley Archer has mentioned—and then see whether it could be implemented on a compulsory basis. Once you start mentioning—and I know this from many years of advocating—mandatory or compulsory things, people build up a resistance in their own way to the thought that they are being told to do something by government, even though it is a very worthy exercise.

Senator MURRAY—On the issue of 16-year-olds voting, I have always thought that the voting age—like many things—is arbitrary. I have met 14- or 15-year-olds who are wonderfully politically engaged and have a great interest in civic life, and people who are 60, who are just abysmal. So it varies. I have always thought that it would be best tied into a legal concept of adulthood—and that that would be the easiest way to progress this matter. After listening to your earlier response and reading your recommendation, I assume if ever 16-year-old voting were to be introduced you would not automatically say that it should be compulsory.

Dr Phillips—I have thought about that a lot because it would be incongruous if we did not have the same law for the remainder of Australia. One way of doing it would be to make it voluntary for two years but then I think people would say, 'It's voluntary for the 16-year-olds; why isn't it voluntary for the rest?' I have written a thesis on compulsory voting and I know there are some objections to it. I just hope that it is something that is maintained in Australia, in that it reflects the will of the total people.

The population has to be educated about it. And they accept it. About 70 per cent always say that it is a good idea. But you could not introduce it in Canada, which I study a lot because I lived there. You could not put in a compulsory aspect in the modern world. That is why I am a little bit reluctant to push it too hard, because you would have to have the same rule for 16-year olds as 18-year olds.

Senator MURRAY—I know you to be a person of integrity. It is interesting, given that you have been steeped in politics for four decades, that you have kept that reputation. But you are

also a person of great knowledge of and awareness about WA. I was surprised that your submission did not include something on migrant citizens. My instinct, and I do not have the figures, is that probably about 30 per cent of enrolled voters in WA are migrant citizens—the percentage might even be higher. In a professional sense, have you ever had a look at the differences between migrant citizens and Australian born citizens in their understanding of and participation in the political process? Do you think that there needs to be special attention given to this area, along the lines that we were discussing earlier and along the lines that have been raised in the community at large in debate?

Dr Phillips—I have never really specifically studied that sort of variable—perhaps I should. I would like to see every immigrant who comes to Australia subject to what I would call an induction process about living in a new country. I would incorporate in that the Constitution, the electoral system et cetera. I lived in Canada for a little while, and it was wonderful. But it is incredibly hard when you first go there. You do not know where to start. I would not impose compulsory tests on these people—I am a little bit uneasy about that. But there should be some program which they may be required to attend after six months of residence or something like that. That could be conducted at, say, our Constitutional Centre. There may be some moneys there. That would help integrate those people, who have to go through a lot of trauma in coming to a new country. It is very exciting. It is a bit like MPs. You can have a fantastic induction program for them when they first come. Once they have been there for years, it is more difficult. When they first land, immigrants would be very responsive and receptive to some induction to their new country, including the civic component.

Senator BRANDIS—I want to explore with you the topic I was talking to Mrs Gray about, and that is the relationship between civics education and education about politics. Would you generally agree—and this is only a generalisation—that, whereas people have a favourable impression of Australian democracy and the democratic process, young people generally have an unfavourable impression of and a lack of interest in politics?

Dr Phillips—It is interesting. First of all, I have done surveys. If you ask people whether political civic education is beneficial, you will get 96 per cent saying yes. No-one questions the value of it. If you ask people whether they are broadly interested in politics, you get some surprisingly good results.

Senator BRANDIS—That is encouraging.

Dr Phillips—You never get an insufficient base of interest from young people at the start. Where you run into trouble—

Senator BRANDIS—By the way, some witnesses today have taken a different position in their submissions. You think that they are wrong. That is interesting.

Dr Phillips—I think that they are wrong—I really do.

Senator BRANDIS—I hope that you are right.

Dr Phillips—Since Aristotle, people have spoken about children not being interested in politics. It is a matter of capturing them and indicating to them the relevance of the system. It is

a little bit cool and a little bit of an anti-authority thing to say, 'I'm not interested.' If you tap beneath the surface, that is not a problem.

Senator BRANDIS—That is very interesting.

Dr Phillips—But you cannot go and ask for a few facts, which is why I worry about these national tests. The *West Australian* commissioned a survey, and they found that only 17 per cent of the 'i-generation' could identify Paul Omodei as the opposition leader. This is the problem. Young people are very busy; they have other interests. If you just prompt them about something that has happened in the last month or six weeks, they do not necessarily come with the answers, and then people say, 'They're ignorant; they're not interested.' That is too much of a jump, and I would not do it myself.

Senator BRANDIS—I would go further and say that politics is not only a good and worthwhile thing but something towards which young people should be encouraged. The higher the level of participation in the political system, particularly by idealistic young people, the better our democracy is going to be. Would you go so far as to say civics education should teach people—I am talking about people in upper secondary school—about the political parties? Or even about the processes of the political parties?

Dr Phillips—I think that is the next step, and I would very much support it to the extent that it can be squeezed in. The answer is a definite yes.

CHAIR—Have you done any research or seen any research on the impact of young people's attitudes to democracy and the political process that result from their perception of what is reported in the media? Do the media turn them off the democratic process, the political process?

Dr Phillips—I have commissioned researches through research companies for youth—I have done that several times—and I have always read the national and international literature. Certainly their major medium of finding out about the political process is the media. A lot of them are not exposed to it; they go through school and they do not realise they are having any civic education, so they are very dependent on the media. I do not find, in the research, that they make any criticisms. They are not adverse to the media; they just accept it as it is.

CHAIR—You have not seen any research that says that all of these negative stories that appear in the media—what we call beat-ups, and they are clearly beat-ups—turn young people off the political process?

Dr Phillips—There is concern that a lot of youth, as they are growing up, develop negativity towards the political system. It is not through a lack of interest. I think they convey examples through the research that has appeared in the media. I am not saying it does not have an impact, it certainly does, but one has to be realistic. One is not going to be able to turn around and ask the media to have more civic education and present politics more fairly and in a better way. They go for headlines a lot of the time, and youth are going to absorb it as such. Looking at newspapers over the past century, it has been the case. There are not that many quality newspapers, at least from a headline point of view.

CHAIR—It is nothing to do with this inquiry, but why does the community accept the kind of reporting that we get, particularly in newspapers? It is not so much on television or radio, but in newspapers. Why do we accept this? Why are newspapers going more and more in the direction of tabloid sensationalism? You do not have to answer that because it is not to do with this inquiry.

Dr Phillips—It is a great worry. As a professional educator it is very hard to fight against. If you start fighting against it, you are setting up problems for yourself that you cannot solve. The other day I asked the *West Australian* whether they would run a civics article for me with your committee coming over and they said, 'Fine.' I just ran with it and they did not change a word. There is a lot of good material in a lot of newspapers, but the amount of football that appears in the front and back pages of newspapers is staggering—and I am a football person.

Senator BRANDIS—Particularly at the moment here!

Dr Phillips—There is a 20-page lift-out tomorrow for the Eagles and the Dockers. I just think that is ridiculous.

Senator MURRAY—You mean it should be longer!

Dr Phillips—It is too long. Yet Hackett, who was a newspaper proprietor in the west, used to argue in parliament that the *West Australian* should do more about educating our population in a political sense. But I suspect you would not win enough of a market share.

Senator HOGG—They will not sell advertising space.

Senator BRANDIS—They might if they reprinted more of your speeches, Senator Hogg!

Senator HOGG—Thank you very much, Senator Brandis; it was very nice of you to say that.

CHAIR—Dr Phillips, I am sorry to introduce that into the discussion. We are all interested in the points you raise.

Dr Phillips—I think you have to be a bit careful: a lot of young people do not have time to read newspapers. They take the run through television clips and a little bit through radio.

CHAIR—We all believe—I think we all believe—that new media is the way that young people are going, with the plethora of information that is available on the internet. Do people have time to look at that too? Is that an overreaction? Is it wrong to have that perception?

Dr Phillips—The internet is a marvellous medium—and remember that the parliament itself, the education section, has a virtual tour. We get a lot of hits on that website. I think the Electoral Commission has to have the same system, and parliament does too.

CHAIR—But do you think getting a lot of hits translates into people actually using it for the purpose that it is there? Or are they just opening up the page, saying, 'Oh, yes,' and closing it down again?

Dr Phillips—I think in many cases it helps. It is a great help for some people—perhaps a minority. I am not sure whether in the long run people will use the internet as much as we expect, but all these opportunities need to be available. This is what I have said in the last 30 years—there is a lot more there than there used to be.

CHAIR—So what you are saying—and we have had evidence about this—is that we are information rich and knowledge poor. Is that right?

Dr Phillips—We are opportunity poor in just being introduced to the great importance and significance of our electoral system and having some sort of ongoing interest in the civic political process.

CHAIR—We are going to run out of time, but I would like you to relate to the committee what you know about young people's politics of self-interest, which seems to drive their lack of engagement in the electoral process. Do you agree with that?

Dr Phillips—I noticed that with the 'i-generation' survey, which the *West Australian* reported on, a couple of commentators were asked to speak and they spoke about the self-interest of young people. I must say, from the research that I have done in the past and readings I have done, I really would not want to present a case that younger people of today are any more self-interested than they used to be. I would have a fairly positive view of the calibre of young people. To label them as self-interested is a bit unfair, I think. I really do not have any data to disagree with you, but my general inclination is not to subscribe to that thesis.

CHAIR—For your own information, a group put a very strong case to the committee that young people's mating habits were militating against their involvement in the electoral process. Senator Brandis took that up, and we will not go there any further, I do not think! Are there any more questions?

Senator BRANDIS—I would just like to congratulate you on your evidence, Dr Phillips. I like optimistic people.

CHAIR—Yes, fantastic, and thank you for your great support for civics education in Australia today.

Dr Phillips—Thank you.

CHAIR—That is terrific to see. Dr Phillips, could you just remember to give us that reference for the Power report, please.

Dr Phillips—Yes, certainly.

CHAIR—We would appreciate that. We will send you a copy of the *Hansard*, which will also remind you.

Senator MURRAY—Through the chair, could I make a request—because you will have gathered that I have a high opinion of Dr Phillips and what he does. Dr Phillips, if you have further thoughts on the migrant issue—because migrants are a very large slab of our voting

population in Western Australia—which could be of assistance to the committee, if you would be willing to put in a supplementary submission, that would be very good.

Dr Phillips—Thank you, Senator Murray. Yes, I will do so.

CHAIR—Thanks, Dr Phillips.

Proceedings suspended from 12.15 pm to 1.16 pm

GRIFFITHS, Mr Ellis John, Acting Executive Director, Office of Multicultural Interests, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia

HARVEY, Mr Ben, Manager, Policy, Office of Multicultural Interests, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Western Australian Office of Multicultural Interests to today's hearing. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but I ask you to remember that these are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the houses of parliament. We have received a written submission from you. Do you wish to present an additional submission or would you like to make a short opening statement to the committee?

Mr Griffiths—I would like to make a short opening statement.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Mr Griffiths—I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear. This is a very important task and I hope your deliberations go well.

In addition to the submission from the Office of Multicultural Interests, I have been asked to mention the submission that came in under the Premier's signature and, in particular, the reference to the proposed electoral amendments. We view those with some concern. If they are enacted, I think it will really raise the need for more and more information to be made available, particularly to new citizens and young people enrolling for the first time. We would risk losing many people to the electoral roll if the kind of proof of identity requirements that are being envisaged are made mandatory, and there are also the timing issues. I would like to reinforce the Premier's submission on those points.

In relation to our own submission, we felt that there was a need to alert rather than alarm, to use a fairly common concept. We are mindful of the fact that migration levels are at record levels. The nature of those entrants is now much more varied. They come from a much bigger variety of sources. We are concerned that the need to learn English and to engage with Australian society is critical. We have a fantastic political culture in the sense that we have enjoyed no violence and a peaceful, transitional, orderly democratic process which has been pluralistic and which has accommodated a range of views and a range of people who have migrated to this country. I think we have to maintain the effort.

It is instructive that, in relation to the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs publication to welcome new arrivals to Western Australia, there is a similar document available for each jurisdiction. They just change the specifics in terms of names and addresses and the like. The words 'voting' and 'electoral' do not appear. This publication is given to new arrivals. I do not think that registering to vote does rank with the first seven things that they recommend that new arrivals do—that is, apply for a tax file number, register with Medicare, open a bank account, register with Centrelink, contact the health undertaking service, register for English classes, enrol your children at school and get a driver's licence. But I would

hope that it would be somewhere in the top 20, because I think that, in gaining an understanding of the way we provide information to new arrivals, it is just as critical to tell them how they can participate in our political culture as it is to tell them how to participate in our economy or in our society generally. It is a vital part of that, in my view.

So, in the 'alert' rather than the 'alarm' sense, I think we can do better as a nation to ensure that people who arrive here are provided with timely information in such a way that they can understand it. The Australian Electoral Commission provides information in about 19 languages, I think, but those languages are changing all the time. I would even begin to wonder now about whether some of the ones they do provide are necessary, as opposed to some new and emerging ones. Languages relating to Africa in particular seem to be underrepresented.

So that is the spirit we come in, hopefully to help, to consider. There is not good research about the uptake of citizenship or even of participation or even about how people participate and who they vote for, et cetera. It is a very underresearched area. That is not the issue anyway. It is about empowering people to understand, as people who live in this country, that this country needs them to take part in the political process in order for the country to continue to work as it is working.

CHAIR—Mr Griffiths, thank you. That is very valuable, particularly what you said about that document. Can you just tell me the name of the document?

Mr Griffiths—This is *Welcome to Western Australia*, in this instance. It is an English-language version put out by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. It is a document given to all new arrivals.

CHAIR—And it is really a derivative of what is given across Australia?

Mr Griffiths—Absolutely. The only variations would be local addresses for the relevant services.

CHAIR—And voting does not appear at all?

Mr Griffiths—It does not get a mention. The word 'enrol' appears very often, but that is 'enrol for Medicare' or 'enrol your children in school,' not 'enrol to vote'.

Senator HOGG—You use the terminology 'enrol for this, that and something else.' It has raised in my mind the thought of the smart card—and whether or not it will come to fruition is still to be fully seen—that the government are contemplating for many social security aspects. Would it be simple from the electoral roll point of view if, when people first presented for that, it took them automatically onto the roll?

Mr Griffiths—I think there is a great deal of discussion yet to occur about that card.

Senator HOGG—I accept that. I am just asking a purely hypothetical question, given that not only these people but a lot of people are confronted with form after form and, at the end of the day, sometimes they really do not know what they have enrolled for.

Mr Griffiths—I think I would have two views. One is that the question of engagement arises. If you do not physically and actively choose to do something and follow it through, you are not necessarily aware that you have done it if it is done automatically, and therefore you might not even follow through in terms of behaviour or understand what your obligations are once you are enrolled. So I would not be sure.

Senator HOGG—That is fine.

CHAIR—In part of your opening statement, you referred to a letter under the signature of the Premier about the concern about the new electoral amendments and proof of identity. Thinking about our new arrivals or our migrants who become eligible to vote—and not thinking about other people in the community—do you think they would have any difficulty in proof of identity?

Mr Griffiths—We have suggested that they might, especially people in the humanitarian class of refugees, of which there were something like 13,000 last year nationwide, so you add that up every year—

CHAIR—But they would have a Medicare card, social security and Centrelink stuff.

Mr Griffiths—But not necessarily a birth certificate.

CHAIR—No, but they do not need that.

Mr Griffiths—They would probably have a passport. I am sure it would be like the bank system. They would probably—

CHAIR—Our problem—'our' meaning the federal government—is that in Queensland we had Giddy Goanna on the electoral roll, because you do not need to prove who you are and you can just get on the electoral roll no matter who you are. Obviously that cannot continue. I take your point about concerns. As Senator Hogg said, I am sure the government will take into account those concerns and make it possible for people to satisfy the requirements. I am very interested in the emerging ethnic groups that you refer to in your submission. You talked about communities such as people from Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Kenya, the Congo, Tanzania, Burundi, Afghanistan and so on. Are you getting those people here in Western Australia?

Mr Griffiths—We are actually getting a higher per capita proportional share. We are roughly 10 per cent of the Australian population. The last figures I have—I am not sure which year they are from—show that we got 13 per cent. That is fine with us, with the high skills demand and the general demands we have in this state—as you would understand, coming from Queensland. I can give you the WA 2005-06 migration stream. There were 14,982, including 4,800 from the UK, 748 from South Africa, 725 from Singapore, and 559 from China. India was high on the list and then there were Sudan, Zimbabwe and others—but 'others' is a fair proportion. Fifty-nine per cent of those were skilled, 30 per cent were family and 9.7 per cent of those were humanitarian entrants.

CHAIR—You said that there were perhaps some languages that could be dispensed with. Can you give me an example?

Mr Griffiths—On the public record, that would be controversial.

CHAIR—We could take evidence in camera.

Mr Griffiths—Senator, I was just joking.

CHAIR—You have just promoted me. I am not a senator; I am a—

Senator HOGG—That is one of the greatest honours you could ever bestow upon him—and, if you do it again, I will applaud even louder.

CHAIR—I am a member of the chamber where we actually form the government. What would you like to do in relation to answering the question?

Mr Griffiths—I will give you an example. The interpreter service list available from the Australian Electoral Commission has, for example, Russian as one of the 19 or so languages listed. I do not think we are getting that many people from Russia. There are also a number of more traditional ones on the list. If the drive is to get people onto the electoral roll in the first instance, it has to occur in the first few years of their arrival.

CHAIR—Correct.

Mr Griffiths—Polish and Italian are other examples. I am not sure why we still need to provide that. Maybe we need to refocus. We are not getting many migrants from Italy now and have not for many years.

CHAIR—That is a common-sense comment.

Senator HOGG—Are these people you are getting in from places like the Congo, Tanzania, Burundi, Afghanistan and so on tending to settle in Perth or near metropolitan Perth or, because of skills shortages in some of the areas like mining and so on, are they going out into those communities? My question really then becomes: how accessible are they once they are outside of the Perth and near Perth metropolitan area?

Mr Griffiths—I think the majority of humanitarian refugees would be settling in the Perth greater metropolitan area. There are three major areas where there seems to be a glomeration, if you like. That is partly to do with housing stock availability, both in the private rental market and in our housing department. I do not know that many would, in the first few years of their being here, move to regional areas because, very generally, they come unskilled, often illiterate in their own language, let alone in ours, with often very little experience of any kind of democratic process. As refugees, they come from war torn or despotic sorts of environments.

Senator HOGG—So, therefore, being pretty much focused—if I can say so—in the Perth area, do you work with the communities directly themselves to try and engender some form of civics education? And do you do that in conjunction with, say, the Electoral Commission or the education department? Just how do you do it?

Mr Griffiths—I do not think we do it as well as we should. As I said—

Senator HOGG—Is it a matter of funding?

Mr Griffiths—There is a submission about our own electoral process; it is quite a brief comment. Has our Electoral Commissioner appeared?

Senator HOGG—Yes.

Mr Griffiths—I think he says in his submission that it is a matter of resources. The state government generally has obviously got a whole schools based civics, politics and legal studies type of approach. And that has been very well supplemented for about 10 years through the activities of the Constitutional Centre, which was also mentioned in the submission under the Premier's signature.

Senator HOGG—That will get the children of the migrants but it will not get the adults. How do you target them?

Mr Griffiths—I think we need to go more into their communities and into their ethnic associations. I do not have an argument with the first six things that the department of immigration and the Office of Multicultural Interests recommends that a newly arrived person does. I do not have an argument with that. I am just saying that it is a pity that it stops at six. I do recognise that getting established, finding accommodation, employment or social security, health services et cetera, are critical. But I would just like to see something somewhere in the radar that says that at some point we should also be encouraging them, when they are ready, to look to participation.

I have a bit of a theory that some of that awareness might begin through the very grassroots processes that they tend to engage in in setting up their own self-help processes. And I think that is almost an introduction to replacing the village-type social structures that they might have come from. A lot of the groups are forming quite strong women's groups, youth groups and whole community groups. We are looking to fund some support to governance at that level because we feel that that might be a bridge to an understanding of self-organisation and self-management. If we do that around those activities that those associations tend to be concerned with then through that we could say, 'This is local government, this is state government and this is the federal government, and you have an opportunity to—'

Senator HOGG—But, for their understanding, the concept of the three tiers of government that we have would be daunting in its own right because, as you have said, in many of their countries they have just had one level of government and it has been despotic. Therefore the need for some form of civics education must be fairly paramount in terms of giving these people a reasonable opportunity to assimilate.

Mr Griffiths—I know that the partnership between the Western Australian parliament, the Western Australian Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia has been very beneficial. Maybe there is an opportunity for the Australian Electoral Commission to become involved in that as well.

Senator HOGG—Is there a missing link there? Do these people just get missed out, in the sense that the focus is on young children while they are at school? That is fairly obvious. Might

these people—not an overly large number of people—be a group which, for some reason, just slips through? Or is that where your office comes into play? That is what I am trying to work out.

Mr Griffiths—Our office has a role to play but not alone. We have a way into a lot of those communities, and access is often an issue—who is able to talk to whom about what. We could certainly help to provide that conduit. To specifically take on the role is probably beyond our means at this time.

CHAIR—Mr Harvey, you are a policy officer. Here is a proposed policy; I will ask you what you think. If migrants were briefed about citizenship rights and responsibilities at the time a migration visa were granted, what would your advice be?

Mr Harvey—I think it depends on what category of migrants you are referring to. The migrants that our office primarily deals with or develops policies for are often humanitarian migrants, humanitarian entrants. At that stage of proceedings, given where they are coming from, their background, what they are trying to do and where they are trying to go, that probably would not be high on their radar.

CHAIR—Is your answer yes, depending on the type of visa that is issued?

Mr Harvey—I think you would have to take a 'horses for courses' approach.

CHAIR—You have passed the easy test, now comes the hard test. This is somewhat controversial at the moment. We have received evidence suggesting that any compulsory test that might be introduced in order to qualify for Australian citizenship—you have seen the debate in the media—would provide a further important opportunity for civics education for the migrant community in the form of adult education to prepare people for this test. Would you agree with that? Would you have any other advice?

Mr Griffiths—Perhaps I could answer that, on the grounds that I actually read the discussion paper. I think that is a discussion that is still to be had. I do not think we have formed a very strong view, having read the discussion paper only two or three days ago. I think any such initiative which does what you say—engages the people and provides an opportunity to impart information—may well be viewed as a very good thing. What I think is not clear is if certain sorts of activities may prove to be an impediment and frighten people off. I think that is the part of the debate that really just has not emerged yet, and that will need very careful consideration. It may have the opposite effect. We may have fewer slightly better-informed citizens and a lot more people not bothering.

CHAIR—That is wise counsel. The Multicultural Council of Tasmania, which is not a government body, submitted to the committee at our hearings in Hobart that there is a danger of new citizens being given too much information too early. Do you agree with that?

Mr Griffiths—Absolutely. Again, as Mr Harvey said, it depends on the category of visas that they come in under. Some people arrive in a highly traumatised state. They may well have come from a refugee camp following torture or any number of problems.

CHAIR—Have you ever attended a citizenship ceremony?

Mr Griffiths—Yes. I took out citizenship on the very first day I was able to, the day I turned 21.

CHAIR—Fantastic. Do you have a view about the essential points that ought to happen at a citizenship ceremony in relation to civics and electoral education? Currently all that happens is that everybody is presented with an enrolment form and that is all you get. You do not get any information at all. Should there be additional material at a citizenship ceremony?

Mr Griffiths—Or before then.

CHAIR—Or before?

Mr Griffiths—If it is an informed choice to become a citizen, presumably you need information on which to make that choice. As I said, if it is to be informed, it should have been made before arriving.

CHAIR—Should civics education be introduced to humanitarian migrants and, in particular, those coming from markedly different political regimes?

Mr Griffiths—The difficulty with that question is that we are already having the very same debate about the teaching of English. A lot of people are asking who can afford to pay for this, even when it is for 500 hours, which is about 13 weeks, when it is well known that some need many more hours than that to achieve any kind of proficiency. So if you want to load other things onto them, when do they do it, who pays for them, does it keep them out of the labour market et cetera? Some of those things have to be weighed up. I would have thought there should be some basic information at some point. We have intensive settlement services for refugee entrants, for example, for six months. It does not stop then, but it becomes less intensive. I would have thought that towards the end of that sort of period when, hopefully, people have accessed the health, counselling and other sorts of primary care—the traumatic end of the spectrum—maybe they ought to be given some basic information and a class on citizenship.

CHAIR—Back to new citizens, ceremonies and whatever: we had evidence from the Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly that they invite new citizens to the assembly for a presentation and a tour. Every new citizen is invited to the assembly for morning tea or afternoon tea and they are given a tour and a presentation. Are you aware of anything like that in Western Australia?

Mr Griffiths—It tends to happen more at the local government level, and the numbers involved would probably suggest that it would have to stay on a dispersed model. Bringing them all to the Western Australian parliament, given the sorts of numbers that we are getting—13,000, maybe up to 14,000—would be a bit hard to contemplate.

CHAIR—Do you play any role at all in citizenship ceremonies? If you don't, do you think you should?

Mr Griffiths—No and no.

CHAIR—That was straightforward! Would you like to elaborate—why the second no?

Mr Griffiths—We are essentially a small policy office with a brief to keep an eye on issues affecting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The government has adopted a policy of what it calls substantive equality, which says that all citizens not only should be treated equally but if they need to be treated differently in order to achieve that equality then we need to provide services. So we have a brief to monitor the public sector in its delivery to this particular part of the population. There are other policy offices which look after the interests of other parts of the population. The view here is that mainstream services need to do their job, so that role of civics education really is, as I said, the role of Education and Training and then of the Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Centre.

Mr CIOBO—I am sorry I missed your opening statement, Mr Griffiths, in the first couple of minutes of your testimony. I am interested in a couple of issues you touch on in your submission. With respect to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and the need to educate them—and I am mindful of what you said about the different points of time depending on visa class, background et cetera—do you believe that that education needs to come from someone within those communities or is it something that, for example, the AEC or, in the case of Western Australia, the WA Electoral Commission could do? Secondly, can you tell me what level of collaboration there may be between your office in Premier and Cabinet and the WA Electoral Commission with respect to apprising them of specific multicultural needs and perhaps the best way to go about any education program that may exist presently?

Mr Griffiths—Mr Harvey has just a slightly longer experience than I have and, because of a particular other position he was in, may have a special insight into this.

Mr Harvey—In terms of the provision of the information, our general view—to pick up what Mr Griffiths said earlier—is that we think the Electoral Commission should play the primary role. We can assist in providing contacts into communities and suggestions. It is often a case of knowing who to talk to, but the role should be of the Electoral Commission itself, not the communities. We do not, for example, expect a community to provide health services to its members. In the same way, we would expect the mainstream agencies to provide those services and just to utilise leaders within the communities in doing so. We have contacts—

Mr CIOBO—For credibility?

Mr Harvey—Or just to assist, often in making sure that the people you are targeting turn up to things, that you invite them at the right time—for example, you would not want to do it now to the Muslim community, because they are just about to hit Ramadan—and just being aware of those kinds of considerations and the kinds of things that might appeal to them. Utilise the leaders within the communities for those purposes, but we would still expect the Electoral Commission to provide that. Our role would similarly be assisting in putting people in contact with communities and maybe suggesting particular things to look out for, but it would not be—

Mr CIOBO—So this currently does not happen?

Mr Harvey—No, I am not aware of any role that we have—

Mr CIOBO—So have you initiated contact with, for example, the WA Electoral Commission, or have they initiated contact with you, with a view to incorporating some knowledge that would better tailor their information seminars to their audience?

Mr Harvey—We certainly could look at that. We have not done so yet.

Mr CIOBO—But, if it is not happening currently, are you aware of it happening anywhere else?

Mr Harvey—I am not aware of it personally, but it is not something that I have looked at closely.

Mr CIOBO—Do you have any observations about work that the AEC or the WA Electoral Commission do with respect to multicultural communities?

Mr Griffiths—Our Electoral Commission did put in a submission a comment about the adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens:

> The Commission presents to TAFE citizenship groups, comprising migrant citizens, on a regular basis, but at this point in time does not have the resources to further extend the initiative to ethnic community groups in Western Australia. So, for this reason, adequacy could be considered low because these groups are not targeted.

They are saying that in relation to your terms of reference. I was not aware of this submission before it came in, and I only took it from your website last week. I have made a note to follow up, to that effect. I think we could assist them to target community groups. The community associations will gather members for a variety of purposes. I am sure that that is something we could look at.

Mr CIOBO—I apologise if this question has already been asked. Mindful of the comments that you made earlier on, I am interested in your thoughts on a citizenship test that comes after, for example, a period of permanent residency or something like that and in your general thoughts about demonstrating knowledge and creating a hurdle, if you will, that provides the motivation necessary for someone from the migrant community to get across these issues. Do you think that would be beneficial or not beneficial?

Mr Griffiths—We did touch on it very briefly.

Mr CIOBO—Yes, I know you briefly mentioned it; that is why I am interested to—

Mr Griffiths—I think that to genuinely engage people in our political culture, which I was very positive about earlier, it has to mean something. There has to be some effort. A lot of us who grow up here are given that opportunity in school or just by participating in community life or reading the newspaper, watching the media and the like. If you do not grow up here, I think there needs to be some kind of program that helps you to engage for it to be meaningful.

The thing that I am not as clear on as I could or should be is the role of ethnic media in this. Not only do people need to know how the system works, but to effectively engage in the system they have to have information about what the great debates are, what the issues are, what you

have to make up your mind about. Maybe the committee could seek some sort of input from somebody who might be more in tune with the role the ethnic media plays in informing people living in Australia. There are many of them. We have something like four Chinese papers in this city, with quite high circulations—40,000 or 50,000 or the like.

So my general feeling is to say we need some incentive. I guess the incentive if you are a citizen is that you can always come back; you cannot be thrown out. That is the major incentive. But there is also the incentive that you can play a full part in the rest of the political process. What kind of test is needed, I am not really clear about at the moment because I feel a lot of people, especially older migrants, would baulk at high English-language requirements, especially if they are in family reunion type visa classes and the like. It is complex, but we will be considering the discussion paper and may well even put in a submission.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, we have run over time, so we are going to wrap up now. Thank you very much for your attendance here today. We will send you a copy of the *Hansard* transcript, which you will have the opportunity to review. Is it the wish of the committee that the documents entitled (a) 'Remote Polling February 2005' and (b) 'Educational Package', presented by (a) Brian Moore and (b) the Western Australian Electoral Commission, be taken as evidence and included in the committee's records as exhibit Nos 8 and 9? There being no objection, it is so ordered.

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 1.53 pm