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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Friday, 29 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: Senator Mason and Mr Ciobo, Mr Danby and Mr Lindsay

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

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Committee met at 9.30 am

HAWKE, Ms Sarah, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

PARKER, Ms Julie, Deputy Principal, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Chris, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

David, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Eric, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

George, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

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Shane, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Steven, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Talal, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Taneka, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

Wilson, Student, Sir Joseph Banks High School

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—Good morning, everybody. My name is Peter Lindsay and I am the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. At the moment our committee is undertaking a public inquiry across the Commonwealth of Australia regarding people's knowledge—particularly young people's knowledge—of electoral matters and civics.

Thank you very much for allowing us to attend at your school today. It is terrific that this school will be noted in the *Hansard* of the Parliament of Australia. With me this morning are Michael Danby, the committee's deputy chair, who represents the electorate of Melbourne Ports; Senator Brett Mason from Queensland; and Steve Ciobo, who represents the electorate of Moncrieff, which is on the Gold Coast. I am from Townsville in North Queensland. Townsville is Australia's largest tropical city and the home of Australia's largest Army base, home of the ready deployment force.

It is really important that these discussions are informal. We will be asking questions of you and we ask that you all respond. Do not be afraid to comment and do not be afraid of what the person sitting next to you might think when you do so. Just give us your response. We need your feedback. Do not tell us what you think we want to hear; tell us what you think, as that is what is important. The members of this committee are ordinary people, just like you. However, we are on a mission to do good things for the people of Australia and we are doing those sorts of things through this inquiry. We have talked to a number of schools already and have found it useful to nominate somebody to answer our questions when there are no volunteers, so watch out—but we do it kindly. Kirsti is here on behalf of Hansard. She is recording everything that is said, so your comments will become part of the official record of the Australian parliament. Who here are the school leaders?

Jake—I am a school captain.

Robbie—I am a prefect.

Chris—I am a prefect.

Kylie—I am a prefect.

CHAIR—Were you elected to those positions?

Chris—Yes, we were elected through a vote. We gave speeches and year 10 and year 11 students voted for those they wanted for captain and prefects.

CHAIR—Did the teachers have any influence in that election?

Jake—Yes. We gave a speech at a staff meeting and the teachers voted as well.

CHAIR—Do the rest of the school think the election was a proper one? Was any inappropriate outside influence brought to bear?

George—I don't know.

CHAIR—Does anyone have another view? Does anyone think the election was interfered with improperly? Let us turn that around. Was the election fair?

Maha—Yes, it was fair.

CHAIR—Does everybody agree with that?

Students—Yes.

Mr DANBY—Did teachers have an equal vote with the students?

Chris—Yes.

CHAIR—And do you agree that they should have had an equal vote with the students?

Kyriacos—Yes.

Mr DANBY—Why should they have an equal vote?

Robbie—Because they know who deserves to be elected to that sort of position, who has worked for it and who is the best person for it.

CHAIR—Raise your hand if you are 17 or older. There are four. Of you four, who is already enrolled on the electoral roll? One. Do you other three know that you can be enrolled on the electoral roll now?

Kylie—Yes.

Henry—Yes.

CHAIR—I have a question for the two of you who know you can be enrolled now: why haven't you enrolled?

Kylie—I am not a citizen.

CHAIR—That is a very good reason not to enrol.

Chris—I have just turned 17 and haven't actually got around to enrolling yet. I got the letter to say I could enrol only the other day.

Mr DANBY—Did you get a birthday card or anything else with that letter?

Chris—I wish!

Ms Hawke—Just before federal and state elections, the local enrolling officer comes to the school to speak with year 11s and 12s and they are all given forms and have the opportunity to enrol. The local enrolling officer from Banks, which is our local area, comes out a few months before elections to give that information out to students, just in case some do turn 18 at the time. It also gives the chance for a whole group to be enrolled. He will come to the school to do that just before the next state or federal election.

CHAIR—How important do the rest of you—those of you who are not 17—think it is to enrol to vote? Is it very important, important, not so important or not important?

George—It could be important because, if you don't, you get a fine.

CHAIR—Are there any other views?

James—Yes, it is important, because you should have a say in how your government works.

Ricky—I think it is pretty important because, as James has said, with the way the system works every vote counts.

CHAIR—This question is directed to everybody: who thinks that whether or not you vote does not matter—that your vote cannot influence the outcome of an election? Perhaps you have another view.

Raman—It doesn't matter because John Howard always wins.

CHAIR—Let's just explore that. You are saying that your vote doesn't count?

Raman—Yes.

Steven—You know how John Howard wins elections; I reckon that is influenced by those who are coming to this country from other countries and voting for John Howard.

CHAIR—We have not had that evidence before.

Ms Hawke—You cannot vote in an election unless you are a registered citizen of the country.

David—People vote for John Howard only because there is no opposition worth voting for.

CHAIR—I think we should declare our conflict of interest here. Senator Mason, Steve Ciobo and I are Liberals and we have one Labor member here, but we are all the best of friends.

David—Except when you get into the party room.

CHAIR—Are there any other comments about whether your vote counts? Does your vote count?

Kyriacos—I am not really sure.

Senator MASON—James, you said that you should vote because your vote should count. That is a clever answer, but do you really think your vote counts?

James—Yes.

Senator MASON—Do you think you do make a difference by participating in the electoral process?

James—Yes, because each individual vote adds up.

Senator MASON—James, how important are politics and democracy to you? What is more important: the Broncos and Melbourne Storm playing this weekend, or politics?

James—Probably sport.

Senator MASON—Let me rephrase the question. Is it right that for most of you—young men at least; ladies probably not—sport is more important than politics?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—What is more important: sport or the future of our country?

James—The future of our country.

Senator MASON—Who determines the future of our country?

James—The government.

Senator MASON—Yes, and politicians and politics. Do not forget that. That is why politics is important. Many of you will be cynical and think, ‘Politicians are terrible,’ or ‘You can’t get rid of John Howard,’ or whatever. All of us understand that. But we are talking about the future of our country. I know that you have all learned about Anzac Day and you know that people have died for you and for our country. Politicians like us decide whether or not we go to war and how we spend your taxes and things like that. So don’t you think politics and democracy are more important than the Broncos and the Storm?

Mr DANBY—Steven, you said that John Howard always gets elected. Do you know how many times he has been elected?

Steven—Three times.

Mr DANBY—He has been elected four times. How old are you?

Steven—I am 17.

Mr DANBY—He has been elected four times since 1996, which is a long time, isn’t it?

Steven—Yes.

Mr DANBY—Before that, who was elected for the previous 13 years?

Steven—I don't know.

Mr DANBY—It was Labor. I can understand how, if you are 16 or 17, you might hold the view that John Howard has always been there. But, when you get into your mid-20s or even earlier, hopefully you might see it all change around again. But you here in the room will determine whether we have a change of government or not. It is the seat of Banks, isn't it?

David—Yes.

Mr DANBY—And at the last federal election the result in Banks was closer than it had ever been before. So what you do really determines things. I will give you a scenario. If, to the horror of these two, Labor were to win some seats in Queensland and were to lose Banks, it would mean that they would have to win two more seats in Queensland. Banks is held by Mr Daryl Melham now. So, again, to some extent, you in this place here hold the future of Australia in your hands.

CHAIR—Who here has travelled overseas? So a significant number of people here have travelled overseas. On your return to Australia, having been in overseas countries, what is your view of our country? When you come back to Australia, what do you think?

Kylie—I am an American citizen. I have been in Australia for a few years now and I like the system here. I like the education system. I like the healthcare system. My mother is a diabetic and she needs her medical pills every month. In America she paid \$550 a month for a bottle of pills that lasted her for three weeks and here she pays \$28 a month and they give her the same brand of pills.

CHAIR—So you recognise that we have a good health system.

Kylie—Yes.

CHAIR—Who else has a comment? Henry, do you have a comment to make? Where have you been overseas?

Henry—I have been to Vietnam.

CHAIR—Are you Vietnamese?

Henry—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have a comment to make about how the economy of Vietnam is changing, now that it is becoming a market economy, compared to Laos or Cambodia, which have retained the communist set-up?

Henry—No.

Mr DANBY—What is Vietnam like compared to Australia?

Henry—Australia is better.

Mr DANBY—Why?

Henry—I don't know.

Mr DANBY—Is it just that it is wealthier, or is it the system with how things work between people?

Henry—The system is better.

Mr DANBY—Are people afraid of the government in Vietnam?

Henry—Not really.

Mr DANBY—They do not know that it exists or they do not worry about it?

CHAIR—Do you worry about the corruption in Vietnam? What other countries have people been to?

Students—China, Lebanon, Serbia, India, Nepal.

CHAIR—Does everybody know what the flag of Nepal looks like? There is no other flag like it in the world, is there?

Mr DANBY—What does it look like?

Neil—If you turn the flag sideways, it resembles mountains. That is why it is a triangle.

CHAIR—When was Australia founded? When did white people arrive in Australia?

David—The convicts came in 1788, but we were founded in 1770 by Captain Cook.

CHAIR—Yes, but white people arrived to settle in Australia in 1788.

David—Yes.

CHAIR—Hands up those who did not know that white people arrived to settle in Australia in 1788. About six of you did not know that. What happened in 1901?

Luke—We became federated as one nation.

CHAIR—Does anyone know what federation means? Who can explain what happened to Australia at Federation?

Shane—We all became one. All the states agreed to combine all their resources to become one nation.

David—I have a point on that. If we have become federated then why on earth do we need six different laws for the same crime in, say, Victoria, Tasmania? We do not need seven different departments of attorneys-general, we do not need state governments; all we need is a federal government running the whole lot and the local governments running local areas. If you have state governments, one's laws will say you cannot park your car in this position and another's laws will say you can. You are breaking the law in one state and not in another. It is just so complicated. Then there are speed limits.

CHAIR—David suggests that we only need two levels of government—federal government and local government. Does anybody disagree with that? No. David, I think we all agree with you as well.

Senator MASON—I think David wants a job with you, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR—This is a hard question: what does the separation of powers mean? I do not really expect you to know, but does anybody know what the separation of powers means? No. Who is the head of the Commonwealth of Australia?

David—The Queen.

Shane—The Queen.

Mr CIOBO—When you say 'head', do you mean commemorative?

CHAIR—The Governor-General is the answer I am looking for. Does everybody know it is the Governor-General? Does anybody not know it is the Governor-General? About 40 per cent of the class did not know it is the Governor-General.

Mr DANBY—The Governor-General is the representative of the Queen, who is the head of state. Put your hand up if you know the name of the Governor-General of Australia.

Henry—Is it Michael Jeffery?

CHAIR—It is.

Mr DANBY—General Michael Jeffery; that is right. He is a general who was formerly in charge of the SAS.

CHAIR—And he was formerly Governor of Western Australia. Here is a trick question: which is the highest court in the land?

David—The Supreme Court located I think in Melbourne.

CHAIR—No, that is not right.

Mr DANBY—There is a Supreme Court in every state. You have the Supreme Court of New South Wales and the Supreme Court of Victoria. That is the highest court in a state. There is a court higher than that.

Senator MASON—You might need to call a friend, David!

David—I would like to phone a friend or go fifty-fifty. Perhaps the teachers can help me with this one.

Ms Hawke—Is it the High Court of Australia—

CHAIR—That is not right either.

Ms Hawke—Or the court of appeal?

CHAIR—No, that is not right either. I told you it was a trick question.

Ms Parker—I would have said the High Court of Australia in Canberra.

Mr CIOBO—I would have said the High Court of Australia also.

Senator MASON—So would I.

CHAIR—My colleagues do not even know. The parliament of Australia is actually the highest court in the land. You can be called before the bar of parliament and, if we sentence you to jail, there is no appeal and you just go to jail.

David—Has that ever happened?

CHAIR—Yes, it has. There are actually two jail cells in Parliament House, but they have never been used. The last time it happened was with journalists and a matter of privilege and we sent them to Goulburn Jail.

Mr DANBY—It is a power so obscure and so seldom exercised that three of the four committee members sitting up here did not know about it, so the teachers are excused too.

CHAIR—Hands up those who have been to Canberra. Of those whose hands are up, who has been to Parliament House?

Senator MASON—Of those who have been to Canberra, who has been to the War Memorial? So more have been to Parliament House than to the War Memorial.

CHAIR—Of those who have been to Parliament House and who have not commented so far, what did you think about your experience? What did you learn from going to Parliament House?

Eric—I just looked at how the two teams debated.

CHAIR—Were you impressed with the operation of Parliament House?

Eric—Yes, I was.

CHAIR—Did you feel that you saw democracy in action?

Eric—Yes.

CHAIR—Is there a comment from anyone else who has been to Parliament House? Have any of the teachers here been to Parliament House or taken school groups there?

Ms Hawke—We do not take school groups on excursions to Canberra. With the cost of excursions for students, we would be lucky if out of 100 students 20 could afford to go. We would like to run them, but unfortunately we don't.

Ms Parker—The cost of transport and accommodation is prohibitive.

Mr DANBY—The subsidy has gone up, I think, from \$15 to \$30, but it is still not enough.

Ms Parker—It is still not enough to outweigh the cost of transport.

Ms Hawke—We have difficulty funding an excursion to Darling Harbour where the cost per student is \$30 let alone asking students for \$130 for an overnight excursion.

Mr DANBY—How do young people get information these days? Do you get it from your own radio stations? Does anyone read the newspapers? What about the net? What about blogs?

James—I talk with my grandmother; she talks about politics all the time.

Mr DANBY—That is family, which is important too. Where do people get information from these days about anything? Suppose it is not politics.

Maha—From the TV news.

Steven—From the internet.

CHAIR—Do you believe the information you get from the internet?

Steven—Not all of it; maybe 50 per cent.

CHAIR—You are saying that it is not reliable. What about the fellow down the back? Do you read the newspaper?

Paul—Sort of.

Mr DANBY—Which paper would you read—the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Sydney Morning Herald*?

Paul—The *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Mr DANBY—Does anyone here read blogs? What blog do you look at?

Shane—I look at most of them. I just browse through them.

Mr DANBY—So you are an internet surfer?

Shane—Yes.

Mr DANBY—Is anyone else here an internet surfer? There are two. If you have to do a project, would you do most of your research on the internet?

Maha—Yes.

Taneka—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you think young people are apathetic?

Krystal—Yes.

Ms Hawke—Do you know what that means, Krystal, or don't you really care?

Krystal—Some of us are apathetic.

CHAIR—Those here who think they are cynical about the electoral process please put your hand up.

Ms Parker—Cynical means 'against' or 'doesn't believe in it' or 'has bad feelings towards it'.

Ms Hawke—It is a bit like Steven's attitude that it doesn't matter because John Howard just keeps getting in anyway. Who feels that way about politics: 'What does it matter what I think or do, because it is not going to make a difference'?

CHAIR—Do you feel cynical?

Raman—Yes.

CHAIR—Can you explain why?

Raman—Because John Howard always wins; John Howard always wins, no matter what. Even though he makes the new IR laws, he still wins.

Mr CIOBO—Who here disagrees with that statement?

Robbie—I do.

Mr CIOBO—What is your point of view?

Robbie—It is not that he is elected because of his popularity or that sort of stuff. He is elected because of the sort of stuff he does, like with the GST, which keeps his ratings at a certain level.

Mr CIOBO—You say that John Howard always wins and I think Raman said something similar. This is not about party politics, but do you think there is any reason why he always wins? I suppose I am asking whether you understand the process whereby the Liberal Party and the Prime Minister that we currently have and have had since 1996 keep getting elected. Does anyone feel that they understand that process?

David—Yes.

Wilson—He is consistent and there have not been many major problems.

Mr CIOBO—When you vote, do you vote for John Howard or for someone else?

Wilson—I don't vote.

Mr CIOBO—But, when your family go to their local polling booth to vote, do they vote for John Howard or for Kim Beazley or do they vote for other people?

Wilson—Don't people vote for the party?

CHAIR—Don't they vote for the policy?

Wilson—Not really.

Senator MASON—Do you think the electoral system is basically fair?

James—I just think that's how it should work.

Senator MASON—Would those who think the system in Australia is basically fair put their hand up.

Jake—I think it's fair.

Senator MASON—Would those who think it is not fair put their hand up. For the record, most people think it is fair.

Mr DANBY—Wilson, you have said that the Prime Minister is consistent. Have you travelled overseas?

Wilson—Yes.

Mr DANBY—You also said that Australia does not have many problems compared to—where have you travelled overseas?

Wilson—China.

Mr DANBY—So you say that things are better here than in China and the Prime Minister is fairly consistent and keeps Australia where it was before compared to another place you have seen where things are not so good.

Wilson—Yes, and he has been better than Paul Keating.

Mr DANBY—Some of you said that you had been to India, Nepal and Lebanon. What are the systems like in those countries?

Talal—Do you mean their school systems?

Mr DANBY—No, regarding how those countries are run compared with Australia. Do you have any feeling about it?

Talal—No.

Mr DANBY—What about Nepal?

Neil—It is pretty bad right now. I think a few months ago they were all protesting about the King and so on, so it is not too good right now.

Mr DANBY—How are things going in India?

Neil—Sometimes it is a bit corrupt. I hear some stories about people bribing police. There was a man on the road; he got hit by a car and no-one helped him.

Mr DANBY—Is it different in Australia?

Neil—Yes.

CHAIR—Apart from joining a political party, what are other ways in which people can become involved in civic life? Who has a view on that?

Kylie—Through involvement with your local council.

Neil—By joining the police force or something like that.

CHAIR—You are probably intrigued and wonder why we have been asking you questions. We are looking for a thread as we go across Australia. Here we are, senators and members of the federal parliament. Is there anything you would like to ask us?

Senator MASON—If you ask a rude question, we will put you in jail!

Maha—What made you want to do what you are doing right now? What made you want to be politicians?

CHAIR—You are asking what motivated us to become members of parliament. Mr Ciobo will answer that question.

Mr CIOBO—I am the youngest MP on the government side; there is one who is younger than me on the opposition side. For me, it is because I have a belief. There are many things that you might be unhappy with in your community or in your nation when you look around and most people react to those things. They say, ‘I don’t like this, I don’t like that and I have a problem with that.’ There is something that people are always reacting to. I like to be proactive and to actually make a difference. I fundamentally believe that politics allows you to make a difference. This is called your MAD room—‘making a difference’. For me, politics provides an opportunity to go out there and make a difference on a national basis. If you get involved in your council, you can make a difference in your local community. Besides politics, there are many ways in which you can make a difference. But that is why I got involved in politics.

CHAIR—Colleagues, do you want to offer a comment?

Senator MASON—Only to say: Jake, you are the school captain. You want to make a difference—as Mr Ciobo said—in the school. You want to make it a better school. I think that the most important thing to all of us is the future of our country and the destiny of our nation. If you love and want to serve your country and want to make a difference to your country, you can do so from federal parliament perhaps more easily than anywhere else. As has been said, there are other ways to do it, but perhaps you can do it more fundamentally in the federal parliament than anywhere else. I do not think there is anything more important than the future of our country, and that is why I do this job.

CHAIR—Let me give you a specific example of why I was motivated to stand for parliament, but it is just an example within a whole raft of other reasons. I ran a small business for 25 years and employed about 30 people. I was very unhappy with the industrial relations laws at the time. I found that I was not employing people because there was a disincentive to employing them. I went into the parliament to change those laws. It took 10 years, but the laws have been changed. In the last six months, with the operation of the new laws, 1,000 jobs a day have been created in Australia. That is fantastic for people. It is fantastic particularly for young people, because young people are now getting jobs where they would never have got jobs before. That is just an example of a specific reason why I went into parliament.

Others will not agree with that and the debate will flow in this country, and that is very healthy. We are very lucky to have a country where we can have an alternative point of view, and I think we should all be very proud to be Australian. Does anybody else have another question for us?

Michael—How do you become a senator?

David—The sixty-four thousand dollar question.

Senator MASON—I think you look intelligent enough to be one. I think you would do very well as a senator. Does anybody know how senators are elected? You have members of parliament, like Mr Ciobo, Mr Lindsay and Mr Danby. About 100,000 people live in a certain area and vote for candidates—generally a Labor candidate or a Liberal candidate. The Senate is

different. In the Senate there are 12 senators for each state; New South Wales has 12 senators and Tasmania has 12 senators. At each election, six are elected for a six-year term. At the next election, which will be at the end of next year, six senators will be elected from New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and elsewhere and two will be elected from the territories—the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. Do people know that the Senate is the upper house in federal parliament? It is the red one, as broadcast on television. Generally we are seen as a house of review. A bill passes through the House of Representatives, where these gentlemen sit, goes to the Senate and usually ends up in a Senate committee. We in the Senate look at that bill and determine whether it is good law—and, if it is not, we send it back. So the Senate does all the good work. Michael, I think you would fit in very well.

CHAIR—Anybody can stand to be a senator, but clearly people who represent major political parties tend to be elected. There are some Independent senators.

Senator MASON—There are the Australian Democrats and the Australian Greens.

CHAIR—There are minor party senators. There is one Family First senator. But, by and large, senators come from the major political parties. Getting on the Senate ticket for a major political party occurs through another process within the party system. So you have to be a member of the party.

Kylie—Would it be fair to say that people coming from underprivileged backgrounds would have the same chance to become part of the parliament as people coming from better homes?

CHAIR—The question is: would it be fair to say that people from underprivileged backgrounds have the same chance, a better chance or a worse chance to become a member of the parliament?

Mr DANBY—That's not really the determinant. The determinant is that on both sides of politics in Australia there are certain political clans—this is my personal view—in all the different states and certain people dominate those clans by having experience in them. Sometimes it is very difficult for people who are not from those political clans to break through, but it is a lot easier in Australia than in other countries. Compared with the United States, you need less money to break through in federal or state politics in Australia. You still need to go and do fundraising and awful things like that, but it is quite possible for a person from very ordinary circumstances to break through.

CHAIR—Would you like to give the example of Senator Bonner?

Senator MASON—Really, I was just going to talk about all of us. I do not think any of us here come from privileged backgrounds. Steven can speak about his own background, but none of my grandparents finished high school—and that is only two generations ago—whereas most of you will finish high school. My parents are very ordinary people. It was only with my generation, in a sense, which spent a long time at school and university—perhaps too long a time—that opportunities really arose. But in Australia—and this goes for the Labor Party and the Liberal Party—most people who are members of parliament come from quite ordinary backgrounds where they are inspired to work very hard and are upright and dedicated. You do not have to come from a wealthy family to succeed in either the Liberal Party or the Labor Party.

Mr CIOBO—My father came as a refugee from Italy at the end of World War II and my mother is Australian. But I am in politics today because I took the time to get involved. It was something that interested me and I had a lot of passion for it. So I joined the Liberal Party when I was 17 and became very active in it and 10 years later was elected to the parliament. But I served 10 years learning about the Liberal Party and all those kinds of things. It is not because I came from a wealthy background or anything like that; it is just because, like anything, you have to learn and get involved. From your involvement, people will make a judgement as to whether you can or cannot make a difference. If you can demonstrate that you have a desire, an aspiration and a vision, they will get behind you.

Mr DANBY—I am a bit like Steven. My father came to Australia as a refugee in the 1930s and my late mother was a hairdresser; she was Victorian Hairdresser of the Year in 1950. Both of them were not very political, although we did discuss politics a bit. But, like Steven, I have been involved in politics for a long time. I can remember being your age at school and being probably the most political person there. I was president of the student union at the University of Melbourne and I was involved in Young Labor.

CHAIR—Neither of my parents went to high school. But the final point I want to make is this: there are a number of members of the Australian parliament now who were born overseas. There is a strong message to all of you there—that Australia is a land of opportunity where you can get into the parliament, if you aspire to get into the parliament.

Mr DANBY—You might ask yourselves why, right at the beginning of this forum, we asked all those questions about your internal elections. Were they asked for no purpose? No, they were not. We have been asking these questions of people your age all across Australia and there is a lot of evidence to say that your attitude to elections, including federal elections—that is, big, serious elections—is determined by your first experiences at school with student elections.

Everybody has indicated that they feel those elections were fair and that will basically give you a good attitude to all elections in which you participate. But you would understand that, if young people have elections at a school that they think were dodgy, strange and unfair and that the people who were put in those positions were imposed on them, people can develop a very bad and cynical attitude.

CHAIR—I thank all of you very sincerely for giving us your time this morning. We have come a long way to be with you. This has been a very useful exercise. We have taken evidence from a number of student groups and this group has been outstanding. Thank you very much. All schools are different, although I am a bit concerned that there are not many girls here.

Ms Hawke—We have two girls schools close by, which are Eastfield girls and Bankstown girls, but the girls at our school are the cream of the crop.

CHAIR—Finally, if any of you come to Canberra, give us a call. We can give you a tour of Parliament House that you could not otherwise have, because we can take you behind the scenes.

Proceedings suspended from 10.16 am to 10.40 am

HAWKE, Ms Sarah, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

MEALEY, Mr Keith, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

MIKEL, Ms Cynthia, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

PARKER, Ms Julie, Deputy Principal, Sir Joseph Banks High School

RUSHTON, Ms Michelle, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

WALIA, Ms Amarjit, Teacher, Sir Joseph Banks High School

CHAIR—We are inquiring into civics and electoral education in Australia. What do you think is meant by civics education?

Ms Rushton—It is teaching the students about government and the way our political system runs and making sure that they understand their role within that.

CHAIR—Do you think they come out of school with that outcome?

Ms Mikel—No, not quite like that; not about the electoral side of things.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Ms Hawke—We do not specifically teach in connection with some of the questions you were asking today—the process of voting and that type of thing. You related it here to the year 10s and 11s and voting for school captains. We do not teach that specifically in any of our subjects. We teach about various events that have happened throughout history. We talk with them about Federation and World War I. We look at the referendums that were held to allow conscription. We have just done Vietnam with year 10s. We look at the moratorium movement and at conscientious objectors. We look at those aspects. So they get a well-rounded view of civics and politics and what their role is, but I do not know that they walk out of here necessarily thinking, ‘That’s me.’ They see it as a historical thing that has happened, but I do not know that they think of themselves as being part of that process. I really do not know that they get that until they have to vote.

CHAIR—Do you think you are sufficiently empowered to teach these subjects?

Ms Rushton—In terms of resources, yes. But I think the difficulty or the obstacle for us is that there is so much for us to teach in both the geography and the history curriculum that it is overcrowded. We try to teach them about the process of a referendum, when we talk about the referendum during World War I, for example, but we do not have time—

CHAIR—Is there sufficient professional development to make you feel confident that you are actually teaching those kinds of things correctly?

Ms Walia—Yes. We are given opportunities to go and do professional courses. But, again, I would say what Michelle has just said—that we really do not have time when it comes to teaching year 9s and 10s in particular because of the time frame. We get just four lessons in a fortnight. We struggle with time.

Ms Parker—Are you aware of the times that the New South Wales government has given for education of mandatory courses?

CHAIR—No, I do not think we are.

Ms Parker—Just going over it, civics is a mandatory course that all year 9s and 10s must pass to get a school certificate. It is compulsory education here. Even in private schools, they must still have their Australian history and Australian geography to be able to qualify for a school certificate. However, they are given only 400 hours in which to do it from 7 to 10. It is up to the school how it approaches those 400 hours, as long as it is done from 7 to 10. There is a certain amount in what we call stage 4, which is 7 and 8, and a required 100 hours in history and a required 100 hours in geography in stage 5, which is 9 and 10. Within those times, they have to cover the mandatory syllabus.

It is very overcrowded as far as history and geography are concerned, because they are joined as one. There is only 100 hours given to history and 100 hours given to geography, whereas science would have the 200 hours together. So it is a very crowded curriculum and it is very hard to get through it.

CHAIR—I spoke this week to a university educator in the department of education and he made this comment—and I seek your comments on his comment: ‘The crowded curriculum is just an excuse for teachers not to teach what they do not want to teach.’

Ms Parker—And how long is it since he was in a school system? I am insulted.

Ms Hawke—My staff and I are obliged to teach what the curriculum says we have to teach. At the end of year 10, our students have to sit for an external exam—it is coming up again in six weeks time.

Ms Parker—It is compulsory for all students.

Ms Hawke—Students across the state are examined on this one exam. If we do not teach the students that content, that will be reflected in their marks. We do not have a choice when it comes to teaching it. What choice we do have in a lot of cases comes down to what we will devote more time to.

For instance, we have to teach about the Vietnam War. We might devote more time to a certain aspect of the Vietnam War, according to student interest. Cynthia and I both have the year 10 classes and she might focus on something in slightly more depth or less depth than I will. I had Vietnamese boys in my class and they were interested in certain other aspects of it. I might have spent more time looking at the refugee issues that occurred after the war, whereas Cynthia might have spent more time looking at issues of Vietnam veterans. It is not that we cut things out, because we cannot afford to do that. We are held accountable for the results we receive and Mark

would question us if the results were not good. If I were to say to him, 'That happened because I didn't bother teaching it,' I would be up on review and would lose my job.

Senator MASON—That sounds like an argument for external exams. For a long time there was a trend away from doing that—but, for what it is worth, Mr Chairman, I am in favour of it.

Ms Hawke—I am in favour of it too. I do not like the way the data is used sometimes, but I think an external exam is a good indicator for us, as staff, to see how we are doing. Ours is a fairly new group of staff. This is only my third year. Keith has been here for a number of years and Amarjit has been here for six or seven years now. It is interesting to hear their comments about how change is happening—and the data reflects that.

CHAIR—Thinking about electoral education, many of the students in this school come from other countries with systems that are vastly or radically different from ours. Does that trouble them? Do you think they need special help in understanding the Australian system, or is it that kids are kids and they have open minds and they just take it all in?

Mr Mealey—The kids bring a lot of influences from home. That is where they form their values. They get their political knowledge, their knowledge about elections, from home as well as from the media. We are close to the divisional office for Banks. In the six months prior to a federal election, the divisional returning officer will come to the school and address the senior students about pre-enrolment. If we go back to the commerce syllabus of about 10 to 15 years ago, it had a section entitled 'How are we governed?' I think we have had two syllabuses since then and now e-commerce is more relevant to the students.

There are a number of electives and we choose which one will best meet the needs of the students within the time constraints. All students are now on the internet; they have their own individual email address and login. They use the internet all the time and that is a high priority for them.

I go back to a comment made earlier regarding electoral education within stage 5. The school certificate exam takes two hours and is for history, geography and civics. From the geography perspective, we are looking at land use and the civics component of that is how decision making or lobby groups affect that. It is not a case of 'this is the role of government', other than if we go along Milperra Road where we have residential areas on one side, light industrial on the other and heavy industrial down near the airport. The civics component of that is council zoning and not so much how Bankstown City Council is elected.

Ms Mikel—As Sarah said before, it is not specific in the history syllabus; it is actually scattered over a number of topics about different governments and how they function. It is not specifically about our voting system and so forth. The civics part we look at with history is more about injustices and how students can be active citizens and participate in order to have a voice. That is what civics is for at the moment. Would you agree?

Ms Hawke—Yes.

Ms Mikel—The civics component is not so much about the government, although they know that we have had different governments and they know how they function. We do not teach the

electoral side of things in history because it is not in the syllabus. The big push with civics has been to talk about the injustices in the world, to make students realise how the other side lives, to teach them that they have a voice in this world and to stand up and be heard.

Mr CIOBO—We have heard evidence about a lack of confidence sometimes being an inhibitor to teaching civics and electoral education; we have covered some of that already. I am interested in how difficult or otherwise it is to touch on issues of electoral education but still remain bipartisan or apolitical. Is that an area where you fear to tread or is that not an issue?

Ms Mikel—No. As a professional teacher, you learn to be not biased about things; you are very cautious. Particularly in a school that is multicultural, you have to be extremely sensitive and we are quite good at that here.

Senator MASON—When you are discussing severe injustices in the world, do you do that in an apolitical, non-partisan way?

Ms Mikel—You look at both sides. We have been taught that you cannot present history just from our point of view; we now have to present history from the other side as well. I think we do that really well.

Ms Hawke—Across the state, I believe it is done well.

Senator MASON—How do you examine civics if you are talking principally about civic participation?

Ms Hawke—I will give an example of a question we had in an exam. The question was about the Vietnam War and people's reaction to it. So the students had an opportunity to write about positive reactions to it and the people who supported it. There was a picture of Bill White being arrested and dragged off as a conscientious objector. That was stimulus for them to talk about those who were opposed and the reasons why. They could talk about either side of the argument. So in exam situations, apart from multiple choice questions such as 'What is a referendum?' they can express their ideas, beliefs and feelings. Sometimes they would be asked to comment for or against something.

Senator MASON—So you had advocates for the Vietnam War as well as advocates against it?

Ms Hawke—Generally speaking, by the time we had finished that unit of work, I think most of them were against.

Senator MASON—That would not be the case if I had taught the course and perhaps, Mr Danby, if you had taught the course as well.

Ms Hawke—They had a definite sense of injustice that young men were forced to go, even if they did not want to, and that those who did not want to go, because they thought it was the wrong thing to do, were thrown into Holsworthy military jail. They thought that was a definite injustice. Of course, we had to be culturally sensitive because we have a number of Vietnamese students here. When we talked about the legacy of the Vietnam War, I said to them, 'You guys

are the legacy of the Vietnam War; you're living here today because of it,' and they said, 'Yeah, you're right.'

Ms Mikel—There is no black-and-white answer to anything in history.

Senator MASON—I accept that.

Ms Mikel—It is really difficult. You should not teach the kids that it is black and white because history changes and continues to change. We get new information and we are obliged to update the kids with that information. But, more so, we would do the students an injustice if we did not present them with a whole heap of information and let them make up their minds about it. That is what it is about—letting them think.

As far as the question 'yes or no for the Vietnam War' is concerned, there was a lot more involved in that. A lot of other issues came out such as the veterans and a whole heap of other things that dealt with civics and citizenship that the kids actually had an opinion about and that they could think about: 'Wow, okay, I would do things differently in that situation.' That is what is really important.

Senator MASON—I have always loved history, as my colleagues know, and I always loved my history teachers. You have mentioned that, when you teach history, the kids look at Federation, World War I, the Vietnam War and so forth, but they do not see themselves being part of it. They see history as something that happened a long time ago. When I was at high school, I found that the joy of history was when I felt that I was part of the process. I am not just Brett Mason, a politician. I am—as we all are—the end product of global forces and forces of civilisation well beyond my control. It is good for people to grasp the fact that they are sitting here not just because they happen to be here but because there was a Vietnam War and their parents were refugees and that war happened because of the post World War II environment, colonialism, communism and so forth. Does that make sense?

Ms Hawke—Yes, and a lot of those kids will come to that realisation, but sometimes they will not come to it unless I literally say, 'Guys, if your name is Nguyen, you are part of that legacy. Your being here has created the country we have today.'

Senator MASON—Does it make a difference when you say that?

Ms Hawke—I think it does for a lot of them, because they write it in their responses in the end of year exam. So it must have stuck with them: 'Oh, I'm a part of this.'

Ms Parker—With our population, many of them being first migrants and refugees here—

Mr DANBY—What percentage would that be at the school?

Ms Parker—We have about a 67 per cent NESB. They have very strong links with their history and where they came from. They have a real identity linking back to their country's history. Our kids here can identify with different cultures quite easily. They are very accepting of different cultures and they do form opinions based on events that have happened in their lives. Many of our children here have had things happen in their lives that the long-term Australian

child who has been here for generations would not even know about. I think our kids have a strong moral sense and purpose.

Ms Hawke—They are quite often happy to share that. An example is a boy I had in my year 10 class who has now left our school and gone somewhere else. We were looking at the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of that child from Biafra and the vulture nearby waiting for him to die so it could eat him. One of my boys is an Afghani refugee and he said, ‘Why did they starve? When we were hungry, we ate grass’—and the class went, ‘Oh my God, what are you talking about?’ He said, ‘We fled the Taliban because they killed my uncle in front of me’—and so on. He very matter of factly just rolled off all these facts. But they are happy to share with the class. I think they are an extremely tolerant bunch of kids here. We do not have any racial problems, I would say. When we have fights here, it is over girls or something like that; it is not over race or anything like that.

Mr CIOBO—Especially with a 70 to 30 ratio.

Ms Hawke—Exactly.

Mr CIOBO—Can I ask about the interface between the mechanics of voting and civics education. You say that you want people to be civically active but you do not really delve into the mechanics of voting. From a lay perspective, does that cause a disconnect, or do you think it is not an issue? I suppose I am driving at whether it is possible to enable someone to feel empowered to do something if they do not understand the application of translating that desire into an actuality. I am interested in your thoughts on that.

Mr Mealey—With the students here, it is what is important to them and what is impacting on them now. If they are not going to vote until they are 18 and they are 14 or 15 and a federal election is held only every three years and a state election is held every four years, it is not constantly in their minds that ‘this is important’. The football game at lunchtime will be more important. The grand final this weekend is important to them at the moment. In their order of priorities, it is what is going to affect them at the moment. Yes, there will be a federal election next year, but that will not really impact upon them.

Mr CIOBO—That may be what they think, but Senator Mason’s point earlier this morning was that, apart from matters of the heart and religion, nothing will have as big an impact on their lives as politics will. Isn’t part of your responsibility to send that message? People may think that this week’s game between the Broncos and the Storm is one of the biggest things that is happening, but the reality is that next year’s federal election is going to have more of an impact on their lives than just about anything else—

Ms Hawke—But they cannot do anything about it, so they are not going to care.

Mr CIOBO—But they can do something about it. This is my point about activation from aspiration. You say that you try to get them to be active.

Mr DANBY—It depends on what age they are.

Mr CIOBO—Sure, but voting is not unique to federal elections. They vote for their class captain.

Ms Parker—We have a student council here and we run through the whole process. Each year has a representative on the council, which is run by the student body. The kids here participate a lot in that process at a low level. We have a very active SRC.

Mr CIOBO—It sounds as though it is largely informal, though.

Ms Parker—No. It is very strict that every kid in a year has a vote and they elect their representative to the council. The council is the voice of the school body. It is a very similar process. You have candidates. The candidates go to their year and express why they want to be a member of the student council body. They then are voted into becoming a member of the student council body and the student council runs quite a lot of things here. So we have what is like a mini-voting process.

I think our kids have a very good idea of what voting is and they understand it. But I agree with Sarah and Keith: it is in the future. Kids live from day to day. For a kid, next week is a long way into the future; next year is unheard of. If they are not going to be voting for the next one, two or three years, they will think about it when it happens.

Ms Rushton—I agree with what Keith and Julie have said, but I also feel that we have that challenge and that difficulty whenever we teach history. To our kids, World War I has nothing to do with their lives and is of no relevance. Our challenge as teachers is to try to connect them to that and make them see how it is relevant to their lives, even though it happened 100 years ago, or it is relevant to their lives and they should listen and be interested even if they are not going to vote for four or five years.

Mr DANBY—Can you imagine any of those who are studying World War I—remembering that 70 per cent of your students come from non-English-speaking backgrounds—doing the pilgrimage to Gallipoli that is done by a lot of other young people?

Ms Rushton—I can imagine a few doing it but not many. I found with my history classes, because they are coming from many different cultures and because—as I think Julie said earlier—they are very connected to those cultures, I used to start my unit of work on World War I or World War II by saying, ‘Who has family that were involved?’ I have been surprised that almost no-one puts their hand up. So instead I now start off by saying, ‘Okay, I will tell you about my family.’ They are very interested in that because they want personal stories.

Mr DANBY—Do you have any Turkish Australians here?

Ms Rushton—Not in my class.

Ms Hawke—We have some.

Ms Parker—We have some, but not many.

Ms Rushton—I get them in by saying, ‘Who knows where Petersham is? Well, my grandfather was living there during the Depression and this is what was happening there at that time.’ It is that sort of stuff. I also feel it is incredibly important to teach them about the mechanics of government. I feel frustrated, as I said before, because we are so constricted by time and by the syllabus. As a teacher, I look at the syllabus and say: ‘Right, I have this many weeks and this is the syllabus I need to teach—that, that and that, including civics and citizenship. The structure of government is really peripheral to this particular topic and I do not have time to go into it in depth.’ That is the way it ends up because you have to prepare them for these external exams.

Ms Mikel—The bottom line is that it has to be in the syllabus for us to teach it, to start with. That is imperative. We have to be able to look at what exactly it is you want us to teach and the timeslot available and what we are going to take out. So it is not a matter of not being able to teach it or not wanting to teach it; it has to be in the syllabus and we have to have specifics about what we have to teach—and, of course, that is what we do.

Mr DANBY—Is the 400 hours an improvement on what it used to be?

Ms Hawke—Yes, it is completely different. We were never forced to teach Australian history in the past. It was just: ‘This is the syllabus and this is the range of things you can teach.’ Basically, schools taught whatever they wanted to. It was not until they introduced the school certificate exam that we had to teach this. You could teach anything.

Mr DANBY—So the former Premier’s view that history should be taught in Australia and in New South Wales schools in particular you can see coming through with this program of 400 hours.

Ms Parker—It has always been a compulsory course, but it has not always been an external exam. It used to be tested and graded within the school. But, over the last three years, there has been an external exam, which has intensified and given far more direction to what is taught in the class.

CHAIR—I will switch now back to the students. Those of you who are here heard me ask them whether they consider themselves apathetic or cynical. What do you think of young Australia? Are they apathetic or cynical? If they are, does it matter? What can we do about it? Do we need to do anything about it?

Mr Mealey—One of the most successful projects here in bringing in civics within history was traditionally the Anzac assembly or Anzac ceremony, which falls on the HSIE faculty. Last year Cynthia’s year 7 class—

CHAIR—Yes, we saw the presentation.

Mr Mealey—That really involved them. One of the teachers last year got up and gave a personal account; he had his uncle’s medals. This year another teacher gave her account of the impact of the political conflict. When the children can see this living, it starts to mean something. They got involved in researching it, partly because they had to—‘Okay, we have to get up in front of the school and present the oath at this assembly; what does it mean?’ That

really seemed to focus and motivate them. I have been at this school for 17 years and that was the most involvement I had seen in the children and it had a really positive outcome.

Ms Parker—I do not think young kids are apathetic at all. I think they can become very emotional, but it is the connectedness that is the important thing. If kids feel strongly about something, they will move heaven and earth to try to make it happen. I think today's youth have that strong connection and that empowers them. I do not think that kids these days are at all apathetic. They may not see the connection at first but, as soon as they do, they own it and they are very strong about it.

Ms Mikel—With something like this, perhaps it would be worthwhile doing a hands-on thing with somebody outside the school, where the students can see what they are doing—say, going to a voting booth. If you are talking about the mechanics of how it works, you could have a speech by somebody outside. Maybe that could be a compulsory component, run by somebody outside the school, on behalf of the government, so that they can see what they have to do. Teaching them to research will come down to us, as teachers. The way I teach as a history teacher is that every single lesson will involve a life skill that relates to them now. I turn something of history into something that is relevant to them and enable them to see the connection.

Senator MASON—It gets back to connection, doesn't it?

Ms Mikel—Yes, it does. That is how I do it. That is how you have to do it. That is how they work and that is part of civics as well so that they have a voice. As for the mechanics, I think a hands-on element would be fabulous.

Mr DANBY—Would it help if the Electoral Commission sent the Banks electoral office to the school to run the student elections?

Ms Mikel—That would be fantastic.

Ms Walia—In commerce we are doing a pretty basic introduction to the electoral system, but it is not in-depth. In teaching that basic information, if it were added on with some practical knowledge, to have speakers coming in from the office and so on and giving a talk would be quite handy.

Ms Parker—We had an election set-up with our SRC this year. The students came in, were given pieces of paper and had to go to an election booth, in the same way as with a state or federal election. They had to fill out their paper and then stick it in a box. We ran it along those lines so that the kids got an idea of how they could vote as a voter—and that was really good.

Mr DANBY—If you ask them to, the AEC will sometimes come and set up cardboard things, which are very similar to those used in a federal election. You have to do your own ballot papers and stuff like that, but there are pencils attached to the stands and so on.

Ms Parker—That is one of the reasons why we ran it that way this year. The whole school was involved, with every year coming in to vote. We did that to give them an idea of what it is to vote.

Mr Mealey—That is very dependent on your local divisional returning officer. I know our divisional returning officer very well and he is great as far as helping us with that goes. If you got into an electorate where the returning officer was not as enthusiastic, it would not work.

I go back to your question as to whether kids are apathetic. I have found that the clientele we have here have a very keen sense of what, from their perspective, is a fair go and ethical. As Sarah said earlier, if they think there has been an injustice, they will move heaven and earth and will dig their heels in. When it comes to their ethics and their values, they will definitely take a stand.

Ms Hawke—As at Cronulla Beach.

Ms Parker—That hit the school hard.

Mr DANBY—When you say it hit the school hard, what does that mean?

Ms Hawke—It was people from this area who went to Cronulla Beach and a number of those arrested were the siblings or other relatives of students of this school; they were even ex-students of this school.

Mr DANBY—But none who were in class today.

Ms Hawke—Some of the year 12s were mouthing about things, but I do not think they had the guts to actually get down there and get involved. Certainly older brothers and cousins were involved, so there was definitely a sense of injustice and justice. We had to deal with it in class. We had just finished multiculturalism and were looking at the negative and positive aspects of it, and our year 10 classes talked about the race riots, why they happened and what they can do to ensure that they do not happen again.

Ms Walia—There was a big thing about the war in Lebanon as well. All the teachers were filled in on how they should handle that situation as well.

CHAIR—Thank you. Do not be surprised if the words ‘move heaven and earth’ appear in our committee report. You are a remarkable person. We have had great evidence here today—thank you very much—not only from the students but also from you. We really appreciate it.

Committee adjourned at 11.13 am