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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Friday, 13 October 2006

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

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

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

WITNESSES

Committee met at 9.03 am

GIORGI, Ms Daniela, Education Officer, Parliament of New South Wales

SPINDLER, Mr Graham William David, Manager, Education and Community Relations, Parliament of New South Wales

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I declare open the public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education. Today we will be hearing from a range of representatives, including the New South Wales parliament, the Australian Centre for Educational Studies, the Parliamentary Club. I remind the 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 houses of parliament. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. I welcome the first witnesses and thank you for appearing. Are there any additional details relating to your appearance that you wish to give us?

Ms Giorgi—I am on a secondment from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training for three years. I appear before the committee as a representative of the education and community relations section of the New South Wales parliament.

Mr Spindler—Like Daniela, I appear as a representative of the section rather than of the parliament or the department.

CHAIR—Thank you. We have received a written submission from you. Do you wish to makes any additional submission, or would you like to make a short opening statement to the committee?

Mr Spindler—I would like to make an opening statement.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Mr Spindler—Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our submission with the committee. We appreciate that very much. We thought we might give you a brief indication of our professional involvement and our interest in the area of the inquiry. The parliamentary education and community relations section is rather similar in nature to the Commonwealth parliament's parliamentary education office, but it is considerably smaller in budget and size and perhaps a little broader in our field of involvement.

There is a staff of three, two of whom are before you; the other is our admin officer. As mentioned already, Ms Giorgi is seconded from the Department of Education and Training. That, from our point of view, provides us with a close link with the department's curriculum directorate, which is the unit that is most concerned with civics and citizenship. I would comment that, as small as we are, we probably are the largest educational unit in New South Wales that is fully concerned with civics and citizenship education—which is probably not a promising sort of statement to make in some respects. Our brief includes providing public education related to the parliament in a range of formats, providing or supporting programs for school and tertiary students, providing professional development programs for teachers, and

providing and coordinating a range of community activities and information programs for the general public. Last year we conducted about 95 programs of at least one day in duration plus many shorter ones. It depends on how you assess the figures, but 8,000 to 10,000 participants attended our programs. In addition to that, we provide educational support and resources for the parliament's tours and role-play programs, which involved 23,000 students in 540 groups last year. Almost all of these programs take place here at Parliament House.

We work closely with the Department of Education and Training, as we have said, and the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools in providing school and professional development programs. We work with them and a broad range of other institutions and community organisations to ensure that our programs are relevant and widely available. We do not define our parliamentary education role narrowly. We work as educators in civics and citizenship. Amongst the subject matter of civics and citizenship is electoral education and, within this context, we conduct specific programs or elements of programs on electoral education. In this, we sometimes work directly with officers from the Australian Electoral Commission, one of whom is sitting at the back of the room. I should also emphasise that we are not speaking on behalf of the parliament as such or the department.

Most of what I want to say is in the submission, but I would like to stress two aspects before we start. The first is our belief that electoral education is most effective if it is seen within the context of civics and citizenship. It does not mean there should not be discrete electoral education programs; we are highly supportive of the excellent resources, programs and work of the AEC. We would like to see those programs increase. We would like to see them receive additional resources because the thing is very valuable. But it is important that the AEC programs be presented in the context of a sound understanding of the system of government and be related to other aspects of active citizenship and democratic participation—as they are. So I am not suggesting that needs to change; it is just an awareness which we know they have and want to support. We also feel that all groups and individuals involved in civics education—for that matter, all agencies of government—ought to be electoral educators to some extent. In many cases they need to be better informed than they are in electoral matters now in order to be able to do that.

The AEC and other electoral education bodies therefore could support a more active and informed role for civics and citizenship educators and groups and government agencies through resources, 'train the trainers' approaches and professional development. We think there is great value in a variety of approaches from a variety of providers, but sometimes good programs are conducted in isolation and many opportunities for effective electoral education are lost. Every effort should be made to integrate electoral and civics education programs so that they fully support each other.

The second aspect which we want to emphasise—although obviously there are other points in the submission and in your inquiry—is that we feel there has to be renewed focus on voter registration, and this also requires a variety of approaches. Comparatively high levels of participation in voting do characterise Australian democracy, but this is largely a result of compulsory voting. We have compulsory registration of voting and we believe we should also have some smarter automatic registration, imperfect as that might be. By whatever means available, we should be constantly promoting and facilitating enrolment and, where possible, simply enrolling people. As it is, our voter registration figures should not encourage too much

complacency. With younger citizens, registration figures appear to be only about 81 per cent of those eligible, and it obviously follows that some of this low registration for 18- to 25-year-olds will flow over time to older groups.

So we have a significant problem here and we feel that this will be exacerbated by the recent changes to the time of the closure of rolls. Federal elections are traditionally announced with as much ambush as possible, even if the announcement does usually follow a period of sustained media speculation. Media speculation about an election, however, is no substitute for the impact of a real announcement in prompting electoral enrolment. This is clear from the fact that hundreds of thousands of people register or change details in the days immediately after the announcement of a federal election—or they have in the past. This appears to be particularly true of young people. Calling an election focuses attention on enrolment in a way that little else does. The most likely consequence of shutting the rolls immediately after the call will be disenfranchisement of a significant number of citizens who are perfectly entitled to vote. Stricter registration requirements may also have a similar impact—perhaps dealing with potential fraud but also perhaps acting as a further barrier to legitimate voters, to younger people and perhaps to the disadvantaged. So if we have a commitment to fully participative democracy then we also now have an increased obligation to vigorously encourage or ensure enrolment before an election date is dropped on the voters. We have suggested in our submission many ways in which voting enrolment could be encouraged, particularly among younger voters.

CHAIR—Ms Giorgi, do you want to add anything to that?

Ms Giorgi—No, thank you.

Mr CIOBO—Thank you for your opening comments, Mr Spindler. With respect to a couple of points you have touched on, in your submission you also make reference to being broadly happy with the curriculum insofar as it relates to teaching civics education to younger students in New South Wales but not to senior students in New South Wales. Has there been any discussion between your office or broadly within the department, for example, about the development of curriculum for senior students? Is there any reason that you are aware of why they have not gone down that path?

Mr Spindler—I am happy to make a couple of comments. Yes, I think we have made our feelings on this clear, to some people anyway. There certainly has been discussion and that discussion has been going on for quite a while—I was involved in the early days of the 'We the people' report, when the Board of Studies was looking at how they were going to address the issues of civics and citizenship, and they certainly looked at that option. I think the reason that they moved away from it is the perception of an overcrowded curriculum in the senior years. Perhaps Ms Giorgi would like to comment.

Ms Giorgi—No, I do not feel that I am in a position to really say why the department has or has not developed that curriculum. I believe it is because there is already so much pressure on the curriculum in senior years and so many of those subjects are seen as very important. The question is which ones you move to put in something like civics and citizenship. So, even though I believe there definitely should be activity there, it is not my position to structure the curriculum. I am able to give an opinion, but I am not one of the people who has to make it happen; I can very much see the difficulties of doing that.

Mr CIOBO—When we have conducted these hearings in other centres, we have often asked witnesses whether or not students there have made the trip to Canberra to see our nation's parliament. For many, cost is a prohibitive factor and understandably so. It occurs to me and to other members of the committee that the state parliaments, especially in bicameral systems such as New South Wales, Victoria et cetera, provide a more localised opportunity for students to understand the parliament and the role that it plays. About what percentage of students in New South Wales have the opportunity to come through the New South Wales parliament? Do you have any of those figures?

Mr Spindler—I have never thought of it in terms of a percentage. As I said in my opening statement, about 23,000 students come through each year on organised tours. Those tours usually last 90 minutes, involving a role-play and a visit to both houses, and they receive information packs and things like that before and during the event. I think the system in New South Wales I think has about one million students in it, so it would be a pretty small percentage; although that would not be relevant to the curriculum of all of those students, so it is a slightly bigger percentage than that. To be perfectly honest, whatever percentage that is, the issue that we would have is that, quite frankly, we are almost fully booked. Unfortunately, unlike the national parliament, which was wisely designed with facilities to assist student visits, educational programs, role-plays and things like that, we are totally dependent on the availability of the two chambers. On sitting days they are not available and on non-sitting days you can only put through a limited number of groups. Given that schools really only want to come during school terms, that cuts out another 10 or 12 weeks in the year. So, to be honest, very soon into the school year we are fully booked. It would be ideal to have more, and we certainly encourage it—it is there in the curriculum. Some of the curriculum statements specifically say 'visits to the New South Wales parliament or the federal parliament'. We would obviously like to encourage more, but I am not sure that we could fit them.

Ms Giorgi—Perhaps I can add to that. One of the ways we try to get around that is by providing other specific programs for students linked specifically to the curriculum that can be done in other parts of the parliament—for example, in the theatrette or even in this room. They are things like leadership programs, parliamentary forums, which are parliamentary-style debating days, and conventions for both primary and secondary students aimed at that curriculum. That gets in a few more, but again that percentage is very small as well.

Mr Spindler—There would be a couple of thousand students involved in those programs.

Mr CIOBO—Is the source of the 23,000 predominantly Sydney. Do you have a specific subsidy program to attract regional and rural students to parliament?

Mr Spindler—There is quite a heavy regional involvement, actually.

Mr CIOBO—There is no subsidy program?

Mr Spindler—There is no subsidy, but with the programs that Ms Giorgi was referring to we make a specific effort to invite a number of regional schools each time. We know that they will be predominantly metropolitan schools, but we always contact and invite a percentage of regional schools in a particular area to each program, and those that accept we pretty much fully subsidise.

Mr CIOBO—Do you have an outreach to regional schools at all?

Mr Spindler—Not as such.

Mr CIOBO—I do not mean this in any way to be disrespectful, but I imagine that on a 90-minute tour it is pretty difficult really to do too much education. Would it be best described as an informational guided tour rather than actually having any real focus on education?

Mr Spindler—I think Daniela would probably like to comment on that. I would just comment that I think the original focus was entirely on information, but, in the last six or seven years, our focus has shifted to role-plays, so there is much more of an educational process. That makes them much more interesting and, I think, meaningful from the point of view of the students.

Mr CIOBO—Do you have any existing relationship with the AEC or with the electoral commission of New South Wales when it comes to the education of students?

Mr Spindler—We certainly do with the AEC. We have several programs where AEC people join us and present and so forth, and some professional development programs. We have an ESL program which is running in November. It is a two-hour program for adult migrant education students and we have 350 booked in at the moment.

Mr CIOBO—I guess what I am driving at though is: who, if anyone, has statutory responsibility to educate New South Wales children about electoral processes in New South Wales? Obviously the education department does at a primary level. In New South Wales, is that effectively all there is?

Mr Spindler—In terms of statutory—

Ms Giorgi—It would be the department of education, at the years 5 and 6 and years 9 and 10 levels, where civics and citizenship is actually in the curriculum. Going back to the question of whether it is educational or just informative, I think that previously civics and citizenship was so specifically in the New South Wales syllabus it would have been much more an information session. But, because now they come along at the time when they are learning more broadly about the system at school, this is an additional lesson to what they would have got at school, and I think using the role-play adds to that. But I think the New South Wales department of education has the main statutory responsibility.

Mr Spindler—And the other educational providers: AIS and Catholic education.

Senator MASON—I have a couple of questions to follow up on Mr Ciobo's questions. In your submission, you say:

> ... we consider the current civics and citizenship education provision in NSW curriculums, except for Stage 6, to be very satisfactory.

Do you mean the curriculum as well as the provision of teaching materials and so forth, or do you mean both?

Mr Spindler—Yes, I think so.

Senator MASON—Then you say:

... senior syllabus (Stage 6) has not civics and citizenship education or Electoral education content at all, which we consider to be a serious problem as this is the very age when students move towards enrolment and voting

That is obviously a criticism of the current syllabus. What do you think should be done?

Ms Giorgi—It is not necessarily a criticism; we see that there is a need and suggest that perhaps we should do something about it.

Senator MASON—I call that a criticism.

Ms Giorgi—I try not to see things quite as negatively because I realise that these things take a long time to create.

CHAIR—But you called it a serious problem.

Ms Giorgi—Yes, and I think it needs to be addressed.

Mr Spindler—We think it is a serious problem because it seems there is an obvious connection—it is so immediate at that age that this would be an ideal time to be providing electoral education. But we also recognise that there are many other factors involved in designing the curriculum in years 11 and 12 and we are not the experts in that area.

Senator MASON—But you would argue that this is important and the curriculum can be improved with the incorporation of this material.

Mr Spindler—Yes, we will continue to argue that. It may not be listened to, but we will continue to argue it.

Senator MASON—That is all I want, thank you. You mentioned automatic enrolment of 17- or 18-year-olds?

Mr Spindler—Basically anybody really.

Senator MASON—To ensure that sort of automaticity, what sort of educational strategies would you adopt? How would you do that?

Mr Spindler—Again, I do not want to try to answer that technically. I am told that in many countries automatic enrolment is used and I am sure that it is possible even though it would not be perfect. There would still need to be all sorts of other things to mop up, such as people who are missed out in that process. Just going back to—

Senator MASON—I am sorry, I do not want to waste your time or the time of the committee. Obviously you could encourage children at school to enrol. Clearly you can do that.

Mr Spindler—Yes.

Senator MASON—But you are also suggesting that, for example, you could use birth dates from drivers licences to automatically enrol people.

Mr Spindler—Yes.

Senator MASON—In a sense, you are covering both aspects.

Mr Spindler—Yes, exactly. I might just add to that one comment, which has come up several times, particularly in Murray Print's study that was done for the AEC. Many students, when told that in fact they were not automatically enrolled, were really surprised. They just assumed that this would be the way in which it would be done.

Senator MASON—It would not be an infringement on individual autonomy?

Mr Spindler—These are issues that would have to be looked at.

Senator HOGG—Part of the problem is not just the initial enrolment but the continuing enrolment, because people do not understand the system, even if they understand that they have to be enrolled the first time around. What do you suggest for the ongoing process? Can you offer anything to the committee?

Ms Giorgi—We seem to be able to track people in terms of taxation, for example. The Australian Taxation Office is able to have a tax file number and they go to schools very early on. Perhaps working with the Australian Taxation Office and sharing those resources might be one way to do it. This is something that has obviously been bandied about for many years. In Mexico, for example, the electoral commission provides an identity card. We are proud in Australia of our Electoral Commission and its role. Perhaps we could have something like an identity card. I know that has been an issue in Australia that has come and gone—some people hate it and people get very nervous of it. If the Australian Electoral Commission were in charge of that and it was an identity card for enrolment purposes—and it could be used for other things as well—that might be one way to go about it. I suppose that is part of the problem of trying to do this.

Senator HOGG—I am not adopting an attitude on this one way or the other, but one of the things that cropped up on another committee on which I serve is that there are 60,000 address changes each week, registered through Centrelink, which means that people have either moved within the electorate they are already registered or, more than likely, outside of it. They have to go through a re-registration process to get back on the electoral roll. The second thing is—and I have raised this with other witnesses before this committee—the way in which people now communicate. I would appreciate your comment on the fact that most young people now have an aversion to forms, as most people do I think. They will SMS or email everything. Is that an alternative that should be looked at?

Mr Spindler—It is not only an alternative; it is actually happening in some places. I understand that the AEC does a certain amount of data matching now with things like RTA licence information and so forth, and I am sure that data matching, particularly with Centrelink

and so on, would pick up a lot of questions that could actually be followed through. But in terms of using the technology, I understand that a number of countries—and particularly New Zealand was raised just lately—use SMS quite a lot as a mechanism for talking to young people. You can certainly enrol on the internet. I do not have the details, but I have a feeling that you can enrol using SMS somehow. I am not an expert in these areas, but I—

Senator HOGG—Is this raised with you when you show young people around? That is the point I am coming to.

Mr Spindler—Very rarely, I would have to say, but we are aware of it, of course.

Ms Giorgi—The post office has enrolment forms. We provide enrol-to-vote forms in many of our programs, and I have never had a comment about that. They are usually quite pleased and will just take one—that is, the paper version.

Mr Spindler—I think anything could be adopted. Particularly young people are so networked and technology savvy. It is just the normal mechanism for communication—using the internet and phones. The potential of this area clearly has to be looked at.

CHAIR—Going further on that particular topic, Ms Giorgi, we had evidence in Victoria that the Victorian education department provides the AEC, I think, with student details so that enrolment forms can be sent to students who become entitled to enrol. Does that process happen in New South Wales?

Ms Giorgi—I do not believe it does. I believe the Board of Studies has those details in New South Wales. One of the reasons I believe it does not happen is various privacy laws. There are issues with privacy. There would have to be changes in the legislation to allow for that to happen.

Mr Spindler—Or changes in interpretation of the legislation. I am not really sure. Certainly our understanding is that the Board of Studies, as a general rule, will not release that information. It is being very careful, naturally enough. It is obviously an institution that does not want to draw flak to itself by doing things that are beyond its role. I suspect that they are placing a cautious interpretation on it, but I do not know. I think it is an issue, though, that those privacy considerations have to be addressed. A couple of states—including, I think, Tasmania—use a bounty system, where the schools are encouraged to actually do the enrolment. The schools are actually paid money for that process. My first reaction to that was, 'Whoops! Paying?' but then I realised that what is really happening is that the AEC is actually saving quite a lot of money in administration by getting the school to do the work. It is really a fee for service for the school. I think that makes some sense.

CHAIR—Privacy might have gone too far. Last week I went to a Medicare office and asked them, in the course of getting my rebate, what address they had recorded for me. They said that they could not tell me. I asked, 'Why?' and they answered, 'Privacy issues.' I said: 'But I'm the person who lives there. It's my address. You cannot tell me my address?' So sometimes things go too far.

Mr Spindler—I have had similar experiences. I have phoned telephone companies and people like that who will not tell me my own information over the phone for privacy reasons. I suspect it is very convenient for them sometimes.

CHAIR—We are going to hear from some witnesses later today who, in some surveys that they have done, have found that only 19 per cent of students know that there are three levels of government. Why is that? Here is your opportunity.

Mr Spindler—I would have thought that 19 per cent is really not a bad result.

Ms Giorgi—I have been in a classroom for many years—they are not listening.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Ms Giorgi—I would suggest that it is similar to a lot of the other knowledge that they know or do not know, if you were to ask them what they remember of their maths or English lessons. Being there every day, all day, being given information and being involved in those activities, students only retain a certain amount. I do not know that the three levels of government are always the most interesting thing at that age, mainly because I do not think they are citizens at that age. We do not treat children as though they have any power in decision making. Until they are prepared to do that as adults, I do not know how seriously they are going to take something that is part of the adult world—the decision making—which they are not really a part of. That is the real challenge in civics and citizenship education: the fact that they are children and obviously they cannot make the decisions that adults make, but give them a little bit of insight into the world of adulthood—the world of power, power sharing and decision making—and help them to realise that that is an exciting world, a world you want to be part of; you want to be an adult, you want to be a decision maker. I believe that is a concern with a lot of adults too. A lot of adults shun responsibility and decision making as well. Getting that across to them comes from innovative and interesting teaching but also the circumstances they come from at home and in their communities. I think that would increase their level of knowledge. Excursions to Parliament House and having members of parliament coming to speak to them at school and things like that help them remember some of those things as well and make it real.

Mr Spindler—It is about making it real. Through a civic action program, which we set up, we work with a school and are happy to say that that particular school has radically changed its year 6 curriculum. The result is that every student in year 6 works on projects which involve contacting government. They are very aware of the levels of government and the different responsibilities, because they have had to deal with it. They understand because it has reality to them. Theory is theory until you need it.

CHAIR—Mr Spindler, in your opening statement you referred to early closure of the rolls or a change in the closure of the rolls. You said that this ‘disenfranchises electors who are perfectly entitled to vote’. Those were your words.

Mr Spindler—Yes, they certainly were.

CHAIR—I can tell you now that the federal election will be in October next year. Knowing that there will be a federal election at that time next year, why does that disenfranchise those who are entitled to vote?

Mr Spindler—With respect, we do not know that there is going to be an election in October next year. Until there is an official announcement, we do not know; and, when there is an official announcement, it is too late to enrol.

CHAIR—You say in your evidence that there should be electoral centres in at least each capital city and major regional centres. Taking New South Wales as an example, where do you think there should be an electoral education centre?

Mr Spindler—It does not have to be electoral education on the level of all education centres. They can be adjusted to the realities of size and scale and location and so forth. But I think that Sydney in particular obviously needs one. I think there would be a good case for Newcastle and then there are several regional centres such as the big regional centres like Dubbo, Albury and Wagga, those sorts of places. Obviously this is a pipe dream and you match my idea or our idea against the financial and practical realities, of course, but there is no harm in having ideals; they are things we work towards.

CHAIR—Do you think that students in regional Australia, then, are discriminated against because they do not have this opportunity?

Mr Spindler—I think it is an ongoing issue and you only have to talk to—as we do—teachers and students in non-metropolitan areas to see that it is a constant concern for them that they cannot give their students the same educational experiences that metropolitan schools can much more easily. For them to do an excursion to Canberra or Sydney is a major undertaking and a very expensive one, and that is a real issue. Particularly these days with the drought and all those other sorts of issues, rural centres are struggling. It is not an easy thing for parents to cough up money for something that city kids can do for $5—it is going to cost them several hundred or something like that. It is a very different situation. I think it always has needed addressing.

Senator HOGG—Just following on from that, do you operate a website at all?

Mr Spindler—Yes, the parliament does; we contribute to it.

Senator HOGG—You contribute to it.

Mr Spindler—Yes.

Senator HOGG—What sort of material do you have available—because I have not been to the website—and does that assist those people in remote and regional areas?

Mr Spindler—I hope so. Virtually all the print materials that are available in the parliament are on the website as well, so they can be downloaded immediately. We know from the hit rate—I do not have the figures in my head—and from the inquiry rate that we get, the feedback rate that we get, that certainly a lot of people use it. What we would not know is where they are coming from. That is not so easy to determine. But I would think that for remote areas that want

to download that material, it is available. One of the things we do have, for example, is an online booking system for our tours. While it still requires personal confirmation and so on, it makes it possible for teachers to look at the dates that are available and things like that before they actually make a request. I would say that that is an area which, given some more resources, would be something I would like to put more effort into. I think we have a very information rich website. I believe it has 200,000 pages or something on it at the moment, which does not necessarily facilitate access to it, in a way.

Senator HOGG—Given that you are a unit of a sort, who provides the support for that part of the site which directly relates to the work you are doing, and how often is it updated?

Mr Spindler—We all do to some extent. It is updated regularly, but there is no pattern to that. It is as needed, it is as required that it is updated. I was updating some material this week. That is just as the need arises. Primarily it would be done by the admin officer, who is not here today. Most of the routine things she would do or we would provide her with the information and she would go through the process.

CHAIR—I would like to continue by asking you about point 9 in your submission, which talks about how to encourage voter enrolment. You have given a range of possibilities there—tertiary institutions providing forms, the ATO, Centrelink, Medicare. You are not qualified to answer this question, but I would just be interested in your reaction. What if it were a requirement of getting a Centrelink payment or registered for Medicare that, if you are entitled to be enrolled, you are actually enrolled? How would you feel about that?

Mr Spindler—My feeling—this is a personal feeling—is that voting is compulsory and enrolment is compulsory, so where is the issue, in a way?

Ms Giorgi—I think I would prefer it to be part of Medicare because just about everybody has Medicare. My aim would be to try to get as many people as possible. Medicare is already there and we already give all our personal details to Medicare. Because it is compulsory to vote, I do not really see a problem with it being part of enrolment.

CHAIR—When you conduct your school tours through this place, do you pick up a sense that the students are chiefly influenced in their views about democracy and civics by the media or by their teachers?

Senator HOGG—Or their parents?

CHAIR—Or their parents?

Mr Spindler—I am not an expert there. If I picked up a sense it would be a few scattered pieces of information that would be hard to make a generalisation about. I go back to the research that has been done, which suggests that parents are the primary source of information, and that the way in which young people use the media is not the way that we as adults would. They do not watch or listen to things like politics and the news but there are other aspects of the media that do influence those views.

CHAIR—Do you pick up a feeling that the students do not believe what they see or hear in the media?

Mr Spindler—I think that many of them would feel that way—that they would have a certain amount of cynicism, as I think they probably do about a number of things.

Ms Giorgi—I think it depends on which students. If you are talking about year-11 and year-12 students, they have possibly been taught at school but also are thinking for themselves and are more cynical about what they hear in the media, whereas younger students are perhaps not. Often students get a lot of their information from home. Obviously, school and teachers are a big influence as well. I think one of the issues is that people at home—the parents—believe a lot of what is being said in the media, particularly about members of parliament. We run public programs and one of the aims of the public programs is to demystify a member of parliament and parliament itself.

CHAIR—You could not do it for the Australian Senate.

Senator HOGG—And it is impossible for the House of Reps.

CHAIR—Can I finish?

Senator MASON—On that very point, Ms Giorgi, shouldn't it be a primary role of educators to provide students with the capacity for sceptical or critical thinking that should apply not just to the media but right across the board—not necessarily for them to become cynical, but certainly sceptical and critical?

Ms Giorgi—It is, particularly in the English syllabus and in the new civics and citizenship statement of learning, which will apply to the Human Society and its Environment type of syllabuses across the country. Critical analysis of information technologies and the media was one of the points placed in there. I think it is working with students. I think they do critically analyse the media. Whether they are still influenced by things like advertising in the media is another thing. I think a lot of good teaching is happening in schools, particularly English teaching, in terms of critically analysing the media.

Senator MASON—You do not have to be a postmodernist to believe in critical thinking.

Ms Giorgi—I think any intelligent person should be a critical thinker—not necessarily criticising but being able to look at something and think about it, is very important.

Mr Spindler—Making them informed consumers of all aspects of democracy, including the media.

CHAIR—Thinking about the area we are talking about, are you picking up any feelings about the adequacy of teacher professional development in this area?

Ms Giorgi—I think that the teacher professional development that is available is very good. I say that because we tend to provide some of it—so I believe it is very good!—and particularly in conjunction with the recently-ended Discovering Democracy program. That professional

development was very good and it went across the country but I can only speak about the New South Wales versions. There is always room for more money for more professional development to get to more teachers, particularly as there are new teachers coming out of universities each year. I think professional development is one of the things we do very well but there should be more of it.

Mr Spindler—I think the problem is that in New South Wales you have something like 100,000 teachers, and it is a mind-boggling exercise to effectively reach all of those people on so many varied curriculum issues. Those resources simply do not exist at that level. Given the resources that are available, I think it is pretty effective, but more resources would make it more effective. I think in the area of civics and citizenship, Discovering Democracy was almost unusual in the sense that it provided a really necessary level of professional development that was able to be undertaken. I think that stands in contrast with many other curriculum changes where those resources simply were not available.

CHAIR—Thank you for allowing us to finish on a positive note. We appreciate your attendance today and the evidence that you have given. We will provide you with a *Hansard* copy of what you have said. If you want to make some corrections, let us know. Congratulations on the good work you do for the students of New South Wales.

Mr Spindler—Thank you for allowing us to appear.

[9.47 am]

LANE, Mr Rod, Lecturer in Education, Human Society and its Environment, Australian Centre for Educational Studies, Macquarie University

SALTMARSH, Dr David Lloyd William, Lecturer, Australian Centre for Educational Studies, Macquarie University

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for being with us this morning. It was good of you to make the time available for us. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but I advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament. We have had a written submission from you. Do you want to add any written submissions, or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Dr Saltmarsh—I would like to make a brief opening statement.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Dr Saltmarsh—Thank you for the invitation to address the committee. This is something that we both feel quite committed to, and it is a very good opportunity to extend on that commitment. The Australian Centre for Educational Studies at Macquarie University comprises departments that deal with early childhood education and school education—that is, primary and secondary—an institute for higher education research and development, and a special education centre. So we cover a very broad range of teaching functions and teacher preparation functions.

The structure of the program that Rod and I are both involved in is called the School of Education. We provide primary and secondary education programs. I convene a unit that provides a general approach and looks at issues to do with national identity as well as issues of citizenship. Rod's area, which no doubt he will expand on during the questioning, is specific to the particular curriculum area of economics and business studies, primarily in the secondary school. There are other units within the school of education that also pick up issues to do with citizenship and civics education. One deals with the policy context, whereas mine deals with the social and historical context of education. We also have a unit teaching history that deals directly with Discovering Democracy and some of those elements there.

Our work within the centre is also now being referenced to the frameworks developed by the New South Wales Institute of Teachers, which requires that a number of components be taught. For teachers to be effectively prepared, they need to have a number of components in their program, so we are now involved in a process of mapping our teaching against these frameworks to ensure that all the students that come through Macquarie University and are qualified to teach have a certain minimum number of components in areas such as civics and citizenship education.

In response to one of the questions in the discussion in the presentation prior to this one, I think it is also interesting to note that the students that we teach are becoming a much more diverse group. It is no longer reasonable to expect that people going into teacher training are

people who have left high school wanting to become teachers. We increasingly have people from other careers coming into teaching. They may have worked as medical doctors or engineers, are coming in and are now qualified to teach. We also have quite an age range—people that have come to do a qualification after a period out of education and perhaps out of the workforce, having taken on domestic responsibilities. Increasingly, we have an older age group and people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While some of this stuff presents challenges in terms of devising a program that starts at an appropriate level, it also provides us with some great opportunities to draw on various sorts of life experience.

The teaching approach that we take—and this is the final point I would like to briefly touch on—is informed by this matter of developing critical thinking skills, which was also mentioned in the previous discussion, but also informed by a commitment to active and informed citizenship. We were aware of the various national and state framework documents, like, in my case, the 1989 Senate document, *Education for active citizenship in Australian schools and youth organisations*, the subsequent *Active citizenship revisited* and the work of the Civics Expert Group. In New South Wales, when the new HSC came into being it was informed by a document called *Shaping their future*, which specified that one of the purposes of the final years of secondary schooling was to produce active citizens. There was also the work of the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Adelaide declaration on education for the 21st century. These are the materials that inform our thinking, and we endeavour to build programs that address that vast array of documents within the frameworks et cetera.

CHAIR—Mr Lane, do you have anything to add to that?

Mr Lane—I think Dr Saltmarsh did a very good job.

Senator MASON—Basically, you teach the teachers. Is that right?

Dr Saltmarsh—That is correct.

Senator MASON—I am just trying to conceptualise what you do. On page 2 of your submission, in the second last paragraph you say:

> Civics and electoral themes are imbedded within the 'learn to' and 'learn about' statements of the NSW Stage 4/5 Commerce Syllabus as well as the cross curriculum content.

Within the learn to and learn about context, learn to is about, to use your words, Dr Saltmarsh, active participation in civic life. Is that right?

Mr Lane—Skills.

Dr Saltmarsh—I think the learn to statements are generally about skills.

Senator MASON—About skills, so participation in civic life.

Mr Lane—Correct.

Senator MASON—And the learn about is learning about democratic process.

Mr Lane—Yes, content.

Senator MASON—Good. I can understand that. Do you see it as one of your goals, or indeed obligations, to celebrate Australia's democratic life?

Mr Lane—I think the role and importance of democracy is ingrained in those syllabus documents and that, in your interpretation of those syllabus documents, is a direction that you would end up going in.

Senator MASON—So there is a presumption towards—how do I put this—that democracy is a—

Mr Lane—The value of democratic processes?

Senator MASON—Is a value worth celebrating. Is that the presumption that you make, Mr Lane?

Mr Lane—I would say so.

Senator MASON—I am not saying that there is anything wrong with that. I am just asking if that is a presumption that you make.

Dr Saltmarsh—It is a presumption I make, yes.

Senator MASON—That is good, because I have asked other people that say, 'Oh no, we can't assume a democracy is any better than any other system.' I agree with you gentlemen. My colleagues have heard me on this many times.

Dr Saltmarsh—One of the points that I think is inherent in democracy is the capacity to reflect on itself and to develop.

Senator MASON—I note that. In fact, it is funny—at the top of page 2 of your submission you say that in relation to the second and third sections of the unit:

In both these sections a themed approach to issues of social disadvantage is presented.

In a sense, that is what we are talking about. You talk about a critical—

Dr Saltmarsh—Yes, and you are talking about a unit that I convene there. So you are talking about an intellectual product of mine. Yes, I certainly—

Senator MASON—Sure. Dr Saltmarsh, in a sense, you are looking critically, however, at the democratic process.

Dr Saltmarsh—Correct.

Senator MASON—That is a good thing. Thank you.

Senator HOGG—Senator Mason established that you teach the teachers, but what teachers do you teach? Are all teachers subjected to the course or the units, or is it only those who will be operating specifically in those areas in either primary or secondary school?

Mr Lane—There is a broad framework that all of the teachers get captured under, and then they splinter into their individual curriculum areas where they focus on content.

Senator HOGG—So you get the broad mass who get a broad education. What is your experience of those people when you first get hold of them? What is their knowledge like? What is their understanding like? One of the things we have heard is that there are many teachers out there who are fearful of this area because they either have poor general knowledge themselves, poor understanding or it is a non-specific teaching area for them. Could you take us down that path?

Mr Lane—I would have to say in answer to that question that my experience has been very diverse. The group of teachers that I have in my TEP422 class, for example, which came out of that pool, are all business graduates. They have no problems whatsoever with any of these themes. They are extremely confident about teaching issues of electoral education and civics. However, at the other end of the spectrum, at the very beginning of the teacher education course, you do find students that are a lot more tentative about dealing with those issues and a lot less confident. But I have been blown away by both ends of that spectrum I would have to say.

Dr Saltmarsh—The unit that I teach is one of two foundation units that all students getting teaching qualifications, primary or secondary, at Macquarie must do.

Senator HOGG—So, if they were going out to be a phys ed teacher or a music teacher or whatever it might be, they would be all embraced in your courses.

Dr Saltmarsh—Correct. My course deals with the historical and social context of education. So all students that qualify, if they have done my course this year, will have looked at issues to do with national identity, disadvantaged groups and the role that education plays in helping them to move into a life beyond school.

Senator HOGG—You might not be able to answer this question but, in other universities that offer teacher education, do they offer the same sorts of courses and units that you do at your university? What sort of cooperation do you have if that happens at the other universities with them in developing a common approach, a common theme to this area?

Dr Saltmarsh—The way teacher education programs are structured in Australia, from my experience and to my knowledge, they are generally on two sorts of models. One model, which is the model that we have adopted at Macquarie University and is also in practice at the University of Sydney, for example, is a model where students are encouraged to take units in other faculties. So, if you were going to become a science teacher, you might have a major sequence of chemistry taught by chemistry experts. If you were doing history, you would have history experts teaching you. On to that we add some general units like the one I have just mentioned that looks at historical and social contexts and then move on to the sorts of units that

Rod teaches that look at specific curriculum areas and how that information is best imparted to students. That is one model. The other model is where the education faculty conducts the entire university training. My feeling is that that second model ensures that you know exactly what information people have got in terms of their programs, but it does not do as well to develop people's ability to take knowledge and transform it into teaching practice.

Senator HOGG—So what is the experience in other universities? Do they offer similar courses to you?

Dr Saltmarsh—Yes, there are generally units that look at social aspects that influence education, psychological aspects that influence education.

Senator HOGG—What I am trying to isolate is that yours is not just a one-off to Macquarie.

Dr Saltmarsh—No.

Senator HOGG—It is something that, if I went to the University of Sydney or one of the others, I would pick up in some form or other.

Mr Lane—Correct, a broad foundation course followed by specific curriculum units.

Senator HOGG—Is there a commonality there for the broad principles embraced in the basic teacher courses there, or is it optional?

Dr Saltmarsh—No. The broad principles would be in all those teacher education programs. There would be a different sort of flavour or texture to the sort of teaching—

Senator HOGG—Yes, I can understand that.

Dr Saltmarsh—But I think these things that we are talking about are considered to be fundamental, necessary elements for any teacher education program.

Mr CIOBO—I have a quick question first up. Do you believe that your teachers at the completion of your core subject would know whether a donkey vote is a formal vote or an informal vote?

Dr Saltmarsh—I would hope so. I cannot say that I know that they would know that.

Mr CIOBO—I guess what I am delving into by asking that question is about the mechanics that actually allows one to implement the philosophical or the broad underpinnings that you obviously touch upon, which I presume you go into—

Dr Saltmarsh—As I have explained, I am dealing with some quite broad issues. The sort of teaching that Rod is doing is much more specific to the development of that knowledge throughout the secondary program. Rod would be able to give you a much more specific answer to that question.

Mr Lane—I would be very worried by the end of my course if they could not answer that question. It is specifically commerce, economics, business studies and teacher education. They are dealing with the curriculum documents, they are dealing with the actual content and the skills they are supposed to learn—they are modelling teaching practice in these areas.

Mr CIOBO—Likewise with the differences between first past the post and preferential voting, et cetera?

Mr Lane—That is where they would learn that sort of content.

CHAIR—In a highly unusual action, the committee secretary wants to ask you a question.

Secretary—Why are you teaching this in business commerce/economics?

Mr Lane—It is the commerce syllabus primarily that has that learn about content in it. The geography years 7 to 10 syllabus and the history years 7 to 10 syllabus have increasing components of that civic content since the 2003 rewrite. So they are getting more on par with what you would find in the commerce document.

CHAIR—Do you get a sense that the up and coming teachers you are teaching feel uneasy about teaching civics and electoral education? Do you think they themselves think they are not qualified to do it?

Mr Lane—No, not from my experience. The thing that needs to be clarified with them very quickly is about the approach they take to teaching it. There is the thought around that you need to isolate civics and citizenship and teach it in a piece by itself. I think once trainee teachers start to see how they can integrate this sort of learning into the content areas that they are teaching then they are a lot less fearful.

CHAIR—Do you have any sense that overseas countries do much better than Australia does in teaching civics education? Do you have a sense that children who come to Australia from overseas know a lot more about the history of their country than Aussies know about the history of Australia?

Mr Lane—I do not think so, no.

Dr Saltmarsh—Regarding the apprehension about teaching, I often present a course to people and it is often the first year of university. The feedback I get from a number of people is that there has been some sort of weight lifted by having some of this stuff explained. In saying that, I do not mean to reflect negatively on the New South Wales curriculum because a lot of the people I am teaching are only just starting to come through from that process. I will be interested to see if there is an increased awareness of these things. But there seems to be a relief that people now understand what a term like ‘economic rationalism’ might mean. It is in the media but it is not explained in the media. Part of our job is to explain some of these sorts of iconic statements, I guess.

Mr Lane—Put it in some sort of a context and integrate it. Then they can make that useful. They can draw on the media. I think part of the problem with the media influence is that it is there but it is not unpacked or untangled.

Mr CIOBO—I am interested in some of the science that underpins your teaching, not insofar as how to teach but with respect to civics education and some of the underpinning science in that respect. We have had testimony from previous witnesses detailing, for example, the view that students, in undertaking these subjects, will often feel disconnected from an issue. They might understand the mechanics of voting but not actually understand why they should vote. Similarly we have heard evidence that teachers, for example, feel that it is sometimes a difficult area to teach because they do not want to get into the philosophies or politics of teaching. I just wonder whether you can help the committee with any particular references—and you can take this on notice—on perhaps some of the science and research that underpins some of this that we could turn our minds to?

Mr Lane—I might take that one on notice.

Dr Saltmarsh—I would be happy to respond to you on that. There are a very broad number of influences. My own intellectual development has been shaped by reading Marx and post-Marxist writers, post-structuralist writers, so that would be some of the science that you refer to, although those people would probably be askance if I were referring to their work as science. So some of that thinking informs social justice issues and the way social justice issues are taken forward.

Mr CIOBO—I guess I am talking more specifically about the actual science of teaching it.

Mr Lane—Of making it more significant to students?

Mr CIOBO—Yes. For example, we have heard evidence that students' first experiences with elections—whether or not teachers in a student council election, for example, have an influence in the outcome of a student council election—have a very large impact on the view that students have, favourable or otherwise, about the legitimacy of elections generally. That in itself is a fairly profound statement. I guess I am asking: can you point us to any science that has examined those kinds of attitudinal issues—to qualitative or even quantitative analysis of events like that? I am interested in some of that background. We can take it at face value as a committee, but that in itself is quite a powerful statement, and it is hard for us to know how accurate or otherwise it is. I am trying to determine some corroborating research that might support—or otherwise—those kinds of statements.

Dr Saltmarsh—I would be happy to look into that and make a further response, but I do not know of anything off the top of my head.

Mr Lane—Direct action research in that area—I cannot think of anything.

Senator MASON—Dr Saltmarsh, you mentioned national identity before. What values do you believe underpin the Australian national identity? What do you teach your teachers?

Dr Saltmarsh—What do I teach them to believe as far as national identity is concerned? I first came to be interested in this because I was researching the development of the Public

Instruction Act 1880. There is a fascinating period of Australian history from the beginnings of representative government through to the end of the century. I have been asking students: what role does school play in forming national identity, and in what ways does it do this? I am thinking of things like the paintings that are on the wall, the things that people are being given to learn to read from, the songs that they sing—

Mr Lane—Traditions of the school.

Dr Saltmarsh—Yes, and the people who are elevated as folk heroes. The values that I would most like them to take away from this are that the idea of national identity is something that is constructed, it is something that is built up, and therefore it can be shifted and changed. I would like people to realise that national identity is not something—

Senator MASON—Static.

Dr Saltmarsh—static, that is right. It horrifies me a little when people present me stereotypical images of bronzed surfers, for example, as: 'This is an Australian, and this is what we know is good and proper and right and lovely, and we are proud to be Australian.' I have no problem with people being proud to be Australian, but I think they should be able to penetrate a little below the surface. So I am looking at the constructed, changing nature of it.

Senator MASON—Even if the Australian national identity is not necessarily static, that does not mean, does it, that anything goes?

Dr Saltmarsh—Of course not.

Senator MASON—That is the national debate at the moment.

Dr Saltmarsh—In order to make a distinction between that and 'anything goes', people need to have some sort of sense of who they see themselves as being and where they see themselves as connecting to, historically and currently.

Senator MASON—Absolutely.

Dr Saltmarsh—I am not disagreeing with you; I am just saying—

Senator MASON—No, that is a very interesting point. When I was at school we spoke about diversity—all we ever spoke about was diversity. Now, when you start talking about national identity, we start looking at things about not so much diversity per se but in fact what binds us together.

Dr Saltmarsh—Correct.

Senator MASON—When you try to list them, it is actually quite difficult at times. There are some things—respect for democracy, the rule of law, respect for others, tolerance, pluralism. I would say that people should learn English as well—that would be my view—but that may be more contentious, although less so today, I think, than it was 20 years ago.

Dr Saltmarsh—It is difficult to get by without it.

Senator MASON—I missed that, in the sense that that is now part of the national debate. I think you are right to enter into it.

Dr Saltmarsh—But it is plunging into that debate that I think is the important thing, rather than coming out with a specified set of answers.

Senator MASON—Thank you, that is great.

CHAIR—There is compelling evidence that students who are taken to a place like this and run through a program are infinitely better off in terms of electoral and civics education than those who are not. Have you considered putting your teachers through a program of coming to the legislature?

Mr Lane—It sounds like a fantastic idea.

Dr Saltmarsh—Before thinking about this particular committee and my response to it, I had not. I had thought of other sorts of excursions of that kind.

CHAIR—There is an idea. Thanks for appearing before us today. We appreciate that very interesting evidence. We will send you a copy of the transcript. We will await with interest that additional material that you said you would research. We appreciate your attendance today.

Proceedings suspended from 10.17 am to 10.33 am

AGACAYAK, Mrs Arzu, Editor, Turkish News Weekly

CASS, Mrs Ann, Divisional Returning Officer for Cunningham, Australian Electoral Commission

MAMO, Ms Peita, Public Awareness Officer, Australian Electoral Commission

MANSOURI, Mr Richard, Editor, Persian Herald

MINAS, Mr George, In-House Counsel, FL Press Pty Ltd

MURPHY, Ms Rhonda Joy, Divisional Returning Officer for Prospect, Australian Electoral Commission

NELSON, Ms Marie Patricia, Deputy State Manager, Australian Electoral Commission

NG, Mr Charles, Adviser, Australian Chinese Newspapers Pty Ltd

NGO, Mr Thang, National Sales Manager, Special Broadcasting Service

O'LEARY, Mr Grahame, Manager, Government Relations, Special Broadcasting Service

TRUMPER, Mr Ezequiel, National News Editor, Radio Austral

WILLIAMSON, Ms Shauna, Director, Public Awareness Programs Section, Australian Electoral Commission

CHAIR—Welcome, everybody. You are from a diverse group of the media and the Australian Electoral Commission. This is the first time the committee has, in its inquiry, had ethnic media representatives appear before it. It is really great that you could come along. We are going to have a pretty informal backwards-and-forwards discussion now, and I think we will get a lot out of it. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these are legal proceedings of the parliament and they should be respected as such. Does anyone want to make an opening comment before we proceed to questions? It is fine if you would like to do so.

Mr O'Leary—On behalf of SBS, SBS acknowledges that electoral education is important, particularly in Indigenous and multicultural communities. It notes that the adequacy of electoral education of Indigenous and migrant communities has been addressed by other submissions and other hearings and agrees that more could be done in this area. SBS is an independent national broadcaster operating under the Special Broadcasting Services Act. The principal charter function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in so doing, reflect Australia's multicultural society.

SBS television provides both analog and digital television services, and around 73 per cent of SBS television programs across its channels are broadcast in a language other than English. SBS

radio broadcasts in 68 languages and assists communities to participate as fully as possible in Australian society. SBS online provides comprehensive text, video and audio services on the SBS website, and the online services extend and enhance SBS's television and radio programming. SBS also provides a range of language services.

CHAIR—As there any no other opening comments, let us move straight to questions. I will ask each of the people representing the media—not the AEC, for the moment—to answer the same set of questions, and we will just go down the line. George, we will start with you. We would like to know: do you have journalists who cover federal, state and local elections? How often do you write editorials on issues of Australian politics and do they generate letters back to the media organisation? Is there strong debate in your media about Australian politics or are your readers more concerned about events overseas?

Mr Minas—Yes, we do have journalists who preoccupy themselves with Australian politics. They do so on a daily basis.

CHAIR—Do they generate feedback?

Mr Minas—Yes, they do.

CHAIR—Is there strong debate about Australian politics or is your readership more interested in overseas?

Mr Minas—When it comes to strong debate, yes, there is a debate, but I am sure you are aware that all ethnic minorities try to get along with all governments and all future governments, so we try to keep a balance between, say, the two major political parties. I think that is the reality for most of us. We do not take sides.

Mr Ng—In the past we have had feature articles relating to the electoral process and government, but it is not on a regular basis. The newspaper is involved a lot with the elections, and different candidates have their voice in the newspaper, but we do not have a specific department or individual in the office who looks after this area.

Mrs Agacayak—Our readers are more interested in Australian politics. The content of *Turkish News Weekly* is over 99 per cent Australian news, so in that sense we do not cover political issues in Turkey. We do not have a specific political reporter, but towards the elections, as Charles has said, we cover a lot more about the parties and the candidates and so forth.

CHAIR—Are your readers more interested in overseas? Obviously they are not.

Mrs Agacayak—No, they are not.

CHAIR—Do you get letters to the editor?

Mrs Agacayak—Not a lot—not on political matters anyway. We do have columnists that encourage voting, to be part of the Australian system and so forth, but there is not a lot of feedback from the readers.

Mr CIOBO—I address this question to all the media: would you characterise your publications as being basically—and I am using this in a general way—the *Australian* or the *Daily Telegraph* or whatever but in a language other than English? Or do you characterise it as being more of a focused newspaper that is delving into issues that may affect, say, the Turkish community or the Vietnamese community? I am just wondering how you are characterised.

Mrs Agacayak—As I said, our news content covers all the happenings in Australia—political issues, health issues and so forth. We do not use news from the world or from Turkey unless it is really significant.

CHAIR—Are you the *Daily Telegraph* of the Turkish community?

Mrs Agacayak—We could be.

Mr CIOBO—I am asking whether it is a stock standard paper but in another language—

Mrs Agacayak—That is right.

Mr CIOBO—or a paper that narrows and has as its core focus issues affecting your community readership.

Mrs Agacayak—No, I would say it is—

Mr CIOBO—I mean beyond the ordinary Australia, if that makes sense.

Mrs Agacayak—That is right. We have community news, local news and also general news about happenings in Australia that would interest the Turkish community.

Mr Ng—The *Australian Chinese Daily* is basically a daily newspaper and it is no different to other language daily newspapers. Of course, we emphasise very much news that relates to the community. It is a very vibrant community. During election time it was very active in all our coverage. The newspaper's role is very neutral and independent. We do not want to give an image that we are inclined towards certain parties or members of parliament. We do not want to be viewed as being inclined towards certain parties. We just have a plain information basis.

Mr Minas—All the newspapers we publish, including the *Greek Herald*, the *Novosti* and the *Spanish Herald*, for example, are considered to be the *Daily Telegraph* of each respective community. I would have hoped that they could match the *Sydney Morning Herald* in editorial material, but I am afraid that is not possible for the moment.

CHAIR—SBS missed out on the first round of questions. Do you want me to remind you of what they were about?

Mr O'Leary—I think I might get the basic thread. SBS employs a number of journalists across its TV and radio platforms. There is extensive debate in a number of formats, in language programs, in television news and current affairs, and in online debates. We do cover both domestic and overseas issues, but many of our programs, due to their nature, have an overseas focus, especially television news and many of the language programs as well.

Senator MASON—Do you claim to be politically impartial at SBS?

Mr O'Leary—Yes, certainly.

Senator MASON—It never tilts to the left?

CHAIR—Just say no!

Mr O'Leary—We are guided by our codes of practice and provide balance over time and accurate reporting.

Mr CIOBO—That is the bureaucratic answer.

CHAIR—AEC, how do you find the role of ethnic media in helping you to provide electoral information to the people of Australia?

Ms Williamson—The AEC very clearly acknowledges the role of the ethnic media and the role they play in informing their communities. For a number of years, the AEC has placed advertising in newspapers and on radio. I think during the last election we did some in language advertising on SBS television as well. We would also be looking to the language newspapers and radio to be providing information to their communities through an editorial component. We met with SBS radio earlier to talk about some opportunities for doing some programming work in language as well.

CHAIR—Do you think the ethnic media discharge their responsibility to inform their readership and viewership in this matter? Be tough on them if you need to.

Ms Williamson—No, they are doing an excellent job.

CHAIR—Ethnic media, do you think the AEC provides you with sufficient resources and materials to put in your publications? Are they a good resource? Have you never heard from them?

Mrs Agacayak—I have, absolutely. We had some advertisements in the 2004 election campaign. Advertisements are very important—I agree with that—and also I think we do need a bit more editorial support, translated in the languages that we are targeting. I think that is very important, and I cannot see an editor that will not publish this information because it is very important for our communities to vote in elections. I am sure that is the case for all the ethnic media. We would welcome a lot more editorial support—translated, preferably, because unfortunately we are not the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Daily Telegraph* and we do not have the resources that these big papers have. Sometimes time is an issue, the journalists' translators are an issue. If it does not come as a media kit, sometimes we can overlook it—I am talking on my behalf—so, yes, editorial support is always welcome.

Advertisements help a lot. I did go through the advertisements that we received as *Turkish News Weekly*. I do not know the percentage but I think there are a lot of informal votes in the Turkish community. When I looked at the advertisement that we received I saw that we only had one week of 'how to vote' for the Senate and the House of Representatives. I think that is just

not enough, although it is in Turkish, because people just do not know, and we have got an aged community. I think that perhaps especially the 'how to vote' advertisements could run for a longer period. That would be great as well.

CHAIR—How do the other newspapers feel about the AEC on providing information?

Mr Ng—From Sonia's email to me, it seems like we are dealing with a high rate of informal vote for the ethnic communities. But let us not forget that the election itself is basically one of the undemocratic elements in a democratic system and obviously people who do not want to be caught and be fined go to vote but they are really not interested in voting. Obviously, to me that is happening. Also, because they are not politically motivated, they are not interested at all. So in terms of advertising, promoting people going to vote, it does not seem to be a problem here, from what I have seen. It is the people who are voting with an informal vote that is the problem. I think that could be on top of the advertising that should be emphasised, but there are other ways of educating the public that we may deal with later on—we can talk about that a little bit.

Mr Minas—I agree with Mrs Agacayak in her comments regarding editorial support. Let's not beat around the bush: with ethnic media, for the bulk of its readership, its attention is focusing more on either an ageing population or a population that does not have any particular education, let's be honest. Many of these people do not know how to vote. They need to be educated in order to participate in the electoral process. I would disagree with Mr Ng that readership are not interested in electoral matters. I do not know about the readers of his newspaper but our readership are very much more interested in what is happening here rather than back in their home country. This is something that you have to take into account.

CHAIR—In that respect—and I am coming to you, Richard, and to SBS in a minute—take people who have come from other countries where the electoral system may be radically different from that in Australia. Do you find that they have difficulty understanding that we have an open and free democracy? Is that a problem?

Mr Minas—I would not say that they have a problem understanding that we have an open and free democracy, but I do not think they know how to use the means.

CHAIR—Richard, do you get support from the AEC with the *Persian Herald*?

Mr Mansouri—Sometimes.

CHAIR—Do you think you get sufficient support?

Mr Mansouri—No.

CHAIR—What would you like to see happen?

Mr Mansouri—We would like to see the AEC get in touch with us—at least half of the other newspapers, the English newspapers—which unfortunately they have not as yet.

CHAIR—What readership do you have? How many readers?

Mr Mansouri—I think about 50,000 Persians who are here by now.

CHAIR—I hope this is not sensitive. Because you call it the *Persian Herald*, does that mean it circulates in the Baha'i community?

Mr Mansouri—Yes, of course. Baha'i is a religion. Persia is a nation.

CHAIR—I understand that.

Mr Mansouri—Yes, Iranian and Afghan people.

CHAIR—I understand that. SBS, how do you deal with the fact that you have to satisfy so many different ethnic groups? How does the AEC work with you to do that?

Mr Ngo—If I could just add this, we look at the way that the AEC have worked through the various elections. I know that any organisation can do better—and of course we are the first to say things can be improved—but, as for the way the AEC worked through the 2001 election versus the 2004 election, there was a marked difference in improvement in terms of communication—and I know of course that anything can be improved all the time.

In terms of the resources, they have people in language. The number of languages that they went to and the budget that was allocated to that was quite strong. We did some research in terms of informal voting. I declare now that my other hat is as a local government councillor in Fairfield, and we have the prestige of being the most culturally diverse—and Fowler covers that area. A quick glance at the informal rate—and I know a lot of effort was put in by the AEC because Fowler was the highest in terms of the informal rate—shows that dropped from 12.8 per cent to 9.1 per cent in 2004. 9.1 per cent is still 9.1 per cent too high—I would be the first to vouch for that—but the way I actually see it is that there were efforts there.

Taking on some of the points of the other contributors, when we looked at the participation rate, the participation rate was actually relatively quite high, so in terms of if you were putting out ads people knew that the election was on. It goes to the point of what the other people were saying. It is actually editorial content to try and flesh out a bit further how to vote or to engage the people in the democratic process so that they feel that their vote is important, so they come there and they make an effort to make it formal.

Coming back to the issue of SBS radio being in 68 different languages, a lot of the migrants who come to Australia have come because they wanted to come to a free and democratic society. If you do come to a free and democratic society—and I know this because I am Vietnamese—you take the right to vote as being very important. That is why we fled Vietnam in the first place: we would not be able to vote if we stayed there. So the interest is there and I think the level of engagement is improving. It can always be improved, but I think there is definitely interest. We run talkback programs. We have an outside broadcast program whereby we go to community festivals and functions . What we actually put to the Australian Electoral Commission is this: one of the issues is that you can communicate, but how do people actually get a form to enrol or change their address, which is the other issue? There are a lot of things we can do to help, because our charter also encourages us to help our listeners adjust to society.

CHAIR—Does anyone have a comment on the SBS evidence?

Mrs Agacayak—I agree. Our community wants to vote, but they really do not know how to sometimes. I am sure a lot of people do not want to get fined, but Turkey is a democratic country so there are no problems there. Its election campaigns are completely different from how the election campaigns are run here, but the voting system would be pretty similar. I do not agree with Mr Ng in the sense that they are voting so they will not get fined for it and are going and getting blank votes. I do not agree with that. I think they want to vote but they just need to know how to do it.

CHAIR—Let us turn to civics education, rather than electoral education, and think of the media which you represent—and I welcome Mr Trumper.

Mr Trumper—I am here representing Radio Austral, which is the largest Spanish-speaking radio station in Australia. We broadcast 24 hours times seven.

CHAIR—Where do you broadcast?

Mr Trumper—Everywhere in Sydney, on 87.8 FM. We own the only two 87.8 FM licences in Sydney. We also broadcast nationwide through a UBI platform on digital because—I do not know whether you are aware of this—UBI has 84 ethnic channels throughout Australia in about 10 different languages and Spanish is one of them.

CHAIR—How is it received? Is it received by satellite?

Mr Trumper—It is by satellite, but it is all based in Australia. It is based in Pyrmont. The satellite does not come from some place in the Middle East. I am a lawyer by trade, but anyway that does not matter.

CHAIR—So you are an Argentinean, Spanish-speaking lawyer in Australia.

Mr Trumper—Yes, I have been a lawyer in Australia and New Zealand for the last 20 years.

CHAIR—And you are related to a cricketer!

Mr Trumper—No, I am no relation to a cricketer. In relation to what I have just heard, the Spanish-speaking community has a very high participation rate in politics. Most of its members are heavily politicised. They sometimes come from countries where having the right to vote was a privilege, not a right, and they had to fight for it, so they feel very passionate about elections, so there is no problem with their voting.

CHAIR—Turning to the civics side of this—which is where Australia has come from, our history and our heritage—and thinking of your own media, do you cover any of that material or are you really interested in just covering contemporary Australia?

Mr Minas—To be quite honest—

CHAIR—Does that mean that you are dishonest sometimes!

Mr Minas—Sometimes; it is a matter of one's trade—I am a lawyer!

Mr Trumper—That makes this a very dangerous room!

Mr Minas—I can honestly say that the majority of our material is concentrating on contemporary Australia but, to be honest, even the English publications, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, really do not cover much of it.

CHAIR—That is a good comment.

Mr Ng—We actually have a weekend magazine which on a weekly basis always has a feature article which basically deals with Australian events and affairs like Australia Day, Anzac Day and those things. So we have sufficient in terms of Australian background, history and so on, but in terms of the election it is really a different matter.

Mrs Agacayak—As to really significant days—Gallipoli, Anzac Day, Australia Day and days like that—I agree as we do, but we do not have a history section. Sometimes our columnists will write about a particular event and so on and so forth but we do not have a section in the paper that covers Australian history.

Senator MASON—Particularly with Turkey, I would have thought Gallipoli would celebrating—

Mrs Agacayak—Absolutely; during Anzac Day and Gallipoli we have pages and pages of articles.

Mr Ngo—As to our content, because we have 68 different languages, we broadcast over two different frequencies. Because of that, we broadcast in a different language every hour from 6 am through to midnight. Each language group has one hour a day. Because of that, we are constrained as to our news. As for our current news, we report a lot of Australian domestic news because we find that the community can get homeland news through the internet or other sources. The key important part of news for us is to cover what is happening in our backyard. Because of that I cannot say that we have that much information about history.

Mr Mansouri—We have considered the information that our community needs and then we go to the parts that we can inform our community about—as the others have said.

CHAIR—Do you print the civics component or are you in contemporary?

Mr Trumper—We do both—the papers and the radio station. We are in a difficult position because, even though we broadcast in Spanish, we have about 25 different nationalities that speak the same language. So we do not focus very much on what happened in the old backyards, we simply talk about what is happening in Australia. We devote about two hours per day to contemporary news about Australia, civic duties and what is happening in the country. We cover politics in depth because the purpose of the station is to integrate the people who do not speak English into the mainstream rather than to keep them where they are. It is exactly the opposite. That is what we do.

Senator MASON—Mr Ngo, SBS primarily seeks to represent and appeal to Australia's broad multicultural society. You said that many of those people that SBS should be appealing to come to Australia because Australia is a free and democratic society. What does SBS do, or does SBS seek to celebrate Australia as a great democracy?

Mr Ngo—I think SBS as a corporation does. In radio a lot of our effort—like the other media—is spent trying to explain how the residents actually live in Australia, and to help arm the listeners to live in Australia—changes in legislation, conserving water and all those issues. We are trying to integrate the listeners into Australia.

Senator MASON—Does it outline in any of its radio programs the merits of democracy? Does it take a salutary view?

Mr Ngo—It is hard to say across all 68 languages. The larger languages that I monitor certainly do. The Vietnamese program—

Senator MASON—It is hard to generalise.

Mr Ngo—It is hard to generalise, but I do listen to the Vietnamese program all the time. Democracy is something which is pushed quite a lot because a lot of people died trying to obtain democracy and similarly a lot of the new settlers into Australia from the Middle East come up with the same issues. We find that is something the listeners want to hear.

Senator MASON—I only ask because I know how much SBS celebrates great democracies like the United States—a pointed question. There are two issues here and the chairman touched on this. There is the electoral process but also civic participation. They are two quite separate issues. Mr Minas, you touched on that a little. Do you think that the people you serve—and newspapers are a service to the community—are less knowledgeable about the electoral process than other Australians?Do you think that the people your newspapers seek to serve understand less about the electoral process than other Australians?

Mr Minas—I would not say so because I do not think many Australians know much about the electoral process anyway.

Senator MASON—That is a fair answer. I just wanted to hear that. You do not feel that you are serving a disadvantaged community in that sense?

Mr Minas—No. When I say they are more disadvantaged, let me mention the *Greek Herald*, which is one of our publications. We all know there are about 500,000 to 700,000 Greeks in this country. A large bulk of that population is aged between 45 and 75. These people have come with many more educational skills. Many times their comprehension of the English language is not the best; it is certainly not perfect. Many times I feel that they get confused. They do not know how to vote. They ask others; they ask for the input of others. This is what I am really touching upon.

Senator MASON—Do you see it as one of your duties to educate your readership about the electoral process?

Mr Minas—Of course it is a duty. It is the duty of all kinds of media.

Senator MASON—Do you all agree with Mr Minas on that, that it is part of your duty to educate your readership about that?

Mrs Agacayak—Yes.

Mr Minas—It is a duty. It is also a duty of our schools to educate people in regards to their duties.

Senator MASON—Sure.

Mr Minas—I just had to mention that. It is the duty of everyone. I am an immigrant myself. We have come to this country and we have made it our home. Yes, I do care what is happening back in my home country, but I have built my home here, I have my family here, this is my country. If tomorrow there is a war in Australia and there is a war in Greece, I cannot go back to Greece. This is where my home is. I have to defend my land here. From this comes the conclusion that yes, it is everyone's duty to participate in the democracy of this country. We need to educate people and get them more active in the process.

Senator MASON—You have actually merged two issues that the chairman touched on before—that you all see it as a duty to educate your readership or your listeners in the electoral process, but you also added, Mr Minas, that it is not just to learn about the process but to be participants in democracy, which is a different thing. One is participation and one is knowledge and you think it is both.

Mr Minas—Yes, it is both because there is an issue with this.

Senator MASON—Do you all see that as a duty? Does SBS see it as a duty for your listeners to actively participate in Australian democracy? Do you promote that?

Mr Ngo—Yes.

Mrs Agacayak—Yes.

Mr Trumper—I do not think it is the role of a journalist to encourage people to enrol in a political party to participate.

Senator MASON—Sorry, I am not saying involved in a political party necessarily, but you can be involved in many ways—

Mr Trumper—That is the only way you can participate in the electoral process.

Senator MASON—Sorry, I do not want to confuse you. There are plenty of ways you can become involved in civic life.

Mr Trumper—I understand that.

Senator MASON—Community life.

Mr Trumper—That is fine.

Senator MASON—And you all see that as part of your duty?

Mr Trumper—Absolutely.

Mr Ng—As far as I am concerned, the education of our readers in the democratic system is not just the responsibility of our media or our newspapers. It is the responsibility of both the public and the newspaper. As we are a private enterprise, we are totally self-financed and independent.

Senator MASON—I understand that.

Mr Ng—The first priority is to make the newspaper financially viable, and that is the whole issue. Educating the public is the second thing.

Senator MASON—I understand that. But you do all feel a sense of corporate responsibility, in a sense.

Mr Ng—As a media worker, yes.

Mr O'Leary—And it is in SBS's charter to assist people to participate fully in Australian society.

CHAIR—Just addressing head-on an issue that is circulating in the community at the moment, the Australian government is considering a proposal to introduce an English language proficiency test for Australian citizenship. Do you have any views on that?

Mr Trumper—I do not think it is right at all. I will say why. Putting aside the values, putting aside everything else that has been debated in recent months or weeks, once a person is a legal resident of Australia, for the period the person remains in Australia the only benefit that is conferred by citizenship is the right to vote and the right to hold certain positions where being an Australian citizen is a precondition.

CHAIR—That is not true and I will tell you why, if you like.

Mr Trumper—Why? I would be interested to know.

CHAIR—I had a constituent who was German. He had been here 60 years—he was not an Australian citizen. He accidentally got caught up in a drug situation.

Mr Trumper—I had a client who had the same problem; I know where you are coming from.

CHAIR—He went to jail and, because the sentence was for more than a year, he was deported. He had his whole family, grandparents whatever, here and knew nobody in Germany. So there is a very good reason to become an Australian citizen.

Mr Trumper—Absolutely and precisely; you have proved my point. If there is a very good reason for people to become citizens, why are we going to put up another barrier for them to become so? What is going to happen in the Spanish-speaking community is that lot of people will feel embarrassed about going and sitting a test that they may fail—people who are 55, who are 50—because it is very difficult to learn a new language. I could teach you—I cannot, but somebody else could—to fly a Boeing 747 in less time than it would take to teach you to speak Spanish.

CHAIR—Is that right?

Mr Trumper—Absolutely. Learning a language is one of the most difficult, never-ending tasks you will ever face in your whole life.

Mr Mansouri—For most people.

Mr Trumper—For the vast majority of people.

CHAIR—Especially for older people.

Mr Trumper—Forget it. For older people it is almost an impossibility.

CHAIR—Good point. Are there any other views on that?

Mr Ng—I see it as being more for political rather than practical purposes. When we start emphasising our multiculturalism, we talk about the first generation; we understand that these are the people who come to Australia and who become Australians for the betterment of their future and their children. So we actually put the emphasis on the next generation, not this one. That is one thing. Secondly, language does not mean everything. It is about the attitude. If a person who speaks English does not have the attitude to become a real Australian, it makes no difference. I see a lot of people in our neighbourhood who become good neighbours without really speaking a lot of the language. All you need is, 'Good morning; how the hell are you!' You do not need to speak a lot, whereas people who speak English do not necessarily follow the rules of the neighbours. That is where conflicts happen. When we emphasise the language test, we are actually going back to the Immigration Restriction Act.

CHAIR—I see a lot of agreement with that; is that right?

Mr Ngo—Everyone has their personal views. But, just so you know, what we did at SBS Radio is that we reported it in a similar way to mainstream radio. We thought it was important to let the community know that the discussion paper was out and where to read it, so at least people could make an informed decision about it and then how to respond to it. The way we would look at it was that, if our listeners reacted to it, you would be getting the input through the normal channels. You talked about civics and how to participate: we see that as one way. At least people are informed first and then they can make their decision.

CHAIR—We are running out of time. What I would like to do now is to ask any of you: is there anything that we have not covered that you feel you would like to tell us about?

Mr Trumper—I think it is very important in your position as the government to be aware that some people have taken the latest campaign on Australian values very badly—not me personally; I am totally assimilated. I am not talking about me; I am talking about others. We ran a talkback show on this issue a few weeks ago and people started telling us that they felt like second-class citizens, that there was one class of Australians and another class of Australians, and I do not think that helps the community. I think it defeats the very purpose that the Prime Minister wants to achieve, in my view, from the bottom of his heart. He is in a way achieving the reverse outcome to what he wants.

Mr Ngo—I want to focus on the electoral process and how we promote and educate the readers. As far as I know, we should have regular questions and answers from the readers themselves, because we really do not know what they do not know. There is such a wide range of matters to deal with. The advertising can help in announcing when elections are going to take place and the rules: if people have no time to do it, where they can vote, and all those types of things. That is where advertising can help. But to motivate those people to vote properly, you need them to actually come forward and tell us what the problem is so that we can answer them. This has to be done fairly regularly, at least three months before the election, so that they have a regular space where they know the questions and answers are. People would hopefully—

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Senator HOGG—Not that I am pushing this barrow at all, but does it warrant, in some instances where there are defined concentrations of ethnic communities, a ballot paper in a language other than English? I do not know, but in listening to what you said—

CHAIR—Fascinating.

Mrs Agacayak—If that could be done, I think that would be very helpful.

Senator HOGG—Would that help participation in the electoral process?

Mrs Agacayak—If it could be done, it could be helpful—absolutely.

CHAIR—What is the AEC's view?

Senator HOGG—I saw them grimace.

CHAIR—How is that for being put on the spot?

Senator HOGG—I would like to hear from the various language groups. Regarding the point about the educational background of some people, which I think Mr Trumper raised, if it is in their own language, that might be a—

Mr Trumper—In fact, we run a citizenship campaign. We ask everybody to become citizens immediately before the test.

Mrs Agacayak—Could I ask a question? Regarding the hotline numbers on advertisements and media releases, do you get a lot of phone calls to those hotlines from the ethnic community?

Ms Williamson—Obviously during election time it peaks. We also get peaks after we have done a mail-out—asking people to update their details—or if we have run a particular advertisement or something that has caused them to take a little bit more interest in it. Across the 16 language lines that we run, yes, we do get calls, but there are definitely peaks and troughs.

Mrs Agacayak—So you get calls; that is great.

CHAIR—Are there any other comments?

Mr Ngo—There are a lot of challenges in this current election because there are a lot of changes. There are boundary changes. People still bumble to the wrong polling booth, even with existing boundaries. There are quite significant changes: proof of identity and the early close of the roll. The one that we struggle with a lot—and this applies in New South Wales and Queensland—is the difference in voting systems. We saw that in the Auburn by-election, where there was a 'vote 1' campaign in a state election two months prior to the federal election. I feel a bit bad for the AEC. It looks like they did a bad job with the federal election, but there was a very concerted campaign for people to remember to just 'vote 1', and that is what sort of affected it. There is the case where you have a state election in March next year and perhaps a federal election. Certainly in Victoria you are going to have an election in November. So the times are slightly different.

CHAIR—In New South Wales' local government elections, is it 'first past the post'?

Mr Ngo—In 2008. It will be afterwards, I think.

CHAIR—No—is it 'first past the post' or is it preferential?

Mr Ngo—I should know, shouldn't I?

CHAIR—Yes, you should know.

Mr Ngo—It has actually changed to a group sort of thing—you can vote for those above the line or below the line.

CHAIR—Is your council political, by the way!

Senator MASON—Mrs Cass, do you have a view?

Mrs Cass—Isn't it optional preferential in a state election?

CHAIR—In local government elections.

Mrs Cass—And in local government elections?

CHAIR—It is optional preferential.

Mr CIOBO—I would like to ask the AEC a question. We heard that you have done advertising in native tongue, so to speak—I assume during the 31-day election period. What do you do outside of that period?

Ms Williamson—In language work in particular?

Mr CIOBO—For instructing ethnic communities on how to vote.

Ms Murphy—In our polling places we draw our polling officials from the local community so we have a diverse range of people with different skills in the polling places. We get an extra loading in the polling places because we are a culturally diverse division. So we have more polling officials who can take the time to help the people in the polling places. We have posters in the various languages displayed so that the voters can look at them and see what a formal vote is.

Mr CIOBO—Inside the booth?

Ms Murphy—In the polling place, plastered on the walls. When they go to the issuing point to have their names marked off the roll there are pamphlets and posters available. So we do have a range of facilities available for them.

Mr CIOBO—So are these initiatives that you take a as a DRO or is there some kind of trigger within the AEC that, once a migrant population reaches a certain percentage, then you must do this? How does that work?

Ms Murphy—We have divisions that are nominated as culturally diverse divisions, and we would all be duplicating the same type of effort across those divisions.

Ms Williamson—During non-election periods we have publications in 19 languages that are on our website on how to enrol and vote—just general information. As part of our school and community visits program, people like Rhonda go out to the community and do work explaining the electoral system to groups of people.

Mr CIOBO—Will you advertise those, or how do you spread the word about doing those forums?

Ms Murphy—We write out to various organisations. We have a list of organisations within the community. Before the last election we made contact with a number of groups within the community and went out and spoke to the community leaders, hoping that the information would trickle down in that regard.

Ms Mamo—We utilise the migrant resource centres, primarily in South West Sydney. The migrant resource centres did a lot of work to get their local community leaders in. We did an education session with the community leaders talking about the voting system and how to vote on election day and the services that are available to electors, and distributed the multilingual information that we had available to those community leaders.

Ms Williamson—We recently produced some short in-language videos in four languages that we will be using at those community meetings as well, just to explain electoral concepts. We can then continue the education session in English so that the people in those communities can get the basic information in-language.

Mr CIOBO—How regularly-how many times a year or in an election cycle—would you hold these fora in a specific community?

Ms Murphy—The forums that Peita was referring to were timed to happen just before the last federal election. But we would write out to the community organisations once a year.

Mr CIOBO—So basically what I am hearing is that if you are an ethnic community you might see some advertising from the AEC in your native tongue in the final weeks of a campaign and if you happen to be involved in a migrant resource centre then you might be aware of a forum and if you have children they might be visited by the AEC, but that is basically it.

Ms Williamson—To date that is probably the case.

Mr CIOBO—Obviously, you have resources on the internet but I would suggest to you that that is probably useless unless you know the AEC exists.

Ms Williamson—Yes, and you have to find it in the first place. Certainly the AEC is aware of that and with the legislative changes we are obviously going to be making much more effort in this area, particularly around informality.

Mr CIOBO—How are you with respect to resourcing for rolling out perhaps more intensive programs and the like?

Ms Williamson—The AEC has a budget for multicultural marketing activities and for enrolment and public awareness activities.

Ms Nelson—Also, part of the funding that we got for POI will be used to try to reach the various communities.

Mr Ng—I would like to make a last comment on the strategic area of how to minimise the informal vote. We could think about how to promote the idea that the informal vote affects people's family or personal wellbeing. Otherwise they think: 'If I just throw a vote, what is the difference?' They get away from getting a fine. The key is: if they cast an informal vote, how does it actually affect them?

CHAIR—Do you agree with that?

Mr Mansouri—Yes.

Mr Minas—I think he is only trying to say that politicians need to start generating some more interest among the public with a bit more debate, and to get out there and deal with the real problems and offer some realistic solutions.

CHAIR—That is another good statement!

Mr CIOBO—Sounds like a politician's answer!

Mr Trumper—If I may say so, one thing is that we do not have the opportunity, and I am personally grateful for this opportunity, to talk to politicians at such a senior level as you. When we speak to people about the English test, their reaction is that they regret not being able to speak English better. It is not that they do not want to; it is very difficult.

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator HOGG—Yes.

CHAIR—Mr Trumper, you have made a second mistake this morning. You said we were politicians; we are members of parliament, actually.

Mr Trumper—I would like to apologise.

CHAIR—There is a difference, you know.

Mr Trumper—Well, you are the successful politicians.

Senator HOGG—No, they are in the lower house.

Ms Nelson—May I say, on behalf of the AEC, that we welcome this review. We were in the process of undertaking our own review to see how we could do things better and taking a whole fresh look at how we were doing things. So we welcome this and the feedback from you today. We will certainly pick up on the issues that have come out about trying to engage more, particularly with your editorial support and so on. So we welcome that.

CHAIR—Are there any final comments before I make a final comment? No? Thank you. I think it is fair to say, outside this committee inquiry, we have all learnt a lot this morning about ethnic media. It is an area we do not have any exposure to. It is! I had never quite understood the breadth of ethnic media in the country until we started to look at what we might do. And I had never quite understood the sincerity that you have put to us today. So I have found this really valuable and, on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for giving us of your time today. It has been very valuable for our inquiry. It has filled in a little gap in the terms of reference that we had not filled. So it certainly has not been a waste of anybody's time this morning. We are all real people—members of parliament and people in the ethnic media—and that is often not quite understood either. So, again, thank you very much for appearing today. It has been very helpful and very valuable.

Senator HOGG—Could I just add that it is one of the strengths of our system that we can have a committee of the parliament meet in this type of arrangement and that people do have access to parliament through us.

CHAIR—Yes. And, of course, it is across party lines, and that shows the great democracy that Australia is. But Senator Hogg, who is a member of the Australian Labor Party, is, first and foremost, a Queenslander, with us members of the Liberal Party! Is that right, Senator Hogg?

Senator HOGG—We are a Queensland committee.

Proceedings suspended from 11.29 am to 11.40 am

SIEREK, Ms Amber Elise, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these are proceedings of the parliament and they should attract the same standing as the proceedings of the parliament itself. We have had a written submission from you. Do you want to provide any other written submission or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms Sierek—I will make a short opening statement.

CHAIR—Please proceed.

Ms Sierek—I am a communications student at the University of Newcastle and I am 22 years old. I wrote my submission as I have a personal interest in educational policy. I have always just had a fair interest in education. I graduated from high school in 2002 and the problems that I see in the education system have only recently occurred. That is why I thought I would write my submission. My submission basically has two recommendations: a long-term longitudinal study into young people's civic knowledge and the gathering of research into the current state of civics education, and the cataloguing of civics resources available for teachers.

There have been four short-term studies into school children's civics awareness, which I cover in my submission—I will not go over them now. All of these studies generally concluded that there is the capacity for great improvement in students' civics knowledge. I think something is really wrong when national drug and alcohol statistics tell us that 39 per cent of Australians aged 15 to 19 have tried marijuana but only 10 per cent of these same people feel they know what the Constitution covers. I think that is a serious problem and it is ludicrous. I believe that watching the news every day and being informed about the world around you is the best education a person can have. I am probably a bit biased, because I am doing journalism at university. I have always had an interest in media, history and the world around me. I strongly believe that the best education is knowing about the world around me.

There have been all these short-term studies; however, there has been no long-term research gauging how each Australian student gains civics knowledge over time. If we were to select a representative national sample of early primary school students and then test and retest that same sample over time, we would see when these students gained knowledge of certain institutions and how their knowledge changes and progresses over time. This would be the first longitudinal study into civics education in Australia, allowing for state by state comparison and allowing each state to gauge areas needing improvement within their own teaching practices. We would also be able to define if at a certain age apathy to politics increases rapidly and we would be able to recommend curriculum changes in state policy to address these issues.

Secondly, civics resources must be relevant to the curriculum and also be creative and accessible to students. It is no use having compulsory civics content in New South Wales if there are inadequate resources available to teach this content. And the content has to also be enjoyable for students. Basically, there is no use showing a video about the Victorian state parliament to students in New South Wales. Several of the short-term studies into civics education recommended the need for civics resources to be better catalogued. Susan Mellor of the IEA

civic education study noted that resources are everywhere but not catalogued as we would expect with a regular curriculum. Before we recommend or finance new civics resources for teachers, we need to comprehensively research the resources that exist now and, most importantly, the relevance of these resources that exist and how relevant they are to each state's needs.

Civics can also be a very contextual area, and material can date quite quickly. We also need to consider the medium in which these resources are available and the response children will have to these. I personally find that, no matter how dry the content matter is, if I am shown an educational product in a multimedia format, such as a DVD-ROM or a website, I am more interested than if the same information is presented to me in a plain written format. My hypothesis is that in any research we may find the need for greater use of current affairs material in civics resources. Civics is traditionally perceived as being a dry area, and we could overcome that by using real-life case studies. Notably, a survey of 352 teachers for the IEA civic education study found that these teachers ranked newspapers, magazines and television as the most important resources available in the teaching of civics. But it is only through recommending research into civics resources that we will be able to recognise gaps in the current resources and see how we could possibly improve this area in the future.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. Have you come down from Newcastle today?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. That is very kind of you.

Ms Sierek—It is not that far; that is all right.

CHAIR—Isn't it?

Ms Sierek—No.

CHAIR—Okay. You are 22?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—When did you enrol to vote?

Ms Sierek—At 17.

CHAIR—Did you?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—So you knew that you could at that stage?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—What about your colleagues? Did they enrol to vote?

Ms Sierek—At 17 or 18? Yes. None of them were over 18. It was definitely around that age.

CHAIR—You said in your opening statement that the teaching of this has to include what I would call fun stuff. That is a very incisive point. As we have gone around the country, teachers have shown us how, by having interesting material, the students absorb it much better than through other ways of teaching. They have indicated to us how they teach the history of Australia through looking at interesting things. That is what you are saying to us, correct?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—You are doing journalism?

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—You said that print, radio and TV media are the major sources of civics material for teachers. But isn't it the case that they does not enjoy a great reputation for accuracy and honesty in reporting?

Ms Sierek—That is certainly true, but that can enter the debate as well. If teachers present the information and say, 'This may not be the whole truth,' then critical reasoning can be formed from that. If teachers do not present it as fact then classroom debate can start from that. That can lead into the whole debate about civics.

CHAIR—Senator Hogg would want me to ask this question: why didn't you mention the internet? Isn't that a source of information these days?

Ms Sierek—Yes, I suppose it is.

CHAIR—Is it less trustworthy than conventional media sources?

Ms Sierek—That is a big question. It depends on what kinds of websites you are looking at. The *Sydney Morning Herald* online is, I would argue, just as reliable as other forms of media. But the author of an online blog does not have to follow the same ethical standards that print or broadcast journalists do. I would question the validity of information coming off something like that. But you will find that most young people are not the passive consumers of the media that people would make us out to be. They critically consume information. They do not always take it as factual. Young people do not just absorb what is given to them at face value. They need to be given a lot more credit for how they pick and choose what they consume in the media.

CHAIR—That is interesting evidence. We have had other evidence that says that students are not interested in the media and that there are other things that attract their attention at this time of their life. But you are saying that you think students—

Ms Sierek—It is probably an age bracket thing as well. From year 10 onwards, you are a mature young adult and you can make those decisions for yourself. But in your early formal education you probably believe more what you are told. You are not taught to question things as much when you are young, as compared to in your senior formal education.

CHAIR—Is there any component of the course that tries to encourage you to report matters of civics and electoral matters?

Ms Sierek—Yes. We have an elective course—it is not compulsory—in public affairs. That teaches us civics and political processes, and our teacher actually thinks he is doing a lot of remedial work. He is teaching us the basics that schools probably should have taught us. But if we are going to be journalists and if we are going to be reporting on this for a living we really do need to know this stuff down pat. So they teach us about ethical reporting, political reporting and that kind of thing.

CHAIR—What happened on 3 September 1901? Do you know?

Ms Sierek—No.

CHAIR—Does the committee know?

Senator HOGG—Is that your birthday?

Mr CIOBO—Something to do with Federation.

Senator MASON—First sitting of federal parliament?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr CIOBO—Do you have a different fact every week, do you?

CHAIR—Yes, that is correct.

Senator HOGG—We get this question all the time.

CHAIR—It is interesting.

Senator HOGG—I was interested in the question posed by the chair about your peers and their willingness to enrol to vote. Was that because you came from a group of friends in a peer group that were involved in studies that led them to be interested in civics, as opposed to those who might not be doing a similar course to you and therefore were not interested? Is that part of the reason?

Ms Sierek—Yes, most probably. Most of my friends were in the same classes as me. In senior high school you do get to choose your classes, so they were in the same classes as me, where they had similar interests.

Senator HOGG—Do you have any idea of the other people who might have been at high school but not necessarily studying the same areas?

Ms Sierek—That is a very hard question. Newcastle High School is a very large high school as well, so I would not wish to comment on the general population. I could only comment on what my friends and I did.

Senator HOGG—The reason I ask is that I want to go to your recommendation about a longitudinal study. Could you expand on what you had in mind. Who might conduct it? I would imagine there would be a fair bit of resourcing required. And where would it be conducted? Is it something that can be confined to the Sydney metropolitan area or is it something where, to get valid results, you need to look at a more diverse community?

Ms Sierek—I think it would be diverse. I think it would be a national thing. Obviously when you go out to regional areas there is proof that there is somewhat of a difference between regional and metropolitan civics attitudes, enrolment in voting and that kind of thing. So it would definitely have to be national. The whole purpose of the longitudinal study that I proposed was that there are all these short-term studies that gauge civic knowledge, but if we had a study of the same set of students from primary school all the way through to high school you would see at what point they start to develop their civics education knowledge and you could see them progress through time.

Senator HOGG—That is where I was a little bit confused. How do you keep the same population that you are testing, given the mobility of the population? I am not trying to be critical here.

CHAIR—It is a fair question.

Ms Sierek—It is.

Senator HOGG—You have a very actively mobile population. How are you going to keep them in the study? You would want two groups: you would want a test group and a non-test group, so to speak.

Ms Sierek—Yes, it would definitely be hard with the mobility. You would have to have a fairly large sample size then, I would say, to negate the moving around and what have you. In terms of who would conduct the research, I am sure there would be university bodies that would be willing, with some funding, to look after this. I am not really knowledgeable on that kind of thing, but I have done some research for this and the same names keep popping up again and again in civics education. I am sure, if you scattered around, some people would be very interested in doing this kind of thing.

Senator HOGG—Over what period of time would this need to be done—just the primary years or into the end of secondary school as well, or would it go even further?

Ms Sierek—I think it would have to be early primary school all the way through, definitely until the end of secondary level education. You would have to look at the age that people choose to enrol. That would be a deciding factor. I do not know when it would finish—probably a year or two after school, I would say. I think it is necessary to see the changing patterns over time, because there are all these statistics coming out about the short term and it might be really hard to implement this long-term research that I have proposed, but it is a good idea in theory.

Senator HOGG—I understand the theory of it and that is why I am trying to get a feel for it—exactly what would it look at?

Ms Sierek—Knowledge of political practices—a lot of the stuff that is in the Discovering Democracy kit: rules, rights, regulations, courts of law, parliamentary proceedings, parliaments, the roles of politicians and that kind of thing; basic civics education that was proposed in the kit. It would be basic stuff that is necessary to become an active citizen: how to fill out a voting form and that kind of thing. It is very basic, but young people may not necessarily understand it. It should be the basics as well as parliamentary proceedings and those kinds of things.

Senator HOGG—I accept that. If that longitudinal study were possible, would you also need to do some sort of study in different age brackets so that you got some idea as to how that matched up against the rest of the community standards—for example, some of the deficiencies that you have pointed to that exist right across the age groups, and that has been evidence before the committee inquiry? Would you see that as being necessary as well?

Ms Sierek—Yes. It probably would not be a bad idea at all. A lot of the discussion about teacher education is: how can teachers be passionate about this and teach it to children if they do not know it themselves? It probably would not be a bad idea to do a survey like this with teachers. Similar things have been done in the past, and the Discovering Democracy kit tried to correct a lot of errors and educate teachers in democratic processes. It probably would not be a bad idea to use a larger sample as well—definitely.

Mr CIOBO—I want to commend you on lodging a good submission with the committee and on some of the recommendations you have put forward. In your opening statement, you made reference to young Australians being apathetic. I am wondering if that is correct. Do you think they could be better described as cynical or is it apathy towards political processes?

Ms Sierek—I do not know. That is a good question. It probably is cynicism. In other people's research that I have reviewed, a lot of them said that young people do know about politics. They feel that politicians alienate them and they do not see how it directly affects them. It is a matter of degrees, I think. I am not quite sure—probably cynicism. They do not think it affects them, so why should they bother?

Mr CIOBO—Depending on which it is, quite a different response is required to address the problem, isn't it?

Ms Sierek—It probably is cynicism—I would go with that.

Mr CIOBO—In terms of your longitudinal study—I am just being devil's advocate for the moment—would it simply affirm to us what we suspect to be the case—that is, young Australians do not know as much as we would like them to know about the Australian political system and the processes? Are we going to gain anything by knowing what we know already? Wouldn't we be better off looking at why we are failing to get the message across or why young Australians may be cynical towards politics and doing a study into that? Why do you believe that a longitudinal study on the level of knowledge that young Australians have is more important than perhaps doing one of the other two types of study that I have just outlined?

Ms Sierek—I think it is important to gauge at what point in young people's education this cynicism enters. Is it something that they are educated in at a young age? Does it come from the family rather than from formal education? It might reiterate what we already know from the short-term studies, but it would pinpoint when the exact knowledge comes about—when the students actually gain adequate knowledge of certain political practices—and also if there is a turning point in their teenage years when they become completely dissatisfied with politics. It probably will reiterate to a degree what we already know, but it will finetune what we already know to a greater level.

Mr CIOBO—Do you suspect that it would be something you could easily pinpoint—year 5, year 7, year 9, year 11 or whatever? Or do you think it could be that there is a continual slow growth of cynicism—however you want to phrase it—so that there is no specific start or end point but rather just a gradual trend between your starting point and your end point?

Ms Sierek—I would not know that. That is something that I would like the research to find out. It might be different for everyone as well. There might not be a specific age bracket in which people become really cynical or what have you, but I think that is something the research would find out. If it did turn out there is a certain point—hypothetically year 6, year 7 or what have you—then you could propose changes to the curriculum that would address that instead of it just being years 5 and 6 and years 9 and 10 that have compulsory civics components. If it is in years 7 and 8 that cynicism really enters then you can propose changes to the curriculum in those years. Instead of letting the cynicism grow, you can pinpoint it when it is at its best.

Mr CIOBO—I think you mentioned you are studying journalism.

Ms Sierek—Yes.

Mr CIOBO—Do you have any thoughts about or are you aware of any research that touches on whether or not news values in Australia today play a role in exacerbating or being a trigger or catalyst for the level of cynicism in popular culture?

Ms Sierek—There are definitely some theories out there, but my view is that there tends to be moral panic and the media tends to be blamed for more things than they are actually capable of. Don't get me wrong; the media—

Senator MASON—As are politicians, you said.

Ms Sierek—The media can inflame different attitudes and violence and what have you, but I think they are blamed for a little too much of all of the wrongs in society. They are an easy scapegoat, I think. The media fulfil an important role—they are the fourth estate and all that jazz—but all too often we just dismiss them as crass popular culture. I think they fulfil an important role. As the fourth estate, they teach us about civic values and bring to the people all of the things that they need to know. I think that is a very important role that they fulfil that is often overlooked.

Senator MASON—You graduated from high school in 2002. Do you think that the civics education that you received was satisfactory?

Ms Sierek—No, but I escaped before it became a compulsory curriculum requirement, so I did not get any of the compulsory New South Wales civics education that has since been introduced in schools. I do not think I did, and I do not blame the school for that. I blame the education system itself, because the school did a wonderful job but they were not required to teach us civics education like they are now.

Senator MASON—Do you think that disadvantaged you or your colleagues?

Ms Sierek—Yes, definitely. When I got to university I realised that I did not know anywhere near as much about the world as I needed to in order to get along as an active citizen.

Senator MASON—What knowledge in particular were you lacking?

Ms Sierek—Intimate political details. You learn a lot about the federal level—I did in year 6; we did the trip to Canberra and all of that kind of stuff—but I know virtually nothing about the state and local levels. It is education about those two tiers that I missed out on, and I am lacking in that. I had a really good history teacher in high school. I learnt all about the history of Australia and Federation and all of that kind of stuff, but it is the state and local spheres that I know virtually nothing about.

Senator MASON—Were you taught about the importance of a constitution?

Ms Sierek—No.

Senator MASON—It is funny. We have discussed this before on the committee, but the Constitution is the document that decides how power is distributed within this country. It is perhaps the most critical document of all, and yet people's ignorance of it is striking.

CHAIR—Which agency do you think should be responsible for the longitudinal study that you propose? Should it be DEST, the federal education department? Should it be state education departments? Should it be the Australian Electoral Commission? Should it be somebody else?

Ms Sierek—Definitely not a state level. I think it would have to be implemented by a national body. The Australian Electoral Commission have done some good work in the past and they might be interested in doing it, or DEST as well. But I think it should probably be the Australian Electoral Commission, because they have done similar things in the past and they are currently running an inquiry into young people's electoral knowledge, so it would fit in with their current studies, I would say.

CHAIR—In your paper you presented to us you said:

Civic education in Australian schools could be substantially enhanced through state level cataloguing of teacher resources ...

Clearly you think that that has not been done.

Ms Sierek—Not adequately enough. I did not look at every state's cataloguing system, I must admit; I mainly focused on the case in New South Wales, where there is a heavy reliance on the

Discovery Democracy resources and very little focus on other resources that are out there. So I think it can definitely be improved.

CHAIR—When you were at school did you participate in the Discovery Democracy suite?

Ms Sierek—No. I was in year 11 in 2001, so I probably missed out. The last of Discovery Democracy was rolled out in 2000, so I just missed out on that.

Senator HOGG—Bad education!

Ms Sierek—Yes.

CHAIR—What is your view about the efficiency of having eight territory and state governments having their own state-level cataloguing of resources?

Ms Sierek—I think the problem is that because the curriculum is state based it is ludicrous to suggest that different state resources are suitable for different states. I think that catalogues have to be state based because they have to be relevant to that curriculum. New South Wales in particular has the compulsory civics content, so I think it needs a well-formed, well-publicised website that teachers can easily access that will present them with information. Obviously teachers have the choice of what resources they can use—and they can shun all of them, if they like, and use their own. But I think we should make their job easier, and as they are teaching a very important area we should encourage resource lists to be developed so they can access them easily if they want.

CHAIR—Help us to be a bit sensitive now. You have probably seen the debate about a national curriculum. What is your personal view on that? And can you relate it to this context with eight different resources in this area?

Ms Sierek—I think it is a good idea.

CHAIR—I am not leading the witness, right?

Ms Sierek—No.

Senator HOGG—You're doing a good job!

Ms Sierek—I do believe a national curriculum would negate a lot of these problems. As I saw on the news, a good reason for having a national curriculum is that if people move around they would not have to pick up their work or start again. That is a very good idea. Because a lot of civics deals with national content—it is about federal politics and court systems that apply to the whole of Australia—why should we not have a national curriculum which suggests this? Yes, I definitely agree with the idea of a national curriculum.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Senator HOGG—In respect of the curriculum at universities, should there be a compulsory unit on general civics in all the courses so that, no matter whether you are doing a degree to be a

doctor or a course to be an economist or whatever it might be, there is a unit that you have to study on broad civics? We have heard of one at the University of New South Wales. Is that a reasonable idea?

Ms Sierek—It is probably not a bad idea. I would argue that for some subjects it is probably not necessary—if, say, you are doing pure science subjects. They are important subjects that everyone should know, but if you are smart enough to get into university you would like to presume that you already have this is a base knowledge—'presume' is the key word there.

Senator HOGG—That is right, it is a presumption.

Ms Sierek—If we had a subject it would definitely ensure that everyone had those values. But at the same time we do not want to be seen as being too patriotic and flag waving and to be taking away people's rights to choose the subjects that they want at uni—their autonomy.

Senator HOGG—No, I am not talking about a whole course. I am just talking about a small unit that would credit towards your degree and would be a part of any course.

Ms Sierek—It is probably not a bad idea, if it were a very small subject. Again, like schools, universities are also complaining they have cramped curriculums—they have to cram as much as possible into a short amount of time. It would be a matter of what you threw out to accommodate the civics component. Do you take scientists away from a week in the lab to teach them this? You would have to ask the universities that. It is probably not a bad idea, but I think it needs a bit of a rework.

Senator HOGG—I am asking you as a student.

Ms Sierek—I am probably not authorised to speak on behalf of the student body, but I personally would not like being told I have to go and do a course in civics. I would like to think I know a little bit about it already, and I reckon all of my friends at university would feel the same.

Senator HOGG—Okay. Thank you.

CHAIR—There being no other questions, I think you have satisfied us, Ms Sierek. Thank you very much for your evidence today and thank you for coming all the way from Newcastle.

Senator HOGG—Thank you for your submission. It was very well thought out and put together.

CHAIR—We have some good ideas from you. If you are representative of your peers, then Australia is in good hands in the years ahead. Your attendance is very much appreciated. Thank you.

Ms Sierek—Thank you.

[12.19 pm]

ARBLASTER, Mr James, Private capacity

BROWN, Mr Euan, Private capacity

PERNA, Mr Don, Private capacity

CHAIR—I welcome the Parliamentary Club. It is terrific that you have travelled so far to be with us today. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these are formal proceedings of the parliament and should be treated as if they were proceedings of the parliament itself. We have received an exhibit from you to this inquiry. Do you wish to present any additional submissions, or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Perna—I would like to make a short opening statement. First of all, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today to give a clear outline of the initiative known as the Parliamentary Club. It pertains to civics and electoral education, specifically for high school students. I would like to introduce the two members of the Parliamentary Club with me here, the honourable prime minister, Euan Brown, and the honourable minister for school affairs, James Arblaster. I would personally like to thank them for giving up their last day of school holidays to be here today.

Senator HOGG—We are very impressed.

Mr Perna—I would like to start with a brief overview of what we are going to present today and then, with the committee's permission, show a short DVD which will hopefully give a snapshot of what the Parliamentary Club is all about. Then I would like to discuss the beginnings of the club, the achievements to date, the plan for the future and possibly a recommendation for why the Parliamentary Club should become a national initiative.

I have been a schoolteacher for 21 years, and the last five years I have spent focusing my experience on developing innovative ways to enhance the learning process, specifically with student learning outcomes. I would like to offer the committee today a solution which has the potential to change civics education in schools forever.

Senator HOGG—You said you have been a teacher for 21 years. Have you been in the area of teaching that you are now in for those 21 years, or did you start out in a different area?

Mr Perna—It is an interesting story. I will be brief. I started out originally as a primary-trained teacher. There was an opening at a Catholic high school for a language teacher. With my Italian background, and as I was only working part-time, I applied for the position and was successful in gaining it. That was 20 years ago. I have not left the secondary system since. I do not have formal training in the area of civics or HSIE. I have been a languages and maths faculty teacher by and large for the last 15 years. This is an area that I saw had a need, and I could see some strategies that would work that had not been utilised before. We have implemented them very successfully.

Senator HOGG—In developing the strategies, did you use any sources in particular to assist you or is much of this your own creation?

Mr Perna—I did not use any resources at all. This is purely a creation of my own as a co-curricular activity. In recent years civics education has become a government priority. We are told that our education systems and schools are failing to engage young people in this area. In late 2004 I decided to implement this innovative project designed to enhance the learning of civics and citizenship. I was aware that the 12- to 18-years age group was probably the most difficult to engage in this area. At the same time, the Australian Electoral Commission published a paper titled *Youth electoral study*, which stated the problems associated with young people and the electoral process.

I decided to start a club. Basically, it created a microcosmic political system within the school. It allowed students to form political parties, to present candidates for elections and to form a student parliament that reflected the federal system we have here. After careful marketing of information we had our first election, which was an amazing success. We had 500 students vote in a non-compulsory poll. I am sure you will agree that to get 500 teenagers from an average working-class area to participate in a civics activity is a fairly impressive achievement.

Senator MASON—If it was noncompulsory, what was the voter turnout?

Mr Perna—It was approximately 63 per cent at that point.

CHAIR—Why did you allow it to be noncompulsory when that is not the federal system?

Mr Perna—The short answer to that is that there were a few things that we needed to keep more as an educational initiative than as a pure replication of the federal system. We wanted to hook, to use a colloquial term, as much of the student population as possible. There have been a few moments where we have not replicated the system perfectly, but for good reason, because students, as you know, are not interested in the political process.

Mr Brown—I would just like to interject there. I would like to make it compulsory, to make it as similar to the federal elections as possible, because that is what we do in Australia. But that has to happen gradually, because in the school it is hard to get young people to vote. Noncompulsory is good because we get 63 per cent of the voters. If we slowly bring in a compulsory voting system it will be an easier change, and that means that we will get more voters and not as many people saying, 'No, I don't want to vote. I don't want to be forced to vote.' It has to be an easy change, I believe.

Mr Perna—As a matter of fact, the school principal is now so in favour of this initiative and such a supporter that I am quite sure that he will accept the possibility of compulsory voting as of next year.

Senator HOGG—Is it likely that you will phase it in on the basis of the newer students being the first to work it through the system?

Mr Perna—No, I do not think so. I think we will be able to bring in compulsory voting en masse. Because it has become such a part of the school fabric and so popular, with the media

attention et cetera, I think it will be quite easy to do that. The Parliamentary Club has two roles. The first is to educate its members and the wider school community about our democracy and the second is to form a real student government, so it has a functional aspect too.

I would like to emphasise here that it is not a mock parliament. The students, as they will probably tell you later on in this session, have a role in policy and decision making within the school. Since the beginning, we have had two elections. In three weeks time we launch our third. It has the largest candidature we have ever had. We have 60 students running for parliament. In 2004 we had 24. So we have 60 students willing to be part of the election process. That is not the club membership. We also have political journalists et cetera, which I will talk about later.

CHAIR—And how many parties in that 60?

Mr Perna—We have two major parties, one party which has formed a coalition with a slightly smaller party, a very minor party and three Independents. Just as a sideline, a dramatic twist has occurred. These two gentlemen have both been in the Progressive Democratic Party. Euan Brown is the leader. However, a new political force has come onto the horizon, made up of mostly year 10 students. At one point in time, the Progressive Democratic Party, which has now formed a coalition, seemed quite unbeatable. However, quite a large group of year 10 students have formed a political party called the Voice of the Youth Party, the VYP. They very cleverly lured the Minister for School Affairs across to their party as the leader.

Mr Brown—Much to my dismay.

Senator HOGG—A defector!

Mr Perna—So in three weeks time, these two outstanding young men will go head-to-head for the prime ministership. As a matter of fact, I am beside myself with excitement, because, as the guide of the club, to have two such outstanding people in either government or opposition means that the club will flourish and do things for the student body that have never been done before.

CHAIR—Let me tell you what will happen next year: a women's party will emerge!

Mr Brown—We hope. As a matter of fact—

CHAIR—Would you like to tell us?

Mr Arblaster—Last year, while I was still with his party, we had an opposition made up entirely of girls from year 12. Who was the leader?

Mr Brown—Lauren Knox.

Mr Arblaster—It was Lauren Knox. They are now gone, in the HSC.

Senator HOGG—That's a good way to get rid of them!

CHAIR—Did you campaign on the basis that a woman's place is in the kitchen?

Mr Brown—Definitely not.

Mr Arblaster—I am not sure we did that—that would not be very popular.

Mr Brown—In fact, Mr Chairman, we are trying our hardest to get more females into the Parliamentary Club, because I personally believe that we need more representation in parliament by females.

A DVD was then shown—

Mr Perna—I was mentioning before we showed the DVD that we have 60 students running in the election. So its participation level rivals the participation levels of other successful activities like, for example, the rock eisteddfod. However, this has surpassed that in terms of the number of students interested. When you look at the aspects involved in the rock eisteddfod—music, dance and drama—you see that they are things that are totally interwoven with teenage culture; whereas the Parliamentary Club deals with politics, democracy and civics. So you can see what sort of achievement it is to actually get that many students and more to be interested in this initiative. I cannot overstate that enough, I do not think.

This year's parliament actually passed two bills, which I think it is important to mention—because it is not just an enjoyable experience where we have a bit of fun in the chamber; we also have a functioning parliament. The first bill was to install the student representative council as the school's upper house. So that is how the Parliamentary Club created a senate. So we are actually using the existing structure and modifying it to make a bicameral system of government. It took only 12 months from its inception for this club to empower the students to a point where they were able to change a leadership structure which had been in place for 25 years. That is a reflection to show you how much influence the young people have in their roles. It has not only doubled the number of school leaders we have but also instigated that system of government which directly mirrors the Australian federal system of government. So just by its existence it teaches the wider community about governance and our democracy.

The second bill passed through both houses, because there were two houses created by then. It actually gave the house of representatives control over and management of the toilet and hygiene facilities of the school, because they were deemed to have decreasing standards. The students play an enormous role in the club. As a matter of fact, my role is diminishing as the months progress—and that is actually the goal so that the students actually own the process. They play an enormous role. They have written the constitution—and you may have seen the constitution: it is not only an outstanding document for the young people to have written but it also reflects their understanding of the importance of the Constitution that makes Australia such a great country. We do not just have members of parliament; we have also political journalists and cartoonists whose work has been published in educational journals. So those students' self-esteem has skyrocketed. Their talents have been utilised in this microcosm of the political system. We have an audiovisual production team whose skills are utilised, as you have seen. We have a security and intelligence organisation and an independent commission against corruption. Their job is to monitor the students for ethical behaviour and integrity, especially during the annual election process.

Mr Brown—We actually have a bill going through the house of representatives at the moment that is an amendment to the uniform policy. Students have to carry their sports uniform on days when they have personal development, health and physical education and the uniform is quite heavy so that is not good for their backs. Problems such as scoliosis can arise from that. So, in conjunction with my ex minister for internal affairs, we have manufactured a bill that allows the students to wear their sports uniforms on the days when they have PDHPE. That is the way that we are going. We can change the uniform policy. That is wonderful because students sometimes do not see eye to eye with teachers. However, in the club we do take into account what needs to be there for the environment around the school, and the relationship between teacher and student maintains itself—because you have to take that all into account.

Mr Perna—It shows that they are starting to understand that the government offers its people services et cetera—and that is what they are trying to do—for the betterment of the common good. So they are listening to each other. James might tell you about the lobby groups that are lobbying him with regard to this bill. Euan may have already told the committee about that.

Mr Arblaster—Ever since I first proposed it to the house of representatives and announced it to people in my class, I have had to answer their questions at least once a week about the progress of the bill and how it is going. It has hit a bit of a standstill at the moment because parliament has been dissolved, but we have been having a bit of trouble with the upper house. They are not willing to pass it, so they want a few amendments. It has been sent back and forth a few times as well.

Senator MASON—It is a common problem, James. Upper houses do that.

Mr Perna—As you can see, just by the existence and by the process it is amazingly reflective of what actually happens in our system of government—for example, the bill not easily going through both houses et cetera. So again it promotes understanding of what the Senate's job is.

Mr Brown—It also helps the students to understand the political process that happens in federal parliament and the difficulties that you are faced with when you are trying to get a bill passed and how long it takes. You get very frustrated with it, but you have to work with it and you have to change, amend and try again.

CHAIR—Senator Hogg has to go, but before he does I want to point out to you that you have inquiries and this is an inquiry but this is a joint standing committee of the House and the Senate, so you might think about that in your Parliamentary Club.

Senator HOGG—My question probably goes to 'Mr One Per Cent' and that is in respect of funding. I heard you talk about a grant that you got. In the internal running of the school, does this put stress on the internal funding arrangements? How would other schools that might want to implement your program do it with minimal cost to the budget of the school?

Mr Perna—We use minimal funding. Most of the things that we have set up are things that are in existence already. For example, we use materials, photocopying and everything that a school has at its disposal. We use a school classroom at the moment for our parliament. However, we are moving into the library because the parliament has grown and because it is

becoming such a formal thing. To answer your question simply, we use very minimal funding. We have not put any pressure on the school's funding arrangements at all at this time.

Senator HOGG—When are you going to become a republic? I think that is terribly important indeed! You can take that question on notice. My other question is: I note your sceptre is deficient. Can you tell me where it is deficient?

Mr Perna—I might pass that on to the Prime Minister.

CHAIR—Just move that the speaker be no further heard!

Mr Perna—That sounds like a good idea to me. I cannot answer your question, I am sorry, Senator. I do not know how it is deficient.

Mr CIOBO—I think he is looking for a black rod.

Senator HOGG—No, I am not. There is a little cross at the top. The reason I know that is it has been the subject of much debate in other fora. You might want to think about that as a topic that your parliament can consider.

Mr Perna—We certainly will. We feel much better that we know that and we will be able to act upon it in future.

Senator HOGG—I think you will see that there are certain reasons that it is of concern to certain groups in the community.

Mr Perna—Thank you.

Senator MASON—Mr Perna, do you formally instruct students about political processes and the Constitution and so forth, or do students learn simply by doing? Are there any formal lectures or formal classes about politics that are then combined or do you generally learn by doing?

Mr Perna—At this stage, because it is not part of the curriculum, we do not have much time to formally have lessons on particular aspects. We do meet and, during those meetings, I will give a stringline of information but generally, and the students will probably tell you this, it is a self-directed learning activity. One of the great things about it—why it can be implemented in any school—is that it will not put pressure on staff and it will not put pressure on the curriculum. It sets up the scenario for students to drive it themselves. That is why it is so successful: because the students are self-motivated and for other reasons, which I might talk about later, they direct it themselves. I suppose that is the simple answer.

Senator MASON—Mr Perna, what was your aim in establishing the Parliamentary Club? Was it to teach about the process, to get students involved or both?

Mr Perna—Both. However, first of all, it was to get students involved because there is a lack of engagement and a lack of involvement, which I do not have to go over, obviously. To leave false modesty at the door, being in a situation for 20 years, you become quite good at picking up

strategies that are able to engage young people. I could see the strategies that would work here. The main goal was to engage and then, because it was set up as a self-directed learning activity, the students can learn by themselves and direct it by themselves. And the wider community learns by watching and being a part at different levels—voting, watching, lobbying et cetera.

Senator MASON—What have you learnt from this process?

Mr Brown—I have learnt a lot about democracy and the importance of it. I know that 46 per cent of the world live in democratic countries and 10 per cent of those live in America. Yet only 41 per cent of the people in America at the last elections voted. In a country like Australia, where we have such a diverse and multicultural community, where we have compulsory voting, the young people need to see the importance of democracy. They need to understand the system of government that we work. That is another thing I have learnt about, the system of government: the upper and lower houses, the Senate. I am actually writing the constitution at the moment in conjunction with Mr Perna. As you were saying before, there is no real formal way of writing a constitution. You research other constitutions and then you base your constitution on that. You look at the formalised wording, how that is written. We make up our own categories. Sometimes the things in a constitution are not applicable to what we do, so we have to morph and change what is already in place to suit us.

Senator MASON—We have heard evidence throughout Australia that young people your age and James's age are disengaged from the political process. They are not interested. They think it does not mean much to their lives. Some are cynical about politics. Some really just do not care at all. What is it about this project, the Parliamentary Club, that engages young people? Why does this work whereas so many other projects do not work?

Mr Brown—I think most importantly it is interactive and enjoyable. You saw from the DVD that fun can be had from this. A session of question time is lots of fun. I have so much fun in question time. You get to heckle and do a bit of arguing. It is wonderful. I do not actually believe that young people are apathetic or simply cynical towards politics. There just needs to be understanding and awareness. That is a very important thing, and that is what this initiative does: it creates awareness in young people. The figures show that 63 per cent of people voting in a non-compulsory voting system are young people. I always hear, 'Young people don't care about politics.' If we make them aware of the politics in our school then why can't we do that in the wider community? If we make them aware of it now, then they will understand it better when they move out. I am at an age now where I am certainly getting more interested in politics, perhaps more interested than a regular 16-year-old. But soon I will be going out into the community and I will be voting in federal, state and local elections. The Parliamentary Club has provided me with a knowledge of these practical applications and the importance of civics and citizenship in our country.

Senator MASON—James, were you interested in politics before you joined the Parliamentary Club?

Mr Arblaster—I was, but not as much as I am now. I have been with the Parliamentary Club since it started. When I was in year 8, I had Mr Perna as a language teacher, and when I got involved I found myself just naturally listening to the news reports at night about politics et cetera. But the great thing about the Parliamentary Club is that when you join there is no barrier

that says that you cannot join unless you are interested in politics. We have two students who have no idea about anything to do with politics, but they are joining just for fun and learning as they go.

Senator MASON—They learn about the process despite themselves.

Mr Arblaster—Yes, and they have fun at the same time. It is not just the people who are in the club who learn about it. During election time, when it is open to the entire school, the entire school is learning about it at the same time. We put up banners and we have reports over the home room announcements and the assembly announcements and that sort of stuff. Not to give anything away, but for this election my party will start using something to do with a microphone and a grandstand outside the canteen. As Mr Perna said before, with the introduction of preferential voting, which is the system that we have now nationally, we will also learn about preferential voting. That will be compulsory for everyone in the school, so everyone will need how to do preferential voting, which is good. Maybe Mr Perna can elaborate on that.

Mr Perna—If schools implement this, they will find that, mathematically, sheer numbers are needed to have a decent preferential vote. We have got to a point now where it has become so popular and part of the fabric and there are so many students wishing to become candidates that next year—and this may seem strange—we will be able to go back to a paper and pen ballot, because we have had online voting to hook in the students, and also introduce preferential voting.

Senator MASON—Have you established an electoral commission as well?

Mr Perna—We have not, but it is possible and it will have to happen, obviously, to register for voting and register the parties. It will all happen. We are even considering a government organisation similar to Centrelink that will offer student services. What it will do—and it is possible—is offer interpreting and translating services, and we will utilise students who are bilingual or language students as study assistants so that the academic elite will be partnered with students in need. We may even offer a peer mentoring program where great role models will be partnered with those students in the school community who are considered to be at risk. So, by instigating organisations like that, the students will see that, yes, government does supply and there are certain ways of accessing services. At the same time, I would like to add that I think the general student population will probably start to look at government and politicians in a more favourable light.

Mr CIOBO—Does St Joseph's neighbour any other schools?

Mr Perna—When you say 'neighbour', do you mean are there any in close proximity?

Mr CIOBO—Yes.

Mr Perna—We have Albion Park High School about 200 metres from us.

Mr CIOBO—I am just concerned in case Mr Brown's or Mr Arblaster's aspirations, should they assume prime ministership, actually incorporate a defence force that might seek to spread liberty and democracy to other schools.

Mr Perna—We have considered that.

Mr Brown—That is one of the articles of the Constitution that we have not yet considered; that we have not included, in fact.

Mr Arblaster—We have a chief of defence at the moment, with the Army cadets and that sort of stuff.

Mr Perna—I approached the principal about a military arm and it was not favourably accepted, so we decided to fall back on that aspect.

Mr CIOBO—There is nothing wrong with spreading democracy.

Senator MASON—Weapons of mass destruction and things like that.

Mr CIOBO—From what you have said, I take it that your activities occur outside core curriculum hours?

Mr Perna—Yes.

Mr CIOBO—So it is all voluntary?

Mr Perna—That is right.

Mr CIOBO—About what percentage of the student population is not involved in the Parliamentary Club?

Mr Perna—That is a hard question to answer, because they are involved to different degrees. Would you include students who had voted as part of that initiative? If that is the case, we are looking at possibly 70 per cent of the school population.

Mr CIOBO—That are or are not?

Mr Perna—That are involved.

Mr CIOBO—So 30 per cent did not vote, and if—

Mr Perna—Approximately—it is probably more like 27 per cent, to be pedantic.

Mr CIOBO—Okay. So just under 30 per cent did not vote. If you count voting as being their only form of involvement, what percentage would be involved then, roughly?

Mr Perna—Involved?

Mr CIOBO—Actively involved.

Mr Perna—Of the whole school?

Mr CIOBO—Yes.

Mr Perna—I am doing some mathematics in my head at the moment. We would probably say less than 10 per cent would be actively involved.

Mr CIOBO—The reason I ask is not in any way to disparage what I think is a wonderful program. I am just wondering whether the group of students that is involved in and attracted to the Parliamentary Club is the same group of students that would be attracted to any other form of civics education or involvement that you might run. I am interested in whether those who are not actively involved are benefiting from the existence of the Parliamentary Club. The students who are predisposed to being interested in civics and political education certainly have a great opportunity to explore that interest, but are those who are not predisposed to that basically left in the same situation that they would otherwise be in without it? I am interested in your reply to that.

Mr Perna—I do not agree with the fact that they—

Mr CIOBO—It is not an assertion; it is a question.

Mr Perna—Sure. The profile of the Parliamentary Club and different aspects of it, such as the passing of bills, are reported to the student population via the newsletter or in assembly. Students are actually made aware of a process that has occurred. So that is one way. I would not say that I would be able to engage every student in the school to a great degree—that is a difficult one and I would not say that. But to that extent it is being displayed to them, and increasingly. I think if we could start to introduce more bills and maybe more government organisations like Centrelink, those students who may not be predisposed to civics—which could be because of very poor academic ability or just not fitting in with the school environment—could come under the banner of one of those government organisations that we set up. Just through that, they may learn about government processes and services et cetera.

Mr CIOBO—I take it then that the core hook for students is your ability to take what is perhaps alien to many students—that is, that connection between federal, state and local government, and the relevance it has to their lives—and use the filter of the Parliamentary Club as a way of saying, 'This is, on a very local, micro level, an example of why politics is having an impact on your life.' Is that the theory, in essence?

Mr Perna—That is exactly right. And, as time goes on, I would say a large number of students will realise the effect that a system of government, the political system, does have on their everyday lives. We state that in particular ways during our exhibitions, during assembly time: it affects the amount of change they might have in their pocket; it may affect the age at which they are going to get their drivers permit; it may even affect, in the future, whether they are allowed out past 11.30 at night without a chaperone. So they are starting to realise that government has an influence on their lives. But what the Parliamentary Club is trying to show them is that they can also have a role in influencing what happens in their lives. I think a lot of young people—and not just young people—feel they are quite helpless when it comes to changing policy on different levels. This initiative is very complex, so I could speak about the many different levels at length, but I think it is the myriad government processes that we are attempting to install that will touch as many students as possible at different levels.

Mr CIOBO—Thank you.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, has your involvement in the Parliamentary Club changed your perception of parliamentarians?

Mr Brown—I know from my experiences as a young person and from the young people around me that, unfortunately, popular culture these days defines things. I will use America as an example because that is the one that comes up most often—and I do not like to use it because I do not believe this personally. It is almost popular to dislike the current government in America and the reason for that is a lack of understanding. Through this initiative, we have been able to get more involved by just watching the news and seeing and understanding. Because that understanding has come to me from being in the Parliamentary Club, I do not believe that it is true that the American administration is bad. I have no problems with it. That is the choice of the American people. It is the understanding and the awareness that is important because of the democratic climate of our country, our neighbours and our friends.

CHAIR—James, how has your perception of parliamentarians changed?

Mr Arblaster—When I was in year 6 we did the necessary trip to Parliament House, but we went to state parliament instead of federal parliament. When we went to state parliament, we watched question time and, to tell you the truth, I was absolutely appalled at the way everyone called across the table et cetera. We were not allowed to do that in the classroom, but here were the leaders of our country doing that. I carried that view across to year 7, but when I joined in year 8 I realised that they were not just arguing for the sake of it. They were arguing about things that affect their constituents—the people in their electorate—and they were arguing for the sake of their people. So I realised it was necessary to do that. When I watch television and I see that—and I see the Prime Minister speaking or whoever speaking about something—my perception has changed to one where I can see their point of view and where they are coming from. That is my answer.

CHAIR—You carefully avoided a trap question. I was going to refer you to your video and the way you portrayed question time, which is a stereotype and not necessarily a true stereotype of what happens. As a government member, I would say the government is always quiet and it is the opposition that makes all the noise. To some extent that is true. Have you got a realisation that being a member of parliament has a very serious side about it; that, in fact, we do not just shout at each other across the chamber and a lot of hard work goes on. Have you got that perception?

Mr Arblaster—A lot of responsibility and a lot of time goes into it. For example, when I was writing that uniform bill that we were speaking of earlier, it took me several days—and it takes considerably longer in real time—and whenever we had our meetings it was usually at lunchtime. We sacrificed our lunchtimes to debate this—but it is all voluntary; it is not forced upon us. It is a lot of hard work. I have come to an understanding that the people who form the majority of people who are outside the Parliamentary Club do not see very often what goes on behind the scenes and only see what the media and what we display publicly. So it is very frustrating sometimes when they get the wrong slant on what you are trying to do. You have worked a lot but they do not seem to see that. They only see people sitting down and yelling at each other.

CHAIR—Has there been an increase in interest in public affairs amongst the student body since the formation of the Parliamentary Club?

Mr Brown—I know from my own experiences that indeed it has. A lot of my friends have shown more interest in public affairs—although not to the extent that we would probably all wish. But they at least turn on the news and have a look. They make their own critical decisions about Australia's government at this time. They do not just take what the media throws at them. That is what we need to be developing: critical human beings who look at the government and try to understand the reason they are bringing in certain bills and the reason they are changing policies.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mr Perna—I am not sure if I am on the right track, but I began this club thinking about it as an educational project to start with. We are talking about teenagers. It may seem as though there is a frivolous nature to some of the aspects of the Parliamentary Club, but that is a small percentage of our input and output. What I had to think of was how to get teenagers interested in something when there are so many forces acting upon them. I will be quite honest here: if you throw this into a school without very careful preparation and a strategy it will be highly likely to fail. There were in the first 12 months many times when this initiative could have failed. It needs to be very carefully set up. I am not sure if I am on the wrong track there. It is generally of a serious nature, but we need to be able to engage young people. We are talking about young people, so what better way of doing that than using an enjoyable aspect of what we want them to do? If there is no enjoyment, then you will get that small band of students who are engaged by other civics activities—the academic elite—and 85 per cent of the young people will be left out. One of the reasons, which I did not mention earlier, for doing this was that this initiative would engage that 85 per cent to some level—and at an increasing level.

CHAIR—We understand that.

Mr Arblaster—In answer to your original question about the current affairs issue, I have to echo Euan's perspective. Because of my involvement in the club, a lot of my friends in the group that I sit with at lunchtime are becoming more involved and more aware of what they see on television or read in the newspapers. It has had an effect on them, and they are not even involved.

CHAIR—I wish you both well in the forthcoming elections. I will give you the benefit of my advice: as a policy, you should offer to the student body—and this will win you votes—a free ice-cream every Friday from the school tuckshop! It will be a fascinating time, and that is all part of it. Thank you also for giving up the last day of your holidays. We really appreciate that. Don, thank you for bringing the students along. This is a great initiative and obviously it clearly works in the school. You were right in your opening statement: we should try and get this extended nationally as a possibility.

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

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 1.19 pm