



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

(Subcommittee)

**Reference: Civics and electoral education**

TUESDAY, 24 OCTOBER 2006

CAIRNS

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT



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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ELECTORAL MATTERS  
Tuesday, 24 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:** Mr Ciobo and Mr Lindsay

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

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**Subcommittee met at 9.15 am**

**Te Loo, Mrs Mali, Teacher, Hambledon State School**

**Brendan, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Daniel, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Drew, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Gavin, Student, Hambledon State School**

**James, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Jared, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Kirsten, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Michael, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Rhanee, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Shannon, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Shaylie, Student, Hambledon State School**

**CHAIR**—Does anyone know who your local federal member of parliament is?

**Jared**—Fran Lindsay?

**CHAIR**—No.

**James**—Warren Pitt?

**CHAIR**—No. Warren Pitt is the state member. You are getting warm though; Warren is right.

**Rhanee**—Warren Entsch?

**CHAIR**—That is right. Has everybody heard of Warren?

**Students**—Yes.

**Shaylie**—A kid in our school is Warren Entsch's grandson.

**CHAIR**—Does everyone know what happened in 1901 in Australia?

**Kirsten**—It was the date of Federation.

**CHAIR**—What does Federation mean?

**Drew**—The first election?

**CHAIR**—Not quite.

**James**—Wasn't it the uniting of the territories of Australia?

**CHAIR**—Yes, when the states federated. That is excellent. How many levels of government do we have in Australia?

**Gavin**—We have state, federal and local.

**CHAIR**—That is right. Where is the state parliament located?

**Daniel**—It is located in Brisbane.

**CHAIR**—That is right. Where is the federal parliament located?

**Daniel**—In Canberra.

**CHAIR**—That is right. Hands up those who have been to Canberra. Two here have been to Canberra.

**Ms Te Loo**—We would love to go, but it is just too expensive. Even with subsidies, we cannot afford to go.

**CHAIR**—That is interesting. You would love to go to Canberra, the nation's capital. Is that right?

**Students**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—It is a wonderful place. What did you see in Canberra?

**Kirsten**—We saw Parliament House, but we did not really see it that much. I was only in grade 3 at that time.

**CHAIR**—You should all try to get to Canberra, if you can. It is a wonderful place. Have any of you been to the local city council?

**Drew**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—There used to be two councils in this area and there is only one now. Is that right?

**Ms Te Loo**—That was probably a little bit before their time.

**Shaylie**—Our class went to the council chambers and we all got to sit in the councillors' seats.



**CHAIR**—Why is it important to vote?

**Kirsten**—So we know who is in charge and what is going on in our country.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Shannon**—To pick a leader.

**CHAIR**—That is a good answer. Can anybody else tell me why it is important to vote?

**Gavin**—So you know that you have a good ruler.

**Rhanee**—Basically, to elect the person that you think will do the best job for you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. That is a good answer.

**Drew**—It is important to vote to have a say in the government.

**CHAIR**—That is right. When you vote, do you think your vote actually counts? Is it worthwhile voting? All those of that opinion say aye.

**Students**—Aye.

**CHAIR**—Against, no. I think the ayes have it. Well done. You would all be good parliamentarians. What responsibilities does the federal parliament have? What do we do? What things do we manage?

**Rhanee**—You help to improve stuff around large areas of our country and basically you help people.

**CHAIR**—Yes. There is a whole range of things.

**Kirsten**—The federal government passes laws.

**CHAIR**—It passes laws, but in what sorts of areas do we do things?

**Gavin**—Defence.

**CHAIR**—That is a very good answer. That is what I am looking for. Defence is one thing.

**Brendan**—Roads?

**CHAIR**—Yes, including the Bruce Highway.

**Jared**—The post.

**CHAIR**—Yes, Australia Post.

**Shannon**—Build bridges.

**CHAIR**—Yes. That is roads. What about things like schools, education and health—doctors, hospitals and all those sorts of things?

**Students**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—What else might there be?

**Michael**—Railways.

**CHAIR**—Yes, some of that in New South Wales and Victoria.

**Drew**—Hospitals.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Drew**—Fire departments.

**CHAIR**—No, not fire departments. One thing that you might not know about is immigration. The immigration department for North Queensland is here in Cairns and it runs immigration for the whole of North Queensland. We have those sorts of things. We have the Treasury and budgets and all that sort of stuff.

**Ms Te Loo**—Excuse me, I am sorry to interrupt, but I do have another class nearby that is just about to start a class parliament for you so that you can see democracy in action. Would it be possible to move everyone across there? This is my class and I just wanted you to meet these students because they have worked so hard—although I am not sure how much you remember, guys. We did this way back in term 1, but they were very instrumental in learning a lot of stuff.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for welcoming us into your classroom this morning. We appreciate it.

**Ms Te Loo**—Thank you very much for coming.

[9.30 am]

**Brendan, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Carl, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Daniel, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Jacob, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Kenny, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Kirsten, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Mathew, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Megan, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Patrick, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Rebecca, Student, Hambledon State School**

**Renee, Student, Hambledon State School**

*Subcommittee observes class parliament in action—*

**CHAIR**—I move that so much of standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the member for Herbert and the member for Moncrieff from asking this class parliament some questions. Mr Speaker, is it your ruling that we ask you some questions?

**Daniel**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Let me interrupt your class parliament for a minute. You have done a marvellous job. We would like to ask you some questions about it. Mr Ciobo, the member for Moncrieff, would like to start.

**Mr CIOBO**—Thank you very much for allowing me to take the floor for a moment. It has been very interesting for us to watch what you have all been up to and the debate that you have been having. Are there any opposition members here, or are you all government members?

**Students**—Government members.

**Mr CIOBO**—Who is the Prime Minister? You have two Prime Ministers? How do you have two Prime Ministers? How does that work?

**Daniel**—We have two Prime Ministers because we all have different areas.

**Mr CIOBO**—Different responsibilities?

**Daniel**—Yes. The Prime Ministers just cover everything. We do not have a certain area.

**Mr CIOBO**—What has been the major thing you have learned from the class parliament? Is it about responsibility? Is it about how to interact with each other and have respect for each other's speaking? What are the major things that you take away from learning about civics in this environment? Who enjoys this process? Most of you have put your hands up. What do you enjoy about it?

**Megan**—I like class parliament because it gives us more time in school to discuss things. We just say to our teacher, 'Miss, can we do this?' and she says, 'Put it through the class parliament.' So that is the way we discuss things. If we want someone to notice something in the school, we say it through our speeches.

**Mr CIOBO**—The bills that you speak to and the acts that are passed here apply to your class. Is that right?

**Megan**—Yes, to most of the form 7 classes and to some of the school.

**Mr CIOBO**—Do the acts that are passed here apply to the rest of the school as well?

**Daniel**—Sometimes.

**Mr CIOBO**—Do other members of the Hambledon school vote for you? How does it work? How do you apply your rules to the rest of the school if they do not vote for you?

**Jacob**—We put it through the P&C sometimes and we sometimes ask Ms Jorgensen that and, if it is passed, we do it.

**Mr CIOBO**—Do the other classes all have a class parliament, or is yours the only one?

**Carl**—It is only year 7s.

**Mr CIOBO**—So every year 7 class has a class parliament, or is it just the one? Are you all from different classes in year 7?

**Carl**—No, just from 7A.

**Mr CIOBO**—So there is another class parliament for 7C, 7D and 7E.

**Students**—Yes.

**Mr CIOBO**—Do they also pass laws that apply to the school and their own classes?

**Students**—Yes.

**Brendan**—There is one year 7 class that does not do it.

**Mathew**—7B does not do it.

**Mr CIOBO**—Has anyone here had the chance to go to Canberra? Has anyone here been to Canberra?

**Kenny**—Yes.

**Mr CIOBO**—What differences are there between the way the federal parliament works and the way your class parliament works?

**Kenny**—I never went there.

**Mr CIOBO**—So you went to Canberra but not to the federal parliament?

**Kenny**—That is right.

**Mr CIOBO**—Has anyone been to the federal parliament?

**Renee**—I have.

**Mr CIOBO**—Are there differences in terms of your understanding of how the federal parliament works and how your class parliament works?

**Renee**—Not really.

**Mr CIOBO**—Who understands the way the federal parliament works with an opposition and a government and can perhaps tell me the differences between that process and what you do here—and similarities as well?

**Daniel**—Having an opposition and a government means it has two sides to it. Here we just have one and, if there is a bill to be passed, if it is sensible we just pass it. But, if you have an opposition, the bill would go to the opposition and they would change it if they do not like it and it would go back and forward until they agree.

**CHAIR**—I sit next to Mr Ciobo in the parliament in Canberra. As I am a deputy speaker of the Australian parliament, I also chair the parliament and so I know how hard your job is. There have been some great milestones, great events in Australia's history. What do you think are the important events that have occurred in the development of our nation as the years have gone by? What wonderful things have you heard about in Australia's history?

**Daniel**—The war.

**CHAIR**—There has been more than one. Which one?

**Daniel**—World War II.

**CHAIR**—Yes. What else?

**Patrick**—Nuclear weapons and North Korea.

**CHAIR**—That is not in Australia's history, but it is in the history of the world.

**Rebecca**—Anzac Day.

**CHAIR**—Well done. Australia really became a nation when Anzac occurred. Any of you who get the opportunity to go to Gallipoli should go. What else? What happened in the goldfields in Victoria? There was a particular flag with a cross on it. Who can remember? It had something to do with a stockade.

**Kirsten**—I do not remember all of it, but I know that the miners thought they were being unfairly treated and so they made a stockade and people got killed.

**CHAIR**—Yes. It was the Eureka Stockade. That was where the ordinary people rose up against the bureaucracy and had their way. That was people power in action. Are there any other events in our history?

**Kirsten**—The referendum where the Aboriginals got the vote.

**CHAIR**—Isn't that interesting. That is a lovely thought and it was an important event. I thought you would say when women got the vote.

**Jacob**—This was ages ago, but the Chinese came here when there was goldmining.

**CHAIR**—Yes, in North Queensland. What is wonderful, what is great about our country Australia?

**Daniel**—Our country is free; it is not like North Korea, for example.

**Megan**—Australia is a multicultural country, so everyone can come here.

**Rebecca**—Democracy.

**CHAIR**—That is right. Everybody can have a vote. I understand that your class parliament has not finished, but we are on a tight time frame. Thank you for sharing your time with us. Mr Ciobo and I really appreciate it. You will have seen that we have Hansard over here. Everything you have said has been typed into that little machine. That will now go on the record of the parliament of Australia. You will be able to read it on the web and see your name on the official federal parliament site. It is great to be in North Queensland today. Thank you very much.

**Daniel**—On behalf of the entire class parliament, we would like to thank you for coming.

**CHAIR**—If you come to Canberra, Mr Ciobo and I can give you a special behind-the-scenes tour that you could not otherwise have. If this class or another class can get to Parliament House, Canberra, we will be happy to help.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.11 am to 10.20 am**

**ANDERSON, Mr Tony, Divisional Returning Officer, Australian Electoral Commission**

**JORGENSEN, Ms Liz, Teacher, Hambledon State School**

**CHAIR**—We are being given evidence that young people, students, are patriotic and fiercely proud of their country, but there is a disconnect between that and their interest in electoral matters and perhaps even in some civics matters. Why do you think that is happening and what do you think we can do about it?

**Ms Jorgensen**—Obviously the more we can do in schools can help, but schools are not the sole answer.

**CHAIR**—Is family the answer?

**Ms Jorgensen**—If there are democratic processes and whatever in the family, and the family is involved in these types of things and bothers to vote and talk about things, obviously that can have a great impact because that is the primary environment. But some children do not have access to family in the traditional sense.

**CHAIR**—How successful is the class parliament in educating young people in civics and electoral matters?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I think it is great because it allows them to work through some of the issues that are happening to them and hopefully it can give some solutions as well. It is great that they are actually involved. Rather than just learning about parliaments and politics, they are creating their own.

**CHAIR**—Do you get help and resources from the Australian Electoral Commission?

**Ms Jorgensen**—Yes, we do.

**CHAIR**—Are you pleased with the assistance that you get?

**Ms Jorgensen**—Certainly. For a number of years we have accessed the Australian Electoral Commission to conduct the student leadership elections. The year 7 students are involved in that in that they act as the scrutineers, the pollsters and so on.

**CHAIR**—Are you telling me that the AEC actually conduct the elections?

**Ms Jorgensen**—Yes. They supervise the elections. They also talk to the students about what their roles would be, why it is done in a particular way and how the vote will be counted et cetera.

**CHAIR**—Mr Anderson, do you find that a valuable process?



**Mr Anderson**—Yes. I find that the kids are very receptive to it. I do not conduct it in any other way than I would conduct any other election. It is done on the same principles, albeit simplified.

**CHAIR**—Does the AEC provide you with the time and the resources to do this?

**Mr Anderson**—It is part of my job. I fit that into our work and operational programs. In the past, I have retained some of the cardboard materials from polling places. Until recently, I stored them in a storeroom. But I no longer have that and have now converted my office into a storeroom so that I can provide screens, ballot boxes and those sorts of things. I conduct it along exactly the same lines as I would conduct a polling booth at a federal election. I come and train the polling officials; I ask the school to provide so many. I work out how many votes we are going to have and produce a ballot paper.

**CHAIR**—Do you think other DROs take the trouble to save polling booth materials and then reuse them in schools?

**Mr Anderson**—I think some may.

**CHAIR**—But it is not a general instruction through the AEC?

**Mr Anderson**—No. I do it on my own initiative.

**CHAIR**—Thinking of all the schools in this area, do a number of them never request your assistance?

**Mr Anderson**—Some do not. I have some longstanding relationships with certain schools here. There is another one down the road that is actually in Kennedy, which is just across the border. I have been doing that for a number of years.

**CHAIR**—Does that go to Gordonvale?

**Mr Anderson**—Yes. I have done it at a number of other schools, including at White Rock, but it has been ad hoc.

**CHAIR**—So it is not a function of the interest of the teachers that you do it?

**Mr Anderson**—Basically, it is the teachers and the school administration and how they wish to conduct their leadership programs. I always insist that, if they are going to have an electoral process, it has to be according to democratic principles that apply to the electoral processes of the local, state and federal elections; otherwise I will not participate, because that has been found to actually do more damage than good.

**CHAIR**—Absolutely; that is what we have found. Do you do a preferential count?

**Mr Anderson**—Yes, but I do count under the old system. If there is one, I will include that and use it as an exhausted ballot paper purely for the franchise of the kids. You must understand

that there is a learning process. You have to accommodate the learning process as well as the reality of it for them because you are making something real for the students.

**CHAIR**—In relation to the teacher body here, are they all supportive of what you do?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I think they are. I am not sure that they all follow through all the time on things. Certainly in electing the student councillors for the student council election, which happens about the same time as the student leaders' election, we do encourage teachers to ensure that it is a democratic process—that students get a chance to have their election speech; to nominate election speeches, voting et cetera.

**CHAIR**—Teaching the civics part of the curriculum, do you find that you teach it with interesting stories? Is that how you engage the children?

**Ms Jorgensen**—As a teacher librarian, I do not have a particular class that I work with in that way. But I am student council coordinator and I will relate to the student council not stories from the wider community but stories from within our school from previous years—the success or otherwise of the process that a group went through to reach a certain outcome and why it might be or might not be successful—but not probably from a wider community perspective.

**CHAIR**—Do you have a personal view of this latest suggestion that there be a sort of an overarching national curriculum for schools across the country? Do you have a personal view on that?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I thought years ago we were trying to work to that and then all the states went their own way—the Hobart Declaration on Schooling and the Adelaide Declaration (1999) on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century and whatever. Certainly there would be lots of advantages for a national curriculum. I certainly hope that the states do collaborate to certain degrees now. I know that Queensland has brought in certain things from Western Australia and they may be modified to some degree. There is that collaboration as well.

**Mr CIOBO**—With respect to the model that we saw with the class parliament, there are some differences between the way that is conducted and the actual operation of our parliaments. Is that a deliberate decision that was taken and what drove it?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I cannot actually remember. We started it probably back in 1995—somewhere way back then. I know it is non-oppositional and I think that is to try to encourage collaboration, negotiation and that kind of thing as opposed to opposition, even though I know that can have its advantages. If a bill is put, we try to look at what its pluses and minuses are. That brings out the oppositional aspects that different members might have within the group.

**Mr CIOBO**—How does that then relate to the children demonstrating actual knowledge of Australian government? Do you find that that clouds or clarifies their understanding of democratic processes when it is different to the class parliament?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I have not really done any survey or whatever. I am familiar with the classes and I have attended some, but I have not done any research in relation to that—except to listen to some of their responses in your session just previously. I would say that it probably does to some

extent cloud it, or it needs refreshers regularly as to what the differences are. I know that the year 7s do a huge unit at the beginning of the year, because that is when the student elections are. That is when we get the Electoral Commission involved et cetera. That is the main focus. The parliament is continued throughout the year, but how much some of those aspects are revised I cannot really comment on. But I think it would be valuable to bring up some of those aspects from time to time.

**Mr CIOBO**—Mr Anderson, with respect to involving other schools in the Leichhardt area, do you have a program where you write to every school once a year, for example? Or is it just that you have a pre-existing relationship here and so it is with those schools with whom you have a pre-existing relationship that you maintain the relationship? How do you look at engaging the various schools across the community?

**Mr Anderson**—Naturally I can best serve the Cairns environment. I do write to the schools. With the schools there is a mix. It is ad hoc and there are ongoing relationships. Where I can identify those opportunities to work with a school, I do, but I try my utmost to support those schools that have committed to a particular process. But that is dependent on the operational needs of our other work activities and that comes down to our resources in terms of staff availability and experience of staff we have to do certain functions. It is virtually impossible to have a totally comprehensive program to service every school in, say, the electorate of Leichhardt, given our demographics and the characteristics of those schools.

**Ms Jorgensen**—Perhaps I can comment on that as well. We take the opportunity, when our student leaders go to leadership camp held at Holloways Beach, to talk about different processes. The teachers talk amongst themselves and the students also talk about difference processes that happen at their schools. We take the opportunity then to say how great it is that the Australian Electoral Commission is involved. Certainly at any teacher conferences that we have had we have taken those opportunities as well. I know that from time to time—not necessarily every year—we try to engage with the *Cairns Post*. They have an education supplement every Tuesday. We take photos and write articles and send them in and some of them have related to that aspect of it.

**Mr CIOBO**—One piece of evidence we often hear about is of a crowded curriculum. Obviously the school makes a commitment to the class parliaments. Is there a difference in terms of your excluding other parts of the curriculum because you believe you need to prioritise this? I wonder why, from my perspective, some schools are so appalling when it comes to civics education and yet a school like yours can make such a concerted effort to give it such a high priority.

**Ms Jorgensen**—When we first went into it, we probably needed to say that we were taking a risk and might be missing out on something else. But, as we developed it, certainly we have found that the literacy is in there—the negotiation, problem solving and democratic decision making skills are in there, and we do rate those highly. I do not believe that we are necessarily missing out on anything else. Certainly the SOSE aspects of government and the various outcomes there are included. I guess that is something that teachers need to come to terms with—that perhaps it is taking a risk to try something new, to try this—but we would certainly support it.

**Mr CIOBO**—How supported have you been in your process by Queensland education? Have they been a help, a hindrance or neither?

**Ms Jorgensen**—We have been lucky in that the teacher who helped us in this process has been in our school and then out of our school in various regional office roles or district office roles and she certainly has been supportive in that line. But, other than that, when the SOSE syllabus came out, Rosalie Shawcross was the SOSE overall Queensland facilitator and the Discovering Democracy facilitator—I cannot remember her exact roles—and now Discovering Democracy has taken a step back. Rosalie is strategic officer for values education—I am not sure of the actual title—and I guess that is what we are trying to do too. We see democratic processes being part of values and valuing.

**Mr Anderson**—Can you confirm that all your year 7s get the opportunity to participate in the class parliaments and there are no exclusions?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I guess it is based on the teacher and whether they have an interest in it or a belief that it is valuable. Certainly Ms Te Loo models to others, when new teachers come in. Part of the maintenance of it is with the induction of new teachers who are not familiar with the process. Over the last two years—the students mentioned it—one class has not gone that way.

**Mr CIOBO**—Why is 7B not participating in it?

**Ms Jorgensen**—I think it probably relates to the teacher's perspective that she could do it in other ways—other class meeting kinds of quality circles and other negotiation, problem solving and democratic ways without going through a formal type process. I say 'do it' meaning classroom management as opposed to learning about parliament and civics.

**CHAIR**—Thank you both for being with us today. We appreciate it. Mr Anderson, I wish every DRO was like you.

**Mr Anderson**—I try.

**Subcommittee adjourned at 10.37 am**