

FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures)

The West Australian State Government is concerned about measures in the above-mentioned bill, to restrict the opportunity for citizens to enrol to vote following the issuing of the writs.

In the seven days between the issuing of the writs for the 2004 Federal Election and the close of the polls 423,975 Australian citizens changed their enrolment details, including 78,816 new enrolments.¹

The proposed amendments will significantly restrict the opportunity for citizens to ensure they are correctly enrolled, potentially disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of citizens. The West Australian Government is particularly concerned about the impact of these changes on new citizens and young people, who will only have until 8.00 pm on the day the writs are issued to enrol to vote for the first time.

New Citizens and young people will be further hindered with the requirement to provide identification such as a driver's licence, passport or birth certificate before being allowed to enrol. These are documents many new citizens and young people may have difficulty obtaining within a short time frame. Whilst the rationale for these changes relate to a desire to reduce electoral fraud, there is no clear evidence that electoral fraud is such a widespread problem to warrant disenfranchising so many potential voters.

If these amendments are passed, the Federal Government must make a significant investment in electoral education to ensure that young people and more particularly new citizens, are fully informed of their need to enrol to vote at the earliest opportunity.

Civics Education in Western Australia

The Western Australian Government believes that Civics Education is important. This belief is backed with an investment of nearly \$800 000 each year to enable the State's Constitutional Centre to deliver civics programs.

The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia was set up in 1997 and is the only Centre of its kind in Australia.

¹ Australian Electoral Commission website (<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/enrolment.htm>)

The Centre conducts a schools education program with programs for students from Year 1 through to Year 12. The programs reflect the need for understanding of our systems of government and incorporated State and Federal Parliament, the Electoral systems and the Constitutional basis of our governments. In order to present a true picture of our systems, each program makes reference to all aspects of the process. This includes relating to the appropriate electoral process, to the parliament and to the "rules" or constitutions under which they operate. All programs are interactive, allowing the students to practise the skills they are learning.

It is the belief of the Constitutional Centre and its Advisory Board that civics education cannot start too early. The Constitutional Centre has developed a program for Years 1 to 3 called Larfalot's Letter. This is a big book story about an imaginary Australian town and how it uses democratic processes to elect representatives to develop a constitution for the town. With the aid of puppets, students become the characters in the story, hold an election, identify the problems that need to be solved and develop a constitution or set of rules for the town. This program is available to all metropolitan schools and to a number of regional areas in the State. This reach in the regions will be expanded as new presenters are recruited and trained throughout the State.

In addition to junior programs and specific programs relating to state and federal constitutions, the Constitutional Centre has developed a joint program with the WA Electoral Commission and the WA Parliament – The Joint Civics Education Program. This program commenced in July 2003. All three agencies contribute funds and the program trains presenters in regional areas of the State enabling the program to be available free of charge to every school in the State. The program is an interactive 2 hour program and involves learning about the electoral process and conducting an election; learning about Parliament and undertaking a scripted debate taken from Hansard and a life-sized board game looking at State and Federal responsibilities under the constitution.

The issue of the difficulty of taking civics education programs to remote Aboriginal Schools was recognised in 2004 and consultation with communities, the Education Department and educational practitioners led to the development of an alternate program that is being produced for remote schools. We are developing an interactive program based on a big book that can be included as part of the Literacy program. This looks at voting, parliament and constitutions and is related to the *no school; no pool* rule. It is anticipated that a big book plus a set of individual reading books plus teacher's materials will be ready for distribution to remote schools by third term 2006.

In addition to the schools programs, the Constitutional Centre runs a number of conventions for high school students both in the metropolitan area and in regional centres. From one of these conventions, The Schools Constitutional Convention, 15 students are selected to attend the National Constitutional Convention in Canberra each year. The Federal Government funds attendance at the national convention.

The vastness of the State makes regional education a very expensive process and the Centre is working with the Parliament and the Electoral Commission to develop

new and innovative ways of delivering quality information and programs to the regions. Participation in programs is growing steadily and is only limited by funding. (see table)

The Constitutional Centre also hosts a Civics Education Reference Group that meets bimonthly and is made up of Parliament, Electoral Commission (WA and Australian) Francis Burt Law Education Centre, university reps, classroom teachers, Political and Legal Educators, Education Department and Curriculum Council reps and the Constitutional Centre. Through this group we try to keep abreast of current issues and best practice and determine need for particular programs for different groups.

The Centre also conducts adult education classes.

SUMMARY OF EDUCATION ATTENDANCES To April 2006

	Oct-97	Jul-98	Jul-99	Jul-00	Jul-01	Jul-02	Jul-03	Jul-04	Jul-05
	Jun-98	Jun-99	Jun-00	Jun-01	Jun-02	Jun-03	Jun-04	Jun-05	Apr-06
Incursions to Centre	4012	4154	5991	4916	8511	10414	5896	5045	2790
Centre Prog Metro Outreach	0		639	590	760	3979	1220	1567	4757
Joint Civics Program Metro	0	0	0	0	0	0	5599	3048	6280
Joint Civics Program Regions	0	0	0	0	0	0	6247	2204	6094
Centre Programs Regions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	825	5112
TOTAL YTD	4012	4154	6630	5506	9271	14393	18962	12689	25033