

Migrant citizens

Despite the work already undertaken by the Australian Electoral Commission to provide adequate voting information to people from non-English speaking backgrounds, it is clear that in many cases the message is not getting through. Because our democracy depends on informed participation it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that all Australian citizens are enfranchised.¹

Australia's diverse population

- 6.1 At 30 June 2005, 4.8 million, or almost one-quarter of Australia's resident population comprised of people born overseas.²
- 6.2 The leading country of origin amongst Australian migrants is the United Kingdom (over one million persons – although as a proportion of the total overseas-born it is declining), followed by New Zealand, Italy, China and Vietnam (see Table 6.1 p. 108).³

1 The Multicultural Council of Tasmania, *Submission no. 33*, p. 2.

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration*, cat. no. 3412.0, Australia, 2004-05, p. 32.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration*, cat. no. 3412.0, Australia, 2004-05, p. 6.

Table 6.1 Estimated resident population, country of birth—at 30 June 2005

Country of birth	Estimated resident population
United Kingdom	1 137 374
New Zealand	455 105
Italy	224 309
China (excludes SARs and Taiwan Province)	191 194
Vietnam	177 728
India	138 662
Philippines	129 401
Greece	127 226
Germany	115 215
South Africa	113 783
Other	2 019 504
<i>Total overseas born</i>	<i>4 829 501</i>
<i>Australian born</i>	<i>15 499 108</i>
Total estimated resident population	20 328 609

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration*, cat. no. 3412.0, Australia, 2004-05, p. 39.

- 6.3 This chapter examines factors affecting the civic engagement of Australia's migrant citizens.
- 6.4 The chapter is divided into two sections:
- section one canvasses issues regarding migrants' generally lower levels of English proficiency, which was identified as one of the major barriers to migrants' participation in Australia's political processes. This section examines the correlation between English language difficulties and informal voting. It also looks at the role ethnic media plays in informing migrant communities about civics and electoral matters, and ways this role could be strengthened; and
 - section two examines how, where and when migrants access information about Australia's system of government and democratic processes. In particular, this section explores opportunities to provide further electoral and civics education through the citizenship ceremony process.

Strength of English language proficiency

- 6.5 A lack of proficiency in English was identified as the major factor contributing to informal voting during the Committee's inquiries into the conduct of recent Federal Elections. In the 2004 Federal Election, the

10 electoral divisions with the highest levels of informal voting were among the 26 divisions with the greatest proportion of persons from non-English speaking background (see Table 6.2 below). This lends some weight to the argument that people from non-English speaking backgrounds struggle to comprehend voting terminology, the different types of electoral systems, methodology and so forth.

Table 6.2 Electoral Divisions with highest informality levels in 2004

State	Division	Total informal % 2004	Total informal % 2001	Proportion of persons born in non-English speaking country (% as at 2001)
NSW	Greenway	11.83	6.79	24.0 (26 th highest)
NSW	Reid	11.71	11.08	41.0 (3 rd highest)
NSW	Blaxland	10.70	9.78	38.8 (4 th highest)
NSW	Chifley	10.10	9.20	25.7 (22 nd highest)
NSW	Prospect	9.24	8.99	36.8 (6 th highest)
NSW	Fowler	9.11	12.75	49.7 (1 st highest)
NSW	Watson	9.10	7.52	43.7 (2 nd highest)
NSW	Parramatta	8.53	6.21	30.1 (12 th highest)
NSW	Kingsford Smith	8.43	6.14	29.8 (14 th highest)
NSW	Werriwa	7.98	8.51	27.6 (20 th highest)

Source: Dario, G., 2005, *Analysis of Informal voting during the 2004 House of Representatives Election*, Australian Electoral Commission research report no. 7, 2005, p. 11.

Kopras, A., 2003, *Electorate rankings: Census 2001*, Department of the Parliamentary Library research paper no. 2, 2002-03, p. 61.

6.6 The Australian Electoral Commission has highlighted the need for electors to be proficient in English in order to avoid casting an informal vote:

There are two plausible explanations for informal voting and electors not proficient with the English language. Firstly, once the voter enters the polling booth voting is a test of their English proficiency. The ballot paper and instructions are in English. Regardless of the amount of education and political campaigning, the voter must have more than a basic understanding of the English language to vote effectively.

Secondly many of the voters who are not proficient in the English language arrive from countries where the voting system is far different. It must be remembered few countries practice the alternative vote system. Many use a system where a one or a tick or a cross is all that is necessary to cast a formal vote. There may also be a number of voters who do not comprehend the system,

and are afraid of making a mistake and simply return a blank ballot paper.⁴

- 6.7 Following the 2001 Federal Election, the AEC identified a correlation between informal voting due to use of ticks and crosses and voters who are not fluent in English. An AEC research paper stated:

...it is apparent that there is a positive correlation between the percentage of informality due to 'Ticks and crosses' and the statistical census variable, 'Not fluent in English'... The AEC's 2003 analysis of the 2001 election showed that the 'Not fluent In English' variable is a predictor of informality and is highly significant statistically. A regression analysis shows that this variable is a major predictor for 'Ticks and crosses' informality.⁵

Addressing Australia's increasing linguistic diversity

- 6.8 The WA Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI) expressed concern that, while the AEC provides voting information in a variety of languages other than English, there did not seem to be information available in languages spoken by some of the emerging communities from African and Middle Eastern countries.⁶ This view was also shared by the Multicultural Council of Tasmania.⁷
- 6.9 Table 6.3 (p. 111) shows the top ten countries of birth by rates of increase between 1996 and 2005, although it is acknowledged that for many of these countries, the growth over the nine year period began from a small base.
- 6.10 Of the top 50 countries of origin, persons born in Poland, Hungary and Italy decreased the most between 1996 and 2005 with an average annual decrease of 2 per cent each. The next largest decreases were from persons born in Malta and Greece. The ABS reported that while these European countries had high levels of post-war migration to Australia, they have had little recent migration.⁸

4 Medew, R., 2003, *Informal vote survey House of Representatives 2001*, Australian Electoral Commission research report no. 1, 2003, p. 14.

5 Dario, G., 2005, *Analysis of Informal voting during the 2004 House of Representatives Election*, Australian Electoral Commission research report no. 7, 2005, p. 16.

6 Office of Multicultural Interests (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Submission no. 92*, p. 1.

7 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 August 2006, pp. 19-20.

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration*, cat. no. 3412.0, Australia, 2004-05, p. 33.

Table 6.3 Rates of increase into Australia's population 1996-2005

Country of Birth	Estimated resident population, Country of birth—at 30 June 2005					
	1996	2000	2003	2004	2005	Average annual 1996-2005
Sudan	2 637	4 199	10 980	16 622	23 787	27.7
Afghanistan	6 351	11 159	14 491	15 944	17 614	12.0
Ethiopia	2 662	3 703	5 301	6 214	6 925	11.2
Nepal	1 608	2 297	3 283	3 573	3 950	10.5
Iraq	15 459	25 010	32 981	35 203	37 290	10.3
Somalia	2 305	4 069	4 891	5 146	5 431	10.0
Bangladesh	5 550	8 352	10 910	11 629	12 577	9.5
Pakistan	9 162	11 537	15 195	16 475	18 083	7.8
Zimbabwe	9 960	11 702	16 133	18 131	19 655	7.8
Colombia	2 988	4 177	5 200	5 412	5 664	7.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration*, cat. no. 3412.0, Australia, 2004-05, pp. 39-40.

6.11 In recognition of these trends, OMI stated:

The Australian Electoral Commission provides voting information in languages other than English, including Greek, Italian, Arabic and Macedonian. However, there does not appear to be any voter information available in languages spoken by members of some of Australia's new and emerging communities, including Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Burundi and Afghanistan. It is imperative that these gaps are addressed so that these groups are able to participate effectively in the democratic progress.⁹

6.12 OMI reinforced that the effects of language barriers are relevant not only at the polling booth, but to 'the broader experience of information gathering in the lead up to an election'.¹⁰

6.13 When this issue was raised with the AEC, it responded that it had undertaken a process of selecting a panel of consultants as part of its non-English speaking background (NESB) strategy, who would provide advice on which languages the AEC should use for the next election. While the AEC does provide information services in Arabic, which a significant number of new African arrivals do speak, the Electoral Commissioner acknowledged the need to address those who come from parts of Africa

9 Office of Multicultural Interests (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Submission no. 92*, p. 1.

10 Office of Multicultural Interests (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Submission no. 92*, p. 1.

where Arabic is not the first language, and confirmed that the AEC would be looking into this as part of its NESB strategy.¹¹

- 6.14 At the same time, the Commission stressed the magnitude of the challenge confronting it with respect to addressing the use of different languages in the information it provides:

The scale of the challenge faced by public authorities in dealing with the considerable diversity (especially linguistic diversity) of modern Australian society needs to be emphasised: an AEC Divisional Office may well find itself dealing with a voter population in which dozens if not hundreds of languages are spoken.¹²

Adult Migrant English Programme

- 6.15 For migrants lacking functional English, language tuition is provided under the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP), funded through the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC – formerly the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs). The AMEP budget in 2006-07 was \$153.7 million and around 6 million hours of adult English language tuition are provided each year.¹³

- 6.16 English language tuition under AMEP is provided as follows:

- refugee and humanitarian entrants under the age of 25, with low levels of schooling, are eligible for up to 910 hours of English language tuition;
- refugee and humanitarian entrants over 25 are eligible for up to 610 hours of tuition; and
- other migrants are eligible for up to 510 hours of tuition.¹⁴

- 6.17 DIAC reported that there were 36 414 AMEP clients in 2005.¹⁵ The registration rate for adult settlers who arrived in 2005 and who self-determined a need for English tuition was 72 per cent. Retention rates (the average number of hours a client remains in the programme) for each key migration category for 2005 were:

- refugee and humanitarian – 422 hours;

11 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 14.

12 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 17.

13 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *What is AMEP?* Available online at: <<http://www.dimia.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/learn-english/what/index.htm>>. Accessed 25 November 2006.

14 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 232.

15 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 233.

- family – 370 hours; [and]
 - skill (dependents) – 380 hours.¹⁶
- 6.18 Learners can choose to undertake the course *Let's Participate: A Course in Australian Citizenship* as part of their 510 hours AMEP entitlement.
- 6.19 The *Let's Participate* course was developed to give AMEP participants an introduction to topics in Australian civics and to assist in their applications for citizenship – while also focusing on improving English language skills.¹⁷ The course is non-compulsory, and those who do not wish to undertake the course can still apply for citizenship and be tested on their knowledge of English and of the responsibilities and privileges at their citizenship interview.
- 6.20 Topics covered by the course include the values and principles of Australian society, national symbols and emblems, Australia's parliamentary system of government, the responsibilities and privileges of being an Australian citizen, and Australian law.
- 6.21 The course includes approximately 20 hours of classroom tuition and is delivered by AMEP service providers. Participants who complete the course are taken to satisfy the requirement to have an understanding of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship.¹⁸
- 6.22 Not all migrants who complete the AMEP Citizenship course achieve a satisfactory outcome. In 2003-04 for example, a total of 123 clients completed the course but did not achieve a satisfactory outcome.¹⁹ Participants complete the course satisfactorily if they:
- attend a minimum of 75 per cent of the Citizenship Course classes; and
 - attend 100 per cent of classes covering Unit 4 (the Unit focusing on the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship).²⁰

16 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 233.

17 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Exhibit no. 10*, p. 1.

18 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Exhibit no. 10*, pp. 1-2.

19 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Answers to questions on notice, Supplementary Budget Estimates hearing, 1 November 2005, p. 1. Available online: <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/Committee/legcon_ctte/estimates/sup_0506/dima/qon_231.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

20 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Answers to questions on notice, Supplementary Budget Estimates hearing, 1 November 2005, p. 1. Available online: <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/Committee/legcon_ctte/estimates/sup_0506/dima/qon_231.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

- 6.23 Migrants who satisfactorily complete the AMEP Citizenship course obtain the 'AMEP Australian Citizenship Responsibilities and Privileges Record'. The record is accepted as evidence that the holder has an adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship. AMEP participants may submit this record as part of their citizenship application.²¹

Creating pathways to participation: the role of ethnic media

- 6.24 Ethnic media play a decisive role in disseminating information amongst Australia's significant migrant population. During a public hearing in Sydney, the Committee conducted a roundtable with representatives from a variety of ethnic media outlets. The aim of the discussion was to examine the role ethnic media plays in informing their communities about civics and electoral matters, and how the AEC could make a contribution.
- 6.25 Television, radio and print media from the Spanish, Chinese, Turkish, Russian, Greek and Persian speaking communities were represented at the roundtable.²² Representatives from the AEC were also present at the roundtable.
- 6.26 There was a general consensus among the ethnic media present that it was part of their duty to educate their readership about electoral processes.
- 6.27 Mrs Arzu Agacayak, representing the *Turkish News Weekly*, acknowledged that advertisements provided by the AEC for ethnic publications in the lead-up to elections were 'very important'. Mrs Agacayak added:
- 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.²³
- 6.28 Mrs Agacayak also suggested that support by way of translated editorial information would be welcome as ethnic publications generally did not have the resources of the major Australian newspapers.²⁴
- 6.29 Mr George Minas, representing FL Press, agreed:

21 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Answers to questions on notice, Supplementary Budget Estimates hearing, 1 November 2005, p. 1. Available online: <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/Committee/legcon_ctte/estimates/sup_0506/dima/qon_231.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2007.

22 Participants represented the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Radio Austral [Spanish], *Australian Chinese Daily*, *Turkish News Weekly*, *Persian Herald*, *Greek Herald*, *Novosti* and the *Spanish Herald*.

23 Mrs Arzu Agacayak (Turkish News Weekly), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 26.

24 Mrs Arzu Agacayak (Turkish News Weekly), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 26.

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.²⁵

- 6.30 SBS noted a marked improvement in support and communication provided by the AEC in the lead-up to the 2004 Federal Election compared to the 2001 election:

A quick glance at the informal rate [in the electorate of Fowler] – 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.²⁶

- 6.31 AEC representatives present at the roundtable welcomed the opportunity to receive feedback from representatives of ethnic media outlets, particularly given that the AEC is in the process of reviewing its own strategies in this area. The Director of the AEC's Public Awareness Programmes Section stated:

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.²⁷

Recruitment of appropriate polling place staff

- 6.32 The Australian Greens noted that there appears to be a limited requirement for language and cultural skills amongst polling and returning officers. Furthermore, the Greens argued that polling place staff, from management level right down to local polling place level, appeared

25 Mr George Minas (FL Press Pty Ltd), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 27.

26 Mr Thang Ngo (Special Broadcasting Service), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 28.

27 Ms Shauna Williamson (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 26.

to lack the necessary knowledge and ability to communicate effectively to culturally and linguistically diverse electors.²⁸

6.33 While the Greens acknowledged the importance of education programmes and English learning programmes for migrants, they argued that it was just as important that polling place officials be able to explain the electoral system on polling day. Recommendations in the Greens' submission included:

- That the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Offices train all electoral officials and managers in communication English as Second Language skills; [and]
- That provision be made for interpreting services in all forward and electoral budgeting.²⁹

6.34 The Multicultural Council of Tasmania suggested that every effort should be made to recruit polling place staff who are able to speak relevant community languages at any polling places which are known to serve a large number of voters from non-English speaking backgrounds.³⁰

Access to information about Australia's democracy

As more migrants, whose cultures and governing processes are markedly different from those in Australia, come to our country, it is important that they are educated about Australian citizenship. While prospective migrants are now expected to attend information sessions in their country prior to coming to Australia, ongoing civics and electoral education must be provided after their arrival.³¹

Impact of previous democratic experiences

6.35 A variety of submitters commented that in many cases, migrants' disengagement derives from a reluctance to exercise democratic rights due to a suspicion of authorities and bureaucracy, or a fear of retribution, based on past experiences in their country of origin.

28 Australian Greens, *Submission no. 30*, p. 5.

29 Australian Greens, *Submission no. 30*, p. 5.

30 Multicultural Council of Tasmania, *Submission no. 33*, p. 2.

31 Australian Catholic University, *Submission no. 90*, p. 4.

- 6.36 The AEC acknowledged that for some new citizens, an Australian election could represent their first experience of voting.³²
- 6.37 The Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment stated:
- ...many migrant citizens are terribly unaware of major political issues in Australia and tend to keep their opinions to themselves. This particularly applies to people from war torn countries and where human rights were severely abused. Democracy is not within the realms of experience for some migrant citizens as they have come from countries where there is no real democracy, and language barriers may prevent acquisition of knowledge.³³
- 6.38 The Auburn Migrant Resource Centre suggested that in cases where migrants have endured traumatic past experiences, the assistance of a community advocate or public interest group could encourage them to participate in democracy.³⁴

Learning about Australian democracy: current requirements and opportunities

- 6.39 Some of the current requirements for applicants for Australian citizenship include having an understanding of the nature of their application, having a basic knowledge of English and having an adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship. These attributes are generally required to be demonstrated at interview. There are some exemptions for elderly applicants or those who are permanently incapacitated.³⁵
- 6.40 Under current arrangements, an information booklet is made available to prospective citizens. The booklet, *What it Means to be an Australian Citizen*, contains background material which includes an overview of Australia's shared values, the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship, an overview of Australia's history and Australia's rule of law and form of government.

32 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 16.

33 Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment, *Submission no. 25*, p. 5. See also, Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission no. 89*, p. 6; and the Office of Multicultural Interests (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Submission no. 92*, p. 2.

34 Auburn Migrant Resource Centre, *Submission no. 37*, p. 2.

35 Australian Government, 2006, 'Australian citizenship: much more than a ceremony.' *Discussion paper – Consideration of the merits of introducing a formal citizenship test*, September 2006, p. 8.

Citizenship ceremonies: how effectively do they inform new citizens?

- 6.41 Over 3.5 million people have attained Australian citizenship since citizenship was introduced in 1949.³⁶ In 2005-06, 103 350 people from over 175 different countries were conferred with Australian citizenship at ceremonies.³⁷
- 6.42 Citizenship ceremonies are usually arranged by Local Government councils. DIAC produces the *Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code* as a guide for local councils and community organisations on the procedure for conducting ceremonies. The code highlights the legal requirements for the conduct of a ceremony, outlines the role of those conducting a ceremony and provides practical advice to people planning to conduct a ceremony.
- 6.43 At citizenship ceremonies, electoral enrolment forms, complete with the applicants details, are supplied by the AEC in partnership with DIAC. Applicants receive the enrolment form when they receive their certificate following the pledge of commitment.³⁸ Once signed in the presence of a suitable witness, the enrolment form is either handed to the AEC staff member present at the ceremony, or posted to the AEC.
- 6.44 According to DIAC, councils are asked to facilitate electoral enrolment by informing the AEC of forthcoming ceremonies and facilitating the presence of AEC staff members. As part of the procedure of the citizenship ceremony, the Presiding Officer is expected to advise on whether the AEC is present, and what conferees should do in relation to completing the enrolment process.³⁹ DIAC acknowledged that processes at ceremonies can alter somewhat from council to council:

...there is variability in the way in which ceremonies are conducted. Where issues are brought to our attention, either by unhappy conferees or unhappy members of the conferee's family or by some other observer, in terms of something they did not like about the ceremony, we get communications either direct to the

36 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Australian Citizenship Facts and Statistics*. Available online at: <<http://www.citizenship.gov.au/resources/facts-and-stats/index.htm>>. Accessed 24 November 2006.

37 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 218.

38 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Exhibit no. 10*, p. 3.

39 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *Exhibit no. 10*, p. 3.

department or through the parliamentary secretary or the minister, and we will pursue that with the relevant council.⁴⁰

- 6.45 In 2005-06, the number of citizenship ceremonies conducted in Australia increased by 15 per cent. The AEC reported that it attended only 47.7 per cent of all ceremonies to collect completed enrolment forms.⁴¹ AEC staff attended 462 citizenship ceremonies in New South Wales, 254 in Victoria, 115 in Queensland, 183 in Western Australia, 60 in South Australia, seven in Tasmania, 28 in the ACT and 12 in the Northern Territory. A total of 64 128 enrolment forms were collected.⁴² However, the percentage of new citizens enrolling within three months of becoming citizens is relatively high: 88.4 per cent of migrants eventually enrolled to vote in 2005-06, slightly lower than the 89.7 per cent in 2004-05.⁴³
- 6.46 The AEC affirmed its intention to increase its presence at citizenship ceremonies:
- We are going to have a big blitz on the new citizenship ceremonies. We are looking at how those ceremonies are run and what information might be provided at them. We are trying to have a much bigger presence at the Australian Day ceremony and Citizenship Week in the coming years.⁴⁴
- 6.47 In evidence to the Committee, it was suggested that citizenship ceremonies offer an opportunity to provide further information about civics and participation in Australia's electoral system. The Australian Catholic University advocated the inclusion of a five-minute presentation regarding the notion of citizenship, voting rights and obligations in Australia as an obligatory component of all ceremonies.⁴⁵
- 6.48 The SA Electoral Office called on the AEC to 'utilise the captive audience' by liaising with state/territory electoral administrations, local government and DIAC to jointly develop and distribute a comprehensive pack for new

40 Mr Peter Vardos (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 29.

41 Australian Electoral Commission, 2006, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 36.

42 Australian Electoral Commission, 2006, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 93. In Tasmania and the Northern Territory, local council staff supplied electoral information and enrolment cards at ceremonies where the AEC was unable to attend.

43 Australian Electoral Commission, 2006, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 36.

44 Mr Ian Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 3.

45 Australian Catholic University, *Submission no. 90*, p. 5.

citizens explaining Australia's electoral systems, structure of government and services in addition to an overview of Australia's democratic history.⁴⁶

- 6.49 The Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly, Mr Wayne Berry MLA, submitted that in the ACT, where the majority of the community is in close proximity to the Assembly building, citizenship ceremonies held at the Assembly are also an excellent opportunity to provide civics education.⁴⁷ Having realised that new citizens often received their citizenship certificate without any education about their new country's system of democracy, the Speaker developed a *Speaker's Citizenship Evening*. These evenings are used to outline the workings of the ACT Government to new citizens, and also afford them an opportunity to meet some of their local members.⁴⁸
- 6.50 In 2005-06 the Speaker hosted four citizenship evenings for approximately 140 new Australian citizens, where participants also viewed a captioned film on the Assembly, undertook a tour of the building and participated in a question and answer session with the Speaker in the Chamber. The Assembly reported that feedback from these evenings continued to be 'very positive'.⁴⁹
- 6.51 While acknowledging the manifest benefits owing to the ACT community's close proximity, the Speaker suggested that where possible, similar programmes should be replicated around the country. Mr Berry stated:

It would be a good idea if some sort of formula can be found to assist (new citizens) in a better understanding of how our democracy works. We ask them to participate fully in our democracy, but many of them who take out their citizenship certainly do not fully understand how our democracy works.⁵⁰

Timing: providing information sooner or later?

- 6.52 There was some discussion during the inquiry about how soon after their arrival migrants should be targeted with information about civics and electoral matters.

46 South Australian Electoral Office, *Submission no. 84*, p. 45.

47 Mr Wayne Berry MLA (ACT Legislative Assembly), *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 August 2006, p. 49.

48 ACT Legislative Assembly, *Submission no. 14*, p. 2.

49 ACT Legislative Assembly Secretariat, *Annual Report 2005-06*, p. 27.

50 Mr Wayne Berry (ACT Legislative Assembly), *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 August 2006, p. 52.

- 6.53 OMI referred to the *Beginning a Life in Australia* booklets produced by DIAC which welcome newly-arrived migrants to Australia. The booklets are translated into 24 community languages for each state and territory and provide information on the types of settlement services available and advice on where to go for assistance. OMI noted that nowhere in the booklets are new migrants informed about enrolling to vote. OMI's Executive Director stated:

The words 'voting' and 'electoral' do not appear. This publication is given to new arrivals. I do not think that registering to vote does rank with the first seven things that they recommend that new arrivals do...But I would hope that it would be somewhere in the top 20, because I think that, in gaining an understanding of the way we provide information to new arrivals, it is just as critical to tell them how they can participate in our political culture as it is to tell them how to participate in our economy or in our society generally.⁵¹

- 6.54 DIAC suggested that the omission of this information is likely due to the fact that the booklets are provided very early in the arrival process, while attaining Australian citizenship is some way down the track.⁵² However, the Southern Cross Group (SCG) also argued that electoral education for migrants could be expanded to target migrants 'at a far earlier stage than citizenship'. The SCG submitted:

It would seem to the SCG that there is an opportunity here for the early education of prospective migrants in matters relating to civic life in Australia, Australian citizenship and the rights and responsibilities in electoral matters arising from that citizenship. Their inability to participate in Australian elections during the time they are permanent residents rather than citizens could be used as a positive force in encouraging the take up of Australian citizenship. ...we suggest that the briefings to migrants at the time a migration visa is granted should include a brochure/booklet detailing the path from temporary residence status to citizenship and the electoral rights and responsibilities, or lack thereof, throughout that process.⁵³

51 Mr Ellis Griffiths (Office of Multicultural Interests, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, pp.49-50.

52 Mr Peter Vardos (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 31.

53 Southern Cross Group, *Submission no. 85*, p. 71.

- 6.55 The Local Government Association of Queensland suggested that capturing the attention of migrants soon after arrival is difficult, but it is important for civics and electoral education purposes that migrants do not lose contact with their support networks. The Association stated:

...many [culturally and linguistically diverse] community members are too busy dealing with the challenges of settlement to spend much time learning about these matters soon after their arrival. However, once they had settled and were ready to play a more significant role in the life of the community, many had lost contact with settlement and other support agencies that may act as conductors of civics and electoral education.⁵⁴

Delivery of civics and electoral education

- 6.56 The Australian Catholic University argued that, in addition to an entitlement to English tuition, migrants should be entitled to education regarding Australian electoral practices, law, history and traditions.⁵⁵ The Multicultural Council of Tasmania added that election information should also be distributed through service providers such as migrant resource centres, volunteer groups and grassroots organisations. Furthermore, the Council stated:

This information should include the date of the election, location and hours of polling booths, ID requirements, instructions on how to vote, including how to cast a vote and general information on voting rights, including instructions on how to contact the appropriate officials if these rights have been violated.⁵⁶

- 6.57 The Auburn Migrant Resource Centre suggested a range of strategies be developed to encourage migrants, particularly from non-English speaking backgrounds, to participate in electoral processes, namely:

- Employ bilingual community educators to work in partnership with NGOs, (Migrant Resource Centres and Migrant Service Agencies);
- Use female educators where culturally appropriate;
- Provide funding to above mentioned organizations to conduct appropriate education programs/ workshops about living in democracy, including their rights and responsibilities;
- Advertise more in the ethnic media; and

54 Local Government Association of Queensland, *Submission no. 67*, pp. 1-2.

55 Australian Catholic University, *Submission no. 90*, p. 4.

56 Multicultural Council of Tasmania, *Submission no. 33*, p. 2.

- Provide information in audio/visual form.⁵⁷

6.58 The SA Electoral Office noted that the provision of translated material must be maintained, and ongoing funding provided for translators, in order to ensure information sessions are provided for migrant citizens.⁵⁸ Ms Jane Gray from the WA Parliamentary Education Office advocated the inclusion of compulsory civics and electoral education in migrant education courses.⁵⁹

6.59 In its submission, the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga explained that the opportunities for electoral education in the region were presently very limited for some, and non-existent for others.⁶⁰ The Council acknowledged that for those who attend TAFE English classes, there is a component which introduces students to the Australian electoral system. However, both the Wagga Wagga and Tasmanian Multicultural Councils pointed out that many of these students are not necessarily eligible to become citizens for two years and are more concerned with other issues. This highlighted the need for ongoing education in this area. The Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga further stated:

...there could be Information Sessions conducted several times each year or at least once a year in areas where numbers are small. For those who do not have access to TAFE Education classes or who are not able to attend for other reasons, there needs to be Information Sessions or Short Courses available at convenient times for workers and free of charge. There may be need for the use of interpreters at some such information sessions, and we suggest this should be provided if necessary.⁶¹

6.60 The AEC submitted that it has translated material available online and is in the process of producing a series of DVDs which explain Australia's federal electoral system. Commission staff have conducted public awareness activities with adult education institutions that run citizenship courses and also with some English as a second language courses. The AEC further stated:

The AEC is keen to see more information about Australia's electoral systems provided to people contemplating citizenship, and included as content in citizenship courses run by various

57 Auburn Migrant Resource Centre, *Submission no. 37*, p. 2.

58 South Australian Electoral Office, *Submission no. 84*, p. 7.

59 Ms Jane Gray, *Submission no. 68*, p. 7.

60 Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga, *Submission no. 11*, p. 1.

61 Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga, *Submission no. 11*, p. 1.

adult education institutions. The AEC will need to work with the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to progress this and will need to enhance links with adult education providers.⁶²

Proposal for citizenship test

6.61 In evidence to the Committee's inquiry there was some comment made on the merits of the Australian Government's proposal to introduce a new Australian Citizenship test (announced in December 2006).⁶³

6.62 Under the proposal, the new test would replace the need for an interview. All people who wished to apply for Australian Citizenship would first need to complete a computer-based test, designed to demonstrate their knowledge of the English language and their knowledge of Australia, including the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship.

6.63 The Southern Cross Group stated that it would 'generally support' the introduction of such a test. The Group added that:

There is a need to place before migrants carefully developed and specifically directed civics and electoral information which would better equip them for their future as Australian citizens.⁶⁴

6.64 Mr Ezekiel Trumper, representing the Spanish speaking community's Radio Austral, was opposed to the proposal due to its potential impact on those not fluent in English:

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.⁶⁵

6.65 While non-committal on the merit of the proposed test, Mr Ellis Griffiths from OMI also raised a concern about the impact of English-language requirements:

62 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 72*, p. 16.

63 Robb, A. (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs), *Australia to introduce citizenship test*, media release, 11 December 2006.

64 Southern Cross Group, *Submission no. 85*, p. 72.

65 Mr Ezequiel Trumper (Radio Austral), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 34.

What kind of test is needed, I am not really clear about at the moment because I feel a lot of people, especially older migrants, would baulk at high English-language requirements, especially if they are in family reunion type visa classes and the like. It is complex, but we will be considering the discussion paper...⁶⁶

Committee's conclusions and recommendations

- 6.66 The Committee acknowledges that English language proficiency is the key determinant of migrants' ability to participate in Australia's democratic processes. While it is evident that Australia's migrants have, in the last five to ten years, begun arriving from new countries (for example in Africa and the Middle East), electoral translation and interpretation services have not necessarily kept pace with this new market.
- 6.67 On the other hand, it is concerning that migrants do not generally undertake the language training made available for the total number of hours provided them. The Committee therefore believes that improving English language proficiency requires a two-pronged approach; one which involves the initiative of government, and the other the initiative of migrants themselves.

Recommendation 12

- 6.68 The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission review the languages it currently translates its materials into and consider introducing languages spoken by more recent migrant arrivals to Australia.

Recommendation 13

- 6.69 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government urge migrants and candidates for citizenship to undertake as much language training as is currently made available to them by the Government.

66 Mr Ellis Griffiths (Office of Multicultural Interests, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, WA), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 58.

Recommendation 14

- 6.70 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government amend the Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code to include the additional mandatory requirement that during citizenship ceremonies there be a presentation regarding the notion of citizenship, voting rights and obligations in Australia, including the opportunity for enrolment at the ceremony.
- 6.71 The Committee raised the issue of the lack of electoral information in the *Beginning a Life in Australia* booklets with DIAC during its final hearing to see whether this information could be incorporated into the publication. Pleasingly, shortly following this hearing, DIAC advised the Committee that it had consulted with the AEC on this issue, and produced a paragraph concerning enrolment which would be included in the next update in both the English language version and those in the 23 community languages.
- 6.72 The Committee appreciates the efforts made by the AEC in relation to migrants' propensity to vote informally but believes that a missing link has been the provision of adequate civics and electoral education. The Committee accepts the recommendations made by migrant resource centres that a programme be developed, specifically targeting the migrant population.

Recommendation 15

- 6.73 The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, in consultation with the Australian Electoral Commission, develop a programme of electoral education, to be implemented through migrant resource centres.

Recommendation 16

- 6.74 The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission prepare a professional development seminar for migrant resource workers to enable them to deliver this programme of electoral education.

Recommendation 17

- 6.75 **The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission provides a programme of electoral education in the lead up to federal elections which specifically targets areas of high informal voting including those with a high proportion of voters from non-English speaking backgrounds and those in areas where there are different voting systems in place for State elections.**

Sophie Mirabella MP
Chair
21 May 2007

