

Looking to the future— education as the key to a healthy democracy

Introduction

- 14.1 In the earlier chapters the Committee addressed the mechanics and events of the 2004 Federal Election and possible changes to our electoral practices.
- 14.2 As people do not exercise power directly in Australia's representative democracy, but elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf, our democracy needs citizens who understand, appreciate and participate in it.
- 14.3 This chapter examines opportunities to encourage young people to participate to ensure that Australia remains a healthy, vibrant and forward-thinking democracy.

Participation

- 14.4 Evidence of the need for hard work to engage the up-and-coming electors with the electoral process can be seen in the generally lower participation rates among younger voters. The AEC estimates indicate that at the close of the electoral roll for the 2004 Federal Election:

approximately 82% of young Australians (17-25 years of age) were enrolled (compared with 95% of other Australians), on the electoral roll... the under-registration of eligible young people raises questions about their political interest and commitment to their civic responsibility.¹

The Committee' view

- 14.5 In this report the Committee has, from time to time, emphasised the responsibility that citizens have to enrol and to vote. But, as the overall enrolment figures, and particularly the lower proportion of younger citizens enrolled shows, more effort is needed to promote democratic opportunities as well as obligations.

Passive promotion

- 14.6 Currently there is a wealth of information about the political system which can be sought out by those who want to find out. The AEC and others intimately connected with the electoral process – the State and Territory Electoral Commissions and Parliaments – all endeavour to make a connection with the voting public and with those still at school. Most State, Territory and National Electoral Commissions have education or teacher assistance components on their websites.² Their orientation is, necessarily, towards the rights and obligations of voters and the mechanics of participation.
- 14.7 Federal, State and Territory parliaments also have similar arrangements, sometimes as part of their more general public interface. Most of the parliaments of Australia offer virtual tours of their parliament buildings on their websites, as well as arranging regular free on-site tours for schools and the public. These approaches highlight functioning of the Parliaments which results from the electoral system.

The Committee's view

- 14.8 All these sources are important for citizens' understanding of Australia's democracy. However, their effectiveness relies heavily on

1 Print M, Saha L and K Reader Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, AEC, December, 2004, pp. 2-3, 23, www.aec.gov.au/_content/what/publications/youth_study_1

2 NSW, Victoria, Qld, SA, WA, ACT.

the initiative of the elector who is already interested in the electoral system.

- 14.9 Not all have that interest. In a long-functioning democracy such as ours, it is easy to take it for granted. This acceptance is reflected in the attitude of the voters to the outcomes of the Federal Elections. Even those who wished (and voted for) a different outcome are generally satisfied that the Government was legitimately elected.
- 14.10 The Committee considers that this predisposition is important in permitting effective functioning of a democracy. Ideally this attitude should be well grounded in an understanding of the electoral process: it should be more than an outcome of habit.
- 14.11 There are means of seeking electoral engagement which are more active.

Seeking out the first-time voter

- 14.12 One AEC initiative to improve youth registration was *Rock Enrol*. In partnership with the radio station Triple J, *Rock Enrol* utilised on-air support and a dedicated website, which encouraged enrolment by raising awareness of the importance of enrolling and voting. Another aspect of *Rock Enrol* involved promotion at the “Big Day Out” concert series and various youth-focused community events. The AEC stated:

The response to the initiative was highly positive, and the AEC received over 4000 application forms as a result of the promotion.³

- 14.13 The AEC is currently sponsoring the Youth Electoral Study, part of which is gathering data through interviews with a national sample in excess of 4,600 senior secondary students.⁴ This has found that although youth are typically stereotyped as politically apathetic, in fact:

they were interested in political issues, what to them were real issues, though not political parties and politicians. The need and challenge is to find meaningful ways to engage

3 Submission No 182, (AEC), p. 5.

4 Print M, Saha L and K Reader Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, AEC, December, 2004, p. 4, www.aec.gov.au/_content/what/publications/youth_study_1.

young people more constructively so they want to participate more directly in voting and to sustain Australian democracy.⁵

- 14.14 By the time they vote for the first time, Australians will have lived through more than half a dozen Federal Elections, but will have had no say in the outcome. One of the challenges for our democracy is to make their first opportunity to vote an eagerly awaited event, rather than an interruption to Saturday.

The Committee's view

- 14.15 Publicity aimed at encouraging those approaching their eighteenth birthday to enrol for voting should be effective, but could be more so if it were not the first new voters had heard of their obligation to enrol.
- 14.16 The Committee considers that promotion of things electoral and parliamentary would be more meaningful if the target audience were younger age groups – those in primary school.

Encouraging the pre-voting population

- 14.17 At the Federal level the Government, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) promotes political awareness through funding for civics and citizenship education. In November 2004, DEST reported that the Government had allocated \$4.9 million over four years, to cover:

curriculum resources through a continuing civics and citizenship education website; national activities including Celebrating Democracy Week in schools and the National Schools Constitutional Convention.⁶

- 14.18 DEST also funds the Education Travel Rebate for visits by schools coming to the National Capital from more than 150, but less than 1,000 kilometres away. An important provision of this rebate is that schools must visit at least two “democracy related institutions” and demonstrate that their visit to the National Capital integrates into

5 Print M, Saha L and K, Reader Edwards *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, AEC, December, 2004, pp. 2–3, 23, www.aec.gov.au/_content/what/publications/youth_study_1.

6 DEST *Media Release*, 11 March 2004. www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/budget04/bud12_04.htm.

their class room activities.⁷ The annual rebate budget is fixed, and is distributed on a first come first served basis until funds are exhausted.⁸

14.19 The Committee was particularly interested in the range of school outreach activities directly involving the Federal Parliament in Canberra. The main programs were:

- National Capital Educational Tourism Project;
- Rotary Adventure in Citizenship; and
- Parliamentary Education Office.

14.20 The **National Capital Educational Tourism Project** (NCETP) is a partnership venture between the ACT Government, the National Capital Authority and the National Capital Attractions Association. It administers the DEST Education Travel Rebate. Mr Garry Watson noted that its aim is to:

increase the number of Australian school children visiting the National Capital as part of their school education, through visits to and participating in the educational programs offered by the National Cultural Attractions that encourage an understanding of Australian history, culture, democracy, citizenship, and values.⁹

14.21 The main entities relevant to democracy and citizenship education that schools visit are: Parliament House; the Parliamentary Education Office; Old Parliament House; the Electoral Education Centre; the National Capital Exhibition; and the High Court. The scheme also embraces Australia's historical and cultural heritage presented in the Australian War Memorial and the National Museum. Each financial year approximately 126,000 school children (mainly from Grades 5 and 6) participate in the scheme, and nine in every ten visit Parliament House.¹⁰

7 Submission No 193, (Mr G Watson), p. 1. Education Travel Rebate \$15 per student, www.edtourism.nationalcapital.gov.au/downloads/form_rebate.pdf.

8 *Education Travel Rebate*, www.edtourism.nationalcapital.gov.au/downloads/form_rebate.pdf.

9 Submission No 193, (Mr G. Watson).

10 *Education Tourism in the ACT: Domestic – School Based* www.edtourism.nationalcapital.gov.au/downloads/School_Domestic_Education_Tourism_in_the_ACT.pdf.

- 14.22 The **Rotary Adventure in Citizenship**, organised by two Canberra Rotary Clubs, brings some 50 Year 11 students from around Australia to the National Capital for a week, to learn about Parliamentary processes and ways of becoming active citizens.¹¹
- 14.23 The **Parliamentary Education Office** (PEO) in Parliament House hosts 2,250 groups (or about 79,000 students) each year. Some 18,000 of these visit under the subsidised *Citizenship Visits Program* (CVP).¹²
- 14.24 The objective of the CVP is to provide financial assistance to final year/s primary school and secondary students from areas distant from Canberra. This aimed at enabling them to visit the national Parliament and take part in a program designed to enhance their understanding of the roles of the Houses, and the parliamentary system of government.¹³
- 14.25 The students participating in CVP must visit at a time when the full range of PEO programs are available, and take part in organised activities provided by the Parliament, spending a minimum of 2 hours in Parliament House. These should include:
- a guided tour of the Parliament including the galleries of both Houses of Parliament;
 - an education program as arranged by the PEO (which may involve students role-playing to teach them the main functions of parliament in an interactive setting);¹⁴ and
 - undertake at least one further approved activity in Canberra from a range including:
 - ⇒ participate in the hospitality program and, meet their local Member or State/Territory Senator where possible;
 - ⇒ complete a special program as organised by their local Member or State/Territory Senator; or
 - ⇒ participate in an education program at the Electoral Education Centre at Old Parliament House, ACT.¹⁵
- 14.26 Funds under CVP are allocated on a per student basis at rates varying according to distance from Canberra:
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11 www.peo.gov.au/news/archive.htm.

12 The Program is funded jointly and equally by the Departments of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Department of the Senate *Annual Report* 2003–04.

13 Citizenship Visits Program Guidelines, www.peo.gov.au/programs/cvp.htm

14 DEST, *In Focus, Civics and Citizenship Education in Your National Capital*, www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=9635.

15 Citizenship Visits Program Guidelines, www.peo.gov.au/programs/cvp.htm.

- more than 1000 km – \$40;
- more than 2000 km – \$110;
- more than 3000 km – \$230.¹⁶

14.27 The PEO has reported that, in recent years, the increased pressure of numbers on the PEO's accommodation and budget¹⁷ has meant that not all who wish to visit can do so:

any further increases in the numbers of CVP students in future years will force corresponding reductions in the numbers of non-CVP students able to participate in Education Centre programs, unless the PEO's budget allocation is increased to accommodate extra students...there were 2,885 students on the waiting list for 2003 and 2,985 for 2004, all of whom missed out on an Education Centre program, but none of whom were eligible CVP students.¹⁸

14.28 The Department of the Senate annual report of 2002-03 noted that members of the Federal Parliament have called on the Parliament to:

make rebate schemes more reflective and considerate of travel distances to the National Capital in order to allow equality of access to the parliamentary education program for all students and that such rebates reflect market pricing for those reliant on air travel.¹⁹

14.29 The PEO is also responsible for *Talkback Classroom*, which, in 2003-2004 gave more than 700 middle and senior secondary students the opportunity to engage key public figures in discussions on issues of importance to young people. This was also broadcast on ABC's Radio National *Life Matters* program.²⁰

14.30 In addition to its Parliament House work, the PEO travels to regional areas to work with teachers on Parliamentary education and provides the important Parliamentary component for a range of programs such as:

16 All students from Tasmania regardless of distance from Canberra – \$110 per student. Average subsidy in 2003-2004 was \$67.18 per student, Department of the House of Representatives Annual Report 2003-04.

17 Budget \$1.22million in 2003-2004, *Department of the House of Representatives Annual Report 2003-2004*, p.150.

18 *Department of the Senate, Annual Report, 2003-04*.

19 Mr K Wilkie MP, House of Representatives, *Hansard*, 31 May 2004, p. 29476.

20 www.peo.gov.au/news/archive.htm; and Department of the Senate, *Annual Report, 2003-04*.

- *Rotary Adventure in Citizenship* mentioned above.
- *National Youth Science Forum*, which brings approximately 300 Year 12 Science students to Canberra to stimulate interest in science as a profession. The PEO assists this two week program by providing the link between the Commonwealth Parliament and funding for science ventures.
- *ACT Constitutional Convention* involving Year 11 delegates in the Parliamentary processes of establishing a constitutional referendum.
- *ABC Heywire*²¹ writing competition which allows winners to attend the Heywire Youth Issues Forum in Canberra.²²

The Committee's view

- 14.31 The Federal Parliament has an obligation to seek out and engage with the electors of tomorrow, and the mechanism to do so is through education.
- 14.32 The Committee endorses the Federal Government's funding of civics education through schools and the related activities of DEST. The Committee encourages the Government to continue this commitment into the future, and to support DEST in expanding programs aimed at educating Australian youth about the value of our democratic institutions, and the responsibilities and benefits of Australian citizenship.
- 14.33 Mr Tony Smith MP has observed that first hand experience is a powerful teacher:

there is nothing like seeing first-hand the operation of parliament not just in question time but in debate; seeing the operation of committees; seeing members of parliament from all political persuasions...and gaining a real comprehension of how parliament works. That is absolutely vital. Before school kids come to Canberra... most of them see parliament only very fleetingly, perhaps on a sitting day through the nightly news... It is only when they actually come here and see the parliament operating that they see the full range of aspects of

21 For 16-22 year olds. www.abc.net.au/heywire/about/default.htm.

22 www.peo.gov.au/news/archive.htm.

parliamentary life and the broader legislative work that goes on here. It is only by coming here that that is conveyed.²³

- 14.34 It would be a sound investment in our future to enable as many children as possible to visit the Federal Parliament. The National Capital also houses the Electoral Education Centre and the former Parliament House; which are significantly able to contribute to the understanding of the workings of Australian democracy. All these can be experienced in the richer context of our past, as portrayed in the National Museum and the Australian War Memorial.
- 14.35 As Mr Watson, of the NCETP, said in his submission:
- the research shows that the majority of students that visit the National Capital, particularly in relation to civics and citizenship education, are from grades 5 and 6. As civics and citizenship education has now become a national priority for schooling in Australia it is essential that all possible resources are provided to assist in this education.²⁴
- 14.36 These are the age groups which the existing school curricula make most receptive to first hand experiences.
- 14.37 The Committee noticed that key components for educating children about democracy were in place:
- the Federal Parliament and associated institutions in the National Capital;
 - established visitor and participation facilities;
 - a range of educational opportunities;
 - funding assistance; and
 - an established audience.
- 14.38 The missing ingredient was coordination of State and Federal monetary input. This was despite agreement in 1999 by all State and Territory Education Ministers to the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*, which included:
- an emphasis on educating students to understand their role in Australia's democracy....when they leave school, [students] should be active and informed citizens with an

23 Mr T Smith MP, House of Representatives, *Hansard*, 31 May 2004, p. 29482.

24 Submission No. 193, (Mr G. Watson).

understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life.²⁵

Recommendation 54

- 14.39 **The Committee recommends that State, Territory and Federal education authorities coordinate their contributions to students' understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government.**

Recommendation 55

- 14.40 **The Committee recommends that State, Territory and Federal education authorities increase their financial contribution to enable students in grades five and six to visit the National Capital to further their understanding of democracy.**

Recommendation 56

- 14.41 **The Committee recommends that the Parliament refer electoral education to the JSCEM for further examination and report.**

Tony Smith, MP
Chair
27 September 2005

25 DEST, *Civics and Citizenship Education*,
www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=8985.