COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

MONDAY, 21 AUGUST 2006

MELBOURNE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Monday, 21 August 2006

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

Members in attendance: Senators Hogg and Mason and Mr Danby, Mr Lindsay and Mrs Mirabella

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

WITNESSES

Committee met at 9.00 am

LANG, Ms Susan, Manager, Communication, Education and Research, Victorian Electoral Commission

TULLY, Mr Steven, Electoral Commissioner, Victorian Electoral Commission

WILLIAMS, Ms Elizabeth Anne, Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Victorian Electoral Commission

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for our inquiry into civics and electoral education. This inquiry was referred by the Special Minister of State on 24 March 2006. We have had over 100 submissions from all sorts of areas of the community, and very good submissions too. There is a lot of interest in this. You can see copies of the submissions on our website. We are intent on finding better ways of inspiring and engaging young people particularly. We have a wide range of witnesses we are hearing from today in the Victorian parliament.

I remind witnesses that although the committee does not require them to give evidence under oath, these proceedings are legal proceedings of the parliament and they have to be treated as such. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

I welcome our first group of witnesses to the hearing. Thank you for coming along so early. You have given us a written submission, which was very good, by the way. Do you want to present an additional submission or would you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr Tully—I would like to take three or four minutes to make an opening statement, just as somewhere to start. Clearly, we have an election on our doorstep on 25 November. It is the first time this state has had a fixed term or a known date election, and that gives us certain advantages as electoral administrators. Most of our education spend is in the lead-up to an election—there is no doubt about that; a good 80 to 90 per cent of our spend is in that period. We will be doing the same sorts of things that all other commissions do. We will be running a campaign with its components of enrol to vote, why vote, how to vote and where to vote. That will be a feature of that campaign where our major money is spent. The advantage of the fixed term is that we can, with certainty, engage with partners from the disability groups, partners from schools, partners from non-English-speaking backgrounds and partners from Indigenous and multicultural communities. We can run our programs in a manner that does not give the media any sort of sense that we are second-guessing an election date, which is an advantage. We will also have a launch.

Whilst we expect to pick up enrolment during that period, as administrators we are still concerned that, even though we work harder, we are not necessarily seeing the rewards of our efforts. We are maintaining our enrolment levels. We hope they will increase, but it is not getting easier for particular groups in our community who, when we survey them, clearly have the view that political matters are not relevant to them or that they have no interest in them or, on the other side of the scale, that they are very complex matters that they have not yet formed opinions on. We are concerned about the high levels of unenrolled people, particularly in the 19 to 24 age group, who hopefully will get on board before the election time but who in normal times are unenrolled in large numbers.

To attack that, we are putting more dollars into our recurrent programs so that we can get a more sustainable interest in electoral matters. The parties, candidates and participants have also got work to do to make themselves relevant and to engage that particular group. But we are doing our best to make contact with young people. For example, we send a pack and a birthday card to every 17-year-old that we know about. For those who respond, we send a pamphlet outlining what it all means to them. We follow up if they do not enrol, but we still do not get anywhere near 100 per cent.

We are going to put more dollars into this sustainable work, and we are fortunate in Victoria that the education system incorporates the civics and citizenship domain within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. This explores civic knowledge and also understanding and community engagement. It is tempting for us to think that this is the answer to some of our issues. Unfortunately, our experience is that teachers are very time poor. They have not necessarily got the time available to put into preparations. They already have crowded curricula, and some of them are not competent in teaching something that they do not fully understand. We are aware that international politics is of great interest these days, and international events may have the impact of squeezing the focus on the domestic aspect, where our political scene is so much more stable.

We have an 86 per cent youth participation rate in Victoria at most times. We hope to increase that through the enrolment program. That is no coincidence—I have outlined that we have a number of innovative programs aimed at youth. We have got a virtual voting experience on our internet site, where youth can see what it is like to vote. It is an animated feature. It is meant to engage them and to give them the opportunity to view and experience in their own environment, without needing to ask a question, which they may consider somewhat embarrassing to ask a veteran of the voting system.

We are putting a big effort into our enrolment campaign, and we are engaging with those who can help us, particularly with those who have low levels of engagement and low levels of participation. For the visually impaired, you would be aware that we are running a special program for them with an e-voting solution, which means that they will be able to vote in secret for the first time. We believe that will provide encouragement to visually impaired people to get on the roll and vote, whereas previously they would not have.

For Indigenous people we are putting on a person with an Indigenous background. We are hoping that, with her help, we will be able to make the necessary connections in those communities to get higher participation on the roll. We have just concluded, with a partner, an investigation into Indigenous voting and enrolling. We had trouble getting a focus group together. There are clear major issues, some of them traditional, that we need to overcome and so make the right contacts.

I will move quickly on to informality. That is another feature that we look at closely as to what more we can do in our programs—not only our run-up to election program but also our longer term program—to reduce informality rates. In Victoria they range from 1.9 per cent in regional communities to seven per cent in metropolitan, more multicultural communities. Clearly, informality increases everywhere where there are greater numbers of candidates and where it is a fully preferential system. Again, through our advertising campaign, we will hopefully be engaging those communities so that we can help further reduce informality rates.

I would draw your attention to our folder. In it we have several bits of material. *Your opinion counts—A teacher resource kit on the Victorian electoral system* is something we prepared for teachers and education staff. We think this is a useful guide to take them through some of the critical issues and to give teachers confidence in the material that they are presenting. We see our role in education as helping those who teach to do it with good quality materials that are relevant, interesting and presented in a comprehensive fashion.

We believe that, on our own, we need to make the puddles in the pool, if you like. We believe we need to reach out in a continued sense to teachers and those communities that we already have good contact with and to partner with the Australian Electoral Commission in a formal sense. We have a memorandum of understanding with the Australian Electoral Commission where we try to reduce duplication of our effort and try to add value to each other's programs and initiatives. It is through this partnership that we see that we will make our major contribution to sustainable electoral education. We will continue to run innovative election campaigns and to put material on our internet site, but we believe that you need to get them at a more fundamental level. That is why our efforts will be going into those partnerships as well.

CHAIR—You said that you have a fixed four-year term for the first time in Victoria. Do you think that that will contribute to getting a better enrolment percentage, or do you think it is not relevant?

Mr Tully—We believe our voting enrolment will increase. We put a lot of effort into the continuous roll update program and its refinements, but we still believe that, by having a call to action—like an election coming or looming and a date is known—we can target our enrolment initiatives. For example, we can put up big billboards around the place that you could not otherwise do and we can hit the press early.

CHAIR—Of the birthday cards that you send out, what percentage do you get returned?

Mr Tully—The first rate is standard with mail-outs—probably about 30 per cent on the first call. You might get another 30 per cent on the second call and follow-up. The rest dribble in at various times. The immediate hit rate is at least 30 per cent.

CHAIR—Do you think it is worth while?

Mr Tully—Absolutely. We have the highest 18-year-old and 17-year-old participation rates in the country at any time.

CHAIR—Well done.

Mr DANBY—What are those rates?

Mr Tully—About 86 per cent. We want to get it into the nineties.

CHAIR—I think it is 48 per cent nationally. Is that correct?

Mr Tully—It varies with election timing. Sometimes it can be in the low fifties. It is increasing throughout Australia at the moment, but it is hard work.

Mr DANBY—Is that the chair making an official comment about how stark the difference is with other states?

CHAIR—I am saying that Victoria is doing a great job. It is great evidence. This might be a bit sensitive for you, but could you tell us whether you are happy with the programs that the Victorian Department of Education and Training run in the schools, or do you think that school education could be a lot better?

Mr Tully—I can only reiterate what I said earlier: teachers have very crowded curriculums; they are time poor; and they need support, particularly in areas like elections and politics. These are dangerous territories where values can come out. Teachers need good, solid materials. I am not going to be critical of the education system. As a partnership, the AEC and the education people can make good inroads—and I might defer to Sue on this, in a minute. We have six pilot programs where we are trying to establish democracy on the ground through representative school councils or committees and to make it relevant to them. They have busy schedules and they make time available. We are not critical of them. We have had good results from those pilot programs.

CHAIR—But you are saying it. A lot more could be done, couldn’t it?

Ms Lang—One of the key aspects of the Secondary Schools Democratic Engagement Grants Program that we run is to provide teacher professional development and the opportunities for teacher release from the school. Often one of the major impediments for teachers coming into the program is that, if they leave the school, they have to backfill, and that is an extra cost to the school. It is very difficult for them to do that. So a teacher professional education session being run is often not enough; you have to take into account those other constraints placed on the school.

Senator HOGG—On that issue, do you find that teachers are bombarded with too much information or get information overload when it comes to this area and think that it is far more complex than it really ought to be. In other words, is it something that could be simplified and made more easily understood? One can always get wrapped up in the complexities of it, the arguments as to why and so on, rather than give it a simple message.

Ms Lang—In many instances I think it is because of the changing resourcing levels in schools. Teachers come in to teach a course that they perhaps have not taught before, so their level of confidence is quite low. They are not quite sure what the students have learnt to that point and, therefore, the temptation, if they have the opportunity, is to go with something that they know. That tends to be something that is not civics and citizenship; it might be something like SOSE—social education—et cetera. Civics and citizenship tend to suffer somewhat from this effect.

Senator HOGG—Mr Tully, you commented earlier about a survey on maintaining enrolment levels and how it is not getting any easier. Is it a specific survey that your department has done?

Mr Tully—It is fairly broad in terms of the effort that we are putting into enrolment and the number of transactions that we are getting back. My view is that we are putting in more effort. We are identifying electors on the move. We are sending a reminder to them if they do not respond. We even follow up with some sort of home or personal contact. But the roll is not increasing at the level that you would think with natural progression and maturation of 18-year-olds. I am drawing the conclusion that we are putting in a lot more effort but that the roll itself is not growing at the rate that we would expect. Given our enrolment program as part of the election program, the real test will be what happens to the roll at that time. We will be putting a lot of effort into the enrolment initiatives.

Senator HOGG—What are the main reasons for the low level of participation?

Mr Tully—On the roll?

Senator HOGG—Yes.

Mr Tully—Before coming to Victoria I was the electoral commissioner in South Australia, and in both states focus groups were conducted. I think they were good, representative groups, and people told us what they thought without fear or favour. I have tried to define the main reasons that have come out of all of the focus groups that I have seen. Whilst there are people who are clearly engaged and who have strong views, a great percentage of people have no connection. They do not see relevance, they do not see importance and, for a lot of them, they would say that the same government gets returned, no matter what. That is the pattern in Australia now.

If they are 25 and have seen three elections—the same state result, the same Commonwealth result—they wonder how that happened. They ask us what the difference between the political parties is because they do not see that as obvious, and clearly we cannot go into that ground at all. So there is a lack of basic understanding of and connection between voting and outcomes. The way that you can steer them sometimes is about the franchise and democracy itself. They are aware, and even some of the young ones are aware, of people like Nelson Mandela and the fight for freedom. They are aware of what happens in other countries, and they feel guilty when they see people going through a lot of pain to have the right to vote—and in Australia we take it for granted.

Our major linchpin to get them in is to say, ‘This is a valuable right.’ Do not tell them to be responsible; do not tell them to do the right thing. Make the connection between their rights and how important the franchise is, and they relate to that. The language we use is not ‘be responsible’; it is ‘value the right’ or, ‘Your vote is important and your vote will help shape Victoria,’ in our case.

Mrs MIRABELLA—There is no correlating discussion of rights and responsibilities; it is about rights—is that correct?

Mr Tully—Yes, it is a right of passage.

Mr DANBY—He is talking about how they see themselves.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I know.

Mr Tully—I am only trying to report fairly on what their perception is. What we take out of that is not to ram down their throat that they need to be responsible. They hear enough of that already, and it is not a word that engages them.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Obviously.

Senator HOGG—Do you use media that would attract their attention, like young pop artists and those sorts of people who might be able to make a connection with them? They might look at me and say, 'There's a dinosaur.'

Mr Tully—I am sure they would not think of you as a dinosaur.

Senator HOGG—They probably would. I am not a 23- or a 25-year-old.

Mr Tully—In your pack you will see that we use photos of young people, we use Z-cards, which they like, and we use animation.

Mr DANBY—What are Z-cards?

Mr Tully—As you can see from this one, they are fancy cards that start off small and have information in them in a fairly presentable way.

Mr DANBY—Do you release these in schools?

Ms Lang—We are sending those to every year 12 student in Victoria this year prior to the election. We did some research and Z-cards are very popular with the students. They tend to keep them a lot longer in their wallets.

CHAIR—Did you use the school's database to get the names of the students?

Ms Lang—Yes, we did.

CHAIR—Are there any privacy issues?

Ms Lang—We obtained those names from the Department of Education and Training.

CHAIR—Were they happily provided?

Ms Lang—That is right.

CHAIR—Have you had any objections from students that you know their names?

Ms Lang—No. What is more, one of the initiatives we are putting into place prior to the election this year is to try and engage with students in terms of their interests. There is a multimedia presentation in here because some students felt better just talking to their counterparts and to a camera about what they felt the issues were rather than writing something. We have an essay competition going within the schools. We have an enrolment poster design competition going on in the university and TAFE campuses et cetera. We are trying to engage them in the mediums and the areas in which they are currently interested.

CHAIR—With regard to the database that you use, do you send the packs to the schools or to the people's home addresses?

Mr Tully—No, to the student's home address. In terms of your question, in South Australia there is a major privacy issue that has not been overcome, and the same level of cooperation is not available.

CHAIR—I think it is terrific what you do, and clearly the results show it.

Senator MASON—Mr Tully, you mentioned before that young people often say that they are not interested in politics. Mrs Mirabella may correct me here, but I think it was Pericles who first said:

Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you.

And that is so very true. It is simply a matter of understanding how important politics is to everyone. The destiny of the nation is in the hands of the politicians, and they are selected by young people as well as by everyone else.

You mentioned in your submission that the VEC began a joint approach to electoral education with the AEC and that it expired in March 2006 and you are reviewing it. What were the outcomes of that first three years? Did you get anywhere? Was it worth while?

Ms Lang—The democratic school grants program was one of the major initiatives coming out of that. Although we are currently going through the evaluation with the schools at the moment, at the end of the first full year, it is something that we have decided we would like to continue going into next year. With regard to what we got out of that and what is coming through: the DVD, which is included in the pack, is one of those components. It is also about getting some of those teachers released from their schools, providing trips for some of the disadvantaged students to be able to come in here when they would not normally be able to afford to do that and providing easy English curriculum and having a specialist educationalist who can sit down and actually write some curriculum for adults who do not speak English very well around their experiences as they arrive in a new country and learn to adapt within that country. We feel that what has been coming through and what will continue to come through is very valuable indeed, and we would like to extend it to another number of schools within the next school calendar year.

Senator MASON—And you are redeveloping that now?

Ms Lang—Yes.

Mr Tully—We do joint publications with the AEC. We do not have one here, but there is a publication that we jointly put out. We will venture to the Royal Melbourne Show together and have a stand. I suspect we will be a lot more visible in shopping centres in non-election years so that we are accessible to people and do not just expect them to log onto our internet site or ring us up.

CHAIR—It sounds as though you have a good relationship with the AEC.

Mr Tully—Both parties work hard to make sure that we do not waste our education dollar.

CHAIR—You are on the one wavelength.

Mr Tully—Absolutely.

Senator MASON—Mr Tully, you were very kind before and said that you did not want to criticise the education department for the lack of citizenship education. Why not; why don't you criticise them? We are redoing history in this country at the moment. It was on the front page of the *Australian* today and I think it was on the opinion pages and all over the *Australian* last week. Surely citizenship and civics education has been neglected in this country.

Mr Tully—Our view is always to make improvements on what we can and to make valuable partnerships. I would not criticise the education people at all in any case, but even less so when we are in the environment of wanting to provide real, valuable and sustainable assistance to them. I do not think criticism is going to be that useful. Every indication that we have when we reach out to partners, even in the tertiary sector, is that there are levels of engagement possible and we need to focus on that. It is almost whether you fine people or encourage them. We would come from the perspective that we need to encourage.

Senator MASON—I accept that. But you say, wisely and cleverly, that civics and citizenship is organised into two dimensions. One explores the concept of democracy and the other explores the skills needed to participate as citizens. Really, what you do is about the latter; it is more about participating as citizens. You mentioned before, in answer to a question from the chair, that we are potentially on dangerous ground because when you are talking about democracy you are talking about different sets of values. What do you mean by that?

Mr Tully—There are histories and traditions that major political parties have and they make different representations to their supporters. There are differences in history as to where they have come from and there are probably differences of some significance in their current policies.

Senator MASON—I accept that, but surely the United States and countries like that do that better than we do. They have the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. I understand that political parties are different, but why can't we celebrate democracy?

Mr Tully—We can.

Senator MASON—Why can't we celebrate the institutions and the history?

Mr Tully—I think we can.

Senator MASON—We do not.

Mr Tully—I think we can.

Mr DANBY—I will start by asking Susan Lang a question. Beyond the democratic schools initiative, do you have a regular program whereby private or public schools can ring and ask you if you could run their student election? Do you do that too?

Ms Lang—Yes, we certainly do. Not only do we hold information sessions in education centres in conjunction with the AEC's education centre, which is just up the road for us, but we now have two full-time people on staff, particularly in this state election year, to go around to schools providing information sessions. We hold mock elections in some of the schools. We will go through the process of setting up with them a school representative election, for instance, or they will have an election on something that is of value to the school. At the Kalianna Special School, for example, which is for young people with mild intellectual disabilities, it was their very first experience of having any idea about what voting was and how it worked. It was very rewarding to see the light bulb go on as they went through the program.

Mr DANBY—Is it targeted at any years in particular?

Ms Lang—We will look to accommodate any school that contacts us for a session wherever possible. Sometimes they are a little further out in regional Victoria and a little more difficult for us to get to. The AEC has been very cooperative in terms of having some of their DROs go out where possible to provide information sessions for us if we are unable to. But wherever possible we certainly address that need.

Mr DANBY—I have one school where I regularly do the grade 6 elections. It is for the whole school, but it is the grade sixers who run. I think it is particularly valuable at that age because when they are teenagers they are a little too busy with their VCE studies or whatever. Do you find there is any right age to pitch this education program at?

Ms Lang—Having been involved in the educational area over a long time in the various roles I have had, I found that the younger you get them the more likely you are to effect longer term change. Some of the young children then go home and start preaching to their parents. For instance, when I was involved in the water industry, they would go home and say, 'Mum, you have to turn off the tap and stop wasting water.' We hope it will be the same here. We hope they will say: 'Mum, why do you have to vote? How does that work? We were talking about that at school today. Can I come with you when you go to vote?'

Mr DANBY—Can you give us an estimate of how many students you get to with this democratic schools initiative that you do with the AEC? Is it 10,000, 5,000, 100?

Ms Lang—I will have to check and get back to you but it would be in the vicinity of 3,000 to 5,000 a year.

Mr Tully—That is not including the education centre, which takes students in blocks.

Mr DANBY—There are two full-time staff involved in education outreach, but are the rest of your staff trained in educational stuff if people come into the office or they are asked to go out to speak at a local school or the VEC? We have a problem with the AEC people in that they are trained to run elections and a lot of them are not good at imparting this information—not for want of trying but because it is not their specialty.

Ms Lang—It would be fair to say that we have been able to accommodate the requests we have had so far with the two we have. There is another resource we have that can also address that requirement. I think the issue comes back to not having had as many requests as we had anticipated. Again, it is because the school curriculum has been so crowded. The teachers are constantly going to get back to us on it but never quite get around to organising it unless we keep on at them.

Mr DANBY—I have one last question, Mr Tully. In your overview, is the 86 per cent related to the fact that you have a predictable election date? If you were in the position that the federal authorities are in and you did not know specifically when things were going to be and you were in the AEC's position where they have to get young people enrolled, do you think it would fall away?

Mr Tully—That figure is from last year's statistics. The figures do bob up and down. New South Wales always used to start from a base of about 53 per cent and get it up to 70 or 80 per cent.

Mr DANBY—So it depends on the election year?

Mr Tully—It depends on the cycle and what sort of activities are around. But Victoria is always above the other states. The only time when it might not be is if there is an election in another state or federally that will bump the others up temporarily. But if it is a Commonwealth election, Victoria will come up above them.

Mr DANBY—Is it helped by you knowing you have an election on a certain day in November?

Mr Tully—In the past it has not. This is our first time for a known election date. As I said, we are putting in a fairly comprehensive effort within the dollars that we have available, which are significant. We will measure the difference in what happened during an enrolment campaign compared to non enrolment campaign. I think that will be useful for a lot of people to look at.

Ms Lang—We have found it beneficial having the fixed election date because Democracy Week occurs in the third week of October, about a month prior to the election. So that has enabled us to target a lot of our competitions and exercises that we have been trying to get the young people to participate in, coming to a bit of a culmination during Democracy Week. We have also been able to target, in conjunction with one of the major newspapers, a special education supplement to come out during that period. So the timing is perfect for us in terms of being able to know ahead when to target those particular initiatives.

Mr DANBY—Mr Whitlam will be hugely happy to if this is true. If you have a fixed election date you are anticipating the highest level of enrolment the VEC has ever contemplated before; is that your aim?

Mr Tully—That would be our aim. Can I say, Chair, perhaps belatedly, we are not advocating fixed term elections.

CHAIR—I understand that.

Mr Tully—All I am doing is pointing out the advantages that are available to us.

CHAIR—Yes. That is what we asked you about. That is okay.

Mr Tully—If we had to work with non fixed terms, we would just do it. But there are advantages to us, and that is all that we are trying to point out. We are not advocating—

Mr DANBY—I am not seeking to embarrass you; I was just seeking to draw them out.

CHAIR—Ms Williams, I want to ask you about some international experience that you referred to in your submission—the Power inquiry in the United Kingdom. It referred to two ways that we might increase participation in democracy. The first way was to lower the voting age to 16. I am going to ask you what your view is on that and what advice you might give the committee about that. Ms Lang, the second part of the recommendation was:

... that citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification.

So I am going to ask you about that.

Ms Williams—A view of the Power inquiry was that lowering the age to 16 would make involvement in the democratic process and enrolling to vote more realistic and more apparent—

CHAIR—Do you accept that, in your experience?

Mr Tully—They are the same issues as with 18.

Ms Williams—That is right. There are the same issues as with 18-year-olds. They have to feel it is going to be worthwhile to them and engage them in the process.

CHAIR—So there is no compelling reason to bring the voting age down to 16 in relation to improving enrolments?

Ms Williams—There are exactly the same issues as we have with the 18-year-olds.

CHAIR—That is fine. Ms Lang: ‘result in a qualification’—what is your view on that?

Ms Lang—We are excited about that concept and included it in our submission. We could help the schools resource it by providing the materials to teach a short, sharp and concentrated civics and citizenship session. We saw it resulting in a citizenship passport, if you like—something the students could relate to. They could have each page stamped as they went through each section of the course. We thought that would excite them and that hopefully it would make them keener to participate if they got some sort of certification at the end to say that they had completed it successfully.

CHAIR—Would the education department issue that or would you issue that?

Ms Lang—We could issue that.

CHAIR—Mr Tully, coming back to punitive measures, I do not know what the position is in Victoria. Is there a penalty for not enrolling to vote?

Mr Tully—Yes, there is.

CHAIR—Do you ever enforce that?

Mr Tully—No, sir.

CHAIR—Why is that?

Mr Tully—All administrators have taken the view that it is important to encourage people and to make it easy for them to enrol without the fear of penalty. We know that there are some people within the community who are not enrolling because they fear that as soon as they do they will get fined. In the Indigenous group that we had there was a clear message given to participants in that focus group that if you do not get on the roll at least you cannot get fined for not voting. So an issue that the commissions have always had is that they need to look at ways of encouraging and providing motivation rather than using punitive measures.

At least once a year electoral commissioners around Australia discuss whether they should be doing more. Focus groups with the youth showed, unfortunately, that one of their suggestions for getting people on the rolls was: ‘Fine us and we’ll do it.’ We have never been convinced. The other issue is a purely technical legal one that people can lead you on, you get to the steps of the court and they will fill out their card and it is gone. I do not believe it is in the public interest to clog courts up with matters that are not going to go ahead. I am justifying the position that electoral administrators as a whole have taken, that it is better to encourage than to fine.

Mr DANBY—I have a final question about a technical comparison on that particular issue with the AEC. The national enrolment at the last election was 92 per cent. Do you know what enrolment you achieved here in Victoria at the last election?

Mr Tully—That question is based on some sort of understanding of what 92 per cent is. If that is 92 per cent of what the Bureau of Statistics says is the eligible population—

Mr DANBY—That is what it is.

Mr Tully—that then makes an assumption that the bureau’s figures are unequivocal and correct. They have to sample like everybody else these days because of the increase in security premises and the difficulties in some areas, so you are making a comparison against another estimate by the bureau. So if we establish that as the base, I think Victoria would be at least that high. But I do not have the figure; I can get back to you if you wish.

Mr DANBY—I would be interested.

Mr Tully—We certainly publish those figures.

Mr DANBY—From this and your youth enrolment it seems that you would probably be doing even better. That is very good. Via this education, examination and all other methods, we are trying to look at what works best around Australia for democratic practice.

Senator HOGG—Do you do a doorknock to find out who are no longer living at the residence to take them off the roll?

Mr Tully—We have a joint roll arrangement with the Commonwealth, as every other state or territory does. The states make a contribution to the national roll effort. As a consequence of that I meet regularly with Daryl Wight, the AEO for Victoria, and we agree on a program of continuous roll update. As part of that program we determine those people who do not respond and they are doorknocked. But the doorknock is authorised under the auspices of the Australian Electoral Commission. So last year there were about 80,000 households that were doorknocked.

Senator HOGG—How do you do the high-rises?

Mr Tully—Sometimes with great difficulty. You can leave cards. They are secure—you cannot get into them. That is a problem that we are all continuing to face. It is not as bad here as in Sydney or on the Gold Coast, but it is getting significant in Melbourne and Port Melbourne.

Senator HOGG—I was thinking of it only in that it must distort what actually is the eligible base. You may well be cleansing one area, but you are not cleansing the other area.

CHAIR—Thank you for appearing today. Congratulations on the wonderful work that you are doing. It is terrific and first-class.

Senator HOGG—And thank you very much for the pack.

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator HOGG—It was very much appreciated.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[9.46 am]

DOWLING, Ms Karen, Senior Policy Officer, Office of Learning and Teaching, Department of Education and Training, Victoria

HINCKS, Ms Pat, Curriculum Manager, Humanities, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Department of Education and Training, Victoria

CHAIR—Good morning. Thank you for coming along this morning. You probably heard some of the evidence given by the VEC. They gave evidence in relation to your department as well. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but this is a proceeding of the parliament and, as such, the proper respect should be shown to these proceedings. We have received a written submission from you. Do you want to provide any other submissions or make some introductory remarks?

Ms Hincks—I would like to add to the submission on civics and citizenship education in Victoria. I believe that was fairly briefly overviewed in the document that you received. I provided the committee with a copy of the Victorian civics and citizenship curriculum, so I will address some key aspects of that now.

Victoria has just been through significant curriculum review in recent years. It has just introduced a new curriculum. This establishes state-wide standards that all schools must report against. In the case of the civics and citizenship curriculum, schools will report against the standards for the first time in 2007.

In relation to the new civics and citizenship curriculum in Victoria, there are three important points that I would like to make. The first is that civics and citizenship has been established as a distinct area in the curriculum with a clearly defined set of knowledge and skills and clearly defined standards that all schools must report against. The second point I would like to make is that civics and citizenship has equal status and importance to all other areas of the curriculum.

Senator MASON—It does?

Ms Hincks—It does. The third point I would like to make is that it establishes the importance of community engagement, which includes skills and experiences of active citizenship, as an important part of student education. While schools have for many years been involved in community projects and student leadership programs, in many schools these were regarded as extracurricular activities rather than as part of the core curriculum. This area of the curriculum reflects research that has been done through the middle years and also through civics education which indicates that experiences of democratic decision making and contribution to a range of community activities enhance learning, knowledge and commitment to communities.

Civics and citizenship has two aspects to it. There is civic knowledge and understanding. This covers areas such as the history of democracy, the main political and legal institutions, the values and principles which underpin democracy, the nature of Australian society as a diverse multicultural community, looking at contemporary issues, developing skills in media analysis and looking at sustainability issues—political, cultural, heritage and environmental sustainability issues.

For example, students at the middle primary level might be introduced to the principles of Australian law by participating in the development of class or school rules and understanding that rules must apply equally to everybody, that rules must be fair, that there is a variety of opinion and discussion to be had about what is fair and what is equal. They also might be introduced to laws through laws they are familiar with, such as the wearing of seat belts or bicycle helmets. Upper primary students might consider the importance and processes of voting in a representative democracy through conducting class elections, discussing the fairest way of electing representatives, looking at the merits or otherwise of various ways of electing representatives, considering the qualities that leaders have to have.

Middle secondary students, for example, might consider case studies of particular events in Australia's democratic history, such as the Franklin Dam case, through which they can look at aspects of Australian democracy such as the role of the High Court, the division of powers between state and federal governments, the role of interest groups in a democracy and the role of international conventions, such as World Heritage listing, on the Australian political system.

Those are examples of areas of content that students might cover in civic knowledge and understanding. The community engagement dimension really focuses on the development of skills and behaviours that students need to interact with the community and to engage with organisations in groups. In community engagement, students participate in processes associated with citizenship such as decision making, voting, leadership, using their knowledge of rules and laws of government. They think critically about their own values and rights and responsibilities and those of organisations and groups.

Community engagement in school includes democratic classrooms where debate and discussion of real events and issues are valued, where the language of democracy is used and where there is collaboration and the development of skills such as listening, asking questions, respecting a range of opinions, negotiating, developing plans, assuming a range of roles. We would see these as the cooperative skills that underpin a community. It would also involve real participation in school governance through structures such as junior school councils and student representative bodies, where students have a real role to play in school decision making. It might include things like student-run assemblies or involvement in transition programs.

It also may involve opportunities for school and community based projects around days of international, national and local significance such as Australia Day, Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Clean Up Australia Day, Harmony Day, National Flag Day, May Day, International Women's Day, World Environment Day, Celebrating Democracy Week and NAIDOC Week. These are examples of important celebrations and commemorations in the community that schools will develop projects around.

As well as this, there is a range of service, learning and volunteer projects in the community. Some examples of active citizenship projects that have been undertaken by Victorian schools include an environmental health project involving a frog census, and student actions teams which involved students sponsoring lunchtime games, planting vegetation to encourage native birds, organising health food awareness week and producing magazines for other students in the school. There was a bicycles for East Timor project and a project to write the history of Koori experiences during the gold rush in Ballarat which included students interviewing Koori citizens, the development of an Indigenous garden outside the gold museum and a drama presentation to the local community.

There was a harmony project, which brought together students from different faiths and backgrounds to encourage intercultural understanding and to work together on recommendations about common values for harmony in the community. There have been intergenerational projects, which brought together students and elderly people in the community, and which included things such as interviewing war veterans and producing a publication of their reminiscences. There are also projects providing services and care for individual community members. Projects with local councils have included designing recreational areas for young people and making presentations to local councils about planning issues. There are also other areas such as the research and development of commemoration gardens in schools, the development of local honour rolls and the recognition of local community volunteers.

CHAIR—Ms Hincks, we have to be mindful of the time. How are you going? We want to ask you some questions.

Ms Hincks—The last point that I want to make is in relation to electoral education. While the importance of voting in a representative democracy and voting systems are topics certainly contained within the school curriculum, we see that the best kind of education to prepare students for future civic participation is broad civic education which promotes understanding of society and its key institutions and which engages students in debates about the kind of society we should have. Those things develop critical thinking skills and skills for participation and connect students to their community. In this sense, electoral education begins when children begin school. In this regard, a significant document is the international IEA study which clearly concluded in relation to the Australian data that student civic knowledge was better when they had experiences of participation in school councils—that was the first thing. Their second conclusion was that civic knowledge is a good predictor of a student's likelihood of voting.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I have a few questions. I will try not to take up too much time. We have all recognised the importance of civics and citizenship education. This is not meant as a dig at all but, out of curiosity, in light of that importance I was a little perplexed at the brevity of the official submission. Is there additional information which you can provide the committee—for example, details of the actual curriculum and the options within that? Are you able to provide that to the committee?

Ms Hincks—I have provided the curriculum document to the committee.

Mrs MIRABELLA—My apologies; we only have the cover page of that. The discussion is very brief. Is there a particular reason for that?

Ms Hincks—I am from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. I believe that that submission came from the department. I was asked rather later to be part of this.

Ms Dowling—I can possibly add a little bit to that. Schools in Victoria are self-managing. It is a devolved system. The schools are required to develop curriculum to best suit the needs of their students in their environment using the Victorian Essential Learning Standards as a framework. It is not a syllabus as such; it is a broad framework. We take a very broad view of electoral education; it is much more than the mechanics of voting and election. It also includes a deep understanding of the values and institutions that underpin our democracy, things like rights and responsibilities as citizens, democratic decision making, representative government, responsible and accountable government, the role of opposition, freedom of speech, equality before the law, justice, respect, tolerance and so on.

In Victorian schools, we ask our teachers to place the learners at the centre of curriculum planning by developing a rich curriculum to address the learning needs of individual students that give them the opportunity to meet the standards in all domain areas including civics and citizenship education. The creation of civics and citizenship as a separate domain is a recognition of the vital importance of this curriculum area and a validation of much of the good practice that has been occurring in Victorian schools over many years, whether in formal classes or in so-called extracurricular activities.

CHAIR—So why do teachers feel unprepared to teach civics and electoral matters?

Ms Dowling—I do not know that that is a general assumption that can be made about teachers in Victoria.

CHAIR—We have had quite specific evidence about that, not particularly in Victoria but elsewhere in the Commonwealth. Teachers just say, ‘We’re embarrassed that we do not know enough about the system ourselves.’ Are you picking that up in the Victorian education system?

Ms Dowling—To a certain extent we are. I think that would indicate what Pat and I were talking about earlier, that we think that funding for professional learning for teachers would be really well-targeted here.

CHAIR—Who should fund that?

Ms Dowling—I think the federally funded Discovering Democracy program made real inroads into that.

CHAIR—What about the state and federal electoral commissions?

Ms Dowling—They have a role as well. The Australian Electoral Commission had a program called Your Vote Counts which was very effective. If that could be continued, it would be fantastic.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Some of the submissions and, by implication, some of your oral submission spoke about active citizenship. It is quite an interesting phrase which can lend itself to contradictions and perhaps to claims that there is something more than just civics and citizenship education, in that certain political issues can be put forward. It is the propagation of a particular argument on a particular political issue. I wanted to ask you whether you were concerned about that. Is there any mechanism to ensure that there is a balanced opinion? I will give you an example. You spoke about secondary schools sometimes looking at particular issues such as the Franklin Dam issue and the role of the High Court, the role of international conventions and Australia's obligations to those. Australia's responsibilities and role in international conventions is something which I have had an involvement in for over 15 years, well before my time in parliament. There is a debate, which is quite contentious, about Australia using its constitutional power under section 52 of the Constitution to sign international conventions to essentially expand the powers of the Commonwealth beyond those specifically stated in the Constitution, the sovereignty issue. To what extent are there mechanisms to ensure that the other side of the debate on such contentious issues is presented to students? I am concerned that certain perspectives on issues are probably spoonfed to students as the given, the acceptable, the normal, the tolerant view and they are told, 'If you think anything else, that is not quite right.' Yes, there are obligations under international conventions but there is also another side to that and it is not as simple. I am a bit concerned. What mechanisms are there, in short, to ensure that the other side of the debate is given to students on these particular issues?

Ms Hincks—Civics and citizenship is certainly not about giving a particular line to students. I spoke about there being many points of view on issues, and students need to be represented with a range of opinions. In fact, good civics and citizenship is about students developing critical thinking skills. Certainly, current pedagogy in the classroom would be about students looking at source documents and a range of points of view.

Mrs MIRABELLA—In that example, though, they would have been given the flipside argument of signing international conventions?

Ms Hincks—I use that example because it is an example that is in the curriculum and it is also an example around which there have been curriculum resources developed.

Mrs MIRABELLA—If curriculum resources have been developed around that particular issue, could those curriculum resources be provided to the committee?

Ms Hincks—I am sure the committee is aware of the Discovering Democracy resources and it certainly—

Mrs MIRABELLA—The Franklin Dam issue.

Ms Hincks—The Franklin Dam case—

Mrs MIRABELLA—You still have not answered my question. Is the flipside of the debate about signing international conventions part of the curriculum for this particular topic?

Ms Hincks—I cannot answer that question.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Would someone like to get back to us on that?

Ms Hincks—I would not say that the curriculum had that level of specificity.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So it has the specificity of saying that international conventions are great and we sign them and their obligation but not the flipside? That clarifies it, does it?

Ms Hincks—It does not have the specificity that I spoke about in the example. The curriculum document in fact talks about: ‘students investigate some historical and contemporary issues such as the republican debate, the inclusion of a bill of rights in the Australian Constitution, the design of the Australian flag, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’. So this would be one constitutional issue that students might look at in that context.

Ms Dowling—Teachers in Victoria are being encouraged to adopt pedagogies whereby they engage their students in critical thinking. They need to use the inquiry method. One way of engaging students is obviously to show both sides of an argument rather than presenting one which can obviously misrepresent things but also not be quite as engaging if there is some level of contention about an issue. So good teachers will always present both sides of an issue and challenge their students to come up with appropriate evidence to support whichever point of view they are going to put forward as their own.

Mr DANBY—That has actually been proven that it is a better pedagogical tool to have?

Ms Dowling—Yes. As well as the civics and citizenship domain, one of the other so-called new domains of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards is thinking processes. We are actually encouraging students to learn, right from an early age, about the process of critical thinking.

Mr DANBY—Is that the same thing as clear thinking that I used to do when I was at school?

Ms Dowling—That is part of it. In response to your question, I would say that you can take encouragement from the fact that teachers in Victoria will be presenting both sides of an issue in order to bring out the best in their students, and they certainly would be very mindful of wanting to present their own personal point of view. Perhaps if the students challenge them—’What do you think, Ms Dowling, about that issue?’—then the teachers would be presenting their own point of view as just that. They would then say, ‘I think this, because here’s my evidence,’ encouraging the students to come back with a response and challenge their thinking on that issue.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I hope that certainly is the case for most students. I had a recent example where a teacher put their point of view quite strongly to mock and to discourage students from engaging in an essay writing competition on the Battle of Long Tan. I had that experience recently. That is why I cannot always accept the objectives as the outcome. We have tens of thousands of students going through the Holocaust Museum in Melbourne. It is an interesting and vivid illustration of the benefits of a democracy and it says a lot about Australia. Is the Holocaust Museum part of the official options on the curriculum?

Ms Dowling—Again, we do not present so-called ‘official options’ to our teachers. We present them with a broad framework and leave it up to them to devise a curriculum to suit the learning needs of their particular students in their actual environment. So there will be some schools where they will choose to do that. The Victorian Department of Education and Training funds a number of cultural organisations to provide learning and teaching programs for students and for teachers.

Mr DANBY—We have received some evidence that the Electoral Commissioner sometimes is refused access to provide electoral education. Are you aware of any schools in Victoria where that happens—where either the VEC or the AEC can't get access to them?

Ms Dowling—I am not aware of that.

Mr DANBY—The look on your faces means to me that you are suggesting that they would embrace that opportunity.

Ms Dowling—Absolutely.

Ms Hincks—As a former high school teacher I welcome the AEC and every politician who is willing to come. AEC programs are brilliant for students.

Ms Dowling—I have personally worked with both the AEC and the VEC. In my former role before I joined the Department of Education and Training I worked as the education officer for the parliament of Victoria for a number of years. I worked in conjunction with the VEC and the AEC doing all sorts of programs and often presented professional learning in conjunction with them, and I know that they were encouraging teachers to make sure their divisional returning officers came into schools and ran school elections.

Mr DANBY—At the Melbourne Education Centre 60 per cent of visits are from secondary schools. Primary school students seem to visit both the Parliamentary Education Office and the electoral education office in Canberra. Do you know why? Are you focusing more on secondary schools? Why do the Commonwealth programs seem to be more focused towards primary? Is there a division of labour? Were you even aware of it?

Ms Dowling—When I was working here at the parliament in Victoria, more secondary schools came through simply because with the primary schools it was focusing mainly on upper primary school, grades 5 and 6, and with the secondary schools there were programs available for junior secondary, middle secondary and for the VCE students. So I suppose it is just a function of that. Prior to the introduction of the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards, anything to do with civics and citizenship education tended to be focused in grades 5 and 6 in a primary school. So I think that probably goes a way to explaining it.

Senator MASON—You say in the first paragraph of the attached submission:

> Civics and citizenship education is located in the physical, social and personal learning strand of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

How much time is spent on the physical, social and personal learning strand in, let us say, year 10?

Ms Dowling—That is a totally school based decision. As I was explaining before, schools are self-managing; so schools are obliged to provide a curriculum that will enable their students to achieve the standards in all of the domains. How they do that will vary according to their own circumstances. So it is not something that we mandate.

Senator MASON—You have two dimensions. Civic knowledge and understanding, and community engagement are the two dimensions. Do you think schools in Victoria are successful in communicating particular civic knowledge and understanding?

Ms Dowling—Given that the Victorian Essential Learning Standards have only come in this year, and schools are only required to begin with the English and the mathematics domains, and they are introducing the civics and citizenship domain in 2007, it is a little early to tell. But looking at the document and in speaking with teachers anecdotally I think that the community engagement dimension is going to provide a real live context that will help students better appreciate and understand the civic knowledge and understanding dimension of the civics and citizenship domain.

Senator MASON—I hope you are right, because, as is stated on page 2 of the submission made by the Australian Electoral Commission:

> There has been considerable Australian research demonstrating that young people's interest in politics and understanding of the Australian electoral system is low.

So there is a task ahead of you, I suggest.

Ms Dowling—I think that is where the community engagement part is going to come in, because that will fire up their interest.

Ms Hincks—But that is not something that only schools and education systems need to be thinking about.

Senator MASON—I accept that, but, as the history debate currently shows, we have gone down the wrong track in this country in education in some areas and we are going to have to pick it up.

Ms Hincks—I think you will notice that, in the criticisms that were made of the curriculum of states and territories during the course of the history summit and the history debate, the Victorian curriculum was largely exempt, because we do have discipline—

Senator MASON—It was one of the better ones, but it still was not perfect. I was there for the summit, you see. I was in fact at the dinner with Ms Bishop, so I know what was said, and you are right but only partly right. Good try!

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence—we do appreciate it.

[10.17 am]

BYRNE, Ms Patricia Ann, Federal President, Australian Education Union

MARTIN, Mr Roy Overton, Federal Research Officer, Australian Education Union

CHAIR—Welcome. Please note that the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, but this is a formal proceeding of the parliament and should be respected accordingly. We have received from you a very good written submission and for that we thank you. Would you like to present any other material or make a short opening statement?

Ms Byrne—We do not wish to add anything to our submission, but we would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear. We are very supportive of the notion of increasing students' knowledge of electoral processes. Our only concern about the inquiry's terms of reference was that, in fact, they were fairly narrow terms of reference in that they related only to electoral education—though we certainly believe that electoral education is very important and something that our young people are lacking in and not confident about. Our main concern, though, is that such education not be at the cost of a broader context of civics and citizenship, including an active participation in our democratic processes. That is the main thrust of our submission. We also think that, at this stage, notions of citizenship and democracy perhaps could extend even beyond Australia—we should not be concerning ourselves just with what is happening in Australia. As the world gets smaller we should have consideration of the broader context.

CHAIR—That point was made earlier today.

Ms Byrne—What we mean is that, for instance, if one is only considering citizenship in the context of what is important for Australia, that is not a sufficiently broad view. We should be taking into account the impact, for example, of decisions that Australia makes in relation to other countries and vice versa. There is a broader sense of citizenship that does apply.

Mr Martin—I would also include an understanding of international organisations and the way that they work as well.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Or government.

Mr Martin—Or government, yes.

Mr DANBY—On the whole school approach to civic education, you say in your submission that student councils are run with 'varying degrees of student participation and engagement'. My experience is that they are particularly disliked when they have results and then the teachers decide this person is unacceptable and act to appoint someone else.

Ms Byrne—I could not agree more.

Mr DANBY—How do you think student councils should be improved to foster a greater sense of engagement? Should there be a bar on teachers, principals et cetera doing that?

Ms Byrne—I think the extent to which principals and teachers do that just encourages cynicism at a very early age. It is at your own peril, it seems to me. If a school is genuine about the principles that it is trying to teach, then you actually have to make sure that those principles are carried through in the processes and structures within the school. That is something that schools need to reflect on, because it will have a detrimental effect on what they are trying to do with the students.

Mr Martin—I would just add that, if you are bringing up your own children, it is always a balance between giving them the freedom that enables them to move towards the world whilst at the same time making sure they do not do anything that is life threatening or potentially dangerous. I suppose a lot therefore depends on the age. We would see students progressing through school having more and more real say in what happens within the school. I think sometimes you basically have to put up with the fact that you do not like their decisions, and that is part of the learning process. But at the same time the whole thing needs to be structured in such a way that it is workable. With a degree of faith in children, done in the right way and brought in from the beginning, it is quite possible for them to make quite serious decisions with considerable responsibility by the time they are getting into senior secondary school.

Whilst we are on student councils, in some cases there is a little bit of a tendency towards the idea that in order to be on the student council you have to be a good student and those kinds of things. We have concerns that that gives the impression that democracy or voting is only for certain types of students when in fact it should be for all.

Mr DANBY—I cannot remember where we heard the evidence but, as I understand it—and I would like your confirmation of this—the primary experience that interests students in democratic behaviour in general but also in the wider Australian electoral system is their participation in a student council. So you could teach democratic rights, the Constitution, freedom of the press and all that kind of stuff, but the primary thing they learn through is having a student council, an election and hands-on participation.

Ms Byrne—I think that is really true at the upper end, if you like, but teaching children about decision making—about their own personal decision making and about the consequences of their personal decision making on the people around them—begins a lot earlier. It begins basically from the time that children start school. By the time they are heading towards the end of primary school there is a sense of extending that to more formal structures, and then obviously a student council is certainly something that children really feel is an opportunity for them to have a say. That is why it is so important that it is actually an opportunity for them to have a say that is in fact listened to.

CHAIR—Are you aware that there are also negatives coming out of that where teachers seek to influence the outcome of a student council election?

Ms Byrne—Absolutely.

CHAIR—It turns people off democracy for the rest of their days.

Ms Byrne—Yes. I can remember exactly the same experience myself at school. It is completely counterproductive and goes against the principles that you are trying to—

CHAIR—How do we get it out within the education system that this is what is happening, this is what students are reporting back and this is why we get low enrolment numbers?

Mr DANBY—It may be a reason why we get low numbers.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Yes, probably not the—

Mr DANBY—Not the only one.

Mrs MIRABELLA—No.

Mr Martin—Could I add the comment that whilst a student council is a good beginning, of itself it is not enough anyway. If it is in contrast to what happens in the rest of the school day and so on—the rest of the school day is totally autocratic and dictatorial—then it is not going to work very well. We desire to create a situation of ongoing inquiry and participation. Probably, if you were educating students well in things like power and so on they themselves may question the involvement of the teachers. That might be quite a healthy development in some cases. If the teachers try to exert undue influence then that, in a sense, is part of the democratic process that they need to learn about.

CHAIR—Do you suggest that teachers could be advised formally that this is an outcome that we are seeing in Australia today?

Mr Martin—I think it is fair to say that we need a much broader understanding among teachers in general about what we are trying to achieve in terms of electoral processes. We have a very thin history and culture of teaching active citizenship in schools. The civics and citizenship education program that the Department of Education, Science and Training has run for a number years has over time moved more and more toward putting money into the professional development of teachers as being the most effective way of moving things forward. We totally support the notion that a lot of what we are expressing is an ideal and that we need professional development money in order to encourage teachers to see what they are doing.

CHAIR—You are struggling with my question. Does the AEU have a role in telling its members, ‘Look, this is what the community is picking up,’ or is that not your charter?

Ms Byrne—I do not know that we would ever say that it was not our charter. That can occur. We could do that via this process, for example. That would be perfectly reasonable. We could do that. We could set it up through our branches.

Mr DANBY—I have a question on TAFE colleges. On page 9 your submission says:

... nothing that appears to resemble civics and citizenship education—

is included in TAFE courses. What civic education could be incorporated in TAFE courses and who would be responsible for developing materials for those courses?

Mr Martin—The difficulty with TAFE is that it has become more and more focused on the delivery of particular units of work and, in particular, training packages and so on. It is far less involved in a general education. In order to introduce civics and citizenship education you would need to move back towards a more general education. I suppose that it would be possible to look at incorporating separate courses. I think it would be very difficult in the current circumstances. The whole focus of TAFE has moved away from that kind of general education.

CHAIR—Senator Mason, do you have a question?

Senator MASON—I have several, in fact, Chair. Mr Martin, your submission is very interesting. You draw the distinction between civic leadership and citizenship disposition. We have touched on that, but it has not really been the focus of this inquiry. I suppose, by implication, we have been talking more about civic knowledge than citizenship disposition. You mention on page 8 of your submission three tensions—and I think this really underlies your intellectual contribution to this debate—and I want to ask you about each of these three tensions. You say:

The first is that this inquiry seems to be self-driven. That is, the members have a perception (only) that young people in Australia have an inadequate understanding of civic and electoral matters.

If you had been here earlier you would have heard the Victorian Electoral Commission say just that. I think it is fair to say, Chair, that nearly all the evidence we have received thus far would seem to say that in fact young people do have an inadequate understanding of civic and electoral matters. Do you question that? I notice you go on to say:

The arena for this debate is often in the media or in the interests of particular politicians.

What are you driving at?

Mr Martin—What we are trying to say is that the topic is broader than whether you know who the Prime Minister is or whether you know who your MP is—those kinds of details.

Mrs MIRABELLA—It would certainly help, though, to know those basic things if you wanted to achieve something by actively participating in democracy, surely.

Mr Martin—If you start with that point the chances are you will lose the students very quickly, before you go somewhere else. It is something that might emerge from a good active citizenship program; it is not something I would want to start with in terms of teaching them. I have had experience of that, I can assure you.

Senator MASON—Mr Martin, do you disagree that there is an inadequate understanding of civic and electoral matters among young Australian people?

Mr Martin—I would say that there is not the level of knowledge that we would like.

Senator MASON—So you do agree with that?

Mr Martin—Yes. But I think we need to put that in a context: (a) that it was ever thus, in most countries, and (b) that arriving at the solution does not mean immediately moving towards a program that emphasises the factual elements of an electoral system.

Senator MASON—I like your dichotomy because your second tension picks it up—civic knowledge and citizenship disposition. A lot of us have been speaking over the last few weeks about the United States, where civic knowledge can be quite high in certain areas—the founders of the American Constitution, George Washington, Jefferson and so forth. In other words, the historical tapestry is quite exciting. Mr Carr, the former Premier of New South Wales, talks about this often. Yet your argument would be that civic knowledge may be higher in Australia and that, even if it is, citizenship disposition is no higher and in fact is probably less.

Ms Byrne—Yes.

Senator MASON—I think that is a good point. I think you are probably right, although I would make a point that you may not agree with or you may not enjoy. President Nixon spoke about the silent majority, and I tend to think that active democratic participation may not quite have the results you think. I will leave that with you. You go on to say:

The third tension about this inquiry is that it assumes that having greater civic and electoral knowledge is what the key stakeholders in schools want.

You conclude that paragraph on the third tension by saying:

Parents, as voters, do not believe that greater civic knowledge per se is important. They want their children to be caring, sensitive global citizens with values like social justice.

There is a lot in that sentence. I assume you mean they also believe their kids should know about individual responsibility, trust, excellence, merit and hard work?

Mr Martin—Yes.

Ms Byrne—Absolutely.

Senator MASON—You should have put that in. But surely you would agree that parents do believe that their children should have civic knowledge about their country and about the electoral process. I would like to see this survey, because the answers always depend on the questions asked. The chair and I have not met anyone who does not think that kids should know more about civic education.

CHAIR—We have not.

Senator MASON—Mr Martin, it just does not ring true.

Mr Martin—What we are trying to say there relates to parents' priorities. In the context of an inquiry on civics and citizenship you are likely to get answers that focus on civics and citizenship. In terms of parents' desires out of schools, what they look to schools to do is to give their children a broad understanding of the world so that they can act within it with all of the qualities that you have enumerated and with the ones that we have listed.

Senator MASON—How can you have that, though, if you do not understand your democracy; if you do not understand civics; if you do not understand your nation's history?

Obviously this debate has been caught up in the history debate that is currently going on, as you know. In a sense, our committee, Mr Chair, has been caught up in that broader debate—for good or for bad, it has been. I cannot see how you can operate effectively as a citizen unless you know your nation's history; unless you know about the forming of the Constitution and the debates that founded this country. How can you operate as a sensitive global citizen without that?

Ms Byrne—Certainly, we would obviously say that that was desirable, but I think that builds on the comment we made earlier about the fact that a simple knowledge of facts, an electoral process and history does not of itself create a predisposition towards citizenship.

Mrs MIRABELLA—That is arguable.

Ms Byrne—We are not arguing that it is not important, but I think all this is saying is that we are not going to overstate the significance. It is in the context of the other activities—the other community activities, the social skills and the other things—that have to be taught as well.

Senator MASON—I do think you have added something to this debate by your dichotomy. It is a clever and appropriate distinction to bring into the debate. I will finish on this, Chair, because I could go on all day. What worries me is this: in this country in previous times we have gone down a path, for example, in teaching English, of saying: 'Kids do not need to know about grammar,' 'Kids study soaps; they don't need to know about history.' I do not want to get a situation again where everything is watered down into social justice, happy feelings and group hugs. You need to know some facts and the narrative before you can build the opinions and themes. You cannot do it without the skeleton. If you are going to put the flesh on the bones, you need to understand the bones.

Ms Byrne—Absolutely—there is no argument with that.

Senator MASON—That is why you need civic knowledge.

Ms Byrne—We are not saying that you do not need civic knowledge.

Senator MASON—This is the problem. I know you know that, but I do not want to go to the situation we had in the seventies and eighties where English grammar was considered irrelevant and it has become an absolute disaster.

Ms Byrne—Sorry, can I just say, as a practising teacher, English grammar was never considered irrelevant—never.

Senator MASON—Okay, but it lost its—how can I put this?—primacy. It is not just English. It has happened in history and elsewhere. This is not about good feelings. This is about the fact that people have to have some concrete knowledge before they can contribute. I agree with Mrs Mirabella on this.

CHAIR—Let us hear what the witnesses have to say about that point.

Mr Martin—With due respect, I think you may be reading too much into that statement in the light of a number of other debates that are taking place that we are not addressing in terms of this particular submission. We are not taking a position in that statement in terms of the history debate or the English debate. We are simply making an observation about civics and citizenship. Basically I suppose what we are saying is that the immediate—

Senator MASON—You cannot have a disposition before you have a knowledge.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Mr Martin, I think you said earlier that you have got to have the disposition first because the knowledge is in fact too boring for kids.

Mr Martin—No. What I am saying is that, when you find out that students do not know a certain level of civic knowledge, the automatic response is to develop a curriculum that teaches it to them, often by rote learning and all of those kinds of things. What we are saying is: we may have a similar desire about the outcome, but we do not believe that that is the best way to arrive at that situation. We are not arguing that knowledge is not important. What we are saying is: you will not arrive at a situation of improving the level of knowledge by simply concentrating on the factual electoral knowledge. That is what you are concerned about.

Senator MASON—I see. So, in a sense, you need to talk about disposition to get to the knowledge, often.

Mr Martin—You perhaps intermingle them.

CHAIR—Senator Mason, thank you.

Senator MASON—Sorry, Chair—although it is quite central.

CHAIR—Mrs Mirabella wants her six minutes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Following on from that issue, and just to make a gratuitous statement, the last sentence in paragraph 3.1.8, in reference to parents, says:

They want their children to be caring, sensitive global citizens with values like social justice.

I think the first one should have been: an adequate education that would give them the skills to be active participants in the workforce. That would probably be No. 1 for the vast majority of parents. But, putting that aside, at the beginning of page 3 of your submission you talk about active engagement in community activities and that civics and electoral education should be in the wider context, as you have said in your oral submission, of 'active and transformative citizenship'. What is 'transformative citizenship'?

Mr Martin—It is the sense that the purpose of democracy is to make decisions about the society that we live in.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do you accept the concept that some people, although they are part of democracy, want to be part of democracy and want to vote, do not actually want to spend their time as part of the decision-making process, not because they do not think they should have a say but because they have better things to do with their time? Do you see that as a legitimate option as well?

Ms Byrne—I suppose it depends on what you mean by the 'political process'. I would not necessarily narrow the political process down to simply participation in elections. There are a range of community activities that are also actually part of a political process.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But some people may not want to. Do you see that as a legitimate course of action?

Ms Byrne—It is legitimate, yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So, in teaching students active citizenship, do you support putting that option to them as well? You can be part of democracy and actually spend most of your time having a good time, with your family, making money or doing something else. To be a good citizen, you do not actually have to be involved in all of these community organisations. Yes, there are other benefits to society if you are, but I am interested in whether you would support putting that option.

Mr Martin—We are not proposing that the objective is for everybody to join a political party, for instance.

Mrs MIRABELLA—No.

Mr Martin—I just think that what you would want is a situation where people are aware of the political process and take appropriate steps for themselves within it. In answer to your question on the election, you would hope that people who vote are making an informed vote. That does not necessarily mean 24-hour-a-day involvement in politics, but you would hope that they would do more than go in and put a cross because otherwise they would get a fine. If what they choose is a fairly low level of involvement in that political process then they would do so in the knowledge of what the process produces and of the importance, and where they are happy with the outcome.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I am one of those people who, were it not for the excesses and ills that governments visit upon citizens they seek to govern for, would not be involved in the political process. But I see it as a necessary evil—that is the only reason for my involvement. Going on that concept, I am very concerned, and quite a few parents would be very concerned, by this active participation approach to the teaching of civics and citizenship. In paragraph 2.10 you mention a number of emphases in that approach. In the second last dot point you say:

It also includes an understanding of human rights, the way in which power is exercised and asserted, the relative power of different groups within society and an appreciation of equity, social justice and social harmony.

It would not be unreasonable to say that some of those phrases—human rights, relative power, equity, social justice and social harmony—have very subjective meanings. They could mean very different things to you and to me. That is politics. That could be seen by many parents to be teaching a particular point of view and politics.

You refer to the relative power of different groups within society. Some people may see trade unions, for example, as representing a legitimate point of view; others may see them, particularly in an era of declining union membership, as having a disproportionate say in the community. Et cetera. They are very political points of view. They are quite legitimate in a politics class et cetera, but I am very concerned—as you have not even accepted that teaching the basics about the process is the starting point—that we go on to include all these other issues that are quite complex and quite subjective.

‘Social harmony’ is a loaded phrase. What does that mean? To get students at a very young age and imbue them with certain concepts of social harmony. What does that mean? Could that mean that, for the sake of social harmony, they should not say certain things or should not stand up for certain things? Are you not concerned that some of these things could be used in a very subjective manner both for the things that you may personally believe in but also for the things you may personally disagree with? Is that not a concern?

CHAIR—Let us hear a response from the witnesses.

Ms Byrne—’Social harmony’, to take your example, can simply be not fighting. It can be an antibullying process. It seems to me you are applying a fairly narrow definition to what these phrases in fact mean. ‘Social harmony’ is far beyond not demonstrating in the streets. It begins at a very young age. That is the point about the dispositions—the dispositions are to ensure that the way you treat people is something that is in fact desirable.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Surely how you treat people is more to do with manners than with civics and citizenship. But my broader question was: do you not accept that the phrases that you use as part of your arguments for active engagement et cetera can be very subjective?

Ms Byrne—What you are actually saying is that there are two sides—there are probably more than two sides—to how people view that. There is an assumption there that teachers will go out and teach one particular viewpoint rather than another. I think the department made the same point. The whole point about good pedagogy is that you do actually teach different viewpoints and you actually ask the children to think about what is going on about them. All of these things are part of the reality of the environment that we live in. It is perfectly reasonable, for example, for children to have questions about social harmony. If they see on television what is happening in other countries, they want to know exactly what is causing all of that.

Senator HOGG—Or Cronulla?

Ms Byrne—Or Cronulla. You are assuming that what we are advocating is one point of view. We are actually advocating good pedagogy, which is that students are presented with a range of different viewpoints and are encouraged to develop their own views.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I think we will have to agree to disagree on certain matters.

CHAIR—Let me thank the representatives of the Australian Education Union. Ms Byrne, Mr Martin, we appreciate your attendance this morning and we appreciate the good work that your teachers do for our children. Thank you very much for attending.

Proceedings suspended from 10.48 am to 11.02 am

JACKSON, Ms Rose Butler, National President, National Union of Students

CHAIR—Welcome. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these are the proceedings of the parliament and you should be mindful of the respect owed to them. We have received a very good written submission from you, for which I thank you. Do you wish to present any additional submissions or make a short opening statement?

Ms Jackson—I do not have any additional submissions but I will say that the detail in our submission came from surveys we conducted amongst our members, who are university students, particularly first-year students. We did not seek material from current school students, and I would think that their input would probably be extremely valuable as well. I just want to give some background as to where we received the information for our submission. Essentially, the critical points are that civic education in schools is of incredible importance, but it need not just be about educating young people as to how to vote and empowering other people but a participatory system in which young people empower themselves to actively participate in our democracy.

CHAIR—It might be instructive, given the wide variety of evidence we have already received, to have a look at voting within student bodies. Typically, what percentage of university students would participate in a campus election for president and so on?

Ms Jackson—It does vary, but I would say the national average would be around a 10 per cent turnout of students. Obviously, we do not have compulsory voting in student elections and you have to consider the fact that a large variety of students study by distance education or are part time and not on campus every day. On some campuses, particularly large, metropolitan campuses where there is an active student body, for example, University of Melbourne or University of Sydney, that percentage can actually move up to 20 per cent or 25 per cent, but on average it is less than that.

CHAIR—Why do you think the participation is so low?

Ms Jackson—On the one hand, I think it is because campus elections are held over a certain set of days and not every student is on campus on those days. The 10 per cent is 10 per cent of the overall EFTSU, student enrolment at that university. Of the number of students who are on campus on the days of the election, that percentage would be much higher. So of the students who walk through the university on the three or four days that the election is held, I should think that that percentage would be 40 per cent of the students who are on campus on that day.

On the other hand, I think young people, particularly today, are overwhelmingly disillusioned with politics, and that includes student politics. I think that young people do not see political processes as something that values what they have to say. I know that as a student representative I work very hard to empower particularly university students. I say: 'Your contribution in this forum is incredibly valuable. You should exercise your right to vote and have your say.' But I do not necessarily think that politicians in other forums outside of student representative bodies make that effort. Young people go: 'It's just another vote. I vote in the local council. I vote in state elections. I vote in federal elections. That does not seem to matter. No-one seems to care what I have to say there.' Student politics is just an extension of that.

CHAIR—We are trying to get a feel in the wider community about civics and electoral education and why people are not enrolling to vote. Your specific little area may be instructive. You said that students feel disillusioned. Can you expand on that. Why are students disillusioned?

Ms Jackson—I think one of the interesting points that we made in our submission is that young people have different priorities to elderly people. For example, in a recent survey that was done—

CHAIR—Are you speaking about Senator Hogg!

Senator HOGG—I am young.

Ms Jackson—Young people identify certain issues that are of critical importance to them. Education is a good example. Sixty-eight per cent of young people would say that education is a critically important issue for them and the economy is only critically important for 20 per cent of young people. Current politicians do not necessarily reflect those priorities of young people in the way that they talk or conduct politics. I do get the feeling from a lot of young people that they do not feel that their engagement in politics can necessarily make a difference. I think that is why they are disillusioned. Obviously, I think that the political processes in our democracy are of critical importance to all young people, and all young people should pre-enrol to vote when they are 17, so as soon as they turn 18 they are able to exercise their say. I think the reason that that is not happening is that they do not see political processes are necessarily things that (1) they can contribute to and (2) will take them seriously.

Senator HOGG—If everything was on SMS, would that make a difference? I am quite serious.

CHAIR—In other words, the use of emerging technology to engage young people.

Senator Mason interjecting—

Senator HOGG—I have three young adults, who typically SMS everything.

Ms Jackson—Yes.

Senator HOGG—That is the way they live their lives. I am wondering if we are out of touch with what is going on in the real world.

Ms Jackson—Interestingly, universities are actually considering using SMS as official university correspondence, and I think that that contributes to what you are saying. It is not because the academics particularly prefer SMS as their favourite form of corresponding; it is because for many university students and young people that is a dominant way of communicating. They are considering announcing changes to lecture rooms or exam dates this way.

Mr DANBY—Wouldn't they send that by email?

Ms Jackson—Email is still absolutely dominant. I think email is, in fact, even better. Most young people have email. They SMS each other if they are going to be five minutes late to meet for coffee, but email is still incredibly useful. But, as I say, SMS is an emerging technology, and universities are increasingly getting on board.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Ms Jackson, how many students participated in the youth and citizenship survey which you mentioned in your submission?

Ms Jackson—It was not a particularly high number. I cannot remember the exact number.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Would you be able to send us that detail? Was it under 100?

Ms Jackson—It was over 100 but I think it was under 500.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Under 500?

Ms Jackson—It was not particularly extensive.

Mrs MIRABELLA—How many tertiary students are there nationally?

Ms Jackson—I think the average enrolment of full-time tertiary students is 590,000.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Would you be able to provide us with the number of students who participated in that survey?

Ms Jackson—Yes, I will.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Were they taken from particular states or particular institutions?

Ms Jackson—No. I know that an attempt was made to make it a random selection. It could well be that that survey is not wholly representative.

Mrs MIRABELLA—It is no surprise, considering that, on average, only about 10 per cent of students are motivated enough to vote in union elections. I suspect even fewer would want to participate in a survey. It does make it very difficult to ascertain the views of students on particular issues. With over half a million students you would not think that there would be a uniform view in any case. Do you accept the view that some students are not interested in getting involved in student politics because they go to university (1) to complete a degree and (2) to have a good time—and, to use common language, they think that student politicians are a pack of tossers?

Ms Jackson—Yes, absolutely. I do not think all students are interested in being engaged in student politics. Indeed, if every one of those 590,000 students wanted to be a student rep we would have chaos.

Mrs MIRABELLA—That is a valid point of view. Someone believing that and choosing to do something else with their time does not make them politically apathetic.

Ms Jackson—No. I think that people overstate the apathy of youth. I do not like the way that people say that, just because they are not necessarily interested in being the president of a student organisation, they are apathetic. They could well want to be the president of the social skiers society or some other absolutely non-political sporting, drama or cultural club that has nothing to do with the representative work of the student organisation—just a club or society on campus.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Or their mates want to spend their spare time at the pub?

Ms Jackson—Indeed. Or they may want to volunteer, for example, in the band competitions. I completely agree that not all students want to be student politicians.

Mrs MIRABELLA—You make some comments about what you believe to be the impact of student unionism on civic education. Could you expand on that?

Ms Jackson—Sure. That came out of the fact that one of the outcomes of the survey was that students identified student representative bodies—and I accept that that is not just universities; it is also school SRCs—as the third most common way that they participated in politics, after petitions and community groups. So young people definitely identify student representative bodies, whether school or university students, as (1) a very common way that they participate and (2) an extremely effective way that they participate.

Voluntary student unionism is in fact already having an impact on the power and the effectiveness of those groups. Their diminished budget means that they are no longer able to engage students in the things that matter to them, they can no longer fund the clubs and societies to the extent that they used to and services are being cut. I feel that the impact of this legislation is already causing—and will continue to cause—a diminution in the effectiveness of groups that young people identify with. Passing legislation that has an impact on university SRCs has a direct impact on those organisations and in some cases is pushing them close to the edge, close to bankruptcy.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Hold on a minute. You used this survey as a basis for your results. If we admit that this survey was not particularly representative and we accept the point of view that a significant number of tertiary students view SRCs and student politicians as 'a pack of tossers'—

Ms Jackson—I would never use that term.

Senator MASON—You never would, Ms Jackson.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But a lot of tertiary students do. Taking into account that, on average, only 10 per cent of students vote in university elections, don't you think it is rather self-serving to claim that the lack of interest, involvement and participation of students is due to the introduction of the voluntary student unionism legislation, when there was apathy beforehand? That is my first question.

The second question is: if you do want to make university SRCs relevant, why do you object to treating students as adults, selling what you have to offer them and giving them the choice of joining or not joining?

Ms Jackson—I will answer the first question. That is a typical way for politicians to view student representative bodies. My position has always been that students should be the ones who decide the future of their own organisations. I did not see a problem with the system that they had in New Zealand where on-campus referendums were conducted with minimum voter turnouts. A minimum number of students had to participate in the referendum for it to be valid in deciding whether or not those organisations would be compulsorily or voluntarily funded. I think that is an effective way to empower young people to have control over certain democratic structures in their lives. It is not very fair of you to say, 'Some students have said to me, "You're all a pack of tossers",' whereas some students have said to me, 'I think you do incredibly powerful and valuable work.'

Mrs MIRABELLA—You have admitted that, on average, 10 per cent of students vote and that most students would prefer to be involved in non-political organisations. I am saying to you that it is paternalistic to say: 'These students do not care enough. We'll just take the money and purport to represent them.' What is wrong with selling them your message of: 'We are an important organisation; you have to join'? Don't you think it creates disillusionment when people say: 'We've got to pay our money anyway. They don't listen to us anyway. They're quite unrepresentative'? Don't you think that creates a bit of disillusionment in the political process?

Ms Jackson—What creates more disillusionment is the fact that students can come out in their thousands and demonstrate against legislation and that politicians do not care what they have to say. We saw rallies across Australia of at least 15,000 students who were coming out against this legislation, and no-one seemed to care what they had to say. You seem to think it is okay for MPs to ignore significant numbers of students who are taking the effort to come out and demonstrate against legislation.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But 500,000 did not.

Ms Jackson—Five hundred thousand did not, but they were not even given the chance to have a say in this legislation. If it had been put to a vote—a referendum—on campus, that would have meant that I did not get to decide whether it was compulsory and you did not get to decide whether it was compulsory. The people who would have decided that would have been the students themselves. That is the key point.

Mrs MIRABELLA—It seems that you have a position on voluntary student unionism, and you have used this hearing as an excuse to tack on the argument.

Mr DANBY—You asked her about it.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I did.

Ms Jackson—There are other key points in the submission. I am quite happy to talk about the other parts.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So someone else has put this submission?

Ms Jackson—No, I put this submission. I found it interesting that students identified SRCs as (1) effective and (2) common ways of political engagement, so I included that as a point; but I do not think it is the key point here. This is about civic education in schools. The overwhelming feedback that I have been getting from university students is that they wish that, when they were in school, there had been a civic education program that could have empowered them to be active participants in our democracy. I do not think this is about the VSU.

Mrs MIRABELLA—No, but it takes up a significant part of your submission. I have no further questions.

Mr DANBY—An alternative explanation as to why young people are disillusioned with federal and state politics, which we heard from one of the other people before you came in, is the benefits of incumbency. In state and federal politics, young people in particular have not seen as much change in government as there was in the past; therefore, they think: 'Why am I voting? There has not been a change.' The evidence we heard was that this applies to people, say, up to 25 years of age. That is an interesting thing for you to bear in mind.

Senator MASON—Mr Danby just keeps on winning.

Mr DANBY—I see the benefits of incumbency. I am honest about it: it applies to everyone—especially in my electorate because it applies to me. I am a person who is interested in the democratic deficit, whether it is in presidential elections in the United States, the emergence of civic education in high schools or university politics. Sophie raised the issue of only 10 per cent of people voting in student union elections. Are you from the University of Melbourne?

Ms Jackson—No, I am from the University of Sydney.

Mr DANBY—At the University of Melbourne a few years ago, to my astonishment, it was proposed that students be given an $8 meal voucher if they participated in the election. They were not given it by one side or the other. The vote went from 10 per cent, or 1,500, of the campus, to over 10,000. Apart from the fact that students are hungry, it was an interesting idea. Do you do those kinds of things that are a bit left field, that do not have a politically partisan result, that do get people to participate?

Ms Jackson—Yes, that is very common—the $8 food voucher at the University of Melbourne. At other universities they offer lollies, Chuppa Chups, sweets to people who vote. It is offered by the union itself, not by either side. On most campuses the different sides cannot offer bribes. It is illegal in almost every campus election. I know of an example at QUT, where every single student who participated got a voucher for the on-campus bookshop. Those sorts of inducements are relatively common in student elections—

Mr DANBY—And do they boost the vote?

Ms Jackson—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do they do anything beyond that?

Ms Jackson—I do not know if a similar system would work for state or federal elections. I think what would be more effective is to empower young people to see the value of their vote, not as represented in a lolly or food. I know why on-campus organisations do that. I am not particularly supportive of it. I wish they did not have to, but when I ran—

Mr DANBY—But you are a practical person. If an $8 meal voucher does boost the vote from 1,500 to 10,000 surely the result you get is more representative of student opinion. Sophie will be very pleased to know that it did make a very marked change to the kind of politics of the people at the University of Melbourne.

Ms Jackson—Yes, definitely the practical outcome was positive, and the more representative student organisations can be the better. On campus when I ran the SRC at the University of Sydney we did not do that—also because we do not have the money to offer those sorts of things. It is usually the larger unions, like at the University of Melbourne. But it is very common.

Mr DANBY—Is that because you are an SRC and they are a union?

Ms Jackson—Yes, that is right. It does boost the voter turnout. I think students are overwhelmingly—to be honest—grateful that they are voting in something which they are actually getting something out of, because they have to vote in local council, federal and state elections and do not see themselves getting anything out of that. So they see it as 'I vote, and I actually get something for it.'

CHAIR—Do you see a role for the NUS in encouraging students across the country to enrol to vote?

Ms Jackson—We often run 'enrol to vote' campaigns, particularly with youth organisations, like, for example, Triple J, who run the 'Rock'n'roll to vote' campaign. At the last federal election we ran a very significant 'enrol to vote' campaign. It is obviously going to be even more important now that young people must enrol before a federal election in order to have their say.

Mr DANBY—Especially when you do not know when it is going to be.

Ms Jackson—Exactly. And we will do that, simply because I think it is so important that young people even pre-enrol when they are 17, which you are able to do now. I see a role for it and will definitely be doing it.

Mr DANBY—Do you think there is any role for universities in giving students information on civics and electoral matters? Do you think that should have been given in earlier years to students and that it thus has no place in tertiary education?

Ms Jackson—I do think it is best passed on in earlier years. I think that students who are particularly interested in civic and political education at university can enrol in the wide variety of courses that are offered there. I think it would be difficult for the university to provide information beyond that, except through—and this is a system that NUS is supportive of—introducing general education courses for first and second year students.

For example, if you are enrolled in engineering currently in a lot of universities, you do not really get a particularly wide variety of experience in a lot of different areas. At a place like the University of New South Wales they require all students, no matter what they are enrolled in, to do a general education course in civics, politics and government. It is a one-semester, six-credit-point course. It is not particularly onerous. But it is a requirement of their degree.

CHAIR—Which university is that?

Ms Jackson—The University of New South Wales.

Mr DANBY—Is that the only one?

Ms Jackson—Other universities offer gen ed, we call it—general education. But from my understanding the University of New South Wales is the only one—

CHAIR—For all students?

Ms Jackson—Yes, a component of every degree is a gen ed course. There is a bit of scope for students to choose different pieces here and there, but everyone, no matter what they enrol in, has to do it. As I said, it is not a particularly big part of their degree, but they have to learn a bit about government and politics.

CHAIR—How do students feel about having to do that?

Ms Jackson—They enjoy it. They very much enjoy it. It is something different.

CHAIR—Do they all pass?

Ms Jackson—I think they pass. The pass rates, from what I understand, are particularly good. But I think that students do enjoy it because it is something different. They are learning something that is not necessarily a core part of their degree in aeronautical engineering, but it is a core part, I think, of their lives as citizens of this country. I do want to say that I think that school is a better place to have compulsory civic education.

Senator HOGG—Can I ask you a question on the New South Wales university course. Is part of that course being enrolled or getting onto the roll itself?

Ms Jackson—No, I do not think so. I think it is just about the institutions of parliament and the Constitution. That might be an interesting thing.

Senator HOGG—I thought that might be an interesting part of the course. The second thing is that we have a population, particularly among younger people, who are very sedentary in that they are at home because it is too costly to move out, but there is that part of the population that is very mobile. How does one address the mobility of those young people in their formative years—they might come in from the bush to study or they might under other circumstances find themselves not at home—in maintaining their place on the electoral roll? That must also act as a disincentive. How do we address that issue?

Ms Jackson—I think what has to be done is that a real effort has to be made federally to explain to young people that they must change—basically, an awareness campaign. The changes that were recently passed will also affect people who have changed address and have not updated their address on the electoral roll. As you have mentioned, many young people will move. More and more are staying at home because of the lack of adequate income support for students, but many young people will still move and relocate in their early years for university or training or early employment or something like that. For most of them, when they are thinking of all of the things that they have to do when they move, changing their address on the electoral roll is not something that is currently ranking very highly.

Senator HOGG—Is there some system that could be evolved which takes out the need to re-enrol necessarily—for example, you are permanently on the roll; it is only your division that changes? Have you thought of that? You can take it on notice. I do not necessarily—

Ms Jackson—I had not thought of it.

Senator HOGG—If you have a solution, I would be interested in it.

Ms Jackson—I had not thought of that particular idea, but any solution that would allow young people to remain eligible voters, even though they might have moved and not re-enrolled at their new address, would be positive thing, I think.

Mr DANBY—In effect, the Electoral Commission helps that, Senator, by its continuous roll update.

Senator HOGG—Yes, I understand that.

Mr DANBY—They do not rely on people advising them on forms. They go out and hunt them down—that is probably the wrong expression. They go and seek them out via various databases and stuff like that.

Senator HOGG—Hunting them down can be a problem in itself as well. I am not trying to decry what the Electoral Commission does. I am saying that they do a good job. I am just seeking the advice of a young person who might be able to give us better insight than you or I could put up.

Ms Jackson—I think that if you have a non-permanent address for a certain amount of time, doesn’t your enrolment become one where you can just vote wherever you are? That is my understanding. I do not think that many young people are aware of that. I also think that mainly applies to people who have no fixed permanent address at all.

Senator MASON—The previous witnesses, from the Australian Education Union, spoke about civics education being divided into two parts: civic knowledge, which is about the mechanics or the institutions of Australian political and civic life—how parliament works, how to enrol and so forth—and citizenship disposition, which is about active civic life and using examples of active civic life in a sense to illustrate the importance of citizenship. They were arguing in effect—I think it is right to say—that you need both. You also made comments about empowering students to vote. Would you argue that it is important to encourage citizenship disposition among students and that simply knowledge of the mechanics is not everything?

Ms Jackson—Absolutely. I think they are both important, because knowledge of the institutions of parliament and the way they work is power. If young people do not know how parliament works—the fact that we have two houses and all of that—they are going to be significantly disadvantaged when they come to having their vote. They will not understand what they are voting for or where their representative is going. So basic knowledge of the institutions of parliament is incredibly important, but I think that, unless we do more than that, all we are doing is teaching young people how to empower other people—politicians. All we are teaching them is, ‘You can go and vote for someone else, and here’s how to do it without casting an informal vote.’

We should tell young people: ‘Did you know that you can write to your local member of parliament and they will reply to you? Did you know that you can make an individual submission to an inquiry like this?’ I mentioned in my submission that I wondered how many individual young people had made submissions to this inquiry, and I would venture that the number is quite low, simply because young people do not realise that there are politicians who are willing to read their submissions and what they think about things. That is key—saying to young people: ‘You can be active not just in casting your vote but in many more different forms of expressing your opinion in our democracy.’

Senator MASON—Active civic life should be promoted and, in a sense, if that is promoted that will assist in educating students more broadly about citizenship?

Ms Jackson—Yes.

Senator MASON—One follows the other. I have one other very quick question: I notice you say:

NUS believes that civic education should not be an opportunity for nationalistic parochialism …

What do you mean by that?

Ms Jackson—What we mean by that is that on some occasions civic education becomes: ‘These are the institutions of our democracy, and aren’t they great? Aren’t they super?’

Senator MASON—Well, they are great, aren’t they?

Ms Jackson—Indeed, but I do not think we should be teaching young people that the system that we have now is perfect. Even if it is perfect, teaching young people that is disempowering. It is not giving them the opportunity to identify problems and say: ‘Who could change that? I could be a member of parliament.’ It would be saying, ‘This is how it is, this is how it will always be and Australia’s the best,’ without necessarily saying: ‘Here are some alternative systems used around the world. What are the benefits of them?’

Senator MASON—I am happy with that. It is just that 20 years ago, if I had asked the NUS president that, they would have said: ‘The system is rotten! It should be overthrown.’ Thanks to Mr Danby and others, it is no longer like that, Mr Danby.

Ms Jackson—Yes. Thank you, Mr Danby.

Senator HOGG—It should be said that we have had an experience of engaging high school students in Alice Springs at this stage, and they found the engagement, the interaction with the committee, quite different from what they otherwise thought it would be. We listened rather than being dogmatic and prescriptive to them and they found that part of the process fascinating indeed. Another part of this inquiry is to engage primary and high school students, which we are doing here tomorrow.

Ms Jackson—That is fantastic. That is much more valuable than talking to me, I think.

Senator HOGG—No, I think you should be aware, and that is the importance of the committee system of this parliament.

Mr DANBY—We are going to Melbourne High School tomorrow, for instance, and Monbulk. Is there a hard core of young people, particularly at university—I would have thought there would be fewer of them at university than outside university—who are not enrolled to vote, who are deliberately there because they are ultracynical about the system? Is there any way of getting to them? Do you come across people—I think I have come across them—who make it a life mission not to participate in the system because of this ultracynicism? They just think it is a higher form of wisdom.

Ms Jackson—Yes, I think that there are definitely people like that. I think that what is scary is that it is an increasing number of young people. I think it used to be—although I was not around—that young people were much less likely to be hardcore cynics. I think they were much more likely to be hardcore idealists.

Mr DANBY—Or hardcore politicians.

Ms Jackson—It is still a small number. Most young people, as I said, are probably more disillusioned than supercynical, but I am concerned that more and more young people are just throwing their hands up and saying: ‘What is the point? My vote means nothing. My voice means nothing. Mainstream media doesn’t print what we have to say and doesn’t care about what we have to say. Politicians are not responding.’ Inquiries like this are really important because I think that the number of young people who are responding in that way is increasing and that is not positive at all.

CHAIR—Ms Jackson, we have to wrap it up there. Thank you for your passionate evidence. It is a delight to have a person like you giving evidence.

[11.37 am]

WALSH, Dr Lucas Leslie, Research Fellow, Deakin University

CHAIR—Welcome. We do not require you to give evidence on oath but, as you have heard, these are formal proceedings of the parliament and you should show the committee the same respect as the parliament itself. We have received a written submission from you with some interesting points. Do you want to provide any other material?

Dr Walsh—No, not at this stage.

CHAIR—Do you want to make a short opening statement?

Dr Walsh—Yes, just a very brief one to put some of the notes in my submission into context. They are part of a broader framework for thinking about civics and electoral education. I have concentrated on four brief areas, which I think are worth drawing attention to: the context in which civics and electoral education take place; what kinds of skills need to be developed by teachers and students; what kind of knowledge about democratic participation and institutions is required; and, finally, how the collection of these may be used to extend the scope for engagement—which is why I brought up the technological dimension in my submission. I will probably touch on those in my responses to you today.

CHAIR—Did you hear the earlier evidence from Ms Jackson on SMS use amongst university students?

Dr Walsh—Yes, I did.

CHAIR—What is your view on that? Is that a possible way of engaging young people?

Dr Walsh—Certainly from my research on digital democracy it is being used more and more extensively in trial programs. However, it is with mixed results. For example, we know from trial programs conducted in Sheffield in the United Kingdom that there were no significant indications that participation increased as a result of SMS usage. On the other hand, when we look at SMS usage taking place on an informal level, we see it is rising exponentially, particularly in relation to other forms of media—for example, citizen media such as blogging and podcasting. These are growing trends. As the technology becomes more integrated—that is, the way we use this technology becomes more seamless, moving from newspaper to web page to SMS—I think the possibilities there will—

Mr DANBY—Blog to email.

Dr Walsh—Exactly. It will increase significantly.

CHAIR—You mentioned a Brazil city council using email and the web. Can you give us a bit more on that and whether that has been successful or not?

Dr Walsh—It has been seen to be successful. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, they have tried one of the more significant examples of online policy consultation. They used various forms of media, including email, to seek feedback about certain issues of direct relation to the council. That is one of the more successful examples of this kind of consultation.

CHAIR—You use phrases like ‘digital inclusion’ and ‘spatial isolation’, particularly with regard to Indigenous Australians in remote regions of Australia. I found myself thinking—and perhaps I am wrong—that the digital age has not reached Indigenous Australians in remote regions. Is that right?

Dr Walsh—By no means. Part of my previous research in Western Australia was looking at how networks were being set up to provide basic resource and information access to remote communities. The results were not very good. That is consistent with other countries, such as Canada.

CHAIR—So other countries in the world have the same track experience as we do in that people in remote areas are not digitally included, basically. Is that right?

Dr Walsh—That is correct.

CHAIR—Do you see that changing? Can you suggest how it could change?

Dr Walsh—Yes. There are few things to point out first. There are a couple of levels on which you have to think about this. One is the basic level of infrastructure. Is the basic architecture there to provide information in spatial regions? We do not have that yet in any developed way. Secondly, are there the skills and capacities to be able to use the technology? We are also lagging behind there. Australia, in international terms, is falling behind OECD countries in some areas of information provision. How would we improve them? For a start, we would have to rethink our architecture. Current changes suggested to Telstra, for example, will, I suspect, inhibit our capacity to do that—I am talking off the top of my head now. Funding to institutions like telecentres would improve the situation in the short term.

CHAIR—I am not sure that I agree with you, but I am not the one giving evidence.

Mr DANBY—Do you want us to call you?

CHAIR—The chair calling himself. Last year, I was in the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia on a property. All of the property homes had access to the internet and email. In fact, there were 32 phone lines if they needed them. They were provided by Telstra. We were in an Indigenous community at Warburton recently, and communications were all available there. I am not so sure that I agree. If that is the case and the capacity is there now, how do we get communities to take up that technology?

Dr Walsh—That is a fair observation, although I would counter that by saying that I have lived in two capital cities in the last five years—Sydney and Perth—and I could not access broadband in either of them from my home.

CHAIR—That is just wrong, because you can. You can get it wirelessly.

Dr Walsh—Yes, but is it affordable—

CHAIR—That is the key, isn't it?

Dr Walsh—to a regular lowly academic? I take your point nonetheless. We have the basics there for it; that is true. But inclusion is also about developing awareness and the skills to use the technology. We are now talking about the second aspect that I mentioned a moment ago—'technological literacy', as it is called.

CHAIR—Don't get me wrong; I am very interested in this. You make a valid point. If this is a way that our inquiry can find to improve civics and electoral education, it is certainly worth exploring. What is your assessment of the level of civic engagement in relation to university students? We heard some interesting evidence earlier from Ms Jackson. Where do you see university students at this stage, or don't you have any experience there?

Dr Walsh—With reference to Senator Mason's remark to Ms Jackson earlier, I come from that particular time in university when perhaps I would have responded, 'The system is rotten; smash the system,' but it would seem that in the meantime the culture has changed a little. I would go back to basic principles here. You have to have the basic skills to be able to convert information into knowledge and knowledge into action, so we have to have awareness of our political institutions. I am going to come back to your question. In order for efficacy to take place, you have to be able to demonstrate that knowledge and receive feedback that it is in fact useful knowledge when applied. If we take away those opportunities and we structure those opportunities through the lens of economic rationalism, then by its very logical definition we are going to get only a limited response. We have to understand the changes taking place within the universities within the broader context of educational development after Dawkins.

CHAIR—You heard Ms Jackson give the example of the University of New South Wales, which has a six-point course for everybody in relation to general civics education—everybody has to do it. What is your view on that?

Dr Walsh—I think that is a good idea.

CHAIR—You do—you would support that throughout the tertiary sector?

Dr Walsh—I think so. I would support that kind of program across the education system. I think that civics and electoral education needs to be ongoing.

CHAIR—You said 'across the education system'. We have worried about TAFE, for example—this may not be your field of expertise—because there is virtually no electoral and civics education in the TAFE system. Do you think there should be a compulsory, small unit in TAFE?

Dr Walsh—There are two ways of looking at it. If we take the path of 'bolting on'—and I use the term quite deliberately—civics and electoral education to the curriculum as yet another area of study, we run certain risks. I personally would argue that it should be running throughout the curriculum across these sectors. In fact, there should be ways in which civics and electoral education is tied into training within the TAFE sector. I also think, incidentally, that this applies across the primary and secondary sectors as well.

Senator HOGG—Of course, you leave a gap. The gap is obviously those people who do not do TAFE education and those people who do not do university education, and they are not a small population in their own right. How does one pick up that group in the post-secondary area? Not all of them are post-secondary, and I understand that.

Dr Walsh—That is a very good question, and it is a very hard question. I have thought about this quite a lot. The radical answer to that, following writers such as Carol Pateman, whom I cite in my own work and who has written classic material on participatory democracy, is that the ethos, as it were, of civics and electoral education be taken to workplaces and across as many other domains of society as possible. How would this work in practical terms? We are in a situation here in Australia where workplace reform is encouraging and fostering conditions where individual negotiations have to take place. As a necessary part of that, people have to have the skills to be able to negotiate. I would argue that those negotiation skills are not all that different in principle from the skills of negotiating a democratic society—that they are in fact the same negotiation skills that are locked into tolerance, a sense of inclusion, obligation, duty and so forth and that these should permeate other spheres of life, and in a workplace environment that is how it might take place, for example.

Mr DANBY—I have a question about the evidence we received from Dr Marie Pitt, who felt a more accurate description of generation Y was the dot coms. She spoke of their expectation that all information could be accessed instantaneously. In your opinion, are information and communications technologies the missing link for young people? Do you think that the greater use of these technologies would encourage young people to become active, participatory citizens or even get on the electoral roll—the bottom line?

Dr Walsh—No, not on their own.

CHAIR—Not on their own?

Dr Walsh—As part of my background, in a life prior to this position, I managed a section of the International Baccalaureate Organisation. I managed their online curriculum facility in the United Kingdom. Our primary work was involved in shifting attitudes and thinking in curriculum onto the web. Even though that was my core activity, my belief then—and it remains to this day—was that the technology is useful only when it is integrated with things that we already do very well. If we get it right at fact-to-face level, we are adding value, adding space, a scope for example for interaction, which is what the web offers us, but it has to be extending principles, practices and institutions that are already working well. That is kind of a yes and no answer. Essentially, it is too readily seen as a panacea. It has enormous scope—and, heaven knows, the bulk of my writing now is concerned with that scope—but only as it adds value to things that we are already doing well.

CHAIR—Out of absolute left field, knowing that education institutions are taxpayer funded, should it be a requirement of enrolment in an educational institution that the student be on the electoral roll?

Dr Walsh—I would have to think a bit about that. Why would you want to do this?

CHAIR—Because young people are less likely to be involved than any other segment of the community.

Mr DANBY—And we want to decrease the democratic deficit.

Dr Walsh—Being aware of where they are enrolled will not necessarily decrease the democratic deficit. In fact, I would say it is a far cry from—

Mr DANBY—He was saying they would actually have to be enrolled.

Dr Walsh—No, I have concerns about that, but I cannot articulate them. That is out of left field. It is a good question.

Senator HOGG—After you have had a chance to consider the answer, could you give us a response?

CHAIR—I said to you it is out of left field, it is not something the committee have thought about but we would be very interested to have a person such as yourself give a view on that. The evidence you have given us so far has been very valuable. I appreciate that advice.

Dr Walsh—I will have a think about it.

CHAIR—Thanks.

Senator MASON—Despite the differences in nomenclature, a lot of the submissions are about the same thing. You argue in yours that civics and citizenship education needs to be developed as a set of inclusionary skills, a knowledge which is potentially empowering to individuals and groups. We have had evidence before us today about the two principal concerns being civic knowledge on the one hand and citizenship or indeed civic disposition on the other. That was from the Australian Education Union. Again, are you arguing that perhaps civic knowledge can be made more relevant by people's knowledge of civic disposition being enhanced—in other words, how civic knowledge can be used to help them not just politicians?

Dr Walsh—Could you explain a bit more?

Senator MASON—The Australian Education Union made this point: they spoke about civic knowledge being knowledge of institutions in the electoral process but civic disposition—they used the words 'citizenship disposition'—being about the disposition to become involved in civic life. They are two different things. You sort of say that. I wonder whether you agree with the duality. Do you agree with the fact that, in a sense, by promoting civic disposition you can in fact enhance civic knowledge?

Dr Walsh—No, I do not think it is a dichotomy. It is perhaps more dialectical. The two complement and enhance each other so that efficacy emerges with a degree of awareness that is then affirmed. I would argue that—

Senator MASON—We can use one, civic disposition, to increase civic knowledge?

Dr Walsh—I would agree with that.

Senator MASON—You say that more or less. In other words, if you are going to make civic knowledge relevant to people you talk about civic disposition, don’t you?

Dr Walsh—Effectively. I am not sure about that notion of ‘civic disposition’.

Senator MASON—We are talking about a disposition to become involved in civic life.

Dr Walsh—I would argue that knowledge includes civic responsibility and duty which blurs those distinctions between those quite clearly.

Senator MASON—I accept that and I think to be fair to the Australian Education Union they said they were not clearly separable components but they did say that they were, as you say, enmeshed somewhat. The evidence this morning seems to be that examples of civic inclusion and civic life can be used, where they relate to individuals, in empowering individuals. Examples of how people can become involved will enhance their knowledge of civic institutions.

Dr Walsh—If they are interested.

Senator MASON—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thanks very much for appearing this morning. We really do appreciate your involvement in this process.

Proceedings suspended from 11.55 am to 1.34 pm

PHILLIPS, Mr Tim, Legal and Business Affairs Manager, Australian Children's Television Foundation

CHAIR—Welcome. We do not require you to give evidence on oath, but these are formal proceedings of the parliament and the necessary respect needs to be shown as if you were talking to the parliament. We have received a very good submission from you, for which we thank you. Do you have any additional submissions or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Phillips—I do not have any additional comments to make. My opening statement would just be an executive summary of the submission. I am happy to give that if you would like me to.

CHAIR—We have read your submission, so I guess there is no need to do that. You are missing your CEO. I believe she has sick children?

Mr Phillips—Unfortunately, yes. She is at home with the kids today.

CHAIR—Can you tell us what your job entails. What do you do at the foundation?

Mr Phillips—I do a bit of a mixed bag of activities. Obviously I do the legal work, with another lawyer there. We look after the contract negotiations for new productions. But my role is also a policy one where we prepare submissions on issues such as this one we are discussing here and basically for any issue that relates to the media and children.

CHAIR—Meaning television media or media in general?

Mr Phillips—Media in general. We recently put in a submission to the Victorian government on multimedia education. The ACTF, as it is known, actually creates and distributes its own multimedia program, which is an educational aid in schools. We are interested in any kind of—

CHAIR—So its name is now a misnomer in what it does?

Mr Phillips—In some respects. There was some discussion about changing it, but we felt the brand in the schools was too strong.

CHAIR—How are you funded?

Mr Phillips—We are funded by every government in Australia. The majority of funding comes from the Commonwealth—about 80 per cent—and the other 20 per cent comes from the states and territories. It comes from a mixture of education and arts portfolios in the states and territories, but the Commonwealth money comes from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.

CHAIR—Now to get to the nitty-gritty. You say that television is a dominant provider of education and entertainment for Australian children. I think we all understand that. You say that it provides an opportunity to further what we are inquiring into—that is, to make civics education and electoral education perhaps part of this information provision—but that that opportunity is not capitalised on. Can you now explain what you mean by that?

Mr Phillips—I guess we looked at what was being done at the moment and, from a short look, it seemed that there was quite a bit of education being done over the internet and there was quite a bit of activity based education through schools. For example, I think the Democracy Week activities often involve students. What we thought was that if these events could be put on a broader platform then perhaps they might have more impact. There was one example of a school's national flag teaching kit, which I think schools can use, and we thought that if these materials were actually broadcast on TV they would go to a wider platform than perhaps just sitting on a shelf in a school library somewhere.

What we have noticed at the ACTF is that children not only like creating their own content but really want to broadcast what they have created. You are definitely seeing that at the moment on the internet with all these sites which are basically viewer created content. We thought that perhaps the exposure, the interest and the fun in the Democracy Week activities could really be increased if they could be broadened to a wider platform. I guess we saw some synergies with our channel proposal and those concepts.

CHAIR—Just leaving your channel proposal aside—that will come up shortly, I would imagine—I want to throw something at you out of left field. Currently there are mandated requirements for the broadcasting of children's programming on free-to-air television. Is that right?

Mr Phillips—On commercial free-to-air television.

CHAIR—Yes. What would be your reaction if I suggested that we might be interested in mandating civics and electoral information as part of that package on free-to-air commercial television?

Mr Phillips—As in a subquota of hours of content produced?

CHAIR—Yes. Or, since according to your evidence there are minimal hours, in your view, for the amount of children's programming that is required, perhaps it might need to be expanded. I do not know. How would your organisation take it if the government decided to mandate civics education as part of the children's hours?

Mr Phillips—Depending on the number of hours, we would not have a problem with it. We have an issue with the diversity at the moment. We pointed out in our submission that no commercial broadcaster is doing a daily news program, for example. They are not doing much in the education field at all. If you were mandating a certain amount of educational content, be it of any policy directive, we would not have a problem with it.

CHAIR—If there was a mandated requirement for education in the field that we are inquiring into, who should produce that?

Mr Phillips—Who would create the content?

CHAIR—Yes. Would it be the various electoral commissions around the country? Would it be your organisation? Would it be the television stations?

Mr Phillips—It could be a mixture of any of those. The issue is really that we find that kids learn a lot better when they are entertained and engaged, so it does not necessarily have to be dry educational program. It could even be wrapped up in a drama program, for that matter.

Senator HOGG—What age group are you talking about when you say 'children'?

Mr Phillips—We are looking mainly at primary school students.

CHAIR—Taking up your point about wrapping it up in a drama program, I have seen this sort of psychology overseas where, just as an example, terrorist organisations get their message across via the public television medium by incorporating various images that are not directly related to terrorism into the programs. That is an extreme example. You are saying to the committee that it would be a useful exercise to incorporate civics education and electoral education into standard programming, so you would be effectively subliminally getting to kids the message that we want to see out there. Is that right?

Mr Phillips—Perhaps. It all depends on the quality of the program. Kids are no suckers. They are not going to watch something that they perceive as just pushing a message down their throats. If a drama program touched on the issues in a clever way, to me that is an ideal way of teaching the subject matter. That is what the ACTF seeks to do in its programming. We seek to create educational content but we do it through drama.

Senator HOGG—Are you talking about the sort of program in the style of the B1 and B2 shows, or are you looking at something more along the lines of a documentary style. What are we talking about? Is it entertainment, is it a documentary or is it something that goes down the path of fusing all those things together?

Mr Phillips—It is just an example I have given of what could perhaps be one way of doing it. It was in reference to who should be doing the content. As an ends to a mean I was saying that if it is a drama program, for example, it should be perhaps an established producer who should be doing the content. The type of program my example was referring to is not your *Bananas in Pyjamas* type of thing, which is obviously aimed at preschoolers. It is a drama program with scripts and actors. For example, some of the Australian ones are *Round the Twist*, which we produce, and a couple showing on the ABC at the moment called *Bluewater High* and *Saddle Club*, which is a popular one.

Senator HOGG—You are not thinking about *Neighbours* and those sorts of shows?

Mr Phillips—No, I am thinking of children's programs, as opposed to, I guess, what might be broadly termed 'family programming', which *Neighbours* falls under. So these are programs made specifically for kids rather than aimed at kids and grandparents and—

Senator HOGG—Whoever else might watch it.

Mr Phillips—Yes.

Mr DANBY—What time does *Round the Twist* screen at the moment?

Mr Phillips—It was on the ABC, which screens its programs at a much better time for kids, and that I think came on at about 5.25 in the afternoon.

Senator MASON—What shows, on either SBS, the ABC or, indeed, on commercial television, are there that you could say are relevant to civics or civic education currently?

Mr Phillips—Directly relevant? I would say almost nothing, with the exception of, I guess, news programs. They are relevant in that kids need to know what is going on, in order to—

Senator MASON—When I was a kid, it was *Behind the News*. Is there a *Behind the News* anymore?

Mr Phillips—There is. There is *Behind the News,* which is excellent and is used in schools a lot.

Senator MASON—It is still around?

Mr Phillips—It is around. It has changed its format slightly. *Behind the News* is on the ABC. And there is another show called *Ten's Total News*, on Channel 10, which is a similar kind of program. So they are news programs which cover specific issues. They are not so much daily news. They try and summarise what can be complex issues in a better way for kids by giving them more background and more context. They are indirectly related to it and, apart from them, I think there is not really anything else out there.

Senator MASON—So there is not much.

Mr Phillips—I guess not.

Senator MASON—And your argument would be that the medium—or the media—of television would be a very good way to promote civics among children?

Mr Phillips—Our argument is that it is a good way to promote pretty much anything, but I would have thought, with some of these activities that are already going on, that TV could really open them up and make them more interesting for the broader child audience.

Senator MASON—Just from your knowledge, how much of their budget do the ABC or SBS use for the purpose of the education of children?

Mr Phillips—From my knowledge—

Senator MASON—It is a difficult question, isn't it?

Mr Phillips—I can have a guess. But from my knowledge—

Senator MASON—I am asking about Australian content.

Mr Phillips—I do not believe SBS do anything for the child audience. They aim at older teenagers and above. They do not have any preschool programs or anything.

Senator MASON—Some of their content is certainly not for preschoolers!

Mr Phillips—Well, that is right. And the ABC's educational content is pretty much limited to *Behind the News*. That is my understanding.

Senator MASON—Is that right?

Mr Phillips—That is, new Australian educational content. They show some schools programs during the middle of the day. I believe that they are mainly repeats, and a lot of them are overseas programs as well. I could be wrong about that, but there is actually a section in the ABC's annual report which covers each genre of programming. So that would be a relatively easy thing to find out.

Senator MASON—Mr Phillips, thank you; you have given the committee food for thought.

CHAIR—Mr Phillips, what has been the response to date from the federal government on the need for a free-to-air, digital, publicly funded children's channel?

Mr Phillips—You may be aware that there has recently been a review of the whole film funding structure, which involved us, the Film Finance Corporation and the Australian Film Commission. Basically we have been arguing that, in any restructuring in any new vision for the Australian film and television industry, this should be part of the process. We have been making submissions to the department of communications on the issue, and we have been getting a good hearing, but obviously we do not know anymore than that.

CHAIR—If you did run a channel, what would its hours of operation be?

Mr Phillips—I might just preface this by saying that we are not necessarily arguing that we should run a channel, but that a channel should be run.

CHAIR—Yes, I understand that. Does that mean a commercial channel?

Mr Phillips—No, we see it more as a public broadcaster for kids. The hours you would be looking at would be, say, between 6 am and 10 pm. The reason it runs that late is that our research shows that most of the kids are watching TV later into the evening. I think we attached our original submission to the media reform discussion paper to our submission. There is a chart in there which shows that more children are watching TV between nine and 10 than they are between four and five, when most of the commercial broadcasters show their content.

CHAIR—Why would you run a channel during the day? Would that be to get into schoolrooms?

Mr Phillips—Absolutely. Our vision for the channel is that, during the day, when the audience is not at home but at school you would be running dedicated educational content to be used in schools. We would like to see our involvement in this channel proposal—which would be a body funded by every state in Australia and a number of education departments in Australia—as being the facilitator for getting the state departments involved in the creation of content, in making sure the content applies to the curriculum and making sure that the teachers actually use it.

CHAIR—You recommended a digital channel. That means that it would be possible to use one of the standard definition digital channels on the ABC or SBS. The advantage of that is that all the infrastructure is there to do the broadcasting, but there is no infrastructure for program production or switching the stuff to air and so on. Would you be happy if it went out on one of the digital channels?

Mr Phillips—Absolutely. We actually make the conclusion in our submission to the media reform that the quickest way to get this channel up would be to run it as a multichannel of the ABC or SBS. Certainly, if you did that, the costs of running the channel would largely be left to the cost of the content, provided the broadcaster was willing to subsume some of the running costs. You would also be able to use their expertise.

CHAIR—If a television channel did begin to be broadcast, how many people do you think would watch it? Do have any idea of what the audience might be?

Mr Phillips—I do not know the answer to that. The ABC's children's figures are very strong. Their figures for children's programs in the late afternoon, for example, are very strong. Interestingly enough, the figures drop by about 50 per cent when they switch to the adult programming at 6 pm. You would assume you would get a strong audience. Certainly the overseas experience supports that. The BBC has a children's digital channel and there is a digital children's channel in Germany, both of which perform very well in the ratings. As to actual numbers, I do not have that information at hand, but I could certainly research that and provide it at another time.

CHAIR—I think we would like to receive that, if we could.

Mr Phillips—Sure.

Senator HOGG—Would there be sufficient Australian content able to be produced to cover the time of operation? It seems to me that it would require enormous amounts of production time, firstly, to have the quality of program and, secondly, to give the standard of program that would be necessary, rather than degenerating into something that imports things as fillers?

Mr Phillips—That is a very good question. On the issue of whether there is enough content already, the Commonwealth, through the FFC, the Film Finance Corporation, has actually been funding children's content for 25 years. It spent $250 million making it, and a lot of this content just is not broadcast anymore. It is primarily shown once, so that the commercial free-to-air broadcasters can meet their first-run children's quota, and then there is a small repeat quota, so they may show it a few more times. But largely it is left on the shelf, and a lot of it is out of licence, so there is actually a huge back catalogue of high-quality, expensive, Australian children's content out there. The other thing is that—

Senator HOGG—Focused in what area?

Mr Phillips—Drama.

Senator HOGG—Not necessarily in the civics area that this committee is looking into?

Mr Phillips—Absolutely not, no. As I said, I do not believe there is really that much current or existing civics material out there.

CHAIR—What would happen if the committee recommended that the FFC fund programs that contain a component of civics education? Do you think that is reasonable? Do you think the industry would hate that?

Mr Phillips—As it is currently formulated, I do not see how you could do it. In respect of adults and children's television, the FFC has no creative say in the program. It judges a program purely on its commercial deal. So if a producer brings a project to it that has all its deal in place—

CHAIR—I understand—

Mr Phillips—Yes. It does not try and input anything into the script.

Senator HOGG—So the fact that there is a commercial imperative behind most children's programming is one of the factors that works against it having any ongoing educational value. Is that a reasonable statement?

Mr Phillips—I guess at the end of the day, for a producer, the quicker you get your show made, the quicker you bring your producer's fee in, so perhaps you might spend a bit less time developing the idea, developing the scripts to perhaps give them full educative value, but there is no reason why you could not make an educational program or why all children's television could not be educational really.

Senator HOGG—You mentioned the United Kingdom—I think you said that they produce their own—and Germany. What about the United States? What happens there?

Mr Phillips—I am afraid I do not know what happens in the US. For Australian children's producers, the US is an impossible market—

Senator HOGG—I accept that—

Mr Phillips—so our knowledge of it I guess is affected by that.

Senator HOGG—Is there somewhere that we could get some sort of evaluation or appreciation of what they do?

Mr Phillips—Not that I know of off the top of my head, no.

CHAIR—So, with Britain or Germany, there is no-one you can suggest whom we could contact to find out what the content is that they produce, to see if there is any civics education in it?

Mr Phillips—The BBC would be the place to go. In Germany, the children's digital channel is called Kinderkanal. I am afraid I do not know whether or not they produce much material with a civics component.

Mr DANBY—There are professional producers in Australia who would know a lot about the American market. I do not know whether you would have to drill down further to get knowledge of civics education in children's programs, but there are people who are commercial producers who are trying to get into that market.

CHAIR—Tim, you have survived very well. It was not as hard you thought it would be!

Mr Phillips—It was not too bad. Thanks a lot.

CHAIR—Thanks indeed for appearing today. We wish you well.

[2.00 pm]

GOODE, Mr Geoffrey William George, President, Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.

NAISH, Dr Lee, Vice-President, Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.

POWELL, Mr Geoffrey, Member and Former President, Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.

CHAIR—Welcome. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but we expect you to treat this as a meeting of the parliament itself, and I am sure that you will do that. We have received quite a detailed written submission from you. Do you want to present any additional information or make a short opening statement?

Mr Goode—I have a little transcript here of what I am going to say in an opening statement broadly. I would like to hand one to each member of the committee.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Goode—Also, if the committee members would be interested, I can give them a copy of a DVD that we will be mentioning.

CHAIR—We will get that right now.

Mr Goode—And, if people could indicate whether they are interested, we have got this rather interesting little thing called a gerrymander wheel. It is just a little educational tool.

Senator MASON—Oh, I am interested in that!

Senator HOGG—I knew you would be!

Mrs MIRABELLA—As a Queenslander, Senator Mason is particularly interested.

Senator HOGG—Not all Queenslanders—

Mr Goode—This will be referred to later. I will give you five of these.

CHAIR—You have certainly got our attention! This is terrific.

Mr Goode—This is just to introduce us. The society is the Victoria-Tasmania branch of the national society. We appreciate being invited. We refer to our submission, No. 60, and mention that the national society made a later submission, No. 103, which is also on your website. We have introduced ourselves. Geoff Powell is a former society president. He is a former secondary school teacher. He happened to have Peter Costello as one of his pupils for two years. Geoff has given up teaching now. He is a principal of Knowledge Online (Aust) Ltd, which specialises in software and internet material for educational purposes. That is his business. He has here some examples.

Perhaps if it takes too long we might omit some of these. These are the possibilities. The first is a five-minute video called *Take a Vote—Make it Fair*. It explains to school students certain features of our electoral systems and why they have developed. The interesting thing about this is that it is one of some 4,000 online learning objects that we will mention later that the Commonwealth has funded, but it is the only one out of the 4,000 that we could find on electoral matters, for educational purposes.

Another possibility is to show you—to give you a taste of it—a one-minute excerpt from the 10-minute PR video that we have handed out to you on DVD. Then, just to change pace a little and to give you the flavour of these 4,000 learning objects, we can show you one on the gold rush. It is a historical one. There are ones on history, science, maths and all sorts of things but only one on electoral matters.

Then we have a software item called *Redistricting Roulette*—you will notice it is not 'redistributing'—which is based on the society's gerrymander wheel, which we have handed out and which I see some people actually looking at. That demonstrates a fundamental flaw with single-member electorates, and the Voting and Democracy Research Center in Washington DC has picked this up and made a software version of it, which is on their website (www.fairvote.org/?page=1567). We hope that Geoff will be able to show you that as an example of how some of these properties of our electoral system can be displayed more entertainingly and with more impact than just talking about them in text. This is not something that perhaps the committee would want to send out and educate people with, but it shows the sort of thing that can be done if a point has to be made. We believe it is soundly based.

Then, to support that, we can show a striking map of a current salamander-like Illinois congressional district that appears on the Psephos website, which is an electoral website in Australia. Finally, if we have time, we have a very suave and amusing US animation about the security aspects of internet voting. It is quite a good sell.

Dr Lee Naish, who is the vice-president of our society, is a senior lecturer in computer science at the University of Melbourne. He has authored papers on teaching about algorithms using animation, and created the first web based system for counting votes in quota preferential PR elections on a small scale. Lee can answer questions or comment on practical and theoretical aspects of web based education possibilities.

At the bottom of the submission I have sent around are the main dot points in our submission No. 60. I could go through those, just read them out, if you would like. I am certainly not going to talk about the whole submission, of course, because that is for you.

CHAIR—No, you do not need to read them out because we have read the submission.

Mr Goode—Good.

CHAIR—Committee, how much of this do you want to see? Do you want to start off and see how we go for time?

Senator HOGG—It is really up to the presenters. Given that our next witness is scheduled for 2.30, I think it depends on how long it is going to take.

Mr Goode—Geoff might be able to note how the committee is reacting and just move on to other things if the committee is not showing much interest.

Senator HOGG—I would not say the committee is not showing interest.

Mr Goode——Sorry, not enough interest.

Senator HOGG—I would not say that either. There are time constraints and there are other witnesses, and I think that is important in the running of the committee.

Mr Goode—Certainly. Yes, I understand.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Why don’t we just start with the video presentation?

CHAIR—Okay, and let us see how far we can get through this. You have a five-minute video.

Mr Powell—It is actually an interactive learning object. This little symbol here stands for the Le@rning Federation. It is a jointly funded initiative of the federal and state governments, and New Zealand was involved as well. They spent a lot of that money on coming up with the metadata and packaging standards for these learning objects so that they would be able to be used on virtually all school networks. We will play this one. It is targeted at primary students.

A video was then shown—

Mr Powell—They go though this procedure, and they gradually build up nine sets of rules, which actually underpin our electoral system. So it is an example of an excellent interactive learning object that works through the exercise there. As you can see here, we have 129 votes, and yet there are only 100 voters. So we quiz Jasmina.

A video was then shown—

Mr DANBY—So what are the nine rules?

Mr Powell—Unfortunately, you have to go through and engage in all of the issues: there is one vote, one value; the returning officer is independent of the candidates; it is secret voting—it is an excellent piece of work.

Mrs MIRABELLA—How disappointing, though, Chair. The second rule is that each person is only allowed to vote once. Under our system we have such an antiquated system that on polling day one person can go around—and one person can purport to be that person and go around—to every single polling booth in that electorate and vote. How disillusioning for the poor young students when they find that out.

CHAIR—Of course, in Sweden you can vote twice.

Mr DANBY—And when they find out in reality what has actually happened—

CHAIR—Why don’t we now move on to the one-minute excerpt.

Mr Powell—Mr Cleese?

CHAIR—Yes.

Dr Naish—While that is firing up, there are just a couple of other things about that. That was one of 4,000 which have been developed so far—the only one related to civics and voting. Note that there was not even preferential voting, which is in every election that we have in Australia, and there a lot more, finer points that really need to get across to future voters in Australia about electoral systems.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Who developed that?

Mr Powell—We can look at the metadata and give you that information.

A video was then shown—

CHAIR—Thanks for that. It is not telling another side of the story, though. You are going to show us *Goldrush* now.

Mr Powell—*Goldrush* is an example of another learning object from the Le@rning Federation. It gives you an example of the style of these objects. They are all designed to be very web friendly. They will work over a dial-up connection. They are fairly small and compact. I will not go into the details, but this is an exercise in which students get gold-digging equipment together and make decisions about what is appropriate. There are certain consequences of the decisions they make.

A website was then shown—

Mr Powell—The thing about these learning objects is that the educational outcomes can be quite significant. The learning objects are generally designed to be accompanied by support material for the teachers, so they are generally not just a game that the students play in isolation.

CHAIR—Okay. Now you are going to show us *Redistricting Roulette*.

A website was then shown—

Mr Powell—This is from the Fairvote website in Washington. The device that you have in your hands came about as a result of one of the redistribution submissions in the 1970s by a Mr Luker from Tasmania, who argued that if you drew the boundaries east-west you got one result and if you drew the boundaries north-south you got a different result. I was running a class on civics for year 12 students at Carey. I took the federal votes in the state of Victoria and transposed them onto state boundaries to see what the outcome would be when you changed the number of members being elected. One of the students saw the submission by JK Luker—I showed it to him—and I challenged him to come up with an idea for how we could do it in a wheel format.

This could represent Canberra, with Parliament House in the middle. We are trying to determine whether we run the boundaries down the main avenues or we run them down the spurs of the hills or we follow the creeks. What is the logical place to put the boundaries to divide up the electorate into, say, five districts? There are 65 circles and 60 squares in this particular election. If we go and put the boundaries here, the squares win two seats and the circles win three seats, which is a pretty fair result. If we look at the votes, we can see how the squares have won two of the seats 13 to two and the circles have won two of the seats 13 to 12 and one of them 15 to 10. However, if instead of going down the avenues we go down the spurs of the hills, the squares win nothing.

Mr Goode—No votes have changed, Mr Chairman.

Mr Powell—No voters have changed their minds; we have just swung the boundaries around. And the question is: which is the most rational or relevant place to put these boundaries? So the squares can win none, one, two, three or four seats.

Senator MASON—You would go for the squares, wouldn’t you, John?

Senator HOGG—No, not necessarily. I’ve been accused of being a lot of things in my life—including ‘not the full circle’!

Mr Powell—The point of this exercise is that gerrymandering is something that we believe does not happen, in a partisan sense, in Australia, because we have independent electoral commissions drawing the boundaries. But they are faced with a pretty difficult task: to come up with the optimum system. In fact, this result here—where the squares, the minority party, win four of the five seats—actually results in more voters having a member of their persuasion elected as their local member. So the circles have 17 of their supporters quite happy there, and the squares are obviously pretty happy—13 to 12 in each of the seats they won. It is giving you a minority government, if you like, but maximising the effectiveness of the votes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—You noted yourself, Mr Powell, that we do have an independent body that determines electoral boundaries, and I know from my experience in Victoria that they do have a difficult job, but they do, I believe, a very good job in trying to determine communities of interest. And we are actually one of the few countries in the world to have that level of independence in the drawing of boundaries. Don’t you think that is also quite important—the fact that we do have an independent body?

Mr Powell—Absolutely. I think that is almost a mandatory requirement in any democracy.

Mrs MIRABELLA—In your literature and the information you try to impart to people, do you provide any balancing information on the stability of the current electoral system, in terms of the stability of government it provides, and the relative lack of stability that a more proportional representative model would provide, as experienced in other countries?

Mr Powell—I will ask Geoffrey to comment on that, because he is more familiar with the history of electoral results.

Mr Goode—The demonstrations we would give would perhaps relate to the states in Australia. South Australia has always had a single member lower house, whereas the state of Tasmania has a multimember lower house. And I think the longest period of government by one party in Australia at state level has been in Tasmania, by the Labor Party, for a very long time, under the Hare-Clark system. So it has not been a problem in the Australian experience.

Mrs MIRABELLA—You speak of Tasmania, but we are talking about national governments. If you look at Europe, other nations that have a greater form of proportional representation have had less stable governments than we have had nationally in Australia.

Mr Goode—The answer to that, I suppose, is that we would be restricting our advocacy to the quota preferential—the direct election of candidates that is required in Australia—and hence we have these quota preferential systems. But they only exist elsewhere in Malta and the Republic of Ireland. Now both Malta and the Republic of Ireland do seem to have been fairly stable; we are not aware of great instability there.

Mr DANBY—I see. So you are arguing for proportional representation, but only of a certain model?

Mr Goode—Certainly. In fact, we are very concerned about, and very opposed to, party list MMP type proportional representation. That is one of the big bugbears as far as we are concerned. Direct election is an important consideration, and that is only obtainable under quota preferential systems, like the Senate's.

Mrs MIRABELLA—In your submission, you express concern about what you label 'vanishing and incomplete data' on the Victorian Electoral Commission website. What experience has your organisation had or what evidence have you collected on that, and over what period of time? Because, if that is true, it is of particular concern to me as well.

Mr Goode—We are not saying there is anything sinister about this; it is mainly a question of it being inconvenient. I do not know how much web capacity they have, but we drew a comparison between the Victorian state website and the Tasmanian one. You can get full scrutiny sheets going back for some time on the Tasmanian website but on the Victorian one they seem to disappear fairly quickly, both at state and municipal level.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Why do you think providing that additional information would be helpful? Would you recommend to the committee that be one of the recommendations in our final report?

Mr Goode—Yes, we certainly would recommend that the archival aspect, for educational purposes, is important. It might not be important for attracting initial interest, but when you do get some interest and you get someone, or a group of people, getting serious and they want to take it further they cannot. They cannot go back, they cannot see more thoroughly the base data, as they can on the Tasmanian website. It is just not there or it is very inconveniently placed. For instance, on the AEC website, after an election you only get one by one each of the 150 seats.

You do not get a spreadsheet which enables you to see it as a picture. It would be very simple—just one spreadsheet that integrated that information would make it far more comprehensible.

Mr DANBY—I assume you would be overjoyed at the introduction of the quota preferential system in the Victorian upper house and the abolition of single-member constituencies in the upper house and all the implications that has.

Mr Goode—Certainly.

Mr DANBY—What about Sophie Mirabella's point about stability? Practically every practical politician in Victoria, state or federal, sees that with the result of the Victorian election you are going to have years and years of Liberal majority in the upper house and a brief period recently of Labor majority in the upper house being replaced by permanent instability. It will be almost impossible for Labor or Liberal to get majority status. There will be elements like the Greens or Independents with the swing vote.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Or another single-issue party.

Mr DANBY—I cannot see into the future, but you are probably right. How do you face up to that?

Mr Goode—One answer, of course, is that it only occurs where neither of the larger parties is able to persuade enough people to give it enough seats to wield the appropriate proportionate power. If neither of the major parties is in that position, it would seem that a majority of the voters is not favouring the major party. The majority of voters are favouring other people now. The people in the middle usually have only the choice of picking or choosing which side they will go to.

Mr DANBY—In this case it is not people in the middle; it is people I would describe as to the left of the Labor Party who are then going to be put in the position where they can determine the operations of governments. Even, perhaps as bad as in 1975, the money supply to a government can be determined by the whims of people who, not to put too fine a point on it, are not in the middle. They are not doing it on the basis of what, say, 95 per cent of voters would consider important. They might decide to do it on the basis of whether one orange-bellied parrot—perhaps that is a bad example—is going to be killed every 10,000 years. That would be an irrational basis for making a decision on whether the Victorian government should be able to continue, whether it is Liberal or Labor. But I can quite conceive of two or three Greens making that choice.

Mr Goode—Of course, in the instance you gave, the Victorian upper house does not have the power anymore to block supply. The government would continue on unaffected. So, basically, it relates to those questions of changes to the law that do not attract majority support. We would take the view: why should the law change if majority support is unavailable?

Mrs MIRABELLA—Are you generally supportive of the changes that have been made in the Victorian upper house?

Mr Goode—Yes, we are. We argued for more like the Tasmanian system, but yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do you acknowledge, though, that it has meant a loss of representation for those living in northern Victoria? My electorate is in north-east Victoria. We have gone from having three regions to one, which takes in 48 per cent of Victoria and which comes right to the outskirts of Melbourne. There are fewer people who will now be representing country Victoria by virtue of the boundaries. I would say that those boundaries have deliberately been drawn to come to the outskirts of Melbourne. Is that not a concern? Before, the electorates were the same size. There was not any gerrymandering; every upper house electorate had roughly the same number of voters, but now country representation is effectively reduced by drawing the boundaries in a particular way. Is that a concern?

Mr Goode—It is not anything unsatisfactory, because the new regions are made up of an exact number of lower house seats, as the old provinces were—just a different number. There are 11 now.

Mrs MIRABELLA—To talk about that technicality of how many state seats are in it, is it not a concern that the boundaries have been drawn in a particular way—

Mr Goode—The boundaries are largely a function of the lower house boundaries. You have to make them up of a certain number of lower house boundaries. Those lower house boundaries still remain in force for electing the lower house, and the lower house is validly elected by a winner-takes-all thing where only half the votes count in each lower house seat. In the upper house far more votes actually count. It is the same number of districts that are amalgamated—11 of them just clumped together—and you have to have a boundary somewhere. In fact, the options for placing the boundaries are very limited because you have Bass Strait on the south, you have the Murray River and you have the South Australian border and you have to divide that into eight regions.

Mr DANBY—Perhaps you could just confirm something for me. Could you be a bit more specific about Mrs Mirabella's question about each of those new province areas? This quota preferential system which you approve of has roughly the same number of people, not just the same number of seats, and those 11 country seats have been amalgamated into that upper house seat. How many upper house people would they have had in the provinces now? They will have five in the northern district in Victoria.

Mr Goode—You have to remember that the house has decreased from 44 to 40. That is a separate thing and obviously that changes it a little bit. Had the house been the same size, it would have been easier to make a comparison. In fact, we recommended a system of six seven-member regions.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Can I put it to you that your answer is very disappointing because, at a time when your organisation is trying to propose greater involvement through proportional representation and making that claim, your attitude towards and your support for the changes to the upper house is support for disenfranchising a significant part of rural Victoria. From my perspective, that is very disappointing.

Mr Goode—My answer is that it is the opposite. When you look at the lower house, only half of the votes count in all those 11 districts. Only half of the people voting actually elect anybody. In the upper house, five-sixths of the people in the country region—and a bit of Melbourne—

will elect the people they want to represent them, the people they marked first, or with a subsequent preference if they are too small in number to elect anybody. That is much fairer.

Senator MASON—My question relates to civics education rather than advocacy and PR. Mr Powell, how broadly distributed is the first video that you showed before, *Take a Vote—Make it Fair*? I thought it was very good. I do not know what all the members of the committee thought. I know Senator Hogg liked it.

Mr Powell—The charter of the Le@rning Federation—or the TLF, as it is known—is to use the systemic bodies, so it is the responsibility of the state education departments, the associations of independent schools and the Catholic education offices to disseminate these learning objects to the member schools. Every government school in Victoria and Tasmania has them. They were sent out some DVDs.

Senator MASON—Do they use them in schools?

Mr Powell—The one issue we are finding is that the schools are required to have a learning management system in place, such as the software that I am selling, in order for them to effectively be used by the students. So one of the issues is that there is a lot of money being spent on developing these resources and getting them produced. The next step is to actually get them being used in schools. That is an issue.

Senator MASON—I think it is an excellent resource.

Mr Powell—They are outstanding and there is a need for more of them, and that is the whole plan. They have now developed a specification, if you like, for how these learning objects should be packaged, so now it is up to commercial developers and organisations to come up with the content.

Senator MASON—Good luck in your advocacy.

Mr DANBY—It is not mandated for school systems to take them, is it?

Mr Powell—No, it is just a resource that is available free of charge to schools, and most schools do have them. I think the problem is that a lot of them were mailed out to principals and they have not necessarily got to the right person in the school.

Mr DANBY—It is on the principal's desk or somewhere.

Mr Powell—I think that is the case.

Mr Goode—Perhaps I could just touch on the last four dot points at the bottom of that sheet to emphasise them. The first of those is:

- Conducting simple mock elections helps demystify an adult experience youth know they will soon face.

I have personal experience myself as a scout leader running these things for a group. The children find it very interesting. It is novel and it is something that they know is going to happen, and 10 years later I have had these young men come up to me and say, 'I've always remembered that, when we had to line up, answer questions—”Have you voted before today?”—and all this sort of thing.’ It impacts.

CHAIR—We have already had a lot of evidence along the same track there.

Mr Goode—The second point I would like to emphasise is on preferential voting. There is more emphasis needed. It is a process that is not well understood in the Australian community, and that is very regrettable. You get a lot of people who really feel there is something wrong with it. The third point is:

- All immigrants, except Irish and Maltese, have non-preferential voting backgrounds …

They really do need to have some of that explained better through some sort of system that you could perhaps recommend.

Senator MASON—Are you talking about advocacy here, or are you saying that the current system is not explained very well?

Mr Goode—The latter.

Senator MASON—I understand that. It is a fair point.

Mr Goode—It is more elaborate than what first occurred. Obviously what first occurred to democratic communities was first past the post. It is the thing you would naturally do, but it is flawed. It soon became evident, and we in Australia were leaders in exposing that and doing something about it. America is just starting to wake up.

Senator MASON—There are all sorts of complaints about first past the post, and indeed the preferential system, but that is not your point. Your point is that the current system is not explained well.

Mr Goode—That is right. We have a preferential system. We should be proud of it and explain it. The final dot point has specific actions that we would urge be considered. We say that a recommendation should be made to properly enforce section 216 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act—that is, displaying posters or pamphlets of group voting tickets at federal elections. We got an apology from Senator Abetz when we wrote to him pointing out that there was widespread failure to do this. You could not get them, and this brings the system into some disrepute. We also recommend improved web resources. I indicated earlier some examples of how that could be done.

Mr DANBY—You do not have any quantification of the failure of the AEC to have the group voting tickets displayed, do you? You could not tell us how many polling places—

Mr Goode—Various people in our society reported it. How many would you have said, Lee?

Dr Naish—I am not sure. We did a quick whip around. Quite a few people went to the polling booth and asked to see the group voting tickets or looked around for posters and so on and did not see them.

CHAIR—Gentlemen, that is not quite within the terms of reference of our inquiry, though.

Mr Goode—It is educational, though.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I think that point was made and was picked up in one of the previous recent inquiries this committee has had on last election.

Senator MASON—It certainly was.

Mrs MIRABELLA—That point was noted.

Mr Goode—Here is another suggestion that we think is an oversight. We have the practice of replacing elected senators before the next election, when a vacancy has been created. For example, a senator can resign after a week, as a couple have done in recent years, and their replacement can remain in the Senate for nearly six years, never having been to the people. It seems a very simple thing to have a law requiring an advertisement that says: ‘Here is your new senator. You didn’t elect him, but here he is. This is his photo, this is the party he is in, this is what he stands for, this is where he lives and this is a bit about him.’ Replacing senators without people knowing who they are is an alienating thing. The level of boredom and alienation is quite strong in this area. People do not want to talk about it or know about it. It is not a good or healthy situation.

Mrs MIRABELLA—In fact, the vast majority of members of the House of Representatives would be hard pressed to name all of our senators at the best of times, let alone asking the poor public to do the same.

Senator HOGG—The same applies the other way, let me assure you.

Mr Goode—I appreciate it is bad enough, but there is no need to make it worse. The complete silence is not good.

CHAIR—Thank you all for appearing today, and thank you for bringing along the aids to the presentation. The committee very much appreciated that.

[2.42 pm]

GOUDIE, Ms Yvonne, Private capacity

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Ms Goudie—I am a freelance consultant working in the field of civics and electoral education. I have had over 10 years of experience teaching political literacy and electoral literacy and designing curriculum programs for civics and electoral education for young children, teenagers and adults in Australia. I have also done some consulting work overseas. I have predominantly been employed by International IDEA—the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance—which is in Sweden. I have also done a lot of contract work for the Australian Electoral Commission. However, I am not representing them here. I am appearing in a private capacity.

CHAIR—You are just the person we want to hear from. We do not ask you to give evidence under oath, but please respect the committee and treat these as proceedings of the parliament itself. We have received your written submission. Do you want to present any additional information or make a short opening statement?

Ms Goudie—No. I am happy to field questions.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Are you serious about your claim to lower the voting age?

Ms Goudie—Yes. I feel very strongly and I am really excited by the arguments that I see from different groups around the world—youth organisations and children's rights organisations that—

Mrs MIRABELLA—How low should it go?

Ms Goudie—There is a lot of evidence out there and arguments in support of lowering the voting age, and there are a whole lot of different arrangements that different organisations have suggested. There are all sorts of things, from lowering the age to 15 or 16 to removing age limits altogether, because it is such an imprecise measure of maturity.

Mrs MIRABELLA—What would you support? What level would you support?

Ms Goudie—I support the idea that we look at it as an interesting case study for what can be done in the context of human rights around the world. The United Nations, UNICEF and other youth organisations are looking very seriously at the concept of children's rights in terms of evolving capacities of children rather than just the common sort of—

Mrs MIRABELLA—In your opinion what would be an optimal age?

Ms Goudie—I do not have an opinion about what an optimal age would be. As I said, I would like to look at all the arguments for and against lowering the voting age, on the one hand, and removing it, on the other.

CHAIR—You are an expert witness. If you had to tell us today, what age would you say?

Ms Goudie—It depends on what and where, and the context. I do not think there is a quick answer.

Mrs MIRABELLA—To vote in a federal election.

Senator MASON—Ms Goudie, on page 5, you said it should be when you turn 16, didn't you?

Ms Goudie—Yes. There are a lot of arguments supporting lowering it to the age of 15 or 16 initially because they are a captive audience while they are still in compulsory years of schooling and are studying civics and electoral education. So before they leave school at the age of 16 or 17 there is talk about the 18- to 25-year-olds being a group that has lower turnout. But they are in a transitory phase of life.

I know that a lot of this evidence comes from America, where students leave school and go on to colleges, interstate and that sort of thing. So they are moving from home to another place to live, and that complicates enrolments and that sort of thing. The whole idea is that they are in a transitory stage when they are 18, and their minds are on other things.

Mrs MIRABELLA—You are really talking about changing the concept of what we would consider an adult.

Ms Goudie—I do not think I made that suggestion, sorry.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I just find it really perplexing. Couldn't we get students of the age of 15 or 16 excited about the voting system using other innovative educational methods—

Ms Goudie—Yes, of course.

Mrs MIRABELLA—rather than getting them to vote in a real election?

Ms Goudie—Yes, I agree. There is probably a whole range of things we could be doing with children in a whole lot of age groups.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Don't you think they are too young at that age to be able to have the relevant information and maturity to cast a vote that could potentially form a government?

Ms Goudie—Yes, definitely there are a lot of those sorts of arguments around but there is a grey area of when you reach that level of maturity. That is why I am excited by these concepts of emerging capacities—when you have the capacity to understand and perform certain skills as opposed to an arbitrary age limit. We know, from a lot of literature, that teenagers are very interested in these sorts of things and, given the opportunity, they want to have their voices heard. They will certainly vote in mock elections when they are given the opportunity but when they know that the experience is authentic it certainly engages them. As educators, we know that to engage your students is half the battle in getting them empowered, interested and participating.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So that gives them a certain degree of independence and separateness from their parents?

Ms Goudie—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—If a political party had to pitch to 15- and 16-year-olds, it would be very interesting to see the sorts of policies they would come up with to be attractive to that age group.

Ms Goudie—They say a lot of the disengagement is because a lot of the policies and politicians are not engaging youth in general. So that could be one of the reasons that there is a bit of youth disengagement from the whole press process and perhaps it would make them—

Mrs MIRABELLA—Before students get excited about specific policies and broader political debates and arguments, do you see a role in explaining the actual process of voting?

Ms Goudie—Yes, absolutely.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Would you see that as the first step?

Ms Goudie—Absolutely. I have written in my submission that I think that electoral education should be seen inside of part of a broader civics and citizenship education program. I think that program should be very much an education program that is seen from early school years right through to the end of school years in various formats so students have regular exposure to electoral education, because we as educationalists know that continued exposure to concepts and skills increases learning and the threshold effect of learning and understanding concepts. So we know that education is not linear. You learn building blocks in your formative years and you build on them as you get older and you continue to learn concepts and use prior knowledge to learn further sophisticated concepts—we revisit this, and this learning process reinforces prior learning. If you have a lot of exposure from your early years on, we know that you have the building blocks and the knowledge already created. So you do not have to reach 15 or 16 not already having the knowledge—it has been built up over years. And so if you happen to have—

Senator HOGG—Following on from the points that have been made, we had a session with a group of students in Alice Springs in years 11 and 12. But for the fact that they were skewed towards students who were doing legal studies and/or some form of history subject at that level, they put to us that the level of interest in civics and electoral matters in general was perhaps not nonexistent, but not very much to the forefront of the minds of the rest of their peer group. That is why I am interested in your concept as to how you are going to get people who are even younger than that interested when the curriculum currently does not necessarily provide for it across the board.

Ms Goudie—That is right—it does not. I have found in my work with teachers in this area that teachers are already doing a lot of electoral education and civic education. They may not even be calling it that by name, but they are certainly doing mock elections, choosing class representatives, choosing what sorts of activities to do and deciding how they want to do things from the kindergarten age. And we know good teachers work with the students' current knowledge and interest area so the playground politics that happens is used as a learning opportunity in the classroom. From a very early age cooperative learning is encouraged; choosing a representative in the group to report back in group work—all these strategies are used already by teachers. When we work with teachers, we know. We say: 'That's great. That fits into electoral education.' They are not always aware that that is what they are doing, but they are, with these sorts of simulations, role plays and cooperative group work. So the good teachers are actually doing a lot of it already—the ones who instinctively know that children are interested in rights and responsibilities and what is fair and what is not. A lot of it is happening already, but it is not coordinated across Australia. Although it is coming into state curriculums in certain areas, it is not nationwide by any means.

Mr DANBY—Ms Goudie, I am very impressed with the places you have been teaching civic education: Stockholm, the Solomon Islands, the Iraq out-of-country elections, Georgia, and recently even in Yerevan in Armenia.

Ms Goudie—To qualify that: I was not actually teaching. A lot of it was consultancies.

Mr DANBY—Consultancies or facilitating people over there?

Ms Goudie—Yes.

Mr DANBY—I would like to ask two things about that. Obviously each country has got a different electoral system or civic society. How do you adapt or are you trying to impart models from Australia or other countries of the kinds of things that they should be considering?

Ms Goudie—When I have occasionally worked for the Australian Electoral Commission, we have had visitors from overseas come to our Election Visitor Program. I have met with hundreds of people—politicians and electoral commissions—from around the world who have visited Australia at election time. They are very impressed with the way we conduct elections fairly and so forth, but more so they are breathtakingly surprised at how well we do electoral education—first, that it exists as a concept, and also that we do it in electoral education centres. The emails we get later when they have returned home say: 'How much did it cost? How can we do it? Can you come over and do it? This is what we desperately need.'

Mr DANBY—So you are actually going over and doing it?

Ms Goudie—They want to implant something like that. We are not suggesting that you can transplant an Australian model overseas, but there are standards and principles about how children and adults learn, and this is the sort of knowledge that they need to be armed with. They can do it with their NGOs, and they often do it very well. We can learn a lot of lessons from how they do it overseas. There are great models of electoral education in different parts of the world. You are probably very familiar already with the Kids Voting program in America, where all children go and vote—six million children in the 1996 election—and the sorts of positive effects this has on turnout. These sorts of things are exciting too because not only do they have the effect of getting children to vote at these elections, even though their votes are not counted, but when they reach voting age they then become lifelong voters. This is what is really exciting.

There are a couple of lessons to learn from the Kids Voting program. One is that in the places that it has been conducted in the United States the most notable effect it has is when children go home and talk to their parents about voting. The dinnertime politics conversations happen and parents go and vote as a result of these conversations.

Senator MASON—The children motivate the parents.

Ms Goudie—Yes. It is called Take Your Parents to Vote in some states. In the last election, in two states 600,000 adult Americans voted for the first time in their lives as a result of their children being involved in this program. Not only that, where there is a series of two election cycles in the states that run this program they then have a cumulative effect. So even where children are not participating in mock elections in schools the voter turnout increases in that state as a sort of snowball effect from children talking about it. What is more exciting for the states is that the majority of those 600,000 people are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and they are a large cohort of people who do not normally turn out to vote.

Senator HOGG—There are two parts to that. One is to get the people enrolled. The second is to get them to turn out, unlike in our situation. Do you have that broken up?

Ms Goudie—The statistics? They are in the studies. I will leave those studies with you.

Senator HOGG—So that dissects how many were on the roll but have never voted, how many were first-time enrollees and voted.

Ms Goudie—Yes. You are probably familiar with the research that is coming out in the *New IDEA Handbook*—the youth voter participation one—

Mr DANBY—If we are not familiar with it can we get copies of it?

Ms Goudie—Of course. I will leave these with you. It includes the voter turnout since 1945.

Mr DANBY—The voter turnout where since 1945?

Ms Goudie—In 170 countries. The one that is coming out in a few weeks covers initiatives to encourage higher turnout. It is an inventory with case studies. This is an International IDEA book that focuses on the different sorts of programs to encourage higher turnout. It talks a lot about Kids Voting America and all the other sorts of programs that exist around the world. Germany is the other exciting place because it has experimented with lowering the voting age to 15 or 16, with hugely positive effects for turnout.

Senator HOGG—Does it link voter turnout with civics education?

Ms Goudie—Yes, it does, but to my mind that link could be made stronger. The initiatives are broken down into case studies of information campaigns; advertising campaigns; grassroots movements; school and special educational programs, which is where civics comes in; and entertainment and inducements. That covers everything from the Australian model, where there are fines if you do not vote, to inducements of competitions or money given to you if you do vote. The whole range of incentives plus the programs are mentioned in the forthcoming book.

CHAIR—Ms Goudie—

Ms Goudie—I do want to finish answering Michael Danby's question, too.

Mr DANBY—You can come back to me. Do not worry about it.

CHAIR—Ms Goudie, with us today we have representatives of the Australian Electoral Commission. They will be very interested in this question and your answer. This morning the Victorian Electoral Commission produced this information for us. It is a kit of materials that is given to students. Your evidence says:

> Whilst it is tempting for ... providers to produce 'glossy' materials (in an attempt to satisfy the desired 'outcomes' of funders & policy-makers)—it is not an effective strategy (and ultimately a waste of money).

Would you like to expand on that, please?

Ms Goudie—As a politics teacher, I was faced with a lot of glossy material on a regular basis, as all primary and secondary schools are. It usually goes into the recycling bin, but teachers with an interest may take hold of it, and that is the key. If they already have an interest in it, they will take hold of it. I was involved in some of the excellent programs in the Australian Electoral Commission. We produced kits which are very valuable and have their place, but we took the advice of education specialists that kits on their own are not much use unless they are implemented with effective, best-practice professional development. The Australian Electoral Commission had an excellent program called Your Vote Counts. It was a fully funded two-day program which attracted schools and teachers who would not normally get professional development in the civics area because they were teachers across the curriculum. Primary teachers are not necessarily specialists in civics.

Mr DANBY—When did it start?

Ms Goudie—I am not sure. I am not familiar with the way the program is operating, but the AEC will be able to answer that.

CHAIR—Do we know?

Interjector—My name is Stephen Kennedy and I am Operations Manager for the Australia Electoral Commission. It has not operated in Victoria since 2002.

Ms Goudie—The reasons are well documented as to why it was so good and the good practice of PD that it used. It was fully funded: the travel, the accommodation—everything that the teacher normally could not afford in going to PD. The school was not out of pocket, the teacher was not out of pocket. It was a two-day program, the methodology was engaging and interactive and we role-modelled how things could be taken into the classroom. It had all the elements. It was extremely popular and successful.

Mr DANBY—Who was funding this?

Interjector—It was a national office—Canberra—budget, and it was delivered in Victoria.

Ms Goudie—I know that the VEC do some great work in electoral education and we also have the Australian Electoral Commission.

CHAIR—Thank you. That is very positive.

Senator MASON—I have just a couple of chase-ups. Senator Hogg has touched on this. You say that the characteristics of good programs include three essential components that are indispensable: civic knowledge, civic skills and civic disposition. This morning, civic knowledge and civic disposition were covered in other submissions. You are really telling the committee, aren't you, that civic disposition and civic skills, such as kids voting in their schools help to garner civic knowledge? Is that right?

Ms Goudie—Yes.

Senator MASON—I think a later witness described them as part of an ever-moving dialectic. Is that right?

Ms Goudie—Probably. I am not sure.

Senator MASON—There is a melding of all these concepts—civic knowledge, civic skills and civic dispositions. They are not separate but they are all, in a sense, moving towards the same thing—better citizenship. Is that right?

Ms Goudie—They are all in the same bucket.

Senator MASON—That is something I have learnt today: to teach civic knowledge, one often needs to give citizens civic skills and indeed civic disposition. That has been my big lesson of the day, and you have merely reiterated that this afternoon.

Ms Goudie—Yes, and I guess you can say that civics is caught as well as taught, so it is not just the formal classroom where I say, 'I'm now going to lecture you on what democracy is,' and it is done in an authoritarian way—it has to be modelled. The values that you are trying to espouse and teach have to be modelled. But institutions are informed.

Senator MASON—Indeed. So this sort of didactic method of saying, 'This is the Senate, this is the House of Representatives and this is how it all works,' is boring for kids?

Ms Goudie—Yes.

Senator MASON—And it needs to be, in a sense, buttressed by, 'You can be the Senate, you can be the House of Representatives and you can be the High Court.'

Ms Goudie—That is right. We do that so well in Australia in our different programs—when they visit the electoral education centre, when they visit Parliament House; they do this in a whole lot of contexts. I have a personal anecdote. On Anzac Day I was with my son at the Anzac Day memorial in Port Melbourne. Michael Danby was standing next to John Thwaites, who was standing next to the local member. I said to my 10-year-old, ‘Look at that: the three levels of government, our representatives, all standing in a row.’ The minute he starts to think that I am giving him a civics lesson, he will run and kick the football, but—

Mrs MIRABELLA—Has he ever said in those situations, ‘Why do we need all three of them?’

Ms Goudie—Well, yes; all those sorts of questions will come up at a later time—not in that educational moment; it is lost because I have turned it into a lecture, but—

Senator MASON—He should have said, ‘Where’s the senator?’

Ms Goudie—Good point! But later on he will say to me, ‘I want to write about the park; the swings are broken.’ And he will ask, ‘Which level of government do I write to?’

Senator MASON—It makes it relevant.

Ms Goudie—It makes it relevant, and that is why education is ongoing and the concepts are reinforced during their upbringing and their socialisation and schooling. It is not that you have one moment when the child is 17—that that is the moment they are going to absorb electoral education, and if you’ve missed them then, you’ve missed them. It is ongoing. It is not lineal.

Mrs MIRABELLA—I hope you do tell your son that, out of all those levels, it would probably be most efficient to write all letters about all complaints to Mr Danby, because he has a way of fixing them.

Mr DANBY—Thank you, Sophie, and I appreciate your recommendation.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But, seriously, in all your experience, across all levels and different cultures, have you found an issue in Australia between children who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds and their engagement in the political process and those who come from English-speaking backgrounds?

Ms Goudie—An issue?

Mrs MIRABELLA—In terms of different levels of engagement and knowledge about the voting system.

Ms Goudie—No, not off the top of my head. I cannot answer that. What I can say, from meeting with a lot of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds who come to Australia and who visit Australia, is how impressed they are by the Australian system, not just our institutions but the people who work around them. When we visit polling places with these people, the first thing that strikes them is the absence of guns and the peaceful nature of it, and all those sorts of things.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Of course. I am not so much interested in the professionals and those with a directed interest as in permanent residents and citizens.

Ms Goudie—What I was getting at was that they are very interested in Australian politics. They are very interested in the issues that are relevant to them, at whatever age they are—

Mrs MIRABELLA—I mean in terms of knowledge of the voting system.

Ms Goudie—Knowledge—it is too ephemeral. They are interested in whatever they are interested in, at whatever age they are, and that can be different. There is no common thing, like ‘All 12-year-olds are interested in this.’ I can make generalisations and say—

Mrs MIRABELLA—No, I suppose what I am trying to get at is: is it important to have a basic workable knowledge of English to be able to vote—to be able to read and to be able to vote? And is that an issue that perhaps we could be addressing?

Ms Goudie—We do have people who have come from systems where they have never had the vote in their life, or have used an entirely different voting system—usually first past the post—so there are different experiences. But they are generally engaged for different reasons. There is not one reason.

I have experimented with doing electoral education with very young children. I think I wrote in my submission that I went into a prep 1 grade to experiment, doing some voting electoral education with them. There were children there from non-English-speaking backgrounds and there were Australian children without numeracy or literacy skills. Well, I will add a qualification: they could count up to four, because they could cast a preferential vote when there were symbols or colours on the ballot paper—something that they could relate to—and most children understand the concept of choice and choosing their favourite thing. There are lots of different ways of doing that visually without words or numbers. So the very first thing we did was an exercise where I gave them a link of a chain, a piece of paper that either had yes or no—a smiley face or a sad face—and they were voting on a plebiscite issue. I do not remember what it was—something like: ‘Would you like to eat your playlunch outside today?’ They could choose a yes or a no vote, and they could choose where they wanted to put that on the chain. And so all the children got their vote. Whether or not they could read or write or understand English, they understood through the pictures and the symbols what the voting question was, and they added their yes or no to the appropriate chain, and then there were the visual results of what topic won the election. So they do not need to—

Mrs MIRABELLA—Considering that in our system we do not use colours or thumbprints or a cross mark, would you support the proposition that it is critical in a vibrant democracy that people have adequate skills in numeracy and literacy?

Ms Goudie—Yes. As I said, you really only need to be able to count up to four or five to be able to vote in the Australian system. Yes, you need a certain amount of knowledge, but you need these civic dispositions as well.

CHAIR—We all have to apologise to the deputy chair, whom Senator Hogg cut off earlier—but it was not with malice.

Senator HOGG—I did it very well, I thought.

CHAIR—You did, yes. It has gone right around and, Mr Danby, we are back to you.

Mr DANBY—I want to ask a question in relation to all the countries you have visited, Ms Goudie. I find it terribly interesting that this committee is concerned that we do not have enough civic education but people are coming from all around the world asking you for the civic education that we impart to people that they obviously do not have. Two questions emerge out of that. Why is an institution in Scandinavia so interested in getting your level of civic education all around world—not yours personally; why do they think Australians do this very well? Secondly, if we are interested in taking civic education issues seriously, we should take seriously the advice you gave us before about that program that the AEC had that has been discontinued. One of the things that we would consider in our recommendations is either an extra appropriation or a request to the AEC that they put that back, because we can hardly be serious about civic education if we do not have the AEC providing that kind of outreach to Australian schools. I am tremendously encouraged by the fact—it is my experience too—that people all over the world think that Australians do the whole range of electoral activities and civics education much better. I cannot imagine that our friends from the Proportional Representation Society, who were here before, believe that Australia would engage in redistricting like they do in the United States Congress. It just leads to the most appalling results, even in a great democratic system like the United States. Can you tell us about IDEA, why they have got you and what they do with Australians? Are there other Australians like you out there teaching the rest of the world about democracy?

Ms Goudie—I am not sure about that! Certainly linking electoral education with civic education is quite a specialised field. There is a lot of fantastic work in the civics education field conducted worldwide for different programs, be it AIDS campaigns or whatever. But the research that these sorts of organisations are very interested in is to do with the fact that there are campaigns and there is education and you can spend your money in either place or in both. You can have a whole lot of approaches, but educational programs seem to be, in the long term, money well spent, because this is where you capture people, because you give them regular exposure to the concepts that they need to get to the point later in their life where they are going to be participating in voting, for example.

So organisations like IDEA are very interested in improving democracy worldwide and are looking for examples of civics programs that support democracy and meaningful participation. And, yes, Australia is a member state of International IDEA, I am proud to say. I do not know how many other people are doing this around the world, because it is fairly specialised but, yes, in most programs that I hear about that are civics based there is a component, anyway, of participation, and we know voting is just one form of participation—a very important one—but there are other forms of participation.

There is a lot of interesting and a lot of contradictory research out there about the effectiveness of such programs. USAID did a huge study recently about civics programs that they had run in South Africa, the Dominican Republic and Poland. One of the effects of a very good program was a negative turnout immediately after that civics program was implemented. But that changed after years. They speculated that, with increased knowledge, there were some people that became cynical with their knowledge. They were armed with knowledge and, with knowledge, came cynicism. That changed—the trend reversed—but there are a whole lot of studies out there about participation and how effective civics programs are.

Mr DANBY—Are you saying that a USAID program in Poland—

Ms Goudie—The Dominican Republic.

Mr DANBY—spent money on civic education and it led to lower voter turnout?

Ms Goudie—Initially, after the program was implemented.

Senator MASON—Civic knowledge led to civic cynicism!

Ms Goudie—Yes. But it also did point out that these people were looking outside the political system for other ways of participating, as voting was not meaningful for them.

Senator HOGG—It seems to me that civics education itself is easiest and best done in the primary school. Once one gets into the junior secondary it is harder, but even harder still in the middle secondary and the upper secondary area. Have you got a response to that?

Ms Goudie—I understand where you are getting this generalisation from. We have the 'crowded curriculum'—we know that. Teachers have been told, 'Now you have to teach this and you also have to teach that.' There is a problem with the crowded curriculum. In most primary schools they will have an integrated curriculum where they can incorporate a whole lot of disciplines into what they will call 'integrated studies' or something like that. They do it well because they use a lot of cooperative approaches in group work in primary schools. They do civics well. In the secondary schools it becomes more difficult as you get into your specialised geography versus history and legal studies. So civics might not find a natural place to sit if it is not integrated into some of those disciplines.

Senator HOGG—Should it find a natural place to sit? In other words, is it an integral part of education?

Ms Goudie—This is a debate that is going on in Australia at the moment, and always has in the civics field: do you mainstream or do you have a separate subject called civics. There are views and arguments that support both. My view is that you can do both. You can have separate subjects, and they often do this in the years 9 and 10 area—they will have a unit or a term where they will do civics and citizenship education. A lot of schools now realising that they have to incorporate civics will do it at years 9 and 10 anyway. Not all of them; some of them will not. But it can be mainstreamed and it can be taught as a separate subject.

Teachers are quite happy to incorporate it. They realise the importance of it. We are not selling them something they do not see the value in; they do. It is just that they need the tools to implement it. They need the kits and they need the professional development that goes with it. They acknowledge that they cannot have specialised knowledge about all things electoral and that they have to leave that to the specialists—to the electoral commissions. That is why they want a working relationship with the electoral commissions.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. Ms Goudie, we appreciate your evidence today. The committee found that very interesting indeed.

Ms Goudie—Allow me to leave you with some of the publications and some other studies.

CHAIR—Yes, thank you, we would appreciate that. Thank you for your attendance.

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

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at the public hearing today.

Committee adjourned at 3.18 pm