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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Tuesday, 22 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: Senator 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 1.15 pm

ASENSIO, Mr Todd, Teacher, Melbourne High School

AXUP, Mr Colin, Registrar (with responsibility for student leadership), Melbourne High School

LUDOWYKE, Mr Jeremy, Principal, Melbourne High School

MAROUTOUS, Mr George, Teacher, Melbourne High School

PASK, Mr Ray, Teacher (with responsibility for political content of curriculum), Melbourne High School

PRIDEAUX, Dr Janet, Assistant Principal and Director of Curriculum, Melbourne High School

SMYTH, Mr David, Assistant Principal (with responsibility for resources and student leadership), Melbourne High School

WILSON, Ms Linda, Teacher (with responsibility for political content of curriculum), Melbourne High School

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I am the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, which is undertaking this inquiry here in Melbourne High School today. I have with me Mrs Sophie Mirabella, the federal member for Indi, which is in country Victoria, and Senator Brett Mason, who is a senator for Queensland. I represent the federal electorate of Herbert, which is in Queensland. We expect Michael Danby to be joining us soon; he is deputy chair of the committee.

Thank you very much for having us here. We are recording what is said for the purposes of *Hansard* and what you say attracts parliamentary privilege. Just be yourselves. I am sure that you will be respectful of the parliamentary process. We look forward to meeting some of the students after getting some information from you. Also with us is Sonia, the committee's secretary. We also have Parliament House DPS people here who are filming us. This will probably end up on television somewhere or other and it is all part of the parliamentary process.

Mr Ludowyke—In the time we have, we thought we would give you some context so that, when you get to meet our wonderful boys, you will have a sense of background from their point of view. I will give you a little bit of information about our school. Melbourne High School is the oldest state secondary school in Victoria; we celebrated our centenary last year. We are unique in a number of ways: firstly, we are the only government boys school in Victoria; and, secondly, we and MacRobertson Girls High School, which is our sister school, are the only academic selective entrance schools in Victoria. We are also unusual in Victoria in commencing at year 9. We have students from years 9 to 12, which is approximately from the age of 14-15 through to 18.

The school has always had as a philosophy that, whilst our students are selected on the basis of their academic excellence, part of our role is very much within the broad liberal education tradition of an education of body, spirit and mind and is very much a balanced, grounded education.

CHAIR—Let me introduce Michael Danby, who has just arrived.

Mr Ludowyke—The other part of that context, which I think is worthy of the committee's note, is that the school prides itself on the fact that it can legitimately claim to have produced many leaders at a national and international level in almost any walk of life. Therefore, clearly part of our responsibility also is preparation for that future which we know will fall on the shoulders of the young men who come through this school. That is the school context. I have asked Dr Prideaux to talk a little about civics and citizenship within the curriculum.

Dr Prideaux—Thank you, Jeremy. Welcome, and thank you very much for coming to Melbourne High School. The students are very excited and are looking forward to expressing some of their opinions.

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards is a new curriculum framework that has been introduced by the Victorian Department of Education and Training. It is very similar to the Tasmanian system and the Queensland system, and the New South Wales system has introduced an essential learning standard as well. Basically, it is a framework for curriculum. Education departments have always presented a framework for curriculum assessment, and schools follow that framework.

Within the new framework, which will be fully implemented next year, there is a subject area called civics and citizenship. We have been working out how we will incorporate that into the curriculum next year. I have presented you with our draft proposal, which is moving towards a final draft.

Within our year 10 program, we already have work experience. Students work on an Anzac Day project. They work with the Red Cross. They have a community involvement program where they have to do 20 hours community involvement. They have a leadership program, which David Smyth will speak about in a moment. We also have the Millgrove Outdoor Education Centre, where students spend a week developing their sense of community and civic duty. Then we thought we would draw on the things we were doing already and on the VELS, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, and the civics and citizenship subject that is within that framework where the students will do a project; it will be an individual project as well as a partial group project. They will need to consider what it means to be a citizen in Australia, what leadership means, what community means and to consider different perspectives and justify opinions on local, national and global issues. They will be required to interview either a migrant or refugee, someone in government at a local, national or state level, a community leader, an Indigenous person, a political activist or somebody else who has a leading role in the community.

Referring to the document that I have given to you, on the centre page with the dot points there are general starting points on what leadership means, what community means and what being a citizen of Australia means. As well as interviewing a person who has a role to play in the

community, they will also look at one or more of these dot pointed questions, which are straight from the VELS civics and citizenship area that the education department has stipulated. You can see that they explore human rights issues at the national and international level and consider ways that allow citizens to participate in governments et cetera. The students will eventually present an individual component of it and will also work together as a group to come up with a presentation. They will be assessed by parents, by another year level and by teachers. They will do a presentation to a panel like this and they will be assessed. Todd Asensio, George Maroutous and I drew this proposal together. George and Todd, do you have anything to add to what I have said?

Mr Asensio—The change in curriculum has really given us the opportunity to investigate what we do well already at Melbourne High School and look at various ways to improve. The proposal that we have drafted really ties together a few of the programs that are already in existence in a more formal way under the umbrella of civics and citizenship and hopefully in the eyes of the students to tie some of the things they are already doing throughout year 9 and year 10 together and draw the conclusions together themselves. That will help their game, but we are trying to make it a bit more explicit and trying to link what they are doing in the community and getting involved as volunteers and things like that with being what part of becoming a good, responsible citizen is. It is really giving us the opportunity to link the concepts together.

Mr Ludowyke—There are two other contexts that would help as we dig down. One is student leadership within the school, which I have asked Assistant Principal David Smyth to address.

Mr Smyth—I took over the coordinating role of student leadership from Colin Axup this year and, between us, we should be able to cover the agenda. The handout I have given you shows how leadership within Melbourne High School has been very much a living animal. It changes over time with the different emphases that the students want to give us and the politics at this point. The best example in our time at the school is where a student initiative just takes off and keeps running. Melbourne High School has just under 1,400 students, who have been academically selected, so basically we have 1,400 potential leaders available. We try as much as possible to maximise the opportunities for our students to develop and show leadership capabilities. Some of it is formal and some of it is not. Some of the positions are selected by a selection panel, with short-listing and interviews. But the vast majority of the positions are student elected, where the students have a chance to employ their lobbying skills and those developing skills to be able to convince their classmates that they are the one to choose—and that is very healthy. A lot of them centre on traditional positions like SRC representatives within forms or form captains and vice captains and the leaders of sporting groups and music groups.

In addition, a lot of them come out from our mentoring processes, which run throughout the school at various year levels. We use our year 11 students quite a lot as mentors of the younger students in year 9 and sometimes in year 10 to help them to develop those skills. Sometimes we arrange for outside professional groups to come in to show the students how to improve those skills. We are always open to looking at outside groups approaching the school to give us opportunities to be part of their programs, some of which are commercial and some of which are not. There are good examples in the handout. Some started this year. The Red Cross mobile blood bank comes to the school once a year and a Red Cross Club Student Ambassadors Program at the end of each year. We have had a few different schools running leadership forums and we always have students applying to go to those. At the Flemington showgrounds this year,

there was a one-day program where students studied childhood poverty in the Philippines. Therefore, we are ready to grab at any chance that anybody wants to throw at us and the students are always willing to put their hand up for those.

The Ray Willis Leadership Scheme has just started this year. That scheme was named after a recent past principal who died a couple of years ago. That is being done by a small group of old boys from the 1960s who were here when he finished his time at the school. We have opened that up to all students who are officially appointed to positions in the school and anybody else who wants to apply. Over 200 students attended that forum at the start of the year. The last page in the handout shows you how that has run this year. The students are in cross-year-level groups. We really encourage cross-year-level groups within Melbourne High School because we find that they work really well with years 9 through to 12, whether it is sport, music, drama or leadership. This is up and running. Small groups of three to five are developing their own project on national identity and cultural diversity and what the challenges are. People have come in and spoken to them. Julian Burnside and Andrew Robb have come in and spoken to them. That is really finishing up. The group projects will be presented at the start of next term, which will be an interesting new phase. We reckon that there are about 800 leadership possibilities at the school. Obviously, the boys double up and triple up. Out of a school of 1,400, that is reasonably healthy. However, we cannot be complacent about that and we are always trying to expand leadership chances within the school.

Mrs MIRABELLA—How do you modify or come up with new school clubs? Where does the initiative for these clubs come from?

Mr Smyth—They are entirely student based. Students come up and ask any one of us whether we would like to sponsor or help a club. According to the criteria, you need more than one person. You need a pretty good idea of where it will be of value and you need a teacher to sponsor it. It is a lunchtime activity. Boys might be hanging around outside, just having a chat. They can go into a room where they can watch some of those shows and have a chat about them as a bit of follow-up.

Mr DANBY—How long has Bollywood been a club?

Mr Smyth—It was a club established last year that had a very short life.

Mr DANBY—It could be *Pride and Prejudice* or something like that.

Mr Smyth—Yes.

CHAIR—Regarding the projects you have mentioned, is there any reason why every other school could not have a similar model, or do you think it can only work in this school?

Ms Wilson—That is a good question. My PIG organisation is about 10 years old. That was started by a student but encouraged by teachers. It was seen as a way of training that person in terms of leadership. He had a political interest and he had an idea of inviting speakers along. The response was fantastic because it was the students inviting the politicians and not the school; we got a very good response from that. We have an annual dinner, which the students also organise. I have asked students who are involved with PIG whether they think PIG could work as a model

in other schools and they do not think that it necessarily could. I think the combination of students here is unusual. It requires one group of students and, once something starts, you have to foster that from year to year. You do need to have teachers helping it along because it is extra to the students' studies. They gain a lot from it. However, often these students will ask themselves whether anything they are involved in will take time away from their studies, so it can be difficult.

Mr Pask—There has been a bit of a spin-off. MacRobertson Girls High School started a similar group called CHOPs, Chicks Hooked On Politics. I think PLC or MLC had a small group that lasted about a year. We were going to have a joint magazine called 'Swill'.

CHAIR—Jeremy, have you finished your presentation?

Mr Ludowyke—Yes, I think I have covered it. I should add that Linda Wilson and Ray Pask jointly have had the role of sponsoring PIG across pretty much the full 10 years that it has been in operation.

Ms Wilson—When a student becomes the president of PIG, I do not think they have the leadership skills automatically. Just because they started a group or they have the idea, I think it is very much something where you have to look after them, guide them without pushing them and give them advice. Therefore, it really is done jointly with teachers. I do not think how much the school supports the organisation should be underestimated. Sometimes the students have wanted to invite speakers to the school where other schools probably would not have invited those people to speak. We have had people from One Nation speak and there was quite a lot of controversy about that. The previous principal was very supportive of it. There is never a judgement about who should come and who should not, because the students should be the ones who actually make such judgements. We have even had Mr Danby come and speak here, so there you are!

Mr Pask—One of the great benefits of the PIG group is that students have seen it as a career path in turning around and saying, 'Yes, I do want to go into politics and I want to be a politician, work behind the scenes, be in a party or something of that nature. So it has been an eye-opener for them, seeing these people come along, listen to them and talk among themselves. It has been quite inspiring. Sometimes politicians have come in and said, 'If you are thinking of it as a career path, go and get a life first and then go into politics.' I do not think the kids see it that way. They really see it as, 'That's what we can do'—and a number of them have. They may have ended up that way anyway, if we had pushed them.

Mr Smyth—You have asked whether these projects would work in other schools. I cannot see any reason why they would not, but you obviously need the right students to come together. That idea of the cross-year level pulling them together as a whole on a topical issue is really a goer. It needs a lot of guidance, as Ms Wilson has said, and teachers have to be there on the way, but the students run it.

CHAIR—Steve from the AEC is with us here today. Have you ever been approached by the Australian Electoral Commission to run or help run civics education or electoral education in the school?

Ms Wilson—I am well aware of the services that they offer. At various times we take the children on excursions to an electoral education office. We have done that many times. Not all students have had that opportunity, so that program probably will be expanded with more emphasis on civics and citizenship.

CHAIR—A short while ago someone mentioned the overcrowded curriculum. Is that an issue for the school?

Mr Ludowyke—Absolutely.

Ms Wilson—You have no idea how much of an issue it is.

Mr Asensio—It is definitely an issue. I am part of the group that is looking at the new curriculum in the state of Victoria. I think the idea originally, when that group started, was to simplify things. Coming from the other side, it is becoming more and more crowded every time any changes happen.

CHAIR—We had evidence yesterday that the University of New South Wales runs a mandatory course—it is basically on civics—which is worth six points, that every student has to attend. How do you feel about such a mandatory short course being run in this school or across the high school system in Australia?

Ms Wilson—I think it depends on the age of the students. I have spoken to the students about this and they feel they are not always ready for a course. Perhaps it would be appropriate at year 10—and when is the magical moment when you should have a compulsory course? We are respectful of the differences between students and it is hard to say. I think year 10 is when they would be politically interested in the information that could be provided.

CHAIR—But answer the question first up: should it be mandatory in some form in high school?

Ms Wilson—I am a politics teacher and I think it should be, but the school does not agree.

Mr Axup—There are other subjects, like history, that should be mandatory. I teach history, politics and international studies, so I cover all the bases.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But isn't politics a form of history?

Mr Axup—It can be. It depends on how far you go back. It is time frames. Civics and citizenship as a stand-alone subject is fine because it is a branch of politics, but it can also be a branch of history. However, to understand the politics you need to understand the history. If you talk about building blocks, history is more important as it gives a starting point, especially at a younger level. It is: 'Let's teach them the basis of our society,' which is what history is about, which therefore leads into a much greater in-depth look at politics; hence the reason that political studies and international politics is offered as a VEC subject for senior students who are therefore intellectually capable of dealing with ideas that are much more complex.

Ms Wilson—But I think the basics should be taught.

Mr Smyth—Every teacher will say that about his or her subject. I am a physical education teacher and I think students should do it into year 12, but they do not.

CHAIR—Relating civics to electoral education, across Australia there is a problem in getting 17-year-olds to enrol to vote. The national average, depending on the time of the year, is 48 per cent enrolled. In Victoria, it is much higher because of what the Victorian Electoral Commission is doing. What advice would you give us on how we can get 17-year-olds motivated?

Ms Wilson—I would ask you: in your last election campaign, what were your issues that you presented to your electorate and were any of them related to young people? From what my class have said when asked, I do not think interest rates and the state of the economy, with all respect, is of interest to 17- and 18-year-olds.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Maybe that is because they are still at school.

Ms Wilson—Drug education and other issues are more important to them.

CHAIR—An election is too late—

Ms Wilson—No, but I think a politician should be engaging in subjects that are of interest to young people.

Mrs MIRABELLA—But we also cannot be too narrow—

Ms Wilson—No, but I think you are narrow now in that you concentrate on the electorate—

Mrs MIRABELLA—I have a country electorate and I know that there are a lot of 17- and 18-year-olds kids who are not at school who would be concerned about the state of the economy et cetera.

Ms Wilson—They would be, but—

Mr Ludowyke—Another thing that is worth thinking about just as a comparison is that there are some significant milestones in taking on citizenship which to some extent schools have always played a role in auspicing, which now include schools commonly using tax file numbers. Although—for the very point that Sophie makes—it is not an entire capture, I think that schools could play a role as the locale for the majority of 17-year-olds in supporting them in the registration process.

With tax file numbers now, it is common for many schools simply to issue the forms to students and say, 'Let's get them back,' and the ATO has deliberately encouraged that process. There could be a role for working with the Australian Electoral Commission on a similar program that would provide us with avenues. We are really the only intervention point for 17-year-olds across the nation and we could play a role there. I imagine that you will hear from students a strong desire to be involved in the political process and perhaps a feeling of marginalisation from it, but that does not defeat their desire to be involved.

Mr Smyth—It is very difficult to talk about this, with the rolls closing on the day that the election is announced.

CHAIR—But they can enrol the year before.

Ms Wilson—But they have to be engaged in the process.

Mr Smyth—We are going to have 80,000 enrolling in that week after.

Senator MASON—Congratulations to Dr Prideaux, Mr Asensio and Mr Maroutous for putting together this civics and citizenship curriculum. This is different from others we have looked at, because this is really about civic skills or civic engagement. In teaching politics, you obviously cover civics per se—how the political system works and the Constitution and history. However, this really is about civic engagement and civics skills and it is quite different. Other schools treat the issue of civics and citizenship quite differently. Do you think this will give kids civic skills? Is that its aim?

Ms Wilson—Yes.

Senator MASON—It will give them a sense of how to participate in and contribute to a democracy and a community; is that right?

Mr Asensio—Yes. I think that is a lot of what has been happening at this school already and I am glad that you have made the differentiation. A nuts-and-bolts course about how to fill in your electoral roll form becomes interesting to kids when they are about to do it. I have worked in a different environment and, leading up to elections, kids would come in and ask, 'What is involved in preferential voting?' Even though they had learned it and they had had courses on it, they had finished at year 10. It was in the year-10 curriculum at the school I was at; there were AEC information packs and so on that they had gone through and they had had practice ballots. However, two years later, when it was time to vote, it was not with them any more. At year 10 it did not make sense, because it was only a course. This puts the students in the community—

Senator MASON—Exactly.

Mr Asensio—and teaches them that civics and being a citizen means being active.

Senator MASON—All the theoretical knowledge they are garnering from your course, in a sense, gives them the skills for active participation.

Mr Asensio—That is right.

Mr Ludowyke—A common strand in the leadership scheme is that they actually have to do something about this. It is not a textbook study. They actually have to go into their community and be active.

Senator MASON—And present it.

Mr Ludowyke—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Would it be fair to say that one of the main preoccupations of your students aged 17 and 18 is how well they are going to do in their final year?

Mr Ludowyke—All of them.

Mr Pask—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—The only reason I mention that is that sometimes as pontificating adults we can come up with all sorts of things that we think are priorities that younger people should do. However, my personal point of view is that I would be far more concerned if students were concerned more about other matters than with what their main objective should be, which is how well they are going to do. Maybe that is one significant reason why many do not bother to enrol. They would think: 'I have more important things to do with my life at the moment. All these pollies or whatever are all the same, but let me just wait until I have got this important thing out of the way and then I can choose what I am going to study, what sort of career path I will take. Perhaps I can then engage that bit more.' Is that an unreasonable assessment?

Mr Ludowyke—I think it is a very apt description of the mindset. PIG is a case in point. It is predominantly championed by year 11s and year 12s who take themselves out of direct involvement because, as school leavers, their commitment to their study is absolutely critical.

Mr DANBY—Does the tax office do that all around Australia or just in Victoria?

Mr Ludowyke—I can only vouch for Victoria. It is a system they have offered to schools where the school will actually act as an auspicer of the tax file number process and I think the school receives some funding for doing it.

Mr DANBY—I think that is very interesting. We could examine whether the AEC could speak to the ATO and see how they are doing it all around Australia and maybe think about doing the same thing with electoral enrolments as a project right across the country. I have been to this school a number of times and I am very familiar with PIG. Some of the graduates think they are going into politics and then work out that really it is Sir Humphrey who has the real power, so they decide to get out of politics and go into the permanent influence. I admire their wisdom, even if I do not appreciate their choice.

Understanding this curriculum, what I find interesting is that you are doing it at various levels. There are people who are really interested in politics and people who are learning about civic engagement at a different level. Even here, I am not sure that mandatory courses would necessarily fit with everyone, because some people would not be interested in it at all. Is the civic engagement course compulsory for everyone at year 10?

Dr Prideaux—It will be next year.

Mr DANBY—But up until now, with your pre-existing programs, would everyone be forced to do everything, or is it a matter of choice?

Dr Prideaux—Senator Mason was saying before that this seems to be based on civic duty. The areas about Federation, parliament and democracy are already covered in history.

Senator MASON—Indeed, history—and in politics as well?

Dr Prideaux—Not all students do politics; it becomes an elective. So I agree with you. At years 9 and 10—other than core subjects like English, maths, science and other things—I do not think you can force students to do every possible thing that we would like them to learn. Things like politics become a choice that students elect to do.

Senator MASON—But they get a grounding in history with Federation and the Constitution.

Dr Prideaux—Yes.

Mr Asensio—A few of the programs that this curriculum has tied together are required and have been running as required programs for a while. For example, every single year 10 student is already involved in the community involvement program. Participation at Anzac ceremonies and such are things that are already in place and they are things that we can deal with in moving to this program.

Mr Ludowyke—The students are about to be brought in and, to give you the best opportunity, a significant number of us will depart. We will leave you with Ms Wilson and Mr Pask, who are the sponsors of PIG.

Proceedings suspended from 1.40 pm to 1.45 pm

Ms Wilson—We have here a variety of students: national politics students from year 12, and year 11 students. Blake is the vice president of PIG. Our president is overseas at the moment. We have discussed some of the issues that you have put up.

CHAIR—Let me introduce the members of the committee who are here this afternoon. Senator Brett Mason is a senator for Queensland; Sophie Mirabella is the member for Indi, which is in country Victoria; Michael Danby is the local member here; and I am the federal member for Townsville, Queensland. Sonia is our secretary.

We are going to have formal but informal discussions with you. When we ask you questions, do not tell us what you think we want to hear; tell us what you think. Be open and provocative; that is fine. We will be recording this for *Hansard*, so this is a formal proceeding of the parliament. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but please give these proceedings the respect that would be given normally to proceedings in the parliament. We usually ask people to talk to their submission. However, as there is no submission, we will just ask you questions.

Senator MASON—From what subject do you obtain information about civics and citizenship—that is, about politics, Federation, the Constitution et cetera?

David—I do year 12 politics; I also did that last year, in year 11. Largely my knowledge of politics and the political system has come from that subject.

Senator MASON—That is an optional subject though.

David—Yes, that is optional and it is not offered at many schools either. Previously to that, you learn about society, say, in years 7 and 8 through SOSE, which some schools do, but a lot of the time it is not very detailed. You do not learn enough to know adequately about your responsibilities in Australia. As we have compulsory voting, we should be addressing more in schools young people's responsibilities in the political system in terms of voting.

Senator MASON—What about years 9 and 10, when you study history per se as a separate subject?

David—You do history in year 9. It is compulsory in year 10. You do not necessarily cover Australian history; I do not think it is compulsory as part of the study design to do that subject. So you largely just ignore Australian history and Australian politics. Unless you have separate class discussions with the teacher where you discuss current or historical issues, it does not really happen.

Alex—We do study the history of Federation. You start early with key events, like the gold rush—the gold rush is looked at in primary school—Australia through the world wars and between the wars and through the 1950s and 1960s. That is an obsolete year 10 history. Federation is in year 10.

Callum—In year 10 we study more postwar history in terms of the Korean war, the Vietnam War and the Whitlam dismissal. Basically, most history is from 1945 up to modern times. It is probably taken more from a social slant than from a more factual historical context, as is year 9 study, which focuses more on the gold rush and a lot of dates and things, whereas the year 10 course focuses more on social movements and social change throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Senator MASON—Mr Chairman, it seems that these gentlemen have a fairly good grasp of civics knowledge. I was speaking to the teachers previously about a new course for year 10 students next year called civics and citizenship. That is a subject really about civic engagement and civic skills. In other words, it is about how students in year 10 will do things and engage in a sense in their community. That can be by working with the Red Cross, doing something for Anzac Day or projects like that. Do you think that is worthwhile?

Sam—We already have something very similar to that. We have compulsory community involvement in year 10. That is where we have Red Cross Day, where all year 10 students jog into the city and do a bit of fund-raising. There is also I think 20 hours of community involvement. That is compulsory in order to receive your report in year 10. But it is definitely something that is not implemented in all schools; I think that is quite specific to our school and only a few others.

Senator MASON—Does that give you a good idea of civics skills and engaging in democracy?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—Some of you, I suspect, will be leaders in the future, so you will need all the civics skills you can muster.

Mrs MIRABELLA—All of you here today would have a greater interest in politics and the electoral system than the rest of the student population of the school; would that be correct?

Students—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Being the minority that you are, do you find that the general disinterest in the electoral system and civics education that is reflected, by and large, by the rest of the student body is indicative of other young people of your ages at other schools?

Alex—More so. What you have here is actually not so much more awareness amongst the students who are interested in politics; it is just that more students here are interested in politics than there are at other schools. I think it is natural that you will always get the brightest students more motivated to learn things related to civics and their civic responsibilities and rights.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Or have a greater disposition to do so.

Alex—Exactly. I think that at other schools you would be less likely to get that group of students. It would be more a minority at other schools because you have a smaller percentage of brighter students. Amongst that group, there will be an even smaller percentage of those who have a disposition to learn about civics and to demonstrate civic responsibility.

Mrs MIRABELLA—Do you find that amongst yourselves there is a diversity of opinion about all sorts of issues out there?

Students—Yes.

Mrs MIRABELLA—So your teachers do not encourage the other side of a particular debate, even if it may be unfashionable?

Alex—For example, just yesterday we had a class where we spoke about cultural relativism versus absolutism. I went up and spoke to the teacher afterwards and found out that he was actually an absolutist, but from the way he was talking he was trying to explain—

Mrs MIRABELLA—What are you?

Alex—I am an absolutist. He was trying to explain a cultural relativist position in a coherent fashion so that people would understand where it comes from. I think there is definitely a balance to all sides that you can come from.

Mr DANBY—I have been to PIG before and I know how divergent people's opinions are on a whole lot of issues. I want to drill down to the disagreements you have amongst yourselves. Do you have disagreements over very contentious issues? I would like to hear some different opinions about this.

A few days ago, the court of appeals in Victoria made a decision to release Jihad Jack Thomas from custody after he had been found guilty by an earlier court. Some of you may have heard the interview that his barrister Starry did with John Faine. Some of you may have seen the *Four Corners* program some months ago, when he talked about why he did what he did in

Afghanistan et cetera. Give us a few different opinions about that. Do some of you think it was good that he was released? Do some of you think it was bad that he was released? Why? Let us hear your opinions.

Callum—While I realise that the court needs to have the autonomy to make these decisions, I still think it was not a wise decision to do that. I think that perhaps the government should have more power in certain extreme cases to overrule those decisions.

Mr DANBY—I might agree with you about this particular case, but judges have to abide by the laws of evidence. Taking account of the laws of evidence, they say that he was not interviewed in front of the Federal Police and the Pakistani police with a lawyer present; therefore, no matter what decision the earlier court came to, they have to quash it. What do you think of that?

Callum—I think that is coming down more to technicalities and it is just finding excuses to let certain people off for crimes that they should not necessarily be let off for.

Alex—I think people have to be careful not to say that this man is automatically guilty or not guilty when they have never been present in the court of law. They have to consider that the judiciary is a separate branch of power within society and I think it should be treated as such in order for us to uphold our belief in the separation of powers. There is the separation of powers between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

Nick—I just thought it was important that we look at the fact that supposedly the war on terror is there to defend our way of life and all of a sudden we have completely changed the way we live and the values we uphold and the idea of a fair trial.

Mr DANBY—You would be very pleased that the judge has upheld the rule of law and, according to the rules of evidence, they quashed this trial. So the war on terror had a big setback.

Alex—I was not there and did not hear all the evidence. But I think that, if they made the decision on the laws that govern our judiciary, they have done the right thing. I think it was put really well by a former Prime Minister when he said that this war on terror seems nothing more than a case of burning the village in order to save it.

Senator MASON—Which Prime Minister said that?

Alex—The one that dismissed Gough Whitlam, actually.

CHAIR—What is your view of a problem that parliament has, where the parliament makes laws, people front up in the High Court and the High Court thinks to itself and says, 'We do not actually like that law,' and they overturn it? What is your view on that?

Alex—There is a reason that the country has a constitution and there is a reason that the High Court exists, and that is to make sure that the laws made by parliament abide by the Constitution. I think that, if the parliament has passed a law which does not abide by the Constitution or is against the Constitution, that may be because there is a problem with the Constitution and, if that is so, that needs to be sorted out by referendum. But I think more often than not it is likely to be

that there is a problem with the law and that needs to be something that is revised by the parliament.

Mr DANBY—In the case I raised with you, it may be that the judges had to make the decision in the context of the existing laws and the laws of evidence et cetera but that, in the circumstances we are facing, perhaps there had to be some consideration of the fact that there is other evidence to be considered. For instance, one thing they may do is take the interview that his lawyer very unwisely got him to do for *Four Corners* and the judges can decide to use that, because he gave that interview freely. He did not give it without the presence of a lawyer. That may be a basis for reconstituting the court to reconsider those charges. So there are many different ways, which is your point.

CHAIR—The legislation may have to be changed.

Mr DANBY—Or the judges may have to be given wider discretion in relation to their responsibilities.

Alex—Laws will never be perfect but, if you are committed to society and the rule of law, I do not think you will get around that.

Senator MASON—It is really inconvenient sometimes—Callum's point.

Alex—I think that is the price you pay, unfortunately.

Mr DANBY—But what if they are in a war with these people? In times of war, law sometimes does not apply. For instance, there were no trials of the German POWs; they were just put in a prison camp. We did not try them. We waited until the end of the war.

Alex—It depends on whether you characterise such a person as a prisoner of war.

Mr DANBY—It depends on whether this is a war on terrorism or a police action or something like that. If we conceptualise it as a war, you can do things that would not be justified in other circumstances. Maybe that is why people want to classify it as a war.

Alex—It is a pretty confusing situation then.

Mr DANBY—It is confusing because people do not agree this is a war on terrorism. That is the problem. That is why we have this great dissonance in society about how to treat all these issues. This goes across the war in Iraq and all these other things. People do not agree that our way of life is under threat. If you conceptualise that it is and that these people are organised all over the world to challenge democratic societies then you agree that it is a war. If you do not agree with that then every case should be looked at individually. People's rights should be respected in Guantanamo Bay as much as they are here. David Hicks should be brought back to Australia and be able to have a trial after 4½ years. He should not be treated like that and should have the same rights as apply to any other Australian citizen. It depends where you stand on the conceptual issue first before you can judge all those other matters.

CHAIR—Is there anyone here who has not yet turned 17? I count five. Are those of you who are 17 and older not yet enrolled to vote? Hands up. Five. Those who are not enrolled to vote, are you aware that you can enrol to vote now?

Nick—Yes, but I leave everything to the last minute.

Brad—I have the form and have filled it out; I just have not got around to actually doing it.

Blake—My form is filled in, but I have not submitted it yet.

Sam—I am going to do it after year 12, as soon as everything is out of the way.

CHAIR—Just addressing the same group: what would it take to interest you in enrolling to vote now?

Mr DANBY—Quite a lot of them are very interested. You do not have to raise their interest that much.

CHAIR—Let us ask these guys just quickly.

Blake—My friend received his birthday card from the AEC in the mail the other day; it was very touching. He laughed it off because it was made out to be like 'Oh, when you have the time, just do it.' He cast it aside and he will not do it because he is not political in any way. Maybe there should be more emphasis in that birthday card on saying, 'You really should get on to this.' It is only a form.

CHAIR—Those who are enrolled to vote and the 16-year-olds—we need some answers from down the back—why is it important to vote? Why should people vote?

Scott—I think it is a responsibility of citizens of this country. You need to make sure that you are ready to vote in case an election is called in the future. Also, just on the idea of voting at all, you have a responsibility to vote to help make decisions for your country and to help put your opinion into the forum.

CHAIR—Does anyone else have a view on that? What impact would be had by all of you voting? What impact does voting have?

Andrew—The impact voting has is that you have a choice in how your country will be run into the future.

CHAIR—Do you believe that?

Brad—With my vote I will have a stake in whether Peter Costello will be re-elected.

Nick—Do you think the fact that nobody has anything to say about why we should vote is perhaps indicative of the sort of cynicism there is towards the process?

CHAIR—You are pinching my questions!

Nick—I am sorry.

CHAIR—Why is there so much cynicism among young people about the voting process?

Jared—I think there is a lot of cynicism because of the belief that youth have in politicians when they undermine youths' belief in the political system. When you have things like noncore promises and branch stacking, people lose faith in the system. I might think, 'What can I do? Oh, right, I can join a political party.' Why? My seat will probably get branch stacked anyway.

CHAIR—We do not allow that in Queensland in the Liberal Party.

Mr DANBY—Except in the seat of Ryan.

Brad—It is difficult here. I think you need to draw a distinction between cynicism and apathy. Cynicism generally denotes some form of informed decision making. I think that is a large issue with the youth today—that a lot of it is not to do with informed decision making; it is a general apathy towards a political system. So it is not that they are going to take the time to involve themselves enough in the process to make such decisions.

Mr DANBY—Have any of you actually seen a change of government in Victoria or nationally?

Blake—Yes, I have seen a change of government in Victoria.

Mr DANBY—How old were you when Mr Kennett was voted out?

Blake—I was about 10.

Mr DANBY—You would be rare among 10-year-olds in remembering that.

Alex—Brad has referred to whether it is cynicism or apathy. It might be apathy due to the fact that in a country like Australia things are good, but also you have a two-party system where it is all about safe seats versus marginal seats. No matter what happens, the outcome is that it will be one of those two parties that gets elected. I live in a safe Liberal seat; I may not necessarily vote Liberal but, in that sense, my vote will not count. It is easy to convince me that my vote will not count in that sense because I think Goldstein returns some of the highest Liberal primaries in Australia. In that sense, with an adversarial system where there will be one of only two outcomes, I think it is easy to convince people who live in a safe seat not to care. That is probably indicative of one factor of young people's apathy.

Senator MASON—One of your teachers mentioned before that not only is there cynicism and perhaps apathy about politics but that the issues discussed do not necessarily relate to people of your age. Is that right?

Nick—Yes, it is about the relevance of the issues.

Senator MASON—And that the political debate should not be all about interest rates—

CHAIR—Or superannuation.

Senator MASON—I did note that the Australian Democrats have invited youth to a sexual health and relationships breakfast. Is that the sort of thing you would be interested in?

Nick—I do not know. I would start on your first point before talking about such a breakfast. It is a fact that previously there was a parliamentary secretary for young people in Australia and that is no longer the case. Supposedly, that position has been absorbed into human services, which is basically the portfolio of the minister for unemployment. Then there are the changes to the laws on voting regarding the closing of electoral rolls as soon as elections are called. All these sorts of things seem to be geared towards excluding young people from the political system. For example, there are ministers for Aboriginal affairs, for older Australians and all that sort of stuff. You have to start wondering where there is representation of younger people in the system. There are not a lot of young people in federal parliament.

Alex—The average age of politicians would be around 50, which goes towards what Nick has said about there being very limited representation of young people.

CHAIR—It is in your hands, not our hands.

Senator MASON—I like your point that the issues focused on by politicians at election time are not necessarily your issues.

Nick—I think the government came out and said that the change in the electoral laws was not meant to disadvantage young people or exclude them and that by moving the representation of young people from a secretary to a minister we are actually being given more representation within the system. That is hard to swallow. It is crap, isn't it? It is a serious issue.

Senator MASON—I understand; you are feeling marginalised.

Nick—Yes.

Mr DANBY—There are some real differences between people in parliament on the changes to the early closure of the rolls, particularly as they affect younger people. That was very contentious. It was one of the big issues and people thought about it a lot, along with all of the changes to our electoral laws. But we do speak about things that affect you as much as things that affect older people. Let us go through all of Australia's overseas deployments. Peter has an electorate that contains a large part of the Australian Army. What do you think of the deployment in the Solomons versus the deployment to help the people in Timor? Was that the right thing to do? What do you think of Australia being involved in Afghanistan as against what we are doing in Iraq? Surely, you all have different opinions about that. That is where your participation and voting might really affect things.

Senator MASON—Not just their vote; that is only part of it.

Mr DANBY—Yes. You can join political parties and participate in ways that this course talks about. You can ring us up and drive us mad. You can email us. You can take up petitions. There are a million different things that you can do.

Senator MASON—You can join the Labor Party, if you need a life!

Alex—It is interesting to note that the membership of parties has actually declined over the last few years. Maybe that is something that you guys should be concentrating on. Doesn't that send a signal to you? If the political class within society is getting smaller, what does that offer to the future of Australia?

CHAIR—In my electorate we have had a 20 per cent increase in branch membership.

David—Good work.

CHAIR—And it was not through stacking.

Senator MASON—People can feel that they are participating in democracy in ways other than joining political parties.

Alex—And in ways other than voting.

Senator MASON—Or in addition to voting, yes.

CHAIR—I want to come back to the word 'crap' which was used. Just because somebody is not branded as youth affairs in the ministry, it does not mean that the government does not take youth affairs seriously. You are sitting in front of the chair of the government's backbench policy committee on youth affairs and here is that chair listening to youth and is very interested in what you are saying. Similarly, as you go up the structure, youth is taken seriously. But youth does not take the parliament seriously. Forty-eight per cent of 18-year-olds are not enrolled to vote. That is pretty scary. In relation to getting on the roll, you know that you can get on the roll a year before the roll closes.

Andrew—Why would people want to get onto the roll if none of the major issues being brought up are going to directly affect them? Sixteen- and 17-year-olds, especially at this school, I think are in the high 90 per cent of—

CHAIR—You name a youth issue and we will tell you what we do about it.

Andrew—Uni fees.

CHAIR—Senator Mason?

Senator MASON—In what sense? The high cost?

Andrew—Recently, I think in the last week, it came out that now uni students are leaving university with a debt that is basically equivalent to a mortgage.

Senator MASON—We are beginning to address what are partisan issues.

CHAIR—That is only for people who pay full fees.

Senator MASON—I suspect that will not happen to most of you. Most of you will apply for HECS.

Mr DANBY—I think a lot of you know the answer to that. An increasing number of courses are becoming full fee paying and the number of HECS courses is going down.

CHAIR—But at James Cook University there are 700 vacant HECS places that no-one will go into. The other point, in answer to that, is that the government responded by increasing the threshold at which you start having to pay back your HECS debt. It used to be down there and it is now up there, so you have to be earning a fair bit before you start paying back your HECS debt. That is in response to the issues of young people.

Senator MASON—I think people should pay. I am a total hypocrite here. I think people should pay some fees in going to university. I have to come clean: I spent a decade at university and I did not pay a bloody cent, so I always feel guilty saying that. But I do think people should pay something

Mr DANBY—Why?

Senator MASON—Because I believe that people value it more that way—and perhaps then I would not have stayed at university for a decade.

CHAIR—People do not value things that are free.

Senator MASON—Can I be brutally frank about it? Tertiary education generally is a wealth transfer to the middle class. Who goes to university? The middle class. It is a wealth transfer where the government still pays about three-quarters of your fee, roughly. Let us be honest: that is the truth. It is a social justice issue.

Andrew—So, with that thinking that you value it more if you pay for it, what about high school students and state school students? If you bring that down a level, would your parents value your education more because you are a private school student where you pay $10,000 or more a year and less if you are a state school student where you only pay a couple of hundred to $1,000 a year? Does that also mean that a private school education is more highly valued?

Senator MASON—That is why increasingly more people are going to private schools. That is the problem.

Mr DANBY—Yes, people would ideologically agree that—

Senator MASON—But the fact is that more and more people are going to private schools.

Brad—I think it is also very easy to categorise the fact that youth are not getting involved in political structures purely because they are not being interested by the political system. But I

think a committee like this really should be addressing the problem of youth not being actively involved in the decisions being made by parliament. The issues around such decisions do not necessarily have to influence youth. It is a very individualistic view to say that youth will only be interested in issues that have a direct bearing on them. They should also be interested in military deployment.

Mr DANBY—That is why I raised it.

Brad—That issue involves the whole country and everyone in the country, regardless of their age, should be engaging themselves in it. I think that is the problem here.

Jared—In the last budget how much was spent on youth affairs?

CHAIR—The answer is that I do not know. A comment was made earlier about 'core and noncore promise'. We were talking about cynicism. How much of that in the electorate's mind do you think is driven by the Australian media rather than the actual reality? Do you think those sorts of perceptions to some extent are driven by the media and, in fact, they are not correct?

Tom—I would say a fair extent would be driven by the media. We all know that channels 9, 10 and 7 show the most watched programs. Then you have the *Herald Sun*, the *Age* and other papers like them. You have to remember that there are also independent sources in the media, like the SBS and the ABC. I think the media does drive it to a fair extent, but there are also matters like family. In my family, for example, most of my dad's side is fairly political. We are always intermeshing, swapping ideas and things like that. So I would say that a fair bit would be driven by the media—but definitely not all the way.

Jared—I think it is hard to argue when you hear the Prime Minister saying things and then saying, 'No, that was noncore. What was voted on at the last election was just public opinion at that time,' and then going back for his own political gain. I do not know how you can say that is media driven, when you see things like that.

Mr DANBY—Just switching gears but following on from the issue of the media, I want to talk about the net and blogs. How do you get your information? What are you reading? Many young people I know read blogs more than they do straight newspapers. They do not read the *Age* or the *Herald Sun*, which they think are really boring. They find some blog that they agree with or that upsets them and they read that. They get most of their information from Google or MSN.

Sam—Personally, I think you have to be careful about any information you get on the internet, whether it is political information or for a school project. You have to approach it with the mindset, 'Right, I am reading this blog; obviously it will not be correct.' Obviously it will not be totally objective, otherwise the person would not be writing it. You have to read it more out of interest or maybe to gain some new insight, but you cannot read it saying, 'Hey, this is the whole story; this guy is showing both sides of the issue.'

Blake—It is a problem though because people do not see it as an unreliable source. The internet and blogs can just be seen as another source of media and can be taken as independent

and relied on. There are people out there who are not as aware as we are who will go and pull information off it for their school projects.

Senator MASON—And their essays.

Blake—Why not?

Mr DANBY—So books, newspapers and encyclopaedias are old fashioned and you would rather get your information from Google?

Alex—Yes, it is a lot easier.

Brad—It is strange also because, in order to publish books and to publish information, there needs to be a breadth of knowledge that is drawn upon as research. That is just not apparent and not necessary in blogs and it is not necessarily in most of the internet and I think that is where the problem stems from. Most authors, in order to write their own opinions, have to draw upon general information and general knowledge of the specific topic, which isn't required on the internet. I think that is where the problem stems from. Many people are not aware of that and, therefore, take this information that does not even have a foundation and use it as the foundation for their own opinions.

Mr DANBY—So it is decontextualised information that people then draw out as the truth.

Brad—Exactly.

Alex—I do not particularly think that blogs have taken the place of newspapers as a news source. I think you have to look at it in terms of active information gathering versus passive information gathering. I read the *Australian* and the *Age* for a couple of reasons, but from there I get information about stuff that I did not know was happening and I will just go, 'Oh, okay, that's interesting; I didn't know that, but now I have a bit of information about that.' When I look at blogs, I am actively looking out for different viewpoints on the subject. So I will go to global security and then to global issues, the left- versus right-wing ideas on different issues. That is what I would actively be doing. I would be consciously trying to find different viewpoints. However, looking at news media, you are just picking things up residually and often you will get whatever side of the story the newspaper wishes to present.

Callum—Firstly, you should assume that most blogs are written by young people—people below at least the age of 50. Mostly they are drawn from a younger generation. I would like to refer this back to a speaker we had last year, Robert Doyle. He gave his view that Australian politics has largely entered a post-ideological era in that there is no longer any ideology left in politics and it is all about management.

Senator MASON—Did he say that?

Callum—Yes.

Senator MASON—No wonder he is no longer in his former position!

Callum—Perhaps more young people are coming to this view and, as a reaction to this, they feel they need to bring ideology back into politics. They can do this through the means of blogs, which are based largely on an ideology. They are usually very passionate and very partisan. We do not have the kind of mass protests and rallies that we had, say, back in the time of the Vietnam War, when there was huge involvement of the younger generation on a wide range of political issues.

Mr DANBY—You are all blogging instead.

Callum—Yes, and that is the reaction, as I see it.

Andrew—Coming back to the media in the form of blogs and newspapers, the *Age* has set up a program for high schools where for $10 a year you can get a subscription that provides the newspaper every day of the week. For students that is very easy. You just walk in to school, tick off your name and you have your newspaper and then you can have your daily fix. So to say that we are just getting our information from blogs now is not really true, because there is an initiative set up to allow students to get newspapers for $300 or whatever it is.

Mr DANBY—That is because the *Age* has discovered that young people are not reading it. It is desperate to get in with high school students particularly—to seek out those with a higher educational profile and hope that they will belong to their readership. That is why they offer you a cheap subscription earlier on.

Andrew—The government could look at subsidising the *Australian* or even the *Herald Sun*—I am not sure that I would read that—so we could get a wider range of views and not just a left- or right-wing view.

CHAIR—Does anybody want to ask us the Exocet question of the afternoon? As there are no questions, we thank you all for attending this hearing; we appreciate it. We are not old fogies, as you might have imagined!

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Danby**):

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

Committee adjourned at 2.35 pm