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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

(Open Forum)

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Friday, 22 September 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 Murray and Mr Ciobo and Mr Lindsay

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.

Committee met at 1.00 pm

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Peter Lindsay and I am the federal member for Herbert. I come from Townsville in Northern Queensland. With me are Senator Andrew Murray, a senator for Western Australia; Senator John Hogg, a senator for Queensland; and Mr Steve Ciobo, the member for Moncrieff, which is on the Gold Coast. We are very interested in hearing what you have to say to us today and we hope that you will be interested in hearing what we have to say to you. Thank you for coming. Thank you to the teachers who have arranged this forum, which is really quite special. It is quite a privilege to be holding this afternoon's forum in the parliament of South Australia. We have an hour and, if we do not finish by two o'clock, the three Queensland committee members will miss their plane back to paradise. Some of you may dispute that, but that is fine.

We would ask you to relax and to break the ice immediately. When we ask you questions, do not just sit there and think, 'Golly, somebody will think I am silly if I answer that question.' Just answer the question. Do not worry about what anybody else thinks; just be yourself. Unless we get your interaction, we do not get the evidence we need for this inquiry.

I formally declare open this school forum being held in the South Australian House of Assembly as part of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education. I welcome the high school and college students who are here today. One of the major focuses of this inquiry is the quality of education provided to young Australians—and, of course, you are the future of our nation. Given these studies, the committee is interested in finding better ways of inspiring and engaging young people in Australia's electoral process. The evidence that we are taking today will be record by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege.

Let us start. Those of you who are 17 or 18, please raise your hands. How many of those who are 17 know that you are able to enrol to vote now? Please raise your hands. That is a lesser proportion. Of those who are 17, who has enrolled to vote? Two of you have enrolled to vote. One is a fellow; good on you, mate. Tell us why you have enrolled to vote.

Connor O'Brien—I just thought it was the easy thing to do and that I might as well get it out of the way before the election.

CHAIR—Did your teachers have anything to do with your enrolling to vote?

Connor O'Brien—I did politics, so I knew that I could enrol to vote when I was 17. If I had not done politics, I would not have been informed. I would not have been told about that in other subjects.

CHAIR—To the other 17-year-old who has enrolled: why have you enrolled?

Aleise Simon—I wanted to get it out of the road now so that I would not have to worry about doing it when I was 18.

CHAIR—Do all of those here personally think it is important to enrol to vote? Who has a comment to make about that?

Lorena De Palma—I think enrolling to vote is important. I visited Canberra and seeing the politicians there and visiting the old and new parliament houses had a big impact on me and I wanted to be involved in politics.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator HOGG—Hands up those of you who have visited Canberra. Of that group, hands up those who, during that visit, visited either the House of Representatives or the Senate. How many of you have visited your state parliament?

CHAIR—That is about half.

Senator HOGG—Yes, about half.

CHAIR—As virtually all of those who could be enrolled to vote now are not, my question is: why are you not enrolled to vote? This gets down to the nitty-gritty of what this committee inquiry is about. Most of you here who are eligible to be enrolled—that is those who are 17 years or older—are not enrolled to vote. Why is that? Who can tell me why they are not enrolled? Do not be backward in coming forward.

Katina Gregory—There really is not that much information about it and, as no election is coming up soon, there is no pressure to start enrolling.

Vanessa Allen—Most teenagers do not care; they do not follow politics in the news, so they do not really care.

CHAIR—Does anyone else wish to say why they have not enrolled to vote? The rules in the federal parliament are that, if nobody is prepared to answer voluntarily, we will pick somebody.

Jacqueline Haggar—As Katina has said, there is not a lot of information out there. Nowhere is the information really available to you; it is not really on the internet or anything like that.

Senator HOGG—Jacqueline, do you know whether your school has had a visit from the Australian Electoral Commission?

Jacqueline Haggar—Last year we were meant to go to the Australian Electoral Commission for Australian studies, but in the end we did not go.

Senator HOGG—What about other students? How many schools have been visited by or have visited the Australian Electoral Commission centre? Please put your hands up. That is probably about 40 per cent of students here—a rough straw poll.

CHAIR—How important do you think voting is? What impact do you think your vote has?

Ellie Calam—I think it is important to have compulsory voting. If you promote it only to a certain population, the minority populations will not vote. Parties' decisions influence our lives, so it is important for us to vote at elections—so it is better for us, for want of a better term.

CHAIR—Who thinks their vote does not matter? Does that mean that everybody thinks their vote does matter?

Connor O'Brien—If you live in an electorate that clearly will be forever either Labor or Liberal and you cannot effect a swing, your vote does not count. If you live in a strong Labor electorate and you vote Liberal, you will never have an effect on the outcome, so there is no real reason to vote in those circumstances.

Senator HOGG—Do you think that applies to voting for representatives in the upper house, the Senate, where proportional representation takes place—that is, your vote can have a profound effect on the outcome in delivering maybe a third or even in some cases a fourth senator?

Connor O'Brien—There is a perception that it counts, but there is also a perception at the same time that the Senate does not really affect policy as much as the House of Representatives does. Sorry, guys.

Senator HOGG—Them's fighting words!

Connor O'Brien—I probably should have rethought that.

Senator MURRAY—That man needs more education!

Senator HOGG—He does.

Connor O'Brien—I know that in South Australia though, with Nick Xenophon, there is definitely a perception that we can change things if we pool our votes and so on. That has influenced it but probably not that much.

CHAIR—Connor's point initially was that, if you are in an electorate that never changes, it votes strongly one way or the other, there is no point in voting because you will not change it. Do any of you disagree with that point? Say so, if you do.

Billie Millard—Sorry, but I have to disagree. I believe that the Electoral Commission works its hardest to ensure that every electorate has a near fifty-fifty per cent split between the two major parties; that is what I have been told anyway. Also, as a voter you have a choice; you can vote either above the line or below the line. When you rock up on election day, you can choose to either conform and go with one of the parties or go below the line and make a difference in the Senate instead of making a difference in the lower house. I think that is where your vote must make a difference.

CHAIR—Billie's point is that she thinks the AEC arranges boundaries so that the representation between the parties is about right. What does the AEC have to say about that?

Chris Moore—I work for the AEC and we do not have that as our criteria when we are drawing the boundaries. We are interested in communities of interest—how people might vote and predicting outcomes.

Phoebe Rowberry—I am from Seymour College. Regarding what Connor O'Brien said, it is also hard to decide who to vote for because you do not necessarily know who the people are. I wouldn't know who anyone is unless they openly say who they are—and not many people do that—so it is hard to decide who you will vote for.

CHAIR—I would say to you all, particularly to Connor, that these days you can get swings of 19 per cent; in years gone by that did not happen. But these days that can happen and, in fact, we all think that safe electorates no longer exist. Our advice to you would be that everybody's vote counts. In our job, at election time, we say to ourselves that we do not want to lose by one vote—so your vote counts, Connor. Does anyone have any other comment on that particular scenario?

Annabelle Trenowden—I have a comment on the whole point that we are not really informed about voting. A lot of people might not know that their vote could count or change the result. They might think, 'I'm just one person; I can't do anything.' It just comes back to that: we are uninformed about it all.

Senator HOGG—How do we better inform people? What solution do you offer us to better inform people?

Phoebe Rowberry—Learning about politics and those kinds of thing should be a compulsory part of Australian studies.

Ellie Calam—I think the media stuff that is put forward is a little bit patronising, to be honest. It seems to be set back in the 1980s and it seems a bit retro, with the rapping over democracy and that sort of stuff.

CHAIR—Good point; fantastic.

Ellie Calam—When I was younger, we used to have *Behind The News* and that kind of thing where younger kids could get involved in political affairs. It might be a good idea to look at having something a bit more appropriate and practical for teenagers.

CHAIR—Do those in the back row up here agree with that comment?

Senator HOGG—Backbenchers are normally pretty vocal. What about the other back bench? Just because you sit on the back bench does not mean we cannot see you.

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—I attend Henley High School. I think more information should be available. Ad campaigns are always being run about everything except enrolling to vote. I think the main target audience watch the TV and listen to the radio and it would probably be really effective if you had some sort of campaign available for them.

CHAIR—In relation to getting information, let us have a show of hands: who reads the newspaper in the morning? That is about 80 per cent. Who watches the television news in the evening? That is less—about 70 per cent. Who listens to the radio news? That is about 50 per cent.

Senator HOGG—Who watches *Australian Idol*? Not many do. I thought we would have got a greater take on *Australian Idol*.

CHAIR—Do you think your teachers do a good job? Speak plainly. You are under parliamentary privilege, so say what you would like to say. Do they do a good job in educating you about electoral matters and civics?

Chanel Polese—I believe that Igor, my politics teacher, is passionate, which makes us more engaged in politics. I admit that I have learned much more from him than I had learned from ads, say; I have become more informed about political involvement and movements. I came to my present school from a private one, where politics was not offered. I wanted to engage in politics, so I had to move to a school where politics was part of the curriculum. I think that is a disadvantage with some schools and an advantage with others.

Bec Smith—Personally, Igor is the only politics teacher I have ever had and I believe the teacher makes all the difference. Having someone who is as passionate as Igor is, informing you and telling you what needs to be done and what difference you can make, makes you less apathetic in general.

Emily Lewis—I think teachers also present a biased view, which can affect the way you vote and even deter you from voting. Possibly, instead of having that situation, the politicians themselves should be informing the community, rather than sending the electoral education office to inform us.

Melanie Trbovic—I do not want to exactly defy what you are saying, but everyone has the right to have an opinion. Most people have an opinion but just do not want to express it or do not have the courage to express it. Igor, as our teacher, just sits there and challenges us. He forces us to develop an opinion, which is so good. The problem with most teenagers today is that they are apathetic because they believe their views cannot change anything.

Katina Gregory—I have been to seven schools in 12 years and no teacher has tried to bias my vote or my opinion in any way. If politicians decided to say, 'Oh yes, we must make young people vote,' they would try to bias them with their own opinions because they want their vote.

Bec Smith—Sorry, I have to debate this point furiously. I have listened to politicians speak, including at lectures I have attended, and all they do is tell you how great their party is and badmouth every other party. Igor is a teacher who has never once implied what party he prefers or anything like that.

CHAIR—He is a communist?

Bec Smith—I do not think politicians should inform us because they are just so much more biased than teachers are—no offence to you guys. If you get a decent teacher, they do not impart any of their beliefs to you; they just teach you what they have to teach you and they do it passionately.

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—Igor must be a great teacher, obviously.

CHAIR—Igor, please stand up and take a bow.

Bec Smith—Not all schools are as privileged as yours is in having a teacher as passionate and excited about politics as Igor is. You have to think about the students at other schools who might not even have politics offered as a subject and about how to reach them. Obviously, all of us here know about voting—how to vote, how to enrol and those sorts of things—but you have to think about other people who are not affected directly by voting because they are the ones who obviously need to enrol to vote.

Mr CIOBO—In terms of the sample of students here today, are all of you taking politics, Australian government studies or something like that as an elective? Who is doing that sort of subject as an elective? I assume that those of you who are not are just doing 'mainstream'—for lack of a better term—subjects. What exposure have you had to politics and civics education as part of your general studies?

Larissa Ismail—We have to do Aust studies as a subject in year 11. We covered politics for a few weeks only and that was it. We do not do it in any other subject.

Mr CIOBO—Was that coverage about political parties or the process of voting? What exactly did it cover?

Larissa Ismail—There was a lot about the process of voting and then we came in here and did a role-play of an actual debate and things like that.

Mr CIOBO—Does that experience accord with other schools?

Alex Baulderstone—In primary school I learned a lot about voting and elections and I learned some more in junior high school. I actually enrolled to vote before I came to the school I am at now, so I did learn a fair bit.

Mr CIOBO—Did you retain that knowledge from primary school?

Alex Baulderstone—Yes, I did. I got it fairly well pounded into me by some of my more passionate teachers over the years.

Lorena De Palma—I think young people are very impressionable. My brother is nine. He watches the TV and sees John Howard but does not know exactly what John Howard is doing and he does not know much about politics. I think it would help a lot if young people were informed by their teachers.

Melanie Trbovic—It was only this semester that I moved to the school I am at now. Previously I went to Marryatville and I actually have a fair depth of knowledge when it comes to politics, which I gained through legal studies. Politics can be learned not just through Australian studies but through legal studies. Through my whole semester of legal studies, I probably learned more about politics, the way that governments work, the electoral system and whatnot than about the legal system.

Mr CIOBO—Who here has political aspirations or is active in politics? Emily, you have raised your hand. What inspired you to become involved in politics?

Emily Lewis—First, I think there is a gender equity issue, which is quite clear here today.

Mr CIOBO—It could be a display of conscientiousness.

Emily Lewis—I think it is important that people know all about the political system and that a lot of decisions that are made in parliament do affect us. I do not think there is enough awareness of that.

Mr CIOBO—Is that what inspired you to get involved?

Emily Lewis—Yes. There just does not seem to be the power and the thriving that should be associated with politics. It seems that it is being downgraded, as though it is just something associated with a backbench making decisions but, in fact, it should be at the forefront of our lives.

Melanie Trbovic—The reason I am interested in politics is that I have a very strong view that anybody can make a difference. If you have the determination and the willpower to have a say, then you can have that say. But if you sit there and do not do anything about it—if you do not do any research—you are just not going to get anywhere. As I have said, I think there is a bit of a gender equity issue in parliaments themselves. I think more women need to take an active role and know that they can be just as strong as men and that men do not have to make all the decisions—that women can do it too.

Ellie Calam—I am coming up to vote in the next couple of years. I have moral groundings and things that I want done, but there is no political party that I am particularly drawn to, to be honest. Labor and Liberal are the most influential, but there does not seem to be much of a difference between them anymore. I would probably tend to vote more for Labor, but there is not even a strong leader to suggest that that would be a good vote anyway. If I were to get involved in politics, it would be to present a new and different party with different values.

Mr CIOBO—Hands up those who are completely uninterested in politics. Why are you completely uninterested?

Alanna Cross—It is just that I have never had any influence from school or anything like that.

Mr CIOBO—Do you mean in terms of education about politics?

Alanna Cross—Yes. I have never had anything like that in Australian studies; I have never studied it at all. I actually find it quite boring; nothing of interest has ever been drawn to my attention.

Mr CIOBO—Do you think it has an impact on your life and, if so, does it have a small impact or a big impact?

Alanna Cross—Yes, I think voting does have a very big impact.

Mr CIOBO—Beyond voting; politics generally. Voting is one way of exercising a political thought, but do you think politics has an impact on your life?

Alanna Cross—Not personally. I do not even understand it, to be honest.

Senator HOGG—Do you have a student council at school?

Alanna Cross—Yes.

Senator HOGG—Do you vote in elections for that student council?

Alanna Cross—Yes.

Senator HOGG—Do you understand the process and do you think it is all right?

Alanna Cross—Yes, that is fine.

Damian Griffin—Politics does not really bother me because it is boring. It does not really appeal to me and I am not very interested in it.

Mr CIOBO—Do you think politics has an impact on your life?

Damian Griffin—In a way it does, such as with how things are run.

Kim West—I have only ever done one sheet in Australian studies on it, so I know basically nothing.

Mr CIOBO—Did you do that year at primary school?

Kim West—That was this year, year 11. When I do vote, I will probably be influenced most by what my parents say, because they understand more than I do. Basically, all I have is what my parents tell me.

Hannah Hudson—When it comes to voting, I think that is probably one of the biggest influences that impacts on people of our age. A lot of people are sheltered by their families and their opinions and who they vote for—Liberal, Labor or whatever it is. It gets to the stage where it is what your parents believe and how it affects them. It is like: 'Mum and Dad vote for them; I don't really care, so I'll just vote for them.' You say, 'You can make a difference.' But, if it gets to the stage where no-one cares and they are just doing it because they have to and their parents are telling them to do it, I do not see how that makes a difference. It is not having your own opinion about it and being strong about it. I think parents influence it a lot.

Connor O'Brien—With one vote making a difference, I think another problem is that people have not been shown there are other ways to get involved in politics. You can get involved with the political parties or, if you are interested in Labor, you can get involved in the unions or

grassroots handing out how-to-vote cards and things like that. Even if they are trying to get you involved, they will never tell you how to do that because they will be scared that they will be seen as trying to push you towards a certain party. But I think it has to be shown that you can get involved with the party system.

Mr CIOBO—I have a question for the few of you who have said that they do not really care about politics and voting. If you did not have the right to vote, would it make any difference to you? If we took away your right to vote, would you or wouldn't you care? There is no right or wrong answer; I am just after your opinion.

Alanna Cross—Sure.

Mr CIOBO—Is there anyone else who does not really care about politics?

Annabelle Trenowden—I care about politics, but voting is something that will happen in the future. When we vote, we will be voting for things that do not seem to appeal to us. It is about housing. It is about education, and we have just got out of that and it does not concern us. So we think, 'Oh well, it doesn't impact on us directly.'

Tiffany Wong—For the time being, I do not think anything in politics concerns me. I do not have a mortgage, I do not own a car. I do not own anything. All those things perhaps affect my parents. I do not have a job. I do not have anything. My mum and dad earn the family's money. If anything happens, it only concerns them. Okay, I am lazy; I just sit there and they feed me. It does not really concern me, so I am not really interested for the time being.

Billie Millard—I am not attacking those who say that they do not have any interest in politics, but I believe this is a clear indication of what is wrong with the youth of today. We are either becoming really apathetic and not interested and hating politicians for what they do or we are too willing to conform to what our parents say. I am an 18-year-old student. I voted in this year's election. I am doing my year 12 over two years. I have a car, I have a job and I believe that, because of the way parliament is structured, it takes a while for things to get through and actually have an effect within society. I believe that, if anything, it is this age group that must start becoming aware and thinking, 'Okay, in five years time I will have finished my uni degree. I will be out there looking for a house. I will be getting married and having kids.' So now is the time for you to start making your own choices and having your say in what your future will look like. We are the ones who will have to shape our future, so why waste our time now?

Annie Hebenstreit—I think having an interest in voting and so on really comes down to understanding. Personally, I do not know much about all the parties and everything, so I do not think I would be able to make a valuable and proper vote because I do not know enough about all of it. Then it does come down to our parents. We are not educated enough about the different parties and about what they will do for us, so it really does come down to understanding whether we are interested in all the voting.

Senator HOGG—I have a question for the young woman who complained—and rightly so—that she does not know a great deal about her politicians, and someone else has mentioned not knowing much about political parties. What do you know about people who work in politics,

such as politicians like us or your local state people? What do you know, how do you get your information and how do you make your assessment?

Billie Millard—I was on the school council and I have done a lot of work with the former member for Hartley, Joe Scalzi. In addition, I have done a lot of work recently with Grace Portolesi, the new member for Hartley. If anything, I am probably not the right person to ask that question of because I do go and talk to my electoral leaders. I am not someone who sits down and just hushes up.

CHAIR—Do you know who your federal member is?

Billie Millard—Yes. It is Christopher Pyne.

Calum Fewter—I would respond to Tiffany's statement that politics does not really affect her. Politics really does affect everyone. It is decisions such as who your country is going to war against and who you can marry, if you love someone—the whole civil union thing. Politics affects everyone, whether or not they realise it at this stage.

CHAIR—Well said. A bill is coming up in the parliament about what you have just talked about; it is being run by the backbench. We want to allow time for you guys to ask us questions, so have a think about that.

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—I think the major problem with young people not enrolling to vote is that we are not affected by what we see on the news and what our parent talk about. That stuff does not affect us. The stuff that affects us is pushed behind everything and, because only 47 per cent of people vote for it, it will not really make that much difference—because not everyone votes. Youth do not really have a choice. Our parents think, 'Oh, hoon driving laws are great,' and we might think, 'Hang on'. We might think something different but, because our parents, the older generation, are the ones who are voting and who have the say, they play things up for them so that they have their votes, because they are the majority of the voters—if that makes any sense.

CHAIR—Thank you. Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY—That is a lesson in politics. If you want to be heard, you have to keep jabbing the bloke next to you so that you get your turn. You should always be prepared to have your opinion, even if it is a negative or otherwise one. I think all of you are likely to be involved in politics and I want to ask some questions to see whether I am right or not. I want to talk to you about school politics. There are the two sides to this—and I will deal with the representation side of this. Including those who are not interested in national parties, is there anyone in this room from the student side who does not take any interest or participate at all in school elections or contests for, say, prefects, school councils, school captains, class captains—anything of that sort? For the schools that have representative elections, do you take an interest in who holds those positions?

CHAIR—Was that a yes answer? Would anyone answer no?

Melanie Trbovic—What is the question?

CHAIR—Are you a no?

Annabelle Trenowden—You started off saying 'don't you' and then you said 'do you'.

CHAIR—We will seek clarification.

Senator MURRAY—In every school there are people who represent the students—house captains, prefects, student councils and monitors.

CHAIR—Not in every school.

Senator MURRAY—You do not have a school captain or anything of that sort?

Bec Smith—We have nothing at all.

Senator MURRAY—I was not schooled in Australia; I came from a different part of the world. My next question is: if you do not have that, do you think the way to encourage children, students and young people to participate in politics is to introduce more representation of politics into schools? You will know that is the American system, for instance. They have constant elections within their school bodies.

Melanie Trbovic—No, not particularly, because in every school there are certain delinquents. We are in a day and an age where we get told all the time that we do not know anything. The older generation do not understand the sorts of circumstances we as teenagers face. We face so many more issues in a more demoralised society. It is getting to the point where you are losing this generation because we do not like to be told what to do. True, if you can get representation in schools and whatnot, it will not particularly make anyone any more aware of politics and want to take a part. The majority of the time having representation in school is more like having a dictatorship. School representatives are more like dictators. From my experience at my old school, it is more that they try to dictate to you and tell you what to do. All that does is deter people more from the actual representation. I think that is relevant within politics today.

CHAIR—The honourable member's time has expired.

Annabelle Trenowden—We go to a school that tells us what we have to wear every day. If one of our buttons is not done up, we get detention on Friday. When it comes to politics, we think, 'Well, do we actually have our own opinion? Can we have our say?' We go to school and we are told how to dress and how to act. We finish school and then we are told, 'You choose how you will dress and you choose how you will act.'

Senator MURRAY—Let me come back to the purpose of my question. The purpose of my question is this: I believe that you learn something by doing it often. My question is: do you think it would help you to learn more about politics if in your school you were engaged in politics relevant to your school?

Annie Hebenstreit—I think it is important to have representatives and voting within a school. Firstly, having someone like a head girl, a house captain or someone like that recognises them within the school community and so younger students have someone to go and speak to if they

need anything. Also, having a voting process educates you about what you need to look for—the important qualities that a person should have—in deciding to vote for someone and that you should not just vote for someone because they are popular and those sorts of things.

Melissa Baxter—At our school we do have a lot of elected positions. Although I do like the idea of everyone being equal, as at your school, it is much easier to vote for people in schools because you come into contact on a daily basis with those who are up for election and you know everything about them. I think that makes voting in schools a lot easier than voting in real life.

Jacqueline Haggar—I think the idea of bringing politics into schools is a very good one. One of the problems is that, with voting in schools, everything is given to you whereas, with politics in real life, it is not given to you or handed to you on a plate. That is probably the difference between voting in schools and voting out of schools.

Jacqui Slocom—We do not have representatives and others like that at our school. It would be good to have politicians from the upper house come to our school and tell the year 8s—as in my case and the case of my friend here—how to vote and all this other stuff, because we do not really get choice.

Senator MURRAY—I want to stop there and move in a different direction regarding the same question. I think you all engage in a different form of politics and that is the form where you express your opinion either formally, say, through debating occasions, or informally in your groups. Someone mentioned that there are big issues in your young lives which perhaps are different to the issues that affected me when I was young, which was a long time ago. But, if you think that when I was young we were not concerned about drugs, drink and sex, you are wrong; we also had rock and roll. The issues are the same.

The question is: does anyone here not participate in what I would call 'debating the issues' that concern the community at large, which in your case might be what is going on in the drinking culture or the drug culture? Is anyone here totally uninterested in that form of politics in terms of discussing the big issues that matter to you? As no hands have been raised, I take it that you are all engaged in that form of political expression. Part of political life is engaging in debate about things that matter to you. As far as I know, young people are engaged in that.

Phoebe Rowberry—Yes, but also it could be that we just do not agree with what the politicians are trying to sell us. We do not want to vote for them because no-one is—

Senator MURRAY—You are saying that they do not represent you.

Phoebe Rowberry—Yes, they do not represent us.

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—Really there is no-one to debate against. You can talk to your friends but, as soon as you start saying to your mum, 'Hey mum, I think they should lower the age of drinking,' or something like that, you will be cut down straightaway. You cannot really debate with older people about what you think, because they just say, 'No, we're right.' Nothing you say will affect it. They just say, 'No, you can't do that.'

Senator MURRAY—But that does not stop you talking about it in your own group.

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—No, talking about it with my friends—

Senator MURRAY—But in many respects that is part of politics.

Shandelle Laurie—In a way, I disagree a little bit with your statement. You do not necessarily have to debate with your family, your friends or anyone else, because I have noticed that a lot of class discussion occurs. We can be talking about something completely different and end up discussing politics in some way, shape or form and we do not know how we got there. I find that we can actually change our teachers' views on things by what we believe.

Larissa Ismail—Sorry, Ruby, I completely disagree. In my experience, you can talk to adults. If you do it in such a way that you are not trying to present yourself as being right but just trying to give your opinion, they are more willing to listen—if you are willing to listen to their opinion. It just evens out.

Melanie Trbovic—I completely agree. I am the queen of debating anybody. It does not matter who it is, I will debate and I will do it until I get my point across. True, you have to listen to both sides. It does not matter how old you are or how old they are; you can talk to them. If you make them listen to you, if you stand up for yourself and what you believe in and make them listen to you, you can make a difference.

Senator MURRAY—I am going to conduct a straw poll, which politicians always like. I want to ask you about Australian democracy, Australian politics and practice, and Australian politicians. I ask you to indicate by raising your hand whether you have a broadly positive attitude to each of those three. I have a suspicion as to what your response will be and I want to see whether it is confirmed. In general, do you have a broadly positive view of Australian democracy? Please put up your hand if you do. My numbers cruncher here will work out what that is.

CHAIR—Eighty per cent.

Senator MURRAY—Hands up those who have a broadly positive response to the practice of Australian politics.

CHAIR—That is about 50 per cent.

Senator MURRAY—Do you have a broadly positive view as to Australian politicians?

CHAIR—Five per cent.

Senator MURRAY—Thank you.

CHAIR—I am going to put a question to the guys in red at the back who have not had a go yet. In describing what we do, you and we have used the word 'politicians'. I put it to you that we are members of parliament. What is the difference between being a politician or a member of parliament? Who has a view?

Senator HOGG—Is there a difference?

Brennan Hutter—I reckon politicians are more like figureheads of the parliament and their parties and so on and political members are more like the workings behind the decisions that are made.

CHAIR—Who agrees or disagrees with that?

Evan Foster-Jones—I will speak broadly about Australian politicians. I think a lot of people within our society disregard the hard work that politicians do. Just being in the lower house of the South Australian parliament today is quite amazing, considering that people in many countries around the world do not even have the chance to vote.

CHAIR—Well done; very good.

Evan Foster-Jones—I think people tend to ignore that fact and just lament politicians for making decisions that they are completely uninformed about, when these decisions may help us in the future.

CHAIR—Do you also understand that here today we have Liberal, Labor and Democrat. Do you understand that behind the scenes we work well together? Is anyone surprised about that? It is your turn now. What would you like to ask us? Who has a question?

Shandelle Laurie—After having heard our comments today, what sorts of things would you want to do to help us to be more informed about politics, voting and so on?

CHAIR—Committee, who will respond to that question? Mr Ciobo.

Mr CIOBO—Many of you have talked about, 'I will vote this way,' or 'I will not vote that way,' or 'I'm motivated to vote,' or 'I'm not motivated to vote.' To me, voting is not the ends but the means. I mean that, if you are interested in the world around you, how you are governed and on a global scale where Australia is placed in the world right through to a local scale, which is what speed you can drive down your local street, each of those issues is affected by politics. We want to get people interested in those issues because, if you are interested in those issues, you are more likely to vote and then you will have a greater desire to understand how to vote. From your evidence and that of other witnesses, we are trying to find out why people do not feel interested or why they feel powerless when it comes to politics and we have to put in place procedures to spur along enthusiasm for the process.

Melissa Baxter—This is slightly off the topic. As voting is compulsory in Australia, do you believe that an uninformed vote is better than no vote at all?

Senator MURRAY—I have told you that I was not educated in this country. I actually come from southern Africa, where I have watched people getting killed in the exercise of their rights. So I believe an uninformed vote is as important as an informed vote, because ultimately it is the expression of a right and a right that is inalienable. So I am afraid I am one of those who attaches enormous importance to just having that right.

Bec Smith—This reflects on a point I begged you to let me make earlier and it is directed to Senator Murray; it is kind of a question-statement. Regarding school committees, do you realise

that a lot of them are popularity contests? Politics with older generations is not a popularity contest because it is not 'I like you and I am going to vote for you,' but it is 'I like your policies; they will benefit me.' Perhaps they will even affect them financially. It is not just friend based relationship-wise. I came from Seymour, a school that had committees, and I somehow managed to get on one of those committees. I thought I would make a difference by being on that committee, but it is primarily dictated by teachers anyway. I got on to a service committee and the teachers told us exactly what we could do anyway. I do not think committees make that much difference. What kinds of committees do you think could be started in schools that could help to make a difference?

Senator MURRAY—I was elected as a member of a student representative council in southern Africa—it was actually Rhodesia at that time. We opposed the apartheid system and I was deported, so I know all about student activism. But I think learning about democracy is 'involving and participating'. You need to involve and participate in an area that is relevant to you. What is relevant to you is how the school is run, who the school captain is or whatever. I tend to support democratic processes emerging in schools within what is possible and feasible.

Senator HOGG—I think Senator Murray has made a very important point and that is that, firstly, democracy is not perfect. No system is perfect, but the system that we have is infinitely more desirable than the alternatives. Our democratic system does have faults and failings and there are problems—and, of course, nothing is perfect—but I think it is infinitely more desirable to have a democratic process than to have the alternative.

Leesa Starr—Through observing what we have been involved in today, I have noticed that the purpose of this forum has been to identify why young people's participation rates are so low. It has become evident that most people here are interested and will enrol. I just wonder whether you have found today valuable for your purposes or whether you were just looking for an insight into young people?

CHAIR—We have been around the country talking to young people. A lot of the evidence we get is the same, but there are significant differences as well, particularly if you go into Indigenous communities or to Tasmania. Speaking on behalf of my committee, we have found this very interesting. We have gathered some very detailed evidence here today and that will be very useful to us.

Chloe Langford—Out of all of this, what has become most obvious to me is that people who are passionate about politic are those who see it affecting their lives immediately. I got involved or interested most in politics because of things such as VSU or the IR laws, which are going to immediately affect me. If you want to get people, especially young people, interested in politics, you need to make them aware of the importance of the things that will affect them immediately. When I go to uni, there will be no student unionism, which is an immediate problem for me; it affects me immediately. I think you need to make people aware of the immediate effects of politics to make them interested.

Calinda Zwar—I am going to ask this in the most respectful way that I can. Do you think it is the responsibility of the education system, through our teachers, to teach us about what you do?

CHAIR—I have a sheaf of notes here, which includes the question: do you think it is the responsibility of the education system to teach you about civics education?

Phoebe Rowberry—I have two questions that kind of bounce off each other. The first is: do you know the statistics regarding how many people around our age are voting?

CHAIR—The answer to that question is: at June 2006, a couple of months ago, only 48 per cent of people of your age were enrolled to vote. That is terrible.

Phoebe Rowberry—What about statistics for people around the age of 21? Is that much more?

CHAIR—I will defer to the AEC. What percentage of 21-year-olds are enrolled to vote?

Chris Moore—You have to be 18 to vote.

CHAIR—No. What percentage of 21-year-olds are enrolled to vote?

Chris Moore—It gets up to about 80 per cent.

CHAIR—That is terrible too.

Phoebe Rowberry—On top of that, what was the percentage when 21 was the age to vote? Do you have that statistic?

CHAIR—I do not know.

Senator HOGG—We will have to take that on notice.

Calum Fewter—Last year I did a fairly extensive report into whether 16- and 17-year-olds should be able to vote optionally in state and federal elections. I think that, if 16- and 17-year-olds have that opportunity, they would feel more involved in the political system and have more of an interest in the decisions that politicians make. Do you think having a system like that would be effective in raising interest among young people?

CHAIR—I do not. Committee? No, we do not think that.

Chanel Polese—My question is in a non-feminist sort of way: why aren't there as many women representative as men? Personally, I feel that is what is holding me back. I always see men telling us what to do. I only know of about four to five women politicians who actually have a very big leadership role. I want to know why it is always male figures. Why hasn't there been a woman Prime Minister?

CHAIR—I have always wanted a question where I can give a flogging. Women are just as capable as men of doing anything; you know that. It is the same with politics. In recent years, the number of women in the parliament has been increasing. It is not fifty-fifty yet, but it is getting very close. I encourage all females here to get out there and stand for election, because these days there is very little discrimination.

Chanel Polese—It isn't a problem of discrimination. It is that I personally do not feel that women get recognised as figures that can control men, because men seem to be the dominant figures in parliament. It is quite obvious, as there are four of you up there right now.

CHAIR—That is not true. Women have exactly the same influence in the Australian parliament as men do.

Megan Payne—This is a little bit off the topic. I have done an investigative report on metal health this year and contacting the politicians has not been easy. They have not exactly responded to me in the way that I have needed. I have asked their opinions on topics and so on and they have not responded. Why is it that they do not give their views?

CHAIR—Get rid of them at the next election. That is the way. If you email me, you will get a response.

Connor O'Brien—We have been talking about women politicians, but I think now that there is discrimination against young people. I think the youngest person we have in federal parliament is Kate Ellis.

Ellie Calam—How old is she?

Connor O'Brien—Have you thought about getting young people as politicians involved in representing people? What do you think about that?

Mr CIOBO—I will answer that because I was the youngest in the previous parliament and I am the youngest on the coalition side. The fact is that there is nothing that stops young people from getting involved in politics. I got elected at 27 and I thought my youth would be a weakness for me and I found that it was actually one of my greatest strengths. A number of you have made comments like, 'People are not interested in what we are interested in.' That may be the case, but also bear in mind that it is my job to represent 100,000 people and I do not represent 18- to 19-year-olds solely. You are part of a bigger group, including 17-year-olds. If you want to be a politician and an advocate for your whole community, you need to understand that you might be young but you have to represent that whole spectrum of people.

Kailee Ingham—You have kind of glossed over this a bit, but why shouldn't 16- and 17-year-olds be allowed to vote?

CHAIR—A lot of thought has been put into that. These are not my views; I am just telling you of the views of others. You have partially alluded to this today, where you have said that you do not know what the political process is about. You have given us that evidence today. So how do you think a 16-year-old would make an intelligent voting choice if they had the right to vote? That is what you have to think about.

Bec Smith—Then how can an 18-year-old, a 20-year-old or a 40-year-old vote?

Ruby Pettinan-Curtis—You have just encouraged us by saying that we learn via practice. Why aren't you encouraging us to practice in this case? You have also said that any vote is better than no vote, so why are you now saying no, that we cannot vote?

Senator MURRAY—The question you ask is a hard one. I have an essential view that I think voting is one of the rights you have when you are an adult. We then have to decide at what age you are an adult and the law has not decided that. You can join the Army and go and fight at one age and you can have consensual sex, get married, vote and so on at others. It is a great unresolved issue in our society. I do not have a final opinion, because I have met 15-year-olds who are amazingly mature and well informed and I have met 17-year-olds who are idiots. With respect, I hear ageism coming from you. It isn't an age issue. It has to be a determined issue in law, I think, at what age you are an adult. Maybe in modern society 16 is a reasonable age; I do not know. Is it 17 or is it 18? As a politician, I can say to you that I am not yet informed enough to give you a good answer, but it is something that I am thinking about—and I am sure this committee is.

CHAIR—Students, I am sorry, but we are going to have to finish—and I apologise for that. Can I just say to you that we have had super feedback today. For what the committee is doing, the evidence you have given us is extraordinarily valuable and I thank you for that. I thank you all for openly participating and speaking your mind, because that is the only way that plainly we can talk to each other. I thank the teachers and the schools for facilitating this forum and I thank the committee for being here in the parliament.

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 public hearing this day.

CHAIR—That means that all you have said now will appear on the committee website and will be published in *Hansard*. You will get a copy of the *Hansard* and, if any corrections need to be made, we can do that. Thank you for your attendance; we appreciate it. Three of us now have to go to the airport to go back to paradise!

Committee adjourned at 2.05 pm