COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Reference: Civics and electoral education

FRIDAY, 29 SEPTEMBER 2006

SYDNEY

BY AUTHORITY OF THE PARLIAMENT

INTERNET

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

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

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

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Friday, 29 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: Senator Mason and Mr Danby 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.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 12.05 pm

ILIADIS, Ms Angela, Teacher, Al Zahra College

MOKACHAR, Haj Ahmad, Chairman, Al Zahra College

SADRUDDIN, Ms Lisa, Teacher, Al Zahra College

Akmar, Student, Al Zahra College

Ali, Student, Al Zahra College

Arhloo, Student, Al Zahra College

Asad, Student, Al Zahra College

Ayah, Student, Al Zahra College

Batoul, Student, Al Zahra College

Fati, Student, Al Zahra College

Fatima, Student, Al Zahra College

Fatima F, Student, Al Zahra College

Izdehar, Student, Al Zahra College

Lasayna, Student, Al Zahra College

Mahmoud, Student, Al Zahra College

Manal, Student, Al Zahra College

Mohammed, Student, Al Zahra College

Mostafa, Student, Al Zahra College

Muqbil, Student, Al Zahra College

Ribit, Student, Al Zahra College

Rouba, Student, Al Zahra College

Salih, Student, Al Zahra College

Shardia, Student, Al Zahra College

Sukaina, Student, Al Zahra College

Sussan, Student, Al Zahra College

Tarbal, Student, Al Zahra College

Zahra, Student, Al Zahra College

Zayna, Student, Al Zahra College

Zeinab, Student, Al Zahra College

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—Good afternoon. Thank you for having me at your school this afternoon. I understand it is an exciting time as you are almost on holiday. My name is Peter Lindsay. I am a member of the House of Representatives. I come from Townsville in North Queensland. I am 2,000 kilometres south of where I live, and I chair the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, which is having a school forum here today. I am joined by my deputy chair, Michael Danby, who is from the electorate of Melbourne Ports in Victoria, and Senator Brett Mason, who is a senator for Queensland.

We are very pleased to be with you this afternoon. We are here to gather evidence for this parliamentary inquiry and it is important that you just be yourselves. When we ask questions, everybody should have a think about what the answer is. We want all of you to participate. I have got a feeling from just walking around the school that none of you are shy. You are welcoming and you are very happy to give us some answers. Tell us what you think, not what you think we want to hear. Do not worry about what the person next to you might think of what you are going to say. Just say what you think.

You might wonder why we are asking you some of these questions. This is an inquiry which we have taken right around Australia. We have been to Tasmania, Melbourne, Alice Springs, Warburton, in the middle of the Victoria Desert in Western Australia, to Adelaide and Perth. We will come back to Sydney in two weeks time. We are going to Darwin, Cairns and Townsville. We have also been holding hearings in Canberra. Hands up those of you who have been to Canberra. That is fantastic. Mr Principal, do you call yourself the principal?

Mr Mokachar—The chairman.

CHAIR—Mr Chairman, it sounds like you have taken the school, as a body, to Canberra; is that the situation?

Mr Mokachar—Yes, in year 4 they go to Canberra for two days. In year 5 they go on a sport and recreation camp for three days. In year 6 they go to Queensland for four or five days. The program in our school is to prepare the children for more than one thing.

CHAIR—We are going to ask you some questions and we will see where that goes. We have got Hansard reporting here. Brett, would you like to start off?

Senator MASON—Our inquiry is all about civics education, which is about how government and politics work and how you might be involved in that. I will ask you some general questions. When did Australia become a country; when did it become a nation?

Fati—1901.

Senator MASON—What happened in 1901?

Fati—Australia became a nation and they got the flag.

Senator MASON—Very good. In 1901 all the colonies came together to form a nation, didn't they?

Fatima—It was called Federation when all the states joined up together.

Senator MASON—You have obviously all learnt history. Do you learn about World War I and Anzac Day?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—Hands up those whose parents were born overseas?

CHAIR—About 95 per cent.

Senator MASON—What did you learn about World War I?

Mohammed—There were 11 countries versus Germany and Germany successfully won the war.

Senator MASON—What does Anzac Day mean to Australia; what does it mean to you?

Mohammed—A way to remember those who protected the nation.

Senator MASON—Do you agree that it is perhaps Australia's most significant national holiday?

Mohammed—Yes, I would say that.

Senator MASON—Why do you think it is?

Mohammed—That question is a bit difficult.

Senator MASON—For many Australians, Anzac Day is perhaps the most important national holiday. Do you feel you are part of that Anzac legacy?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—What does Anzac Day mean to you?

Fati—The people who fought for our country gave up their lives just to save our country. We are remembering them and we are thanking them for their sacrifice.

Senator MASON—You understand about mateship, adversity, hard times, friendship and struggle. Is that what Anzac Day means to you?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—What other significant events in the history of Australia have your teachers taught you about?

Ali—Australia Day.

CHAIR—Why do we celebrate Australia Day?

Batoul—We celebrate Australia Day to show that we have become a nation, that we are independent and that we do not need England.

Mr Mokachar—She is a republican.

CHAIR—Who else wants to comment on what Australia Day means to Australia?

Ali—Australia Day is celebrated once a year around Australia.

Zahra—It shows that we are all one, no matter what colour we are and where we come from.

CHAIR—Do you know how many ethnic groups are represented in Australia? Would anyone like to have a guess?

Fatima—10.

CHAIR—It is a bit more than that. Australia is the most culturally diverse country in the world. We have more ethnic groups than any other country.

Salih—What does 'ethnic group' mean?

CHAIR—People who come from other countries, other cultures.

Assad—About 80.

CHAIR—A bit more.

Rouba—In the hundreds.

CHAIR—It is in the hundreds, but how many?

Rouba—150.

CHAIR—More.

Mohammed—112.

CHAIR—You are going down. It is more than 150.

Assad—180.

Sukaina—195.

CHAIR—Say 208.

Sukaina—208.

CHAIR—She is right. Isn't it amazing that we have 208 ethnic groups in Australia? We can be very proud that we are the most culturally diverse country in the whole world, but we are one. Let's turn to electoral matters for a minute.

Mr DANBY—Can I ask a couple of things? Does anyone's family come from Turkey?

Fatima—My friend is Turkish.

Mr DANBY—Tell us something more about Anzac Day. We know that Anzac Day marks Australia's participation in the very famous battle in Gallipoli. What country was that in?

Rouba—Turkey.

Mr DANBY—Very good. All of these Australians went over to Turkey and were fighting. Does anyone have anything to say about that?

Sussan—For Anzac Day we have poppies, those flowers.

CHAIR—Who can tell me the story of the Eureka Stockade?

Batoul—It was in the gold rush. It was when I think Germany—I can't remember the name—found gold and then because there was someone killed the judge didn't make the people who killed the other person—I can't remember the names.

CHAIR—Okay. Young man, did you want to expand?

Mostafa—A man was killed. They got involved and they got really angry and brought the troops.

CHAIR—What kind of governments do we have in Australia?

Muqbil—There are three parties in Australia: the Australian Liberal Party, the Australian Labor Party and The Nationals. There are three levels of government: the federal, the state and the local.

CHAIR—Very well done. Mr Chairman, many high school students cannot give an answer like that.

Mr Mokachar—That is why we are very proud of them. Most of them know the ministers and the opposition.

CHAIR—Where is the Australian government based?

Zeinab—Canberra.

CHAIR—Have you have been to Canberra?

Zeinab—Yes.

CHAIR—Did you visit Parliament House?

Zeinab—Yes.

CHAIR—What stands out in your memory about your visit to Parliament House?

Zeinab—The House of Representatives, all the seats in the centre and when you go around there are lots of different things.

CHAIR—Was your visit worthwhile?

Zeinab—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have something to add about Canberra?

Muqbil—The capital is Canberra. In the House of Representatives there are 93 electorates. There are people called the constituents in parliament who debate and vote.

CHAIR—Is the Prime Minister in the Senate or the House of Representatives?

Muqbil—He is in the House of Representatives.

CHAIR—And we follow the British system.

Muqbil—Yes.

CHAIR—What other systems are there in the world?

Muqbil—The US.

Senator MASON—This is a very difficult question: what do politicians do?

Mostafa—Politicians debate in parliament on bills that are going to become laws. When a bill is debated in the House of Representatives, if it passes, it goes to the Senate and it is debated there as well. If it passes, it goes to the Governor-General and he signs the bill and it becomes a law, an act of parliament.

Senator MASON—Very good. Is what politicians do important?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—Why is it important?

Mohammed—Without them there would be no laws. Somebody who was going on public land where there were no laws, they can just go through. We need laws to pass through.

Senator MASON—Is that more important than football or sport?

Students—No.

Senator MASON—What is more important?

Students—Laws.

Senator MASON—Do you hold politicians in respect?

Sussan—Yes.

Rouba—Politicians do a good job but sometimes when they are in session they have an argument and fight.

Mr DANBY—Do you think most people would be more interested in the Broncos versus the Melbourne Storm or politics?

Mohammed—Broncos versus Bulldogs.

Muqbil—I think politics is more important.

Senator MASON—Why is it more important?

Muqbil—Sport is not that important. People go to stadiums to follow their side, but in politics, there is no-one beside them, only their member. Politics is much more important because they make new laws up. In sport they don't; they just play.

Senator MASON—That is a really good answer. Of course, football on the weekend is important, but what we want to know is whether you agree that the future of our country is important.

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—Is that more important than a football match?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—With the laws that we make, we try to make a better country. Things like whether we go to war or stay at peace and how we spend your taxes are all decisions which politicians make. That is why politics, at times, may seem distant, but it is very important.

CHAIR—Students, Mr Danby is going to introduce the subject of elections in the school. Before we do that, this school prides itself on the values that it teaches. Can you explain to me what values this school teaches?

Fati—Understanding.

Lasayna—Respect.

Mohammed—Care.

Batoul—Tolerance and freedom.

Manal—Honesty.

Ayah—To do our best with everything.

Izdehar—Integrity.

CHAIR—I think you know what values and education are about. That is really terrific. Let's move to elections. Mr Danby?

Mr DANBY—Have we got a class captain here?

Students—Yes.

Mr DANBY—What year are you in?

Fatima—Year 6.

Mr DANBY—Is there a boy who is a school captain as well?

Ms Sadruddin—He is away.

Mr DANBY—Are you elected by the students in your class?

Fatima—I have to make a speech in front of years 3, 4 and 6 and in front of the teachers, and I got elected on my speech.

CHAIR—Did the teachers have a vote?

Fatima—Yes.

CHAIR—Was their vote equal to the student vote?

Fatima—I do not know.

CHAIR—Mr Chairman?

Mr Mokachar—It is.

CHAIR—So teachers get one vote and the students get one vote?

Mr Mokachar—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you think the process was fair?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—It got the right outcome?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—Was it a preferential vote? Does anyone know about preferential voting? Was it preferential?

Mr Mokachar—No.

CHAIR—First past the post. What we are saying is the person who got the highest number of votes won. In a preferential system, if there are five candidates, you could number the ballot paper, 'I want that person 1, but if that person did not get elected, I would like to see the next person elected.' That is a preferential system. That is how we run the federal elections.

Mr DANBY—Did you have a girl who also wanted to be school captain and did she speak also?

Fati—The whole class made a speech.

Mahmoud—All of year 5 made a speech.

CHAIR—The candidates for school captain were the whole of year 5; is that right?

Mohammed—At the end of year 5 we had to do a speech and everybody from year 3 to year 6 voted. We were then told who the school captain was.

Mr Mokachar—What about the posters; the campaigns?

Senator MASON—There was campaigning?

Ms Iliadis—They did their own campaigns.

Mr Mokachar—In their speeches they say what they have in mind.

CHAIR—So it was free ice-cream for all of year 5, was it?

Ms Iliadis—They were very sensible suggestions.

CHAIR—Who knows who their local member of parliament is?

Shardia—John Howard.

CHAIR—He is the Prime Minister. The local federal member.

Rouba—Cherie Burton.

Mr Mokachar—She is the state member of parliament and she is a minister as well.

Mr DANBY—That is fairly good; they know the state members.

Mohammed—Mark Latham.

CHAIR—No, he resigned from the parliament.

Fatima—Morris Iemma.

CHAIR—No, he is the Premier of New South Wales.

Mr Mokachar—It is Robert. Does anybody know the surname?

Ali—McClelland.

CHAIR—Robert McClelland is the shadow minister for defence in the parliament and he is a good friend of mine. You have a good local member. How would Robert McClelland get elected? What would he do in the electorate?

Fatima—He held a campaign like the others who were trying to get into government and everyone voted for him.

CHAIR—Do you think, when you come to vote, your vote will count or do you think that John Howard will always get elected or Kim Beazley will always get elected?

Tarbal—It does count.

CHAIR—Why will it count?

Mohammed—Because a long time ago, this man, he won by one vote.

CHAIR—That is an exceptionally good answer.

Arhloo—We can't vote because we are not over 18, but the people who are over 18 can vote and each vote is counted.

Senator MASON—Why is it important to vote?

Fati—It is important because, for example, if I want John Howard to be in the government, I have to vote for him.

Senator MASON—Do you think it is important that people participate in voting?

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—Do you think people should vote?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—Hands up those of you who have been overseas? Tell me where you have been?

Ribit—Lebanon.

Mohammed—Brunei.

CHAIR—Do you know where Brunei is?

Mohammed—I don't know where it is, but I have been there.

Students—New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Germany, China.

Ali—Syria, Pakistan.

Muqbil—Thailand, Hong Kong.

CHAIR—Many of you have travelled overseas. Have you come back to Australia and found yourself thinking this is a great country?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—Why is Australia a great country?

Shardia—Because some countries are not as clean as Australia and as nice and as beautiful, and they do not have as much nature as Australia has.

Mohammed—It is truly a nation that welcomes people. It is multicultural.

Ayah—I think that Australia is good because it has rules and if we follow those rules we can be safe.

Akmar—Australia is a good country because everyone in it can have a fair go.

Sussan—It is big and it doesn't get too crowded.

Mostafa—I went to Iraq and in Iraq you don't have to wear your seatbelts and we had a really, really bad crash and here in Australia you have to wear seatbelts.

Assad—They have beautiful animals.

Senator MASON—Young man, you said that Australia is a multicultural society. What do you mean by that?

Mohammed—I mean it welcomes people from all around the globe. It lets other people have a place here in Australia.

Senator MASON—Do you think that makes Australia a special country?

Mohammed—Very special.

CHAIR—Hands up if you have travelled within Australia? Who has travelled outside New South Wales? That is about 50 per cent. Has anyone been to Western Australia? No.

Mohammed—Queensland.

CHAIR—In relation to the environment, does your school teach you about looking after our environment?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—What sorts of nasty things are happening at the moment?

Mohammed—Cutting too many trees down.

Ayah—People are throwing their chewing gum on the floor.

Fatima—Pollution.

Ali—We are not getting real grass.

Muqbil—There is too much rubbish.

CHAIR—Thinking about the environment in Sydney, what is the major environmental problem here in Sydney?

Batoul—The pollution that goes into the atmosphere, the ozone layer.

Muqbil—The major roads.

CHAIR—How are roads an environmental problem?

Ms Iliadis—The traffic.

CHAIR—Traffic noise. What about aircraft noise; is that pollution?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—What about our waterways?

Mohammed—Oil.

CHAIR—We are running out of water.

Mohammed—Droughts.

Fati—Petrol.

Zayna—Littering.

CHAIR—Lisa, this is mostly your class?

Ms Sadruddin—Yes, the people around the outside are year 6 and the ones in the middle are year 5.

CHAIR—Tell me why this is a good school.

Zahra—There are safe rules.

Assad—The education is very good.

Senator MASON—Young man, you mentioned wars earlier. Where are some wars being fought today?

Mohammed—Iraq, Lebanon.

Senator MASON—Do those wars in Iraq and Lebanon worry you?

Mohammed—Yes.

Senator MASON—Why?

Mohammed—Because people are dying. I have relatives there.

Senator MASON—Are you worried about your relatives being hurt in the war?

Mohammed—Yes.

Senator MASON—Do you think the government should do something?

Mohammed—Yes.

Senator MASON—What should the government do?

Mohammed—Help the people and stop the war, try to stop the war.

Ali—We should try and get as many people from the country as we can so they don't die.

CHAIR—It is now your opportunity to ask us questions. We are members of parliament, the House of Representatives and the Senate. What have you always wanted to ask a member of parliament?

Fati—Why do governments decide to have a war?

CHAIR—I think we will take that on notice. Did you hear the question?

Mr Mokachar—Yes, I will leave it to you.

Senator MASON—Governments decide to fight wars if they think it is in the interest of the country.

Mohammed—Are you a member of parliament?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ali—What do you do?

CHAIR—There are three major aspects of a member of parliament's life. There is what you do in your electorate, which is quite different from what you do in Canberra, which is quite different from what you do when you are having a public inquiry. In the electorate, I represent 100,000 people, as Michael Danby does. Senator Mason represents the whole of Queensland.

Fatima F—How much do you get paid?

CHAIR—There are a few answers to that. One answer is: not enough. Another answer is: it is on the public record. Another answer is to say most children ask how much you get paid. The real answer is—

Ms Sadruddin—They have asked me all term how much do politicians get paid.

CHAIR—The answer is a member of the backbench gets paid, in round numbers, about $118,000 a year.

Fatima—What are the good things about being a member of parliament?

Mr DANBY—One of the important things about being a member of parliament is that you cannot go into it if you are doing it for the money. $118,000 is not the issue. You have to believe in things and be passionate about them and think that, whatever political party you are in, you can change them for the better, particularly on behalf of the people you represent. You can do great things for people you know, for people living in your area and also for the country.

CHAIR—For example, we are currently facing a real challenge as to whether we allow embryonic stem cells to be used for medical purposes. This is a very big debate. On the one side of the debate people say, 'You are destroying human life.' On the other side of the debate, the person with Parkinson's disease or spina bifida will say, 'This is the possibility of getting a cure.' Members of parliament are faced with very big decisions.

On the other hand, just helping one person can give you more joy than bringing $100 million to something. For example, quite recently I saved somebody's house from being repossessed by the Westpac bank. I moved heaven and earth because I knew they were right and the bank was wrong. When you have the person ring you up and say, 'You saved my house,' and then cry with tears of joy, it is a really humbling experience and you know why you are there. Senator, why are you in the Senate?

Senator MASON—In life what is important to you is your family, your friends, your beliefs and your values. All of us believe our country is important, don't we? As you said before, we are a very lucky country because we welcome people from everywhere. One of the best ways that you can show your appreciation for the country that we all love is to be a federal parliamentarian and work for the future and destiny of the Australian people. So if you think your country is important, and I think you do, you will think that politics is important. One day some of you may even go into politics. I hope you do.

Zahra—What is the main purpose of having the government?

CHAIR—To make the laws of the land, to decide how much income will be collected and how much will be spent on goods and services, to defend our country, to make sure we are secure and to provide for health and education. All of those sorts of reasons.

Ayah—What is the difference between federal, state and local governments?

CHAIR—Teachers, you are falling down on your job!

Ms Sadruddin—She has not learnt that yet but ask year 6 and they can tell you 20 reasons.

CHAIR—Local government deals with issues like footpaths and rubbish collection, in some states sewerage, water supplies and roads, parks and gardens. State government deals with hospitals and schools, transport, rail transport, harbours and marine. The federal government deals with all the national issues—defence, immigration, treasury, health, education and so on.

Mohammed—Are you from the legislative council?

CHAIR—No, we are from the federal government in Canberra, so Michael and I are from the House of Representatives, which is the lower house, equivalent to the legislative assembly. Senator Mason is from the Senate, the upper house, equivalent to the legislative council.

Mr DANBY—We make the laws in Parliament House. The legislative assembly go to Macquarie Street, Sydney. They sit in the state parliament. You see that on TV sometimes too.

CHAIR—You can see where my seat is in the House of Representatives on that poster.

Muqbil—This question is for Senator Mason: how did you become a senator; did you go to the House of Representatives, through the lower house, to go to the upper house?

Senator MASON—Good question. No, I was elected to the Senate straightaway. Sometimes people go from the Senate to the House of Representatives and sometimes they go from the House of Representatives to the Senate. You are a fine, intelligent young man, so I think you would be a very good senator.

CHAIR—Boys and girls, we have to finish there. I thank you all for the answers you have given us, which have been terrific. You are a fantastic class in a fantastic school. Thank you very much to you and your teachers. Have a happy holiday.

Proceedings suspended from 1.00 pm to 1.15 pm

ILIADIS, Ms Angela, Teacher, Al Zahra College

LYNHAM, Ms Sarah Jane, Teacher, Al Zahra College

MOKACHAR, Haj Ahmad, Chairman, Al Zahra College

SADRUDDIN, Ms Lisa, Teacher, Al Zahra College

CHAIR—I think I speak on behalf of the committee: I cannot believe the depth of knowledge that your students have about civics and the history of our country. We have taken evidence from a number of schools. I do not think we have had a class who had the depth of knowledge that your students have. Even at senior level, they did not ask the standard of questions that your students asked. It is an extraordinary credit to the leadership of this school and its teachers that years 5 and 6 had such a depth of knowledge on these matters. So the question to teachers is: how do you do it when other schools cannot do it?

Ms Sadruddin—I gave them two big tests—one on state government, with 106 questions, and one on federal government. They are competitive and they wanted to have more knowledge than the person next to them. They found it really exciting to just learn where people sat.

CHAIR—How do you make it exciting?

Ms Sadruddin—We made the class into a parliament. We sat them in parliament. We had local, state and federal government. Their reading groups are The Nationals, the Democrats, Liberal and Labor. I made them wear badges around the school. I was the Prime Minister when we were doing federal and I gave them all a federal minister badge to wear. For example, they took on the role of the minister for health or the minister for finance. The Treasurer added up everything in class that day. The next week we did the shadow ministers and then the state. They took their badge home and wore it around the shopping centre.

CHAIR—You engaged them in that way.

Ms Sadruddin—They became fully involved rather than just doing a lot of reading.

CHAIR—In the curriculum is it mandated that you teach a certain number of hours on civics and electoral education?

Ms Sadruddin—Civics education comes under the HSIE and we do that.

Ms Lynham—We also try and integrate it with literacy. As English is a second language, if you have it focused on science or the civics type of thing and bring it together with English, it makes it a lot easier because you spend a lot of time focusing on interesting subjects that are related to what they can understand.

Mr DANBY—Is English a second language for a lot of these kids?

Ms Sadruddin—Yes, basically all of them.

Mr DANBY—Their English is fantastic. What is their primary first language?

Ms Sadruddin—Arabic.

Mr DANBY—Do you teach the students the Arabic language and Arabic literature?

Mr Mokachar—We give them 1½ hours a week in Arabic and learning the Koran.

Mr DANBY—Do you find, as with lots of immigrants, that they lose their first language as their knowledge of English increases?

Mr Mokachar—We believe that even the Arabic is not their first language, it is a third language.

Mr DANBY—Do they speak it at home with their parents?

Mr Mokachar—Yes.

CHAIR—Am I right in observing that the trip to Canberra left a positive image in the children's' minds about democracy?

Ms Sadruddin—They went to Canberra in year 4 as a general introduction. They became interested in democracy last year. There were a few who were selected to go to Canberra. They went to Parliament House and the city.

CHAIR—Did they go to the AEC Electoral Education Centre in Old Parliament House?

Ms Sadruddin—I am not aware.

CHAIR—You are not aware of that facility?

Ms Sadruddin—I am not aware that they went there.

CHAIR—Does your local federal AEC returning officer offer to come here and talk to the children?

Mr Mokachar—When our children went to Canberra, he had to apologise because unfortunately he was not available that day. We understand that he was probably busy.

Mr DANBY—Are you talking about Robert McClelland?

Mr Mokachar—Yes.

Mr DANBY—Mr Lindsay is talking about something different. There is an officer who runs the elections in this seat. Does he sometimes come to the school to help out with things?

Mr Mokachar—No.

Mr DANBY—You should know that you can ask him.

Mr Mokachar—Thanks for that information.

CHAIR—Can you suggest any improvements to the way civics is taught or are you comfortable with the way it is going?

Ms Sadruddin—I am very comfortable with what I have done this term. Muqbil is a student of lower ability. This term he has become really interested and he has come from the middle right up to the top.

CHAIR—He was amazing.

Mr DANBY—He sounds to me like a very bright kid who has got a very low boredom threshold and that has probably affected him in other areas as well.

Ms Sadruddin—He is an underdog who has become Prime Minister in this particular case.

Mr DANBY—One thing I was hinting at when I was talking about Turkey is that I can understand why you have a protocol of not going into wars and conflicts because it is so passionate and it probably upsets people a lot. My recent experience in Turkey is that there is such a positive angle on the Muslim-Turkish-Australian relations that it might be something particularly worth exploring in Islamic schools, if you don't mind me having the cheek to suggest it, because the Turks are so positive about Australia. It might be a really interesting way of teaching about Anzac Day.

Anzac Day in Turkey was astonishing to me. It has become the biggest Turkish national event because we started it there and all the memorials are there. Now the Turks have it and you see Turkish schools coming and they remember that they actually won. So that is even funnier, but it is a very interesting and unusual cultural thing. This is a cultural thing where the two countries actually like each other more as a result of that conflict.

Mr Mokachar—I have to disagree with you because I have the vision of concentrating on positive things and not about the conflict. That is what I like to strongly emphasise to my children for their future because for so many years all over the world we have been concentrating on the conflict. Let's look at the positive side.

Ms Lynham—As part of the topic we were learning about Australian contexts and values and we are in the process of creating a museum about what it is to be Australian, what it means to year 5s to be Australian and how they are Australian.

Part of the Australian experience for them also involves the conflict in Lebanon and in other countries, as there are other children in the school, and the conflict that they see has been with Jewish people. When the war started, they had some misunderstanding and misguidance as to what the media was telling them about Jewish people—the image of the Jewish children signing bombs and sending them to Lebanon. That made them very angry and they had a lot of anger

that they needed to get rid of. There were comments such as: 'I hate all Jewish people. All Jewish people should die. Look at what they are doing. Look at this message.'

There has been much discussion about it and they have asked me to invite a year 5 class from a Jewish school or area to come next term so that they can have a conversation with them, so that they can understand that they are normal people, just as they understand that people see them as Muslims and they wear funny clothes and they look strange to people from the outside. The same comment was made, 'They wear weird hats and that scares me.' I told them that they are normal people and they are starting to come around to that. So it will be a good experience to invite children from other schools next term.

Mr DANBY—Is that approved and supported by the school?

Mr Mokachar—We do not see any problem.

CHAIR—I was in Jerusalem, Israel, in early July and I went to a child-minding centre which was combined Jewish and Muslim. They had Arabic teachers and Jewish teachers side by side in the classroom. Parents of both faiths got to know each other and the kids got to know each other and the tension disappeared because they are just normal people. I just wish that could happen around the world.

Senator MASON—Are there any occasions when the Islamic religion would have any impact upon the teaching of civics? I will give you a specific example. Until the last couple of hundred years in the Christian religion, there was not the idea of separation of powers. In other words, today we have a distinct separation between church and state. We have a distinction between the executive, the legislature and the courts. Is that an issue that is sensitive or that you touch on? Is there any problem with the Koran versus separation of church and state?

Ms Sadruddin—When the year 5s learnt about democracy last year I was aware that they looked at the separation of powers and how a government overseas came to be. They compared overseas to government here.

Senator MASON—Keep it as church and state at the moment.

Ms Sadruddin—They did that last year but this term we did not touch on Islamic culture or history and how it manifested with the Australian government.

Senator MASON—Because it is absolutely explicit, the separation between church and state, but it is not quite so clear. I am not an expert on the Koran.

Mr DANBY—Perhaps a more neutral term would be a separation between religion and state rather than church and state.

Senator MASON—I agree with you.

CHAIR—Without saying where we were earlier today—but I will tell you it is a school where 70 per cent are non-English-speaking background—we took evidence and I wrote this down:

NESB students all have a strong knowledge of the history of their own country but not of Australia's history. Why is it that your students are so different?

Ms Sadruddin—In term 1 we covered gold, so they learnt about the Eureka Stockade. They wrote their own play and incorporated all the events. They made that fun and the play was performed at assembly. Last term we did space exploration where we learnt about Neil Armstrong. This term we did federal and state.

Ms Lynham—If you look at the year 5 curriculum, we look at the Australian rainforest on Taiwan and the impact that we have. We look at the global picture and then focus on Australia because we have fine examples in Australia of rainforests and wildlife.

CHAIR—The previous school was a state school. This is an independent school. Is there a difference in teaching? I understand that is a sensitive question.

Ms Sadruddin—I think with this particular school the students know we have got very high expectations of them and their learning. As far as discipline goes, it does not get in the way of our teaching. The kids are eager, they are ready to learn and we do not have management problems in trying to teach them. I am not saying that state schools do; I am just saying that in this school we do have a very strong discipline policy which they follow in a positive way. We have very high expectations of their learning and their work quality. Their parents also have very high expectations of them.

CHAIR—Does this mean that because you can show a student the door if they do not conform to the policies of the school, you are in a stronger position than a state school?

Mr Mokachar—School is not only about what they write and what they read. It is the whole environment. It is the teachers, the admin and the maintenance. I believe that the paint inside a classroom makes a difference. I believe the light inside a classroom makes a difference. It is the architecture. It is the people. It is every single thing you see. A person is impressed not only by the feeling and the school but also by the school, the parents and the environment to which that person belongs.

Yes, the board of study syllabus which is delivered to us will be shared by every school in New South Wales; it might differ from one stage to another and in the sequence, but in essence it is the same. It is our teachers who make the difference and it is the students and the parents because, after all, we have to deliver what our customers want. When we see that the customers—who are the parents—want a decent citizen, we need to deliver. We need to assist and we need to make sure that we will be partners in making a decent citizen.

CHAIR—You are an impressive chairman. I wish everybody had the same feeling.

Ms Iliadis—He is very impressive.

Mr DANBY—And passionate too.

Ms Iliadis—Definitely.

CHAIR—You can take it from me that you and your school have inspired us. If there are no other questions from the committee, it remains for me to thank you and your school for having us on a difficult day. This has been really valuable for us and I hope that some of the recommendations that we make will come out of our visit to your school and will be in the interests of the people of Australia.

Committee adjourned at 1.40 pm