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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

(Briefing)

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TOWNSVILLE

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Tuesday, 24 October 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: 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

Meeting started at 2.10 pm

BOEVINK, Mr Simon, Head, Department of Health and Physical Education and Social Science, Heatley Secondary College

BOYD, Mr Stephen, Committee Secretary

SPERRING, Mr Bill, Principal, Heatley Secondary College

Alexia, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Alisha, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Allanah, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Amanda, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Andrea, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Ben, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Caitlin, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Chris, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Eleanor, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Glen, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Hannah, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Jasmin, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Jason, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Jimmy, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Joelle, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Jordan, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Kalea, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Kristen, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Navdeen, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Rachel, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Sarah, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Sean, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Tamsin, Student, Heatley Secondary College

Teri, Student, Heatley Secondary College

CHAIR—Good afternoon. My name is Peter Lindsay. I am the federal member here in Townsville and I chair the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. We are doing public inquiries around the country and are here at your secondary college today to listen to your views—and you might like to listen to our views as well.

Before we start our inquiry today, I want to present two school leavers and the principal with two Australian flags to fly proudly here. You will hear me talk about this later on during the inquiry process.

Flags presented—

Sean—Can I have one too?

CHAIR—Why do you want a flag that represents Australia?

Sean—I want a flag because we got to meet the Prime Minister and listen to his speech. We got our photos taken with him.

CHAIR—The Prime Minister is one of the many great Australian leaders who have come from both sides of politics and you were very pleased to meet the Prime Minister when he came out to visit this part of our country. But that is part of our democracy, that the people of Australia can meet the Prime Minister. It would not happen in many other countries in the world today.

The information that you give us today will be published in the *Hansard* of the Australian parliament. If you contribute today—and I hope all of you will contribute—you will be recorded in the parliamentary *Hansard* for perpetuity, which is fantastic. One day in the future, you will all be able to show your grandchildren: 'There I was, giving evidence to a parliamentary inquiry.' Hands up those of you who are going to have grandchildren.

Mr Sperring—Some of these people have just been to Canberra.

CHAIR—Unfortunately I did not get to meet any of you while you were in Canberra. Were you there for the snow season?

Students—No.

CHAIR—Hands up those who are skiers or snow boarders. I see that two of you are. Snow boarding is the best. Canberra is a great place. If any of you do come back to Canberra, try to

make it during a sitting week so that I can give you a tour behind the scenes that you could not otherwise have. Many of Australia's young leaders come to Canberra and get chosen; so, if you have an opportunity to apply for that, do it. It is a fantastic experience. We have Stephen Boyd with us, who is the committee secretary; Dr Sonia Palmieri, the secretary of the inquiry—it gets a bit confusing—and Justin Baker, who stands between them and keeps them apart. They are all from Canberra and will help me to take evidence today. If you come to Townsville wearing a suit, everybody knows that you are from the south. I have told Justin that we do not wear suits up here. What is the age range or the year level range here? Do we have year 12s here?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—I understand that we also have year 11s and year 10s, so we have a good spread. I would now like to formally open proceedings and welcome you all to this school forum. I thank the principal Bill Sperring and Simon for making this possible. I have already introduced Sonia, Stephen and Justin to you. We will ask you questions, but it might well be that you will come back and ask us questions. Just a quick icebreaker: who can tell me when and where the first parliament of Australia was established?

Ben—I think it was in 1901.

CHAIR—Where?

Ben—Between Sydney and Melbourne.

CHAIR—No.

Sarah—Sydney?

CHAIR—No.

Allanah—Canberra?

CHAIR—No. Who here is a Victorian? Quick, say 'Melbourne'.

Allanah—Melbourne.

CHAIR—What is the role of the Governor-General?

Jordan—I am pretty sure it is basically to check over what people want. It is for the needs of the people and the public basically.

CHAIR—Not quite.

Andrea—They are the Queen's representative.

CHAIR—The head of state, yes. Who is the current Governor-General?

Joelle—Is it Michael Jeffery?

CHAIR—Yes, Major General Michael Jeffery. What are some of the functions of the federal parliament? What does the federal parliament do?

Jasmin—They pass bills.

Sarah—They are also about multicultural affairs, immigration, currency and lighthouses, as in section 50 of the Constitution, I am advised, as passed over from the colonies.

CHAIR—Are you in year 10?

Sarah—Yes.

CHAIR—What are the sorts of things that federal parliament does that touch your lives? I will give an example of what I am looking for. Hands up those with parents in the Defence Force. Defence is a matter that the federal government deals with. What other matters would we deal with?

Sean—Fire brigade?

CHAIR—No, that is state government.

Chris—Education.

CHAIR—Education, of course. What goes hand and hand with education that is to do with doctors?

Kristen—Health.

CHAIR—Yes. Then there are things like immigration, Treasury, environment, foreign affairs and all that sort of stuff. How many parties are there in the Australian Senate at the moment?

Sean—Five.

CHAIR—And what are they?

Sean—Greens, Nationals, Liberal, Labor and Democrats.

CHAIR—There is also Family First, I am advised, represented by one senator only. That was just an introductory session to get you all going and relaxed. I want you to answer questions just as if we were all friends. I will put a proposition to you. Young people are apathetic and cynical about the political process in Australia. Why are you lot apathetic and cynical? You can say that you are not apathetic and cynical if you want to. You do not have to accept my proposition.

Chris—What is ‘apathetic’?

CHAIR—Could not care less.

Chris—We see parliament as a bunch of old people just talking together.

CHAIR—That is very kind of you!

Chris—Nice old people.

Glen—We watch programs such as *The Glass House* and media representations of what goes on down south.

CHAIR—Firstly, you should not be up that late at night. But that is an interesting point—the media effect. Is it correct to say that your perception of the media affects your perception of the parliament and its processes?

Glen—Yes.

CHAIR—What is wrong with basing your perception on the media?

Glen—With the media, each shows bias towards one party most of the time.

CHAIR—Do you think so?

Glen—Yes.

Eleanor—I am not sure whether this is true, but I think it is more that the media is based on false representations of parliament and politics and everything that is going on at the moment.

CHAIR—Would you agree that, as a group, you do not actually trust what you are seeing and reading in the media?

Jordan—We do see what is going on, but we feel that there is no truth to it.

Kristen—The only opinion we get to advise us is from the media.

CHAIR—That is an interesting point. How would you get a different opinion, I wonder.

Jordan—Probably from parents, teachers or friends.

Ben—By being there in person and actually seeing what is happening.

CHAIR—That is a very good answer. Do you think your perception from the media is affected by the media's need to have very short grabs and that you see just a snippet of what has actually gone on? Do you think that is a fair comment?

Sean—I do not mean to be mean—

CHAIR—That is a disclaimer.

Sean—but I think the media are just out for a good story and do not care about the truth. They are just after what the public wants.

CHAIR—What kind of media do you watch? What news do you watch? Do you watch the news on Channel 7 or on Channel 10? Where do you get your news information from?

Eleanor—Because there are so many different news and current affairs programs, you get all the different sides of the story and most of them are the bad sides; you do not really get the good sides.

CHAIR—What gives you the impression that it is bad?

Eleanor—Because the stories that they show are about, say, the tsunami and so on and they say how it is a tragedy and we have to give money and stuff. But there is poverty everywhere and we are not giving any money for that.

CHAIR—That is a very incisive point.

Kristen—I prefer to watch the ABC or SBS. They give a more generalised view. They expand more on what is going on rather than give one precise point or snippet.

Kalea—And their stories are more dramatic.

Rachel—People will watch the news, but I think they sometimes like to hear the more dramatic stories.

CHAIR—Thinking about the media that you would generally see—press, radio, television—which is the most believable, in your view? Hands up those who think it is the press; those who think it is the radio; and those who think it is television. About half of you think that television is the most believable. Turn your mind to emerging media in the digital age. A school principal in evidence yesterday called students like you 'digital natives'. Thinking about what you read and see on the internet and in blogs and whatever, do you trust the internet?

Students—No.

CHAIR—Does anyone trust the internet?

Rachel—I do, because many websites pretty much say the same thing.

Kristen—I go to Queensland government sites or Queensland government funded sites rather than to people's blogs. You have to cross-reference to get the right information.

CHAIR—You are saying that you have to check. Is that right?

Rachel—Yes.

CHAIR—Does everybody agree with that?

Students—Yes.

Kalea—It depends on the website. If you are looking at a news website, say 9 MSN, you know it is really the Channel 9 network, whereas if you are on some random website with a blog it is different.

CHAIR—We are going to conduct a straw poll. Hands up those of you who are 17 and 18. Of those who have raised their hand, those who are not on the electoral roll put your hands down. There are six. You are a classic example of the Australian population where less than half of your age cohort is on the roll. Those of you who put your hands down as not being on the roll, why are you not on the roll?

Kristen—It was only about two weeks ago that I turned 17 and I have not had the time to enrol.

Jordan—I just feel like I do not need to do it yet as I am not 18 and I do not need to vote—even though they have sent me two electoral roll forms in the mail.

CHAIR—We are interested in that.

Mr S. Boyd—Have you considered some ideas for the Australian Electoral Commission to get information to you about your opportunities to enrol? Would you like an AEC officer to come to the school to give you some information about your responsibilities and your rights?

Glen—Yes. That would be very good.

Mr S. Boyd—That would be a more personal touch than a letter.

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—If the AEC did that, would you enrol then and there on the spot?

Glen—No, you would have to think about it.

Teri—I think part of the reason is that people do not know how to enrol or how to get the information to enrol.

CHAIR—That is a good point. If you actually go and vote—this is to all of you, even those who cannot enrol yet—do you think your vote counts? Is it a waste of time? Should you do it? Does your vote count?

Navdeen—No.

CHAIR—Why does your vote not count?

Navdeen—Because you are not 18 yet.

CHAIR—But assume that you were.

Navdeen—Then I do not know.

Caitlin—As an individual I do not think it counts. Maybe in a group it counts, but no-one is going to listen to you if it is just one person—and no-one really cares.

Amanda—There is always the possibility that one person's vote can count. Say that two parties are tied, with both parties needing one vote to win, and there is only one person left.

CHAIR—So you are saying that your vote can count.

Kalea—There are historical records of people wining by one vote.

Alexia—I think it does count because, as Kalea says, you could be that extra person to add on to the group.

CHAIR—What are some of the great things that have happened in the history of Australia? Name some momentous things in our nation's history.

Caitlin—The Olympics.

CHAIR—Which ones?

Caitlin—The Sydney Olympics.

CHAIR—I think you are right.

Sarah—Colonisation.

CHAIR—So you are talking of 1788 or around that time?

Sarah—Yes.

Kristen—When the Constitution was formed.

CHAIR—Yes, on 19 May 1901. What happened on 3 September 1901? The Australian flag was chosen and flown for the first time. Another couple of very important things have happened in Australia's history. You will know about them and this school celebrates them every year.

Jordan—NAIDOC.

CHAIR—Right. I was not thinking of that.

Eleanor—Anzac Day.

CHAIR—Well done. This school puts on a magnificent ceremony on Anzac Day and you should be very proud of that. What about our scientific discoveries and our sporting achievements?

Glen—Ashes.

CHAIR—Right. We have a lot to be proud of as a nation and we are only a little nation in the scheme of things. When your teachers were teaching you about these things, was it interesting in the way they did it, or did you think, 'Oh gee, we don't need any more of this'? What did you think?

Ben—Not really, because most of the time teachers just drag things out and put too much information into it or not enough information into it and they just sound boring.

Andrea—They just put lots of writing up on the board and we copy it down and there is not a full-on explanation.

CHAIR—What do you think about the way the teachers have taught you?

Tamsin—I think that for my class it is interesting.

Hannah—My teacher told us about it and gave us a lot of information about it and told us to write some stuff up for it.

CHAIR—Did you find the way it was presented to be useful?

Hannah—Yes.

Alisha—When our class was taught about it, it was mostly just written up on the board and not gone into in any depth. We had to read what was on the board and figure it out for ourselves.

Ben—Sometimes dictation can be the easiest way to get things stuck in your mind. Teachers will say something and you have to write it down just to get it in your mind.

Eleanor—I think it is more about attitude. If a teacher has a good attitude about wanting to teach us, we will take information in and then they will be happy and we will be happy. If they are in a gross mood, we probably will not take it in and accept what they are telling us.

CHAIR—I congratulate you for that answer. The evidence that we are getting across the country is that, if the teachers are engaged, you learn; if they are not interested in the subject, you do not learn. That is fascinating.

Jason—I think it is all about interaction. Today we are probably going to learn quite a lot but, if it is dictation from a teacher, not everyone is going to get involved. If you are going around and asking each and every person to give a bit of information and to receive some as well, the whole class will learn something.

Mr S. Boyd—Once you have done some theory, are you given any practical opportunities? Some schools have class parliaments.

Jason—It depends on the subject. With basic subjects, such as maths, you would not receive that sort of thing.

Mr S. Boyd—No, but with the representative requirement.

Jason—Yes, regarding democracy we have the opportunity for that in the school.

Eleanor—I think it is also the environment we are in. If you have a good school environment, everyone in the class is in a good mood. There is not a lot of noise, you can hear your teacher and it is easier to obtain the information.

Kristen—Some topics are weighted differently. The teachers will perceive the teaching of one topic, say, the Olympics, as being more important than teaching us about the Anzacs. For example, I got to re-enact the Olympics, whereas with the Anzacs we were given a couple of handouts. They do not really care about it so much and so we do not really learn so much.

CHAIR—Jimmy, do you know what kind of voting is used to elect the members of the House of Representatives?

Jimmy—No, I do not know.

Tamsin—Preferential.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr S. Boyd—Would you learn about that in your legal studies course?

Tamsin—In our SOSE class, we got to form our own parties and take roles to see what would happen. Then we had to vote for what party we wanted.

CHAIR—Good. Jimmy, do you know what system is used in the Australian Senate to elect senators?

Jimmy—No.

CHAIR—Does anyone know? I am not picking on Jimmy. It is important that you say you do not know, because that is what this inquiry is about.

Amanda—Isn't it that you choose just the one person?

CHAIR—No, it is not that you choose one person. You can choose to vote above the line if you choose one party—that is when you put the '1' in—or you can, if you want to, fill out the whole lot below the line, which is preferential voting. Which is the highest court in Australia?

Sarah—Queen's Counsel?

CHAIR—No. A Queen's Counsel is someone who appears before the court. What is the name of the highest court in Australia? Dr Palmieri tells me to tell you that this is a trick question.

Ben—Is it the Australian supreme court?

CHAIR—No. There is no Australian supreme court; there is a supreme court in every Australian state.

Chris—Is it the High Court of Australia?

CHAIR—That is good, but it is not right. Mr Sperring, which court is the highest in Australia?

Mr Sperring—I would have said it is the High Court.

Mr Boevink—The parliament.

CHAIR—Yes, it is the Parliament of Australia. If the parliament sentences a person to jail—and it has in the past—there is no appeal and you are held there at the pleasure of the parliament. That is interesting. Do any of you have any ideas of how we might improve Australia's system of government? Have you ever thought, 'Gee, if I could be in a position to change things, this is what I would change'?

Sean—I would have a bill of rights.

CHAIR—Why?

Sean—I did my legal studies assignment on why Australia does not have a bill of rights. I am really tired of my rights getting swapped around. I want them to be the same so that no-one can touch them—unless you want to write a whole new Constitution, as I do, because that will change Australia all over again.

CHAIR—That is a good answer.

Ben—We should have a voting system where people wrote down what they wanted. It would then all be collated and, where the same thing was put by many people—one group being larger than another—you would go that way.

CHAIR—Thank you. There are three levels of government; do we need all three levels?

Jordan—No. It is said that people have the power, but most of the power goes through parliament and there is so much power that sometimes they become corrupt with that power.

CHAIR—I do not agree with that, but that is your evidence.

Andrea—Yes, you need three levels of government. Federal government cannot look after tiny towns like Townsville, Brandon or Ayr and so on. You need individual attention by each council.

Jason—You need local government because they know what the issues are with the local towns. State or federal governments will not know how to deal with individual issues. They may make decisions that are highly unpopular with local people.

CHAIR—Hands up those who would agree with this statement: you need local government for all the local things, you need federal government for the national things, but perhaps you do not need state governments. There is a move in Australia to disband state governments, but it will probably never happen. What would you have to alter to make that happen?

Jordan—Laws.

CHAIR—Yes, but I am thinking of the Constitution. You would have to alter the Constitution.

Amanda—But isn't it that the people who run the towns will not want it changed and voted out?

CHAIR—Yes, quite probably. How do you elect—what do you call them—your school's student representative councils?

Mr Sperring—The school captains and student council processes are just starting now.

CHAIR—How do you elect your student council?

Eleanor—We nominate them on a form and hand that form in. The teachers then decide who would be the best candidates. The students decide as a group who they want to have as their leader, like the school captain and so on, and the teachers decide who our school council representatives will be.

CHAIR—Are you happy with that model, or would you like to elect all of your leaders yourselves?

Students—No.

CHAIR—We have had evidence from other parts of Australia where young people like you say that, if they do not run the electoral process within their school, that causes them to have cynicism in the Australian electoral process. Would you agree with that?

Mr Sperring—I have to intervene. The students here do actually elect their leaders in a democratic process.

CHAIR—Mr Sperring, the Australian Electoral Commission goes into some schools around the Commonwealth and runs their elections. Have the AEC ever offered to do that for this school?

Mr Sperring—Not to my knowledge.

CHAIR—Does the AEC do anything for this school?

Mr Sperring—Not in my time here and not in my previous role.

CHAIR—We took evidence this morning at the Hambledon primary school in Cairns.

Mr Sperring—I used to teach there.

CHAIR—It is a great school. The district returning officer goes to that school with all the booth materials used in a federal election and conducts a full preferential election for the school students. It is quite a fascinating process. But I am hearing from you that you are happy with the process here at this school and you trust the process. Is that right?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—It does not make you cynical of elections in general. Is that right?

Students—Yes.

CHAIR—That is good evidence; thank you for that. I think it is a credit to your teachers that you do have trust in your election process. When students nominate for leadership positions, do they have to prepare some sort of CV, or do they get up in front of you all and say, 'Vote for me because'? Tell me what happens. What is the process?

Caitlin—They prepare a speech before the actual day and present it to us and we get to choose.

CHAIR—Who gets to vote? Is it the whole of the school or just the upper school?

Caitlin—I think it is the whole school.

Mr Sperring—It varies. For the school captains, it is this year's year 11 students who will be in year 12 next year. For the student council, it is their representative at their year level. For the house captains, it is the people within the house; it is the identifiable group for that particular leadership role.

CHAIR—Very democratic.

Mr Sperring—It is. It has gone from a selection process to an election process—and we have two elected Indigenous school captains in this school this year.

CHAIR—Fantastic.

Mr Sperring—True.

CHAIR—There is a moral to that story. Anyone who thinks that an Indigenous person is not as good as any other person in this country is wrong. This is now your opportunity to ask us questions. Here we are. We are from Canberra. What have you always wanted to ask someone from Canberra? It does not matter what it is; it can be across the board.

Jason—How do you think the media perceive you?

CHAIR—You are asking about my view of the media. Your evidence, I believe, was right. I will see an issue from start to end and then I will see it reported on the media and it bears no relationship to what actually happened. Journalists try to be professional, but some journalists show that they are biased. I do not have any difficulty with editorial opinions published as editorial material, but I object to journalists writing news and editorialising in their news report. That is wrong. Editorialising should be clearly demonstrated.

I think your evidence about television is right. Television is the most believable because you see it. You can see people's body language and so on, even though you are the victim of a 30-second grab. You can give a wonderful speech on something and a journalist will take 30 seconds out of it, play it out of context and it will just look wrong. That is very difficult. All of you at this school have clearly learned not to trust everything that you see, read and hear. Work it out for yourselves. Australia is in good hands with the attitude that I am seeing before me today—and, of course, now I am editorialising. But it is true that you are a great group of students. Jason, that is the answer to your question: you cannot believe the media.

Sean—This is another media question. Do you guys feel like the good guys and the others as the bad guys because they try to put you down?

CHAIR—Sean has asked whether I feel like one of the good guys and feel that the others are the bad guys. I suppose you mean the opposition.

Sean—Yes.

CHAIR—No. I take every issue on its merits and I do not hide from the media. If there is a bad issue, I do not hide. I am there trying to explain it, but sometimes that is difficult. However, I believe that you have to be there, no matter what.

Andrea—What do you think of George Bush and the war in Iraq?

CHAIR—How about a hard question! What do I think about George Bush and the war in Iraq? I used to think George Bush was a lightweight fruit loop. But I have learned that he is not like that through contacts in Washington who know Bush quite closely. Iraq is a terrible issue and I guess I am going to put a spin on it now that is almost editorialising. When the world went to Iraq, the world thought that we should go to Iraq. For example, in Australia, both the government and the opposition thought we should go to Iraq. Do you object so far?

Andrea—When you say 'the world', who do you mean?

CHAIR—The countries that participated. It was not just the United States, Britain and Australia; a whole lot of other countries went to Iraq but in smaller numbers. The world thought

that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. All he needed to do was to demonstrate that he did not have any and there would not have been any invasion of Iraq. But he chose not to do that, so the world invaded Iraq. It turned out that there were no weapons of mass destruction; however, a dictator and a tyrant who killed millions of people was taken out of the loop. That was a good thing.

Andrea—On the grounds that they went into that country to see about nuclear weapons or whatever, America, China and Russia have nuclear weapons.

CHAIR—They were weapons of mass destruction. Your point is correct and I will explain it. Remember that in Iraq there are terrorists and fanatics, which is another story. In the world, the Islamic people suffer terribly because of a small number of fanatics who operate in the name of Islam. Because these terrorists may have been able to access weapons of mass destruction and kill additional millions of people—and remember that the terrorist attacks that we have seen in the world were principally in other Muslim countries, not in the West—the world decided that we had to fix this and show the terrorists that terrorism is not acceptable. That is what got us in there.

It turned out that there were no weapons of mass destruction. It turned out that the Sunni and the Shia then basically started a civil war and the world is in the middle of that civil war. That is what is causing the problem at the moment. The world's view is that we should get Iraq to be a democracy that can take care of its own security and, as soon as that is possible, withdraw—and we will. It was never about oil. People used to say that we went into Iraq to get their oil. We did not get any of their oil because it belongs to the people of Iraq. The reasons that we went in were right, but it turned out that things went wrong from the intelligence perspective. So you get a dilemma.

Andrea—So we have all had to pay higher petrol prices.

CHAIR—No. I submit to you that petrol prices would have gone up anyway. The price of petrol is only a function of supply and demand in the world and there is a lot of demand, so the price goes up.

Eleanor—What is happening with ethanol? Is it going to come out and are we going to see a big breakthrough with it?

CHAIR—The cane industry thinks that ethanol is its saviour, but it is not. You can make ethanol from grain far cheaper than you can make it from cane. But the real problem in that debate at the moment is that we have a drought in this country and we cannot grow the grain. That is the real problem.

Jordan—We also have solar powered cars. You could now replace all other cars with solar cars and they could be a lot safer and so on.

CHAIR—Yes, we could have solar powered cars.

Ben—Going back to the subject of war, North Korea now has weapons of mass destruction or whatever.

CHAIR—Kim Jong Il.

Ben—Yes. Why don't we just send in special forces to do what the Americans did to Japan and just bomb the hell out of him?

CHAIR—Are you saying that we should nuke North Korea?

Ben—Yes.

CHAIR—We do not do that because we respect other people's rights and we expect other countries to respect our rights—and Kim Jong Il is not doing that. Here is a person who lives in the most incredible luxury, loves every minute of it and basically keeps all of his people starving. It is a horrible situation. You probably saw Alexander Downer when he called in the North Korean ambassador and said, 'Ambassador, we object to what you have been doing and I want to show you why.' He pulled out a photograph of the Korean Peninsula. The photograph showed North Korea and South Korea at night. South Korea was a blaze of light and in North Korea you could not see anything. It was a stark example of what is wrong with North Korea. It was just terrible.

Glen—What do you think is our appropriate reaction to their testing?

CHAIR—The appropriate reaction is diplomacy. You have to keep talking. This guy in North Korea is foolish enough to decide one day, 'I will just unilaterally invade South Korea.' Imagine what would happen if the North Koreans came pouring over the border into South Korea. Remember that the capital of South Korea, Seoul, is only 80 kilometres from the border; they would be there in just a day. We would have World War III immediately and nobody wants that. China and Japan are paranoid about it.

Sarah—What is your stance on the IR laws?

CHAIR—We have had the same industrial relations system in Australia since Federation—and you know the world continues to change. We live in a global village. My son lives in Townsville and works in Laos. He flies 2,000 kilometres to work and then flies home again. You will be doing that. You compete not with students at Curtin high school; you complete with students in Mongolia, New York, Britain and so on. It is a global village. If we do not keep our economy and our workforce productive and competitive, our jobs will go somewhere else in the world. It is as simple as that. There are no barriers any more. If somebody over there can produce a widget 10c cheaper than we can produce it, it gets produced over there.

There is no reason why we should cut Australian wages. We know that in Asia wages are very low, but they are low because their productivity is low. Here in Australia, as long as we have terrific productivity and competitiveness, we can keep paying ourselves good wages and have a high standard of living. But you cannot do that if you have an industrial relations system that is not relevant to the 21st century.

I will give you an example of what is happening under the new laws. A spray-painting business here in the city said to its employees, 'We can do an AWA with you. We are not going to cut your wages. We are going to do good things for you, but they will be good things for us

too.' They put their staff on a mining industry agreement, which means two weeks on and one week off. So, instead of having a two-day weekend, their staff now have a seven-day weekend and they love it. They can go away from work for seven days and be with their families and they can do more things. The employer also said, 'You can work as many hours as you want and I will pay you for every hour you work.' It is a great deal for the employer too. By just talking at the local level in the local workforce, you can do good things between employer and employee. I thank you for your evidence and I thank you for your superb questions. Mr Sperring, you must be mighty proud of this group.

Mr Sperring—I sure am.

CHAIR—You did not choose them especially. If this is the future of Australia, Australia is in good hands. Thank you everybody.

Proceedings suspended from 3.10 pm to 3.20 pm

BEINSSEN, Mr Craig, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

BOYD, Mr Greg, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

BROWN, Ms Rebecca, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

CAMILLERI, Ms Tracy, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

CHESTER, Mr Nathan, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

COOKE, Ms Janine, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

GARDNER, Mr Jamie, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

GAVAN, Ms Erica, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

GEORGE, Ms Joan, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

STAUNTON, Ms Jill, Teacher, Heatley Secondary College

CHAIR—Thank you for giving us your time this afternoon. I have with me Dr Sonia Palmieri, secretary of this particular inquiry; Stephen Boyd, secretary of the joint standing committee as a whole; and Justin Baker, whose work is in administrative support and research. We are inquiring into how well electoral and civics education is being conducted in this country. We have been all around the country and taken evidence all over the place. This is a great credit to you, Mr Principal. We have never had so many teachers at an inquiry, so thank you for coming. We have just had a number of students here who were very impressive. They were not chosen because they were impressive, but they were really impressive. Your students have given us a lot of great evidence, Mr Sperring. You must have been proud of the answers they were giving us.

Mr Sperring—Absolutely.

CHAIR—We need to get to the bottom of a number of things. Please put up your hands those who are responsible for teaching civics and electoral education here. There are six of you. What other subjects do you teach?

Mr Chester—I teach English and ancient history.

Ms Brown—English.

Mr G. Boyd—Film and TV, SOSE and drama.

Ms Staunton—SOSE, English and English communication.

Mr Gardner—I do film and TV and media.

CHAIR—In relation to electoral aspects—and I think I know the answer to this because I asked the earlier group—have you ever been approached by the Australian Electoral Commission or the Electoral Commission of Queensland to help you with what you do?

Ms Staunton—We have approached them.

CHAIR—What answer did you get?

Ms Staunton—They were very good. When we were doing our unit on voting and how to vote—teaching students what the voting process was all about—we had a vote here at school. We contacted our local division and Steve Brown came in. He set up booths for us, ran us through the whole process, conducted the vote and decided who had won the vote.

CHAIR—He did a preferential count.

Ms Staunton—Yes. It was very good. We ran that system in electing our senior leaders some years ago. It involved the whole school community.

CHAIR—We have been getting evidence that that kind of process really engages the students.

Ms Staunton—It did.

CHAIR—It is very worth while. What kind of training or professional development opportunities are there for you to teach electoral and civics education? Is it adequate? Is there none? Did you learn it when you were at university?

Ms George—You acquire it through personal experience.

CHAIR—Does everybody agree with that?

Teachers—Yes.

Ms Staunton—It is a life skill.

CHAIR—Of those who teach this, how many personally feel that you have not had enough training to teach it and that you could do with more professional development? Are you game to answer that? Deep down, do you feel that is the situation?

Mr Boevink—It depends on what year level you are teaching it at and to what year level you are going. If you are looking at the process of making a law, that is something I feel competent with. It is a superficial understanding. I assume that most people would have an understanding about how parliament works—the roles of the upper house and the lower house and those types of things. You do your own research. As long as you are sticking to that type of level, I feel confident with it. But that would vary per teacher as well.

Ms Brown—I feel that there is enough information around in order to get what you need to teach the kids. The government and parliamentary websites and things like that are particularly awesome. I find I do not need to go anywhere else. I can get the information I need from those sites. I have the resources.

Ms Gavan—There are interactive kits freely available to us.

CHAIR—That is good news. Have you made any attempt in the school to link civics education in the classroom with extracurricular activities?

Ms Gavan—Here it is part of the school life. Only this morning, Mr Sperring was reminding our students at assembly that selecting our captains is part of being a good citizen. It is a skill they have to have in the real world.

Ms George—In my senior legal studies class, I talk about the importance of people voting. I talk about countries where voting is not compulsory but voluntary. I talk about those sorts of things.

CHAIR—That is very good.

Ms George—I really push such issues as it is their civic duty to vote and that, if they do not do so, they cannot gripe about a single thing.

Ms Camilleri—I think actually across our curriculum—and it is a focus of our school—there is the importance of civic participation in everything from voting to fundraising to just participating in what happens in the big world.

CHAIR—We had evidence about that yesterday in Brisbane, where it was suggested to us that civics should be across the curriculum, which is what you have just said.

Mr Sperring—I would like to reinforce that. If you dig around, you will find a lot more of that activity across this school tied up with the concept of sustainability and the four elements of sustainability—economic, political, social and environmental. Democracies are fragile within themselves and need support. The point is really made about it being our civic duty to help those in need, whether that is kids collecting for appeals or the blood bank donations that are on next week. All that stuff is on all the time.

CHAIR—Excellent. I put this question to all of you: why then is it that more than half of the 18-year-olds entitled to be on the electoral roll are not on the electoral roll?

Ms Brown—I am quite young myself and I think a lot of it has to do with apathy and a lot of it has to do with fear.

CHAIR—Explain ‘fear’.

Ms Brown—Fear that they will make a wrong decision and, if that person gets in and then maybe does not stick with some of the things they have promised, perhaps they will feel responsible for that decision.

Ms Camilleri—We do a lot of education about voting and civics when they are in year 10 when perhaps they feel too far removed from it. It is not until they are 18 that they get to vote, but when they are in year 10 it seems like such a long way away. I am not suggesting we should not be beginning that education then, but it seems that it is never referred to again.

CHAIR—Do you all think that is a fair and relevant comment?

Teachers—Yes.

CHAIR—But you would probably say, 'If I were to try to do a refresher in year 12, where would I fit it into my teaching day?'

Ms George—It only comes into year 12 legal studies.

CHAIR—So the whole school does not get exposed.

Ms George—Not to that depth.

Ms Brown—We do talk about the effects of voting and electoral decisions and so on in modern history. We do a fair bit of that. We look at Australian history, all the way from Federation through to the present. So we are linking it with civics and citizenship and all that sort of thing, but we are not specifically teaching the electoral process again in year 12.

Ms Staunton—Another problem we have here is that traditional subjects, like modern history, are becoming less and less popular and fewer students are being exposed to a course where that may be revisited in the senior years. That is a problem too.

Mr Sperring—I think it is part of the wider picture of disengagement and individualisation—of a person looking after themselves first and foremost rather than looking after others. We talk about kids disengaging from upper primary school and not wanting to learn. The number of people in service clubs is declining. The Defence Force numbers are falling significantly. Then there is the number of people who are willing to coach a sporting team. All of that is disengagement. In themselves, the fences around houses isolate. All of the media coming into the house helps to isolate people and we disconnect and isolate ourselves from community and group. I think that is the really big factor.

The second factor and a related part of that in my mind is that we tend to engage more—at least I do—with people you can engage with and whom you see as real and not plastic. The media, to some degree, is at fault, as came out in the last session, in presenting people as plastic. Also, I would like to associate with somebody that I think is a good role model. Sometimes politicians themselves leave something to be desired in terms of role modelling for the nation. I think that is also part of disengagement.

CHAIR—When I sit in the House in question time, I am embarrassed—literally embarrassed.

Mr Sperring—Watching it on the TV, I get embarrassed and everybody else does too.

Ms George—I really think one of the reasons why you have this disengagement and why young people are not voting is because they do not understand party politics. They really do not understand party politics.

CHAIR—Well done. We were given some evidence about that.

Ms George—It is one thing to know about the electoral process but knowing about party politics and political parties is just mind-blowing. Just recently I got up in front of a class and talked about party politics. On one side of the room there was a girl who hands out how-to-vote cards on election day for her dad and on the other side of the room was another person who does something else for another party. I have to be very neutral, but I do talk at some length about party politics. It is a big scary thing. It is one thing to teach students about electoral processes but, when it comes to election time, that just blows them away because they know nothing about party politics and they know nothing about what the parties stand for.

Ms Camilleri—It is really hard to explain to 15-year-olds. There is so much that goes into your understanding of party politics.

CHAIR—It is interesting that this has come up now because it was fully discussed yesterday and we received evidence that teachers should be engaging students with party political material and we freaked. But then I think we came to the realisation that teachers are professional people who know and understand the need to be straight down the line and that there is nothing wrong with articulating policies for this party or that party and then letting people choose, but letting them choose and not throwing any bias.

Ms George—That is right.

CHAIR—You would all feel confident of doing a professional job in that regard. Is that right?

Teachers—Yes.

Ms Staunton—We would all feel extremely confident in doing that. But this business of disengagement occurs also because 15-year-olds have competing interests. They see politics as being in the adult sphere and not something that they are particularly interested in. They will do it if we ask them to do it, but the level of interest is not there. They have too many competing interests.

Ms Cooke—If you think about the access that students have to party politics and politics generally, basically it comes from the media. If you think about what they are getting from the media, they come to see politics as a game. You get a statement from the opposition or you get a statement from a particular politician. It is like a seesawing game. That is the only image that students have access to because, generally speaking, it is not pursued in secondary schools, apart from those isolated subjects that some students do. No general discussion occurs within most homes. There is no unbiased, open look at what politics is all about.

Obviously, there has to be a certain level of maturity to engage in it, but it also has to be started early enough so that it can be a developmental process. We cannot just trust that it is the sort of thing that can be done in the homes. We certainly cannot trust it to the media because you

know yourself how you are portrayed in the media. It is a question of whether it should be dealt with in schools, where the curriculum is so crowded at the moment I would not know where you would put the damn thing.

CHAIR—It has been put to us also that there are two sides to the fear situation: what students might understand or appreciate about party politics and the teachers' fear of repercussions from talking about party politics in classrooms, and then having parents coming back saying, 'What have you been teaching my child?' Is that a common situation?

Ms Camilleri—Actually I do not think so, because it is done professionally and I think most teachers are professional enough. If they are presenting subject matter objectively, they are not going to run into that problem.

CHAIR—What are you using to present that information?

Ms Camilleri—In the English unit I am doing at the moment, I am just teaching them about ideologies—what is a socialist ideology and what is a capital ideology—and what they represent along a continuum and tying that into my English unit. At the moment we are looking at protest music. You might bring that kind of discussion in there and do it in a way that says, 'This is what this ideology represents; these are the ideas that it stands for and this is the opposite. This is where the Liberal Party in Australia sits along that continuum and this is where the Labor Party sits along that continuum.' I use a diagram to illustrate that. I cannot see any professional being stupid enough to go in and preach politics to a class of kids. If they do that and cop flak from parents for doing so, they deserve it basically.

Ms Gavan—I agree. I do not think it happens very often. It did happen a great many years ago when I was teaching in Toowoomba and an economics teacher was teaching communism.

Mr Sperring—If I just take the words 'human relationships, AIDS and sex education,' some of the feedback we used to get 10 or 20 years ago was, 'What are you doing to my child?' We do not get that feedback now because it is part and parcel of the way of the world. If there was more engagement in terms of what some people might perceive as sensitive political processes, there might be some of that initially, but eventually that would wane, just like the phone calls from parents saying, 'What are you doing to my kid?' when we went to drugs, sex, rock and roll, AIDS, death et cetera, because it was sheer life and death.

CHAIR—We saw in Tasmania a group that produced for schools a manifesto that was provided by each of the political parties: 'This is what we stand for and why.' That was quite well received, I think. It just told in black and white in plain English what it was about.

Mr Beinssen—I think we can draw an analogy here with religion. We can teach religion or about religions; we can teach party politics or about party politics. It is important to keep that 'about' happening.

Ms Brown—I was talking with my kids last term about this disengagement issue and some of it actually comes from the fact that they are not critically literate. They need to be up with a certain level of critical literacy so that they can pull apart what the politicians are actually saying. A lot of them said, 'With the last election, a comment was made that interest rates would

be lower under a certain party. Interest rates are now going up, so how can we believe what they say?' I told them it was one of those ambiguous statements where you have to sit down and critically analyse what the person is saying and not take it on face value. I think many kids take it on face value and then they say, 'He or she lied, so why should I trust politicians any more?' I think they see it as being too hard to break down at the grade 10 level at which we are teaching.

CHAIR—You make a good point. You will have seen a national debate emerging about the possibility of a national curriculum. What do you all think about that? I guess that we are specifically thinking about electoral and civics education, but how do you feel about a national curriculum?

Mr G. Boyd—In the mid 1990s, I was working for an education centre in Brisbane and can recall clearly that there was a similar push at that time. People with a sense of history were saying, 'This is an idea that has been revisited again and again in the history of education in this country. The states ultimately come back to a mistrust of any belief that we can arrive at a valuable national consensus on what the core elements of the curriculum should be.' The whole outcomes push certainly failed again in the mid-90s. It was meant to be a nationalised set of statements; at the end of the day it came back to state based statements on those outcomes. I just think it is a waste of people's time and energy, when we have collaboration happening across state boundaries anyway, to revisit something that, since Federation, states just do not want to know about.

Ms Cooke—My initial response is that it is not something that I am in favour of, if what I understand by a national curriculum is a uniform curriculum across all states. I believe that there are points where we can have uniformity. For example, we do have the national goals that we can have in our benchmarks across the states. We can have them in certain outcome statements—that we already have—which are national. But the further you get into some sort of nationalised homogenous curriculum the further you get from the kids' needs and context based programs. The fear is that, if that ends up driving our curriculum, the really good things we can do, which are the kids based stuff, will be the lower end of what we do. For me, that would be an absolute shame.

The other thing that would really worry me relates to Queensland having the only system that has school based assessment, and I would be very anxious to learn that that was going to be disbanded because of a national curriculum. Does a national curriculum mean national testing et cetera? If that were the case, I would say, 'No way. We have fought too hard to get where we are now and what we have is very good.'

CHAIR—The evidence we have received on this subject is that teachers think there would be a lot of similarity in a state based curriculum but there is room for individuality in the states. Do you agree with that?

Ms Brown—That was going to be my point. If we move to a national curriculum, what is good for New South Wales students or even just Sydney students may not be good for people in Townsville, say. When you look at SOSE, for example, we can do lots of learning on the Great Barrier Reef and the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef, but that will not work in Adelaide. It is the same with politics. The political issues in Queensland will be very different from the political issues in other parts of Australia. It is good to focus on those because that is where our kids will

be living. These are the sorts of things that people engage with within our state and to teach them about things that are happening in Tasmania or somewhere else might not be relevant.

CHAIR—What kind of direction or assistance do you get from the state department of education with the teaching of civics and electoral matters?

Ms Cooke—It is not so much the state education department. QSA, the Queensland accrediting authority for our subjects, has civics education as one of the strands within SOSE. If we just go back a little, it is one of the ACONA, which is across all of the states in Australia, so there is similarity there. If you look at the SOSE KLA across the states, I think you will find a huge similarity between our civics syllabus and the syllabus documents that exist in the other states. They are going to be put together. What differs is the content. The benchmarks are pretty much the same; there is a little bit of difference but not a lot. But the civics syllabus sits there. Education Queensland's role is more to provide direction in terms of pedagogy and resourcing in ways that we are going to assess reporting frameworks and curriculum frameworks. But the syllabus content, the curriculum content, is a QSA responsibility for all three—the independent sector, the state sector and the Catholic sector.

CHAIR—Is there anything that we have not covered that you think might be relevant?

Mr Sperring—I would just like to make this point: I think you have got from here today that the concept of democracy, citizenship and anything to go with our way of life are priorities and important in this school for students and for staff. Those messages have come through in both forums. So it is not the 'what' that is in question; it is the 'how to do it' and I would just like to make this point. I could drive a T-model Ford to get around the place, but in the year 2006 it really would not be a good choice because the competition is a little bit tough with the other vehicles on the road—but I could do it. Likewise, I would hope that nobody would think that we could help to fix this problem by trying to do what we did in schools in the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s—the 1970s and the 1980s in particular.

In the 1970s, there was a subject in Queensland called citizenship education. It was known as 'cit ed', but everybody called it 'shit ed'. We cannot use a 1970s or a 1980s solution to fix the problem. We have to do something much more innovative, because it is a whole new world and I would make the following points—and I am not saying that this is what to do. I could talk about the blood bank or 'deadly Australians'—snakes and stuff like that—and the arts council do something on a road show basis regarding life skills or what is called life education. They do something that is different from doing it directly as a subject based in school. I think, whatever the approach is, it has to be multifaceted, it has to be different from what existed before and it has to be able to be such that kids can tune in, because we live in a world of selfishness and disengagement. I do not know what the answer is, but I know that nothing that has been done before will work in the future, because we have gone from an industrial age into post-modernism and a technological information age. They are the points that I want to make.

CHAIR—Wise words. I think that is a good point to finish on. The committee and I looked at which school to choose to come to in Townsville and we have not been disappointed in our choice of this school. We have received excellent evidence here today. It has been really good to have this opportunity. Thank you very much. You can be very proud of your students and clearly you can be very proud of your teachers as well. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving us

your time this afternoon. We appreciate it. You will in some small way help our inquiry and help the recommendations we will make to the government, which ultimately will help to bring forward better-informed Australians.

Mr Sperring—We appreciate your remarks. If you had the time, would you give these teachers the same opportunity that you previously gave the students?

CHAIR—Mr Sperring is referring to my having said to the students previously—after I had fired a torrent of questions at them, which they were very good at answering—'It's now your turn to ask us some questions,' and he is saying that could be dangerous! Thank you, everybody.

Meeting adjourned at 3.50 pm