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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Thursday, 19 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: Senators Mason and Murray 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.

Committee met at 9.07 am

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—Good morning everybody. I declare open this school forum being held as part of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education during Celebrate Democracy Week 2006. I would like to welcome the 32 students who are here this morning who successfully applied to be part of Every Voice Counts! Thank for you coming to Parliament House today. The committee's inquiry began in March of this year and it was referred to us by the Special Minister of State. He directed the inquiry to inquire into, among other things, the adequacy of civics and electoral education in schools. In addressing this question the committee has now conducted nine school visits and forums. Early next week we will be going to Cairns and Townsville. We will be wrapping up in Darwin in November.

The evidence you give today—and we expect all of you to have a view—will be recorded by Hansard and it will attract parliamentary privilege. That means that in about a week's time you will be able to log on to the federal parliament's website and see what you said today on the web. When we ask you questions or you ask us questions, we need you to stand and we need you to always say your name first—it does not matter if you just use your Christian name—because that will go into the *Hansard* record.

This morning I have with me Senator Andrew Murray, senator for Western Australia; Senator Brett Mason, senator for Queensland; and Sonia Palmieri, the inquiry secretary. My name is Peter Lindsay and I am the federal member for paradise—I am a Queenslander and I come from Townsville.

Senator MURRAY—Beautiful one day, idle the next!

CHAIR—Thank you for that. We have about an hour. We are very lucky today: normally on a Thursday morning the House of Representatives goes berserk—the Senate is always well behaved—and we have all sorts of divisions and quorums and so on, but that has not happened this morning, so that is terrific. On the screen here you can see the Attorney-General speaking in parliament. I think he is introducing a bill on the Copyright Act.

Let us start. Just relax and be yourself. When you want to say something, do not worry about what the person next door to you might think about what you say—just say what you think. We are all different, we all have views—you have probably already discovered that. It is important that you all be open with us, because that is the way we get the best evidence. Could those of you who are from Queensland please raise your hands. Thanks. You all get two points for every question you answer,

As an ice breaker, let's ask what motivated you to apply for the Every Voice Counts! forum this year. If I cannot get someone to answer, I am going to nominate somebody. So, what motivated you to apply?

Tim Ghan—The chance to learn about politics and democracy in our society and how it works. And also basically to have fun and meet new people.

CHAIR—Excellent.

Tim Ghan—Also, a week off school!

CHAIR—Fantastic. Has someone else got a view?

Senator MASON—Have you always been interested in politics?

Tim Ghan—Not really. This week has been good because I have been learning a lot about politics. I have been starting to get a bit more interest in it.

Senator MASON—This has kindled your interest?

Tim Ghan—Yes, a bit—a lot actually.

CHAIR—Who will go next?

James McNicol—I was interested in seeing politics and the way our federal government works in more of a behind the scenes way. I know how the media puts it forward, but I was interested in seeing it for myself.

CHAIR—Thank you, Jim. Come on girls, you are being left behind.

Georgia Burke—The behind the scenes part of parliament really interested me. I follow it reasonably on the news and in the newspapers. I know that later we are being talked to by advisers and all that sort of thing. That really interested me, so I thought I might follow that path.

CHAIR—Well done.

Emilia Budisavljevic—The first thing I thought was kind of bad: I thought it would be good for my resume. And then there would be four days off school, which meant double Maths, double English—get rid of that. Also I have always been interested in politics and I think it is really interesting how we can communicate with people when normally we do not really.

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator MURRAY—I must tell you that it has not been good for my resume!

Senator MASON—Nor your bank account, Andrew!

CHAIR—Let me introduce Michael Danby, the member for Melbourne Ports in Victoria.

Mr DANBY—Good morning everyone.

CHAIR—Because he is Victorian, you have to speak slower to him.

Mr DANBY—I thought it worked the other way around—in Queensland you spoke slower!

CHAIR—Okay. We will have one more answer and then we will move on to the next question.

Natalie Tavassoli—I was more interested to be in an environment where other people voice their opinions with actual knowledge. Sometimes when you are in a classroom you want to be able to discuss and debate, but unfortunately the people that surround you do not have the insight to give the type of knowledge that you want to use and to have a proper discussion. I thought that, being here, we would all be interested and, as we all wanted to come of our own free will, it would be enjoyable and we would learn a lot.

CHAIR—Okay.

Senator MASON—Jim, you said something about wanting to get the inside running or the inside knowledge about politics, because you think the media does not necessarily reflect the reality. What do you mean by that?

James McNicol—I think the media sometimes blow things up just for the entertainment value. We watched question time yesterday and the way that they managed to pull out the big uproars and stuff. As far as I can see, that is one part of government, but having been here I can see that there is a lot more stuff that goes on that the media just ignores because it is not entertaining and with-it and fast action for the public to get interested in.

Senator MASON—You said 'an uproar in question time'. It must have been in the House of Representatives.

James McNicol—Yes.

Senator MASON—We do not have uproar in the Senate. Thanks, Jim, that was a good point.

Senator MURRAY—I thought the young woman over there made a really good point about people having insight and knowledge when they give opinions. One of the things you should understand in the background of all that we do is how much information we are fed or we seek. With everything we do we try to inform ourselves, so the opinion we express is not off the top of our heads. That is an important thing to understand when you are watching people express opinions: they have read bills, explanatory memorandums, had information from the library, consulted with people. You made an important point.

Mr DANBY—Television has completely changed the nature of coverage of parliament. If any of you want a historical project, go back 20 or 30 years ago and look at how any of the serious newspapers reported parliament. There were very long reports on the serious debates and who said what and when. That is all now seen through the backward telescope of television into your loungerooms for 10 or 15 seconds on the nightly news. The serious stuff that used to be the *Herald* or the *Age* or the *Australian* is not there.

CHAIR—We want to do a quick quiz to test your knowledge on electoral education. The first question is: who can tell me what the qualifications are for electoral enrolment in Australia?

Senator MASON—There is no phoning a friend!

Tara Alexander—Don't you have to be 17 to enrol to vote?

CHAIR—Well done, one point.

Tara Alexander—Does a criminal conviction count as to whether you can vote?

CHAIR—Yes.

Tara Alexander—Is it if you are currently in jail or is it if you have had a criminal conviction that you cannot vote?

Senator MURRAY—Under the new laws, if you are currently in jail you may not vote. If you finish your sentence, you may re-enrol. The only law which prevents you from voting is the one related to someone being convicted of treason.

CHAIR—There is one other qualification; what is that?

Daniel Thomason—Being an Australian citizen.

CHAIR—Yes. Do you have to change your enrolment every time you move house or are you automatically enrolled at your new address?

Natalie Tavassoli—You do have to change your enrolment.

CHAIR—Correct. Well done. Does every state and territory have the same electoral system as the federal parliament? We have a 'yes' there and a 'no' here. Let us have a show of hands. You are outnumbered by the noes, because the noes are correct.

Mr DANBY—Do those people who said no come from New South Wales?

Bailey Campbell—Yes.

Mr DANBY—What system do they have in New South Wales?

Bailey Campbell—I am not quite sure about the system they have in New South Wales, but I am aware that the Northern Territory have a problem with their votes, as they can simply be overthrown by Canberra because they are not a state and they do not have the population.

Mr DANBY—That is not quite what we were banging on about.

Senator MASON—But you got the right answer.

Senator MURRAY—Right answer, different question!

James McNicol—I think Queensland has some different rules about the number of preferences you have to allocate. I am not quite sure what it is, but I think you have to allocate the full number of preferences or something.

CHAIR—It is called optional preferences.

Mr DANBY—Yes. We should not just leave you up in the air. The difference is that in the upper house—they do not have an upper house in Queensland—you just vote one. That is what the advertising is and that is what confuses people. This is what our problem is, including with people your age. There are differences between the federal system and the state system. In the federal system, when you go to an election you have to allocate your preferences. In New South Wales and Queensland, you only have to vote one.

CHAIR—But you can express a preference if you want to.

Senator MASON—It is optional.

CHAIR—Optional, yes.

Senator MASON—Does everyone understand allocating preferences? If there are six candidates you have to write one to six in order of your preference.

Students—Yes.

Senator MASON—If it is in a Queensland state election, as Mr Danby has said, you can write one, one and two, one, two and three or one, two, three, four, five and six if you want.

Mr DANBY—In New South Wales it is only the upper house that has optional preferential voting.

Senator MURRAY—Yes.

Mr DANBY—You have to give your preferences in the lower house.

Senator MURRAY—Many of you who said 'yes' were of course right if you were thinking about the basics of our system. The basics of our system are the same everywhere. Everybody is franchised. There is compulsory attendance at the polls in every election. You do not have upper houses in a number of places. We have 15 houses in nine governments. The basics are the same but the actual systems differ between state and federal.

CHAIR—Thanks, Senator Murray. The last question in this bracket relates to the election of the Australian Senate. Do you know what electoral system we use to elect the Australian Senate? Can someone describe that?

John Mckuong Dhol—It is proportional voting. You use proportional voting in the Senate.

CHAIR—Yes, exactly. Well done.

Senator MASON—It is proportional representation, isn't it, Mr Chair?

CHAIR—Yes. Does anyone know how many senators there are from each state?

Daniel Tran—There are 12.

CHAIR—Well done. What about the ACT?

Daniel Tran—Twelve.

CHAIR—How many?

Daniel Tran—Twelve. No, two.

CHAIR—Two, that is right.

Senator MASON—How many senators are usually elected at each general election? How many are elected for each state?

Daniel Tran—Twelve.

Senator MASON—No, that is not right. At the last election, how many were elected for each state?

Chloe Roberts—Six.

Senator MASON—Six. It is called a half Senate election, unless there is a double dissolution, which has not happened since when, Mr Chairman, 1984?

CHAIR—Something like that.

Senator MASON—Or was it 1987?

Senator MURRAY—It was 1987.

CHAIR—Yes.

Senator MASON—In 1987, all the members of the House of Representatives and all the senators were up for election. But since 1987 we have had half Senate elections and rather than having 12 elected each time, six are elected each time under the proportional system. Does everyone understand what proportional representation means? What does it mean, David?

David Brown—It means that each state has equal representation within the Senate rather than it being based on population.

Senator MASON—Yes, you are right; that is part of it. So, for example, Tasmania has 12 senators and New South Wales has 12 senators. Is that right?

David Brown—Yes.

Senator MASON—And that was the price of Federation, wasn't it, when the colonies came together to form a federation? Does everyone understand that?

David Brown—Yes.

Senator MASON—One of the prices was that the Senate had to have the same powers as the House of Representatives.

Daniel Tran—So everyone is represented equally.

Senator MASON—That is right, Daniel. Does everyone understand that? That is right, but in terms of electing the Senate how does that work? Does anyone know? What does proportional representation mean if there are six senators elected from each state? How are they elected? The whole state votes as one. For example, if you are in Queensland and you are in Mr Lindsay's seat of Herbert, based on Townsville, you get a little green slip and you vote for the House of Representatives. You go one, two, three, four, five and six. Has everyone got that? In the Senate, you get a big white ballot paper, and usually you vote above the line just one: Liberal Party, Labor Party, National Party, Democrats or whatever. But how do you elect six senators out of that process? Does anyone know?

Lawrence Hamblin—Under-the-line voting where you preference from one to however many candidates are running that year and it is ordered by the person who gets the most votes to the person who gets the sixth most.

Senator MASON—Yes, that is good. You are all getting close to it and Senator Murray will correct me if I am wrong because he is much better at this sort of thing than I am. He can add up; I cannot. In effect, if you get half the vote in Queensland you should get half the senators. Does that make sense? It does not quite work like that but basically there is a quota. I will not go into quotas; it is too boring. In effect, if the Liberal Party gets, let us say, one-third of the vote, it means that one in every three Queenslanders has voted one for the Liberals above the line. There are six senators and they get one-third of the vote, how many senators do they get? Two. Does everyone follow that? So, in effect, if you get half the vote you get half the senators. Does that make sense?

Daniel Tran—Is that penalising people?

Senator MASON—How is it penalising the people, Daniel?

Daniel Tran—If the people in the state are not voting, they are penalising their own representation. They are not having proper representation because they chose not to vote.

Senator MASON—That is true. If people choose not to vote, that can happen. In essence, the whole state—two million Queenslanders—vote in a federal election. If one million vote for the Liberal Party, the Liberal Party gets half of the senators—three out of six. Does that make sense? That is roughly how it works.

Senator MURRAY—The statistics are that about 95 per cent of all votes in the Senate count—that is, you get someone who represents the party you voted for. But five per cent do not count, so about five per cent lose out.

Senator MASON—That bell, ladies and gentlemen, is for prayers in the Senate. We resume at 9.30. I am going to miss out on prayers today, Senator Murray.

Senator MURRAY—I am sure God will forgive you.

CHAIR—Of course, the House works harder. We started at 9 o'clock this morning.

Senator MURRAY—We need to pray more!

CHAIR—We are going to flip to civics education now. Senator Mason wants to ask you some questions on civics.

Senator MASON—When the chair asked me to ask you these questions, the first thing he said was, 'Brett, do you know the answers?' I think I do, but you will have to correct me if I am wrong. It will be interesting to see what sort of knowledge you have about civics. When and where was the first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia established?

Sarah McMillan—Wasn't it in Melbourne in 1901?

Senator MASON—Well done! Two points. Do you know the day and the month?

James McNicol—I think it was 19 May.

CHAIR—Yes, it could have been. I was going to say 3 September, but that is when we chose the Australian flag.

Senator MASON—We do not like smart alecs here!

Mr DANBY—Has everyone seen the picture in the Exhibition Building? They do not only have caravan shows there, they have other things.

Senator MASON—What is the role of Australia's Governor-General, and who is currently the Governor-General?

Tiffany Williams—The Governor-General represents the Queen here in Australia, and his role—

Senator MASON—What do you mean by 'represents Her Majesty the Queen'?

Tiffany Williams—Official duties as part of the Commonwealth.

Senator MASON—Does he have any official function in terms of legislation?

Tiffany Williams—Yes. Is he the final signer of new bills that come in?

Senator MASON—Yes, very good. Royal assent is given by the Governor-General or Her Majesty the Queen—but usually by the Governor-General.

Senator MASON—Who is the Governor-General?

David Gilks—Major General Michael Jeffery.

Senator MASON—Very good.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Danby)—Our chair has not lost interest, he has just gone off to be present at a quorum. Do all of you know what a quorum is? We have to have a minimum number of people in the House when someone draws attention to the state of the House—that there are not enough people. The government has to constitute the quorum, so Mr Lindsay rushed off there to do that. Okay, let us press on.

Senator MURRAY—Do you know the difference between assenting and proclaiming?

Senator MASON—I do not even know the answer to that!

Senator MURRAY—It is easy. When the Governor-General signs something into law, he is assenting. But, of course, for the public to get to know about it, you have to proclaim it. That is the difference between those two things. You will sometimes hear people talk about whether an act has been proclaimed, which is about whether it has been made known; when it is assented to is when it is signed.

James McNicol—Isn't that the deal with this new media stuff? It has not actually been proclaimed yet—

Senator MURRAY—Or assented to, either.

James McNicol—so it is not officially law, and the old law still applies.

Senator MURRAY—That is right.

James McNicol—So it is not until it is proclaimed that it is actually a proper law?

Senator MASON—Correct—well said. This is a tricky question. What are some of the functions of the federal parliament? I am going to add a little rider to this, if that is all right. What is it that decides the functions and powers of the federal parliament? Where are they delineated? Was that you, Muhammed?

Muhammed Akbulut—No.

Senator MASON—Was it you, David? Who whispered something?

David Gilks—About the Constitution.

Senator MASON—What does the Constitution say about the federal parliament?

David Gilks—The Constitution establishes the parliament as the house of federal power. It assigns rights to the federal government, leaving the remainder to the states.

Senator MASON—Very good. It delineates the powers the federal parliament may legislate with respect to that, doesn't it? Does everyone understand that? It is in the Constitution. Do you know which section?

David Gilks—Section 100.

Senator MASON—No.

Muhammed Akbulut—Section 51.

Senator MASON—Very good. Section 51 lists all the powers. Does everyone understand that? It is very important. The Commonwealth Constitution was drafted late in the 19th century, after the convention debates in the late 1800s. All the powers of the federal parliament are listed in section 51. There are 29 or 30 subclauses. The federal parliament may make laws with respect to things like what?

David Gilks—External affairs.

Tiffany Williams—Education.

Senator MASON—External affairs, customs, education—excellent; dead right. What else?

Tiffany Williams—Health.

Senator MASON—Yes. Under which head of power would that be?

Daniel Thomason—I do not think it is section 51, but section 100 says that the state can legislate the use of rivers for trade or irrigation.

Senator MASON—It could come under the trade and commerce power, which is under the Constitution. What is the really important one that the federal government is responsible for? We hear a lot more about it today. Someone said 'the defence force'—yes.

Mr DANBY—The young fellow sitting behind you was about to ask something.

Senator MASON—You are a Queenslander too, and I ignored you. I am sorry. Can you think of any other functions of federal parliament?

Liam Howitt—They are responsible for national security. In the early Constitution, they were responsible for ensuring the safety of Australia, from 1901. Now, particularly in the five years

since September 11, they are responsible for national security. Since the late sixties, they have been responsible for aviation security as well.

Senator MASON—Yes, aviation is another one.

Mr DANBY—Could you give the microphone to the young gentleman who gave me the correct answer about proportional representation? You gave us a good answer on proportional representation. We inherited our political system from the British. Do you know what the political system is called?

John Mckuong Dhol—Westminster.

Mr DANBY—Very good. What distinguishes Australia from the British system and other systems? Some people have used another word to describe it. We do not have a House of Lords; we have elected senators. We have a mixture of what the founding fathers decided to have. Does anyone know the word that describes the mixture?

Daniel Tran—Washminster.

Mr DANBY—Do you know what that means? It means that, when they decided to establish the Australian political system—they did not want to have the House of Lords—they wanted to have, like the United States, an elected senate and a lower house, elected on the British system. So the Australian political system is a mixture, with part of the American political system: an elected senate. Over the years, in my opinion—the other senators may correct me—the senate has more resembled the American Senate, with committees and investigations of people. These guys have tried to take on the role of very powerful committees, more like you see in the US Senate. The Australian system is a very interesting system. It is a mixture of those two systems.

CHAIR—We are going to change tack now. We need a show of hands here. Who thinks young people of your age are cynical and apathetic about the political system in Australia? Almost everybody has put their hand up. Is there anybody who thinks young people are not cynical and apathetic? Yes. We are going to get a response from every person along the bench there. Why are young people cynical and apathetic?

Angel Babao—I am from Queensland. Basically I do not think students have enough education about the political system and what happens behind the parliamentary process. Just this year in April I participated in the YMCA Youth Parliament, which is state parliament. We were put into committees—for example, I was in the education committee. We had to write a bill and then present it in state parliament. Our bill was about selective schooling and cross-school enrolment, and just doing that gave me a real insight into things, because kids are turned off by politics. Kids from my school are turned off, and they say: 'Oh, Angel you are so smart; you're going into politics. We do not even understand all that.' Programs like youth programs and stuff that youth can get involved in make it a lot easier so that kids do not get turned off about politics.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. I will ask again: why are youngsters apathetic and cynical?

Tara Alexander—I think that young people are cynical about politics because we cannot actually take very active participation in it yet. We can enjoy things like forums, as we are doing now, and state parliament YMCA, but we cannot actually vote yet. We can make changes in that we can write petitions and we can try to involve ourselves as much as we can, but at the end of the day we still cannot vote and we still do not have a voice.

CHAIR—Thank you. Next, please.

Kelly Fleming—I think that some young people have no incentive to learn about it because we do not have the rights to vote yet. Also there is a lack of education. At our school we do not learn much about politics. I do not come from a politically-minded family. That is why I came here—to learn more, because I know nothing about it, really; I just wanted to see what happens.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Jacob Tarrant—I think perhaps we should be taught more at school. I thought politics was a bit boring, as well, and when we went to question time yesterday I got a bit of an interest for it. Maybe if the schools took their students to question time it might be good.

CHAIR—Two to go.

Rossina Ngwenya—I think that the problem is that the lack of interest is due to the lack of knowledge. I think that that comes back to the school systems. I think we really need to learn a lot more about politics so that we can engage the younger audiences. I think that I am personally a great example of that, because I really had no interest in politics and my main motive for coming here was just to learn a lot more and get some knowledge so that I could make opinions based on that knowledge. Yes, so I think that is good.

CHAIR—Okay. The last response.

Natasha Hagan—I reckon we need to learn more at school. We do not really learn anything about the things that happen in our parliament. They need to start teaching us so that we know what to do when it comes to our time to vote.

CHAIR—Thank you. None of you has given the response that we typically get elsewhere. You have all said that you do not learn enough at school but, in thinking about why young people are apathetic, is there some other reason that has nothing to do with education at school?

Tom Howard—I believe that a lot of youth look at certain things that the government has done and disagree with it. They feel they cannot really make a difference and they kind of get disillusioned with it all.

CHAIR—Ten out of 10.

Tom Howard—And they just—

CHAIR—That is the point. Who feels that they are not empowered? Who feels that their vote does not count—if you could vote? That is less than half. So the other part of the group feels that

votes do count—is that right? Who would like to say why votes count? Can we have somebody who has not had a go. Why do votes count? I am having difficulty here.

Tim Ghan—What was the question again?

CHAIR—Why do you feel that your vote counts?

Tim Ghan—Because people feel like they have a power if they have a vote. So basically what I thought was: optional voting for 16- to 17-year-olds. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds feel that they are mature enough to make decisions as well, and I am just saying that, if they really want to, then they can go out and vote.

CHAIR—Yes, okay.

Anika Bratzel—In contrast to that, I think that it is really hard for young people to feel that they are actually represented properly in parliament. I mean, when you vote—me personally—I do not get represented by the major parties, and there is no room for minority parties in federal parliament, so my views are not represented by parliament at the moment.

CHAIR—Andrew, do you want to respond to that? Andrew is a Democrat.

Senator MURRAY—I am an endangered species. And when you hear me and see me, you can see why! What you say is both true and not true. A parliament does not represent every demographic fully. It does not represent all the racial types, all the gender types, all the age groups and so on. So that is perfectly true—it tends to be skewed a bit. But the other thing is that we do have a plural democracy, and the advantage of a proportional system of course is that those who get a low vote—if they get sufficient low votes—can get in. So in this parliament—and it is not commonly understood because of the way it is reported—there are actually eight political parties. Some of those are kinds of offshoots of and are very close to the major parties: the Country Labor Party and the Labor Party are very close; the Country Liberal Party and the Liberal Party are very close. But then you get, as very distinctive groups, Family First, the Democrats—

Senator MASON—Barnaby Joyce.

Senator MURRAY—the Australian Greens, the 'Barnaby Joyce party'—a very well-known party! People often forget that the National Party is a minor party—very small in terms of total votes. So you might not find someone there whom you can attach yourself to in terms of a party, but, in terms of individuals, you probably will, because the variety of opinions in the parliament is quite extraordinary. One of the mistakes people make is to just think of parliament as question time, but, if you listen to adjournment speeches and to speeches where people talk about things that matter to them, and their engagement in debates, you will find a remarkable number of views that you can actually agree with. So it is actually knowing more about what goes on here, rather than having a presumption about it.

Mr DANBY—Can I just say something to the young lady who made that point. I will be a bit less timid than the senators. Isn't politics and voting just like life—you do not get everything that you want? You have to make a choice between what is available. Sometimes you can vote in

the Senate for the pure version of what you would prefer, and other times you have to make a choice between bad, worse and fairly good.

CHAIR—Now here is your opportunity—do you want to respond?

Anika Bratzel—No.

Senator MASON—Oh, go ahead.

CHAIR—Come on.

Senator MASON—Go on.

Anika Bratzel—Ultimately that is the decision that we are forced to make, but I still think young people like myself in Tasmania—that is where I come from—feel the same way as I do: there is no way that we can be represented. It is really hard, because all the politicians are older—I do not think that they really know where we are coming from in some issues.

Mr DANBY—But in the Senate you have a much wider variety of people. For instance, you would have Greens that could quite easily get elected in Tasmania, so you have an option there.

Anika Bratzel—That is why the Tasmanian system is really good, because it gives the chance for minority parties to have a voice.

Mr DANBY—But that minority party thing exists in all states. For instance, in Victoria, we had Family First elected. You may not agree with them, but that was other people's choice.

CHAIR—You were talking about the Hare-Clarke system?

Anika Bratzel—Yes.

CHAIR—We have been asking you questions; here is your opportunity to ask us some questions. What have you always wanted to ask a member of parliament or a senator? So there you are—that is an offer you cannot refuse. And as long as you ask everybody else and not me, that will be okay!

Liam Howitt—Do you think the media plays a role in decisions in politics? Do you sometimes feel that politicians play to the media to try and win public support? I have always felt that the media does not give a full perception of what is going on, and I noticed that very much in question time yesterday. I think the media also plays a role in why youth are disengaged from politics. So does the media influence decisions and do you influence the media?

CHAIR—You just gave us some great evidence in your question. Who would like to respond to that?

Senator MURRAY—I can be first. The media are businesses and have to make money, and they decide how they will make money. So they are always guided by that, and they are not guided necessarily by what you would think of or we would think of as the public interest. So

they do not necessarily cover what is going on, and they certainly do not cover it in depth. That is the first point. So you are under-informed if you rely on the media—it does not matter what range of media.

The second point is that the media, like anybody, have their particular obsessions and interests and things which really drive them. So if they run a campaign and they are strong and they activate the population, we have to react to that because it generates public opinion. That is the good role of the media. Say they get excited about trafficking in women from Asia and they start exposing all those stories. We then learn of those stories, the public get agitated and we pass laws to try and close it down. That is a very good example of media force and power.

But the media effectively operate as a censorship mechanism. They decide what to print and what not to print. Every one of these people would produce masses of speeches and material which would never reach the public. Therefore, that is why political parties are necessary to get an opinion and perception across, because it is very hard for an individual to get across through the media. So the media have immense power. It is selective power but I do not think it is a malicious power—it is just natural to the way in which the media are structured and operate.

Senator MASON—You are right, and in a sense your question touched on this: it is a sort of symbiotic relationship. We need the media and the media need us and we sort of leech off each other. Do politicians use the media? Yes, of course we do. But they use us. It cuts both ways. And Senator Murray is dead right that some of the most important work we do in this place—the negotiations behind closed doors—never reaches the media. Some of the really good committee work, Andrew, never does see the light of day, does it? Yet some histrionics in question time in the House of Representatives will be on the Channel 7 and Channel 9 news that night, and it just does not reflect the reality of parliamentary life.

Mr DANBY—In 1948, the great actor Humphrey Bogart made a film called *Deadline—USA*, where he is a reporter, and one of the great lines in that film is, 'We need more reporters, less journalists.' What he was saying was that people who create public perceptions about politics often infuse a lot of opinions in their reporting. I think that has become more and more so these days, and journalism is politics. If you can spot the agenda in how people report something or how certain newspapers report certain events, you are three-quarters of the way towards understanding politics. So politics is not just us; it is them as well. One of the ways around it is this. I am so cynical about journalists that my favourite way of communicating with people is to write my own stuff—to try to get comment pieces in newspapers or in online publications et cetera, so you get straight to people. That is one way of handling it.

Tiffany Williams—I just want to know how interested people are in hearing the views of youth. Do they want to hear from us? Do they want us to come forward with our views? How interested are they in receiving what we have to say?

Senator MURRAY—Do you mean young people?

Tiffany Williams—Yes.

Senator MURRAY—I will go first. Everyone here is in many guises and most of us are family people, so things which concern you concern us—either with children or grandchildren,

or whatever. So you are connected that way and through your interest in the community. But also you have to be receptive to things. Very few politicians are in here for their own selves. They come in to make changes and to benefit society, so the answer to your question is: if they see something which concerns them about society, they want to do something about it, and therefore what you tell us does matter if it strikes a chord with the politician. If it does not, that is different.

CHAIR—We need to hurry on because there are a lot of people wanting to ask questions. Tiffany, back to you: why is it that less than half of all eligible 18-year-olds actually are enrolled to vote?

Tiffany Williams—Did you say they are or they are not?

CHAIR—I am saying they are not. Less than half of all 18-year-olds who are entitled to be enrolled are not enrolled in Australia. In other words, I am putting it back on you that you are not interested as a cohort of people. You do not have to respond to me, but I am just telling you. Let us go to this guy over here.

Jordan Badenko—Do you find that your personal opinions conflict with the views of the party, and how do you find that balance?

CHAIR—Of course, and that will always happen, but different parties have different ways of handling that. The Labor Party way of handling it is that they will caucus, they will all express a view to each other, and then the caucus will resolve a collective view. Members of caucus are bound by that collective view, whatever it is. If a Labor Party member votes against the caucus, then they are out of the Labor Party. In the Liberal Party—

Mr DANBY—That is not exactly right. I would be happy to speak on our own behalf, but, anyway, go on.

CHAIR—Please. Did I get it right.

Mr DANBY—No, you did not.

CHAIR—I did not get it right. Okay. But that is their system. In the Liberal Party, in our constitution it says that no-one can tell a member of the Liberal Party how to vote in the parliament, but in practice you would not dare vote against the Prime Minister without a very good reason. What we do then is that we advise all of our colleagues and the Prime Minister that we have difficulty with this issue and we reserve our right to vote against the government. That has happened on a number of occasions, and that is good for democracy. Does anyone else have a comment on that?

Senator MURRAY—I can just give you a practical, quick example. If a bill comes up in this parliament, the portfolio holder in the Democrats forms a view, does the research and produces what is known as a party room brief. The other senators then examine that brief. If they are happy with the portfolio holder's decision, they tick it off; if they are unhappy then the decision might be changed or people will vote as they see fit. Mostly they will be happy to support the portfolio holder. So the portfolio holder initiates and the others decide.

Mr DANBY—The truth is that the discipline of all of the political parties is starting to break up more and more. That is why you have more and more conscience votes on difficult issues, where people across different political parties vote different ways. It is true, as Peter said, that the Labor Party was a very disciplined party, but I have noticed that more and more people are abstaining on certain issues and no-one does anything to them after that happens. And of course one way of handling things is the way we have unfortunately done it the last few years when people disagree with each other and that is to have massive brawls about leadership. You cannot resolve these differences of opinion, and you put one leader in or another leader in. Hopefully, we have managed to resolve that for this period of time until the next election.

CHAIR—Okay, now we are coming around this way. We are going to have David and then—what is your name?

Kyle Davies—Kyle.

CHAIR—You will be next.

David Gilks—There is a large perception that the issues that are debated in federal parliament—the economy, even workplace relations laws and the war in Iraq—are not relevant to youth. The youth do not see the impact that it has on them in terms of how the issues are going to affect them. What do you as members of parliament think you can do to make the issues appear more relevant to youth so that they do see that things like the economy and the environment do have a direct impact on them?

Senator MASON—That is a good question. This inquiry in fact is all about civics education and it relates directly to who? To you. One of the big debates going on in the community at the moment—and all of us have participated in this—is about a national education curriculum. Have people heard about that? That debate is raging. Whether you think it is a good idea or a bad idea is really a different issue. That is really not your point. But it is an issue that directly touches people of your age—for good or for bad, but it does. And even the war in Iraq: every time the government sends troops overseas, they are not much older than you are. It is not something governments do very lightly: send troops overseas, potentially into harm's way. Environmental issues: they affect not just me, but they affect you and people your age, specifically.

CHAIR—Thank you. Let's go to another question.

Kyle Davies—Do you think that Australians understand what a privilege it is to live in an Australian democracy?

CHAIR—Very good! Who would like to tackle this one?

Mr DANBY—I think they do because a lot of them travel overseas and they see how good Australia is compared to other countries.

Senator MURRAY—My answer is: many don't. I am a migrant myself and I chose to live in this country because it is a marvellous country. I think there are many Australians I have met do not understand just how good a system they have got in comparison to other countries.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mark Lord—I am not sure how to word this properly, but Senator Murray and Senator Mason both said that with the media it is sometimes and often an inadequate source of politics. What do you think? What other forms of information on politics are offered to youth in general?

Senator MURRAY—I suspect that is a division being called and we are going to have to go—

Senator MASON—We've been saved by the bells!

Senator MURRAY—so I will answer quickly. What you have got to try and do is connect with people directly. The way in which we can do that in the modern environment is through websites, through direct mail, and through things such as Mr Danby was talking about: direct parliamentary feeds of radio and television and so on. But, of course, that requires people to be interested in what you are doing, and that is the difficulty—they have actually got to want the information.

CHAIR—Senators, thank you. We will be finished shortly.

Emilia Budisavljevic—I think that with teenagers a lot of them just do not care. I think a lot of teenagers care about whether it is cool or not, and at the moment it is not cool. I think a lot of people see it as just a whole lot of men in suits—that is what I have heard—and they really do not think it affects them. Like, one of my friends compared to the school social hierarchy: it is like the principal—how do you get through to him? They are always busy. We have sent letters. We get angry, we have sent letters and we just get the automatic response, and we do not really think they really care.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Sarah McMillan—I personally feel that the youth feel disconnected because these are such huge issues in the world. A lot of people I know said: 'You're going to a youth forum. What kind of world are we living in? What is a democracy?' They do not know the definitions of these things, so they do not know how lucky we are. In your opinion, would you say that we need to spark interest? I believe that we do, because we just have no understanding and we do not know how any of it ties back to us. We need to basically be more informed so that we can have that understanding that the big things that go on in this very place do actually affect our lives and the lives of the people around us.

CHAIR—Thank you. I think we all agree with you. That is what this inquiry is about, and trying to spark interest.

Lawrence Hamblin—I think the reason the youth are a bit disassociated with politics is because we are used to instant gratification. Nowadays communication is practically instant: everything, we want it, we get it now. But politics is quite a long-term affair, in relative hours of course. What do you think of that—does it sound at all right?

Mr DANBY—There is a lot of truth to that.

CHAIR—Yes, absolutely.

Mr DANBY—It is not instant gratification. Someone said that politics is the slow boring of hard bores, and you are not going to get instant answers out of that.

CHAIR—The issue that has not come up this morning is that, of course, with young people, why they are not engaged is because of their interest in the opposite sex at this age, for whatever reason.

Daniel Thomason—Do you think that the current way the media portrays politics in Australia is beneficial or detrimental to the progress of democracy in this country?

Mr DANBY—There are a whole lot of different media—some are good and some are bad. I think it is bad that we do not have parliament reported seriously, because it means that people see all the cynical stuff on the nightly news through the backward telescope of television. You see an untypical vignette. You do not see issues that could matter to you, whether it be the environment or changes to the workplace laws that affect 17-year-olds when they are going to be in workplaces and have their lifestyles changed.

These are all serious issues and you should know more about them. If they are not reported seriously, you think we are just a whole lot of boring people in suits. That is the effect that is wanted by some of the people in the media who are being paid very high salaries. They want to exert themselves as people who are very powerful and denigrate the earnest representatives of electorates, like Mr Lindsay and me.

CHAIR—I do not think democracy is under threat in Australia. I think we have a very robust democracy. However, as a person and a practitioner in the industry, when I watch the reporting of issues I just shake my head and say: 'That is not what happened at all. That is not the focus of what happened.' And that is a worry.

Neeshima Rao—With regard to why young people are not really that interested in politics, do you believe there is a lot of information out there that is actually targeted towards our age group? That would help us to understand issues better and understand why we should be interested. I do not believe there is much information.

Mr DANBY—I think we could all do a lot better—absolutely. There is one thing that I think all politicians are doing a lot better. We are starting to move into the world of blogs, websites and stuff like that, which I know younger people use. One of the things you should do as an experiment is to get onto the website of your local MP. Some of them are very good, but some of them are really primitive and embarrassing. Shake them up about that. Email them and see if you can get them interested. Use an easy access point like that.

Neeshima Rao—When you are finding information, you find that a lot of the stuff that is written is really dry. Unless you are really interested in a particular topic, it is boring. Reading and getting interested in matters is hard. You have to have your interest engaged in some way, and that is not really happening.

CHAIR—Another point I would make—and we have had evidence on this—is that, deep down in your hearts you people do not trust the information that is on blogs. You know that, if there is something there, you should check that it is in fact correct. It is a worry with the internet in general that you cannot trust the accuracy.

Caitlin Weightman—I think the general disinterest in politics is because people are not passionate enough. There is not someone whom they really want to get voted in. They are not interested because there is no-one that they really want representing them. When they go to vote, it is more like, 'I do not want him in, so he'll do.' It is not like, 'I really want someone in.' They just lose interest.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Bailey Campbell—At the risk of being crucified, I actually see the government as holding most of the youth as hostages. Our thoughts and ideals are not going to be the same as the thoughts and ideals of your voters. When we come of age to vote and to kick you out, you have either left the parliament or we have long forgotten about you. Do you see that as a possibility?

CHAIR—In relation to being held hostage, there are actually two jail cells here in Parliament House. Parliament is the highest court in the land and, if we sentence you to jail, there is no appeal. A jail cell in Old Parliament House was actually used in the 1940s. We do not exercise that power at this stage, but it is there if we want to. I object to your comment, because young people and older Australians have equal access to me.

I had a student down from Townsville in the last sitting week and he was concerned about David Hicks. Do you know that issue? He said, ' I want to tell the Attorney-General what Australia should be doing.' I said: 'Right. Come with me,' and we went and saw the Attorney-General. And he, a single student from 2,000 kilometres away, told the Attorney-General of Australia what his view was. What a great democracy we live in. You can do that. You do not have to salivate over kicking us out in a few years time. You need to act now!

Student—But we just tell them the stuff and they do not do anything.

CHAIR—No, that is not true. This claim that we don't do anything is not true.

Student—Not for us.

Bailey Campbell—My problem might be that if you have 10 20-year-olds who are registered voters and, let us say, they are saying yes, and then you have 10 students from a public school saying no, I question who you are going to be going with: the voters or the kids of the voters?

CHAIR—No, what we are going to go with is the policy issue, the principle of the matter. That is what you go with. It might be that the youngsters win. Who knows. We have time for two more questions.

Tara Alexander—This is not a question, but can I just say something. Everyone has been talking about how there is a lack of education about politics in school. I completely disagree. I have been to five schools in my lifetime, in different states and territories, and in every school I

have done politics. I have learnt about the House of Representatives and the upper house and I have learnt how it works. I have learnt about democracy. We learnt how to vote. Now I am in high school and we have politics as a class. I really think that there is opportunity for kids to learn about politics. It is on TV; it is on the news. It is just their lack of interest. People are not motivated.

CHAIR—Okay, thank you for that. We have a question over here—no arguing among yourselves!

Georgia Burke—Do you believe that perhaps a solution to this problem of cynicism of youth is like breaking a cycle—because if the parents and the adults in their community have these views of politicians being people higher than them, involving issues that do not involve them, and that is what they talk about and portray to the children in their communities, then the children follow those views and are like: 'Yes, well, if they're just doing all these things that don't involve us, it doesn't matter. I don't need to vote.' So maybe it is not even about involving the youth. It is about changing the views of the communities that they live in.

CHAIR—I will answer the question with a question. Do you think it is our role to get you engaged or is it your role to become engaged?

Georgia Burke—I think because we are a certain group of Australian youth obviously we are going to get ourselves involved and I will get myself involved in any way that I can, but I think it is important that we involve every type of youth in Australia—and the only way that we are going to do that is to reach out to them. This is hard because I am not talking as me as such. I think there is such a vast array of people in Australia and if we are going to involve everyone we have to work really hard.

CHAIR—Michael and I agree with that point you made. You had the last question, but we have a supplementary question—is that right?

Alice Hudson—I was just going to say something about what Tara said. I think in schools, in my experience, what we have really been learning is about the system: yes, there is the lower house and then the upper house, and how a bill gets passed. But there is only a limited time in schools, and so a limit on what you can learn about, and I think it is more important that we understand our part in democracy more than the whole overall system. We really need to know about the parties and what they stand for and how we can take our place, rather than how the system works, because if we do not know about that it is still going to work, but if we do not know about our role it is not going to work.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. We will have to wrap up now. I am being told by your officials that we have gone way over time. I thank you very much for your contribution today. What you will not know until you see the report come out is that there are reasons why we have been asking you certain questions. You have given us some very good responses. Thank you indeed for that. I wish you well in your stay in the nation's capital. It is a great place and you have seen for yourselves what a wonderful democracy that we have.

Mr DANBY—I hope that actually being here and seeing how it works has made you all less cynical and apathetic about politics.

CHAIR—There is one formal bit we have to do, Mr Danby.

Mr DANBY—I have to move a boring, legal conclusion to this thing.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 10.10 am