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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON

ELECTORAL MATTERS

Monday, 20 November 2006

Members: Mr Lindsay *(Chair)*, Mr Danby *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Brandis, Carr, Hogg, Mason and Murray and Mr Ciobo, Mr Griffin and Mrs Mirabella

Members in attendance: Senator Hogg 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.

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SHEPHEARD, Mr William Peter, Electoral Commissioner, Northern Territory Electoral Commission

CHAIR (Mr Lindsay)—I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics and electoral education. Today we will hear from representatives of the NT Electoral Commission and the Local Government Association of the NT. We will also be holding a roundtable discussion with a number of civics and electoral education professionals. I remind all witnesses that although the committee does not require evidence to be given under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament. It is my privilege to welcome our first witness from the NT Electoral Commission. We have received an excellent written submission from you. Do you want to present any additional submissions or make a short opening statement to the committee?

Mr Shepheard—I would like to give a bit of background about myself and my agency. I have been in charge of the Northern Territory Electoral Commission, in my capacity as Electoral Commissioner, for the last 18 months or so. Prior to that I spent five years as the Australian Electoral Officer for the Northern Territory with the Commonwealth, and prior to that I spent seven years with the Western Australian Electoral Commission. I have been in electoral administration for about 30 to 35 years. I first had involvement in the Northern Territory electoral system in 1980. I served for six months on the original Aboriginal education teams that were operating at that time, and I have performed management positions in the Northern Territory over the years.

The Northern Territory Electoral Commission was established in 2004. Prior to that, it was an operational unit of the Chief Minister's department. It basically just ran elections. Since its establishment its functions have been broadened. It now takes in public awareness, research and a whole host of other responsibilities. Its functions virtually replicate that of the Australian Electoral Commission. In that context and with my background, I have worked hard over the last 18 months to try to build as many bridges and work as collaboratively as possible with the Australian Electoral Commission for the delivery of all our services.

I have no opening statement per se; I am happy to field any questions you might have. One thing I would like to say is we have a unique jurisdiction here. Public awareness is a particular concern of mine. Thirty per cent of the electorate are Indigenous and living in remote areas. I think we need a customised service delivery system to service them. I also think that a number of initiatives that we have started in more recent times have been very positive and, if you would like to ask me questions about that, I would be happy to elaborate.

CHAIR—That happened to be my first question, because under your NT Electoral Act 2004 you were charged with a number of things. One of them I would like to ask about is the promotion of public awareness of electoral matters. That was specifically in the legislation. Can you explain to us how you have accepted that challenge, how you have gone about it and where you think you are not doing well enough at the moment? This is not about being critical of your operation; it is about trying to seek positive ways of improving the situation. Talk to us about promotion of public awareness, all the sorts of things that you do.

Mr Shepheard—I was not there for the first 12 months of the operation of the NT Electoral Commission. I can speak about the last 18 months and how we have tried to give this a higher focus. We have been distracted by a lot of electoral events here in that time, as you are probably aware. However, we have managed to do a few things. One of the important things is the establishment of a joint working party with the Commonwealth. It is called the Joint Electoral Services and Programs. Basically it puts people in charge of strategy for public awareness and also their operatives get together on a monthly basis. We pool our resources to deliver an integrated program, which includes public awareness. That is especially useful in relation to remote electors because, as you could imagine, there are a lot of logistical challenges to be faced and by pooling our resources we can be far more effective in doing that.

CHAIR—Are you pooling on a fifty-fifty basis?

Mr Shepheard—It has been fairly informal, but as our organisation gets more settled in its structure and its own strategies then we will certainly be able to contribute more. There has been a lot of goodwill and it has not been a question of who is contributing more at this stage. Certainly, in the longer term, that certainly will not be the case.

There are a couple of initiatives that are a part of that too. One is setting up a joint office in Alice Springs. The Alice Springs region is a critical region for delivery of any electoral service. It services probably a quarter of the NT electoral population, but if you expand that to include the areas of Western Australia and South Australia who have the same needs and who use Alice Springs as a service delivery hub then it is an even greater service delivery area that we have. At the moment we are only in the fledgling state of setting up an office there. The arrangements at the moment are that the Australian Electoral Commission's office there was previously unmanned and we have placed an officer there.

Hopefully by early next year we will be able to provide some more resources there and move to better premises than we currently have. The arrangement that is in place now is pretty much an interim one; it was put in place just before the 2005 general election. Given these advancements and initiatives with the AEC that I have been speaking about, I would hope that we would be able to put together some modest education facilities in both Darwin and Alice Springs that will help us deliver a number of our electoral services, particularly increasing the public awareness of people who are visiting regional centres and using distance delivery mechanisms to deliver public awareness messages as well.

CHAIR—Would these centres target younger Australians or all ages?

Mr Shepheard—I think it would be across the board. We have identified a number of target groups in the Northern Territory. Some of those are fairly generic. There are senior people, obviously people in the youth age group, Indigenous people, people with non-English-speaking backgrounds, new citizens—a whole range; all that sort of stuff. If we had a modest facility available, then I would certainly expect the full range of targets to be looked at. I think that that is also in keeping with the Australian Electoral Commission's development of education centres.

CHAIR—In relation to public awareness in Indigenous communities, would you say the current situation is poor?

Mr Shepheard—Yes, I would.

CHAIR—In practical terms, do you see it changing?

Mr Shepheard—Firstly, I think it is a really big challenge. Obviously, over the years I have done quite a bit of observation of the various methods that have been used—for example, the AEEP and the ATSEIS programs. They have all delivered more effective public awareness to those areas. But one thing that comes through pretty loud and clear is that you have to have an ongoing program. And you have to build networks within communities. Those communities operate more on what you might call a congenial basis than a transactional basis. So you need to build relationships fairly strongly in those communities.

I think the other thing with electoral administration or education is that they do not come to the forefront of anybody's mind unless there is an election on. We can get a lot of traction in delivering a message at election time, even though we have to compete with politicians and parties, but we are not geared up, resource-wise, to make the most of that. For instance, in public awareness, in terms of schools or anything else, there is more general interest amongst the public in seeing how things work at election time, but of course we are preoccupied with running elections.

CHAIR—This is a tough question. On the effectiveness of the public awareness campaign, the committee could report to the parliament: a lot more needs to be done; we are not getting out there; people do not know; awareness is very poor. Or we could look at the other side of the coin and ask: should we be spending scarce taxpayer dollars to try to achieve something that will never be achieved? What is your advice to the committee on that?

Mr Shepheard—After observing fairly highly resourced programs in the past, I can see where people are coming from in looking at outcomes and the lack of outcomes. I guess it becomes more of a philosophical question, too. I think there is a real need to at least teach people the basics.

CHAIR—Are you really saying that the information should be available to all Australians? If they do not take it up—well, they do not take it up.

Mr Shepheard—There are a couple of things I would say; that is certainly one of them. I would also say—without trying to digress too much—that we have many more tools and mechanisms available with which to deliver public awareness these days. I came up here, on this last stint, in the year 2000, and the electoral commissions were not even using television—Imparja Television. We had just started looking at radio networks to try to convey messages in language. These are all necessary developments and I think that, properly managed, they are not particularly resource intensive. That is still not saying that we do not get out there in the field. What I am saying, in the Northern Territory context at least, is that, if the two electoral commissions, as agencies, have a very cooperative arrangement, then there are now enough field people within their own structures to supplement that.

The other thing related to that is the level of understanding in the communities. We recently had a by-election in Stuart and we had six candidates run for that by-election. The informal rate was something like 14 per cent. Since I have been at the NT Electoral Commission we have kept

statistics on the general election and that particular Stuart by-election. What we can say, although we still have to put an internal report together, is that one-third of the electors in Stuart either failed to fill in their ballot paper formally or required assistance to fill in their ballot paper. I think that is an important statistic to know in terms of the service delivery and the philosophical argument about what our obligations are.

CHAIR—It Stuart an urban electorate?

Mr Shepheard—No, the Stuart electorate takes in probably about 20 per cent to 25 per cent of the Northern Territory. It runs down the Western Australian border and its precincts go as far south as right towards the outskirts of Alice Springs.

Senator HOGG—I want to take you back to that one-third who fail to fill in the ballot paper correctly—I think that is what you said?

Mr Shepheard—No, not quite. Fourteen per cent failed to fill their ballot paper in formally. That was a giant leap I think. At the previous election it was only four per cent. But what I should say there is that at the previous election, as in many elections before, we had only two candidates and it was very simple to fill in the ballot paper. When it went to six candidates in the Stuart by-election, it jumped from four per cent up to about 14 per cent.

Senator HOGG—Was that a first-past-the-post, a preferential option—

Mr Shepheard—Full preferential—the same as we have in the Commonwealth. One of the benefits, or luxuries I suppose, in giving a public awareness message out in the Northern Territory is that the systems are the same. In fact there is a strong nexus between Commonwealth and Territory law.

We found that what was supplementing that 14 per cent informal rate—because at the last election for the first time we also did surveys of ballot papers—was that in remote areas, unlike the urban areas where more of the European population is voting, the vast majority of the informal votes were unintentional formal votes; they were not protest votes in any way. So you make the assumption that 14 per cent of people had difficulty filling in their ballot paper and were not expressing their franchise, then you add to that our statistics, which we gleaned from the polling officials, on the number of people who were having assistance—and you presume that they were formal votes because those people were being assisted by somebody who could fill in a ballot paper. That constituted another 18 per cent. In the end, 32 per cent or 33 per cent of people in that Stuart by-election either could not fill in their ballot paper correctly or could not fill in their ballot paper without assistance from somebody. That is the profile of the electorate we are talking about. If I can go back to an earlier question—

Senator HOGG—Can I just interrupt you there, because you have raised something that I have raised with other groups, and that is the nature of the ballot paper itself. Was the ballot paper in English?

Mr Shepheard—The ballot paper is in English in the Northern Territory elections. In that election we also had photographs. So it is not a question of not being able to recognise people. Most of these people are fairly prominent individuals. We are talking more about skills in

literacy, in numeracy and also in understanding the system—understanding, for instance, that they can get help. We talk about public awareness, but it can be done at various levels. The very basic level is what I am talking about, where people know that they are obliged to get on the roll, that they are obliged to vote and that this is the way you fill in a ballot paper. Those sorts of things are at the very elementary level. We can go up above that to how the bicameral system works and all of that. That is at another level. We can even take it further, depending on what the target group is. But in those remote areas, when the question about public awareness is posed, I would have to say that we are really looking at pretty much the elementary level.

Senator HOGG—So, in the interests of converting that almost one-third—in the broader sense—of votes from being informal to formal, is there a need to look at some other way in which people can cast their votes in those communities, such that their vote becomes a valid vote? We may well be terribly fixed in our own mind and bound by the ballot paper, which is a piece of paper, and I know we may be opening up Pandora's box, but it is a question that has to be asked because the will of the people at some stage has to be seen to be done. We participated in a very difficult debate in the Senate just last week. A number of senators were absent, but at the end of the day we had to see that the will of the Senate prevailed as if the people who were absent had participated, which was not easy. So I am just wondering whether we now need to think outside the box in terms of how people in certain communities would be allowed to vote, given their difficulty from a language perspective or an awareness perspective, and in constructing a system of ballot that at least enables them to have their voice heard. Or are they going to be constrained forever by the rigours of 'dot the i and cross the t' and so on?

Mr Shepheard—One thing I would say—and this was the question earlier about what we can achieve—is that it depends on our target. It is a very challenging environment. I do not think we can afford to judge things on just whether we are going to get 100 per cent in five years or 10 years time. I do not think that is achievable. I think the real issue is about making an effort to improve something which is a pretty poor result by any standard. In terms of mechanisms, I go back to what I said before: I think there is a necessity to have field operatives in place in the electoral commissions, and they create networks. What we will be working towards, certainly in the Northern Territory Electoral Commission, is to try and divide the Northern Territory into manageable chunks so that people have ownership and accountability within the office to deliver services and to keep trend analysis going to see what improvements are being made.

The other important thing is that we have to have networks of people within the communities who are prepared to work with us on this outside an electoral event. One of the key planks that we have been trying to implement here over the last 12 months, between the commissions, is to use community council electoral events as a means to deliver the public awareness message as well as update the electoral roll and run the election. In the past, the only focus of the Northern Territory Electoral Commission was to go out, give out ballot papers, count them up and leave it at that. With our broadened functions, we are now looking to use those electoral events, which mean something to the community, to go into the community schools, where the candidates are real candidates to them, to explain how the system works and use that as a springboard for the broader electoral message.

The other thing is using technology. I am no expert in what the capacity is. I have mentioned the paper, and other experts will come along who will know more about the subject matter than I do. The Territory government, it seems to me, is looking towards using technology, creating high

schools and that sort of stuff, and getting more technology out in the field. We had broadbanding in Yuendumu just the other day, which brings them on a par with anyone in Sydney. These are the sorts of things that I think we have to look at in using other mechanisms that are not so resource intensive.

The other thing I mention there is actually getting people who work in these communities to deliver the services on the ground for us as third-party agents. The AEC used to bring in teachers to do in-service but dispensed with that as a mechanism. I can see good reasons why they did that—I think they were not assured they were getting good value for money—but the terms and conditions would be that you actually deliver: 'You go and run school council elections. We will give you all material. We can do that.'

One other thing that we have not got off the ground yet that I really want to get off the ground is a Northern Territory Electoral Commission's website. Naturally the AEC has a website which is pretty advanced. It has a lot of information on it and is a very busy website. From the Northern Territory perspective, the profile of our electorate is unique and our needs in some respects are quite different from the rest of Australia. I would like our website to be developed for more customised materials. I am happy to work with the AEC to put them on there, because I know that they do not want to keep clogging up their website. The website, if it is progressed in that manner, could be a very useful resource for people in the field working in remote areas, supplemented with some in-service trading. We could start having people doing the transactional stuff for us out in the field more than we do in the public awareness arena at the moment.

CHAIR—One of your other charters is research. You gave us an example of looking at trends and so on. Is there any other research that you have been looking at doing?

Mr Shepheard—I have an agency of only half a dozen people. To be honest, we have been running elections ever since I got here. We have tried to dabble with research. I mentioned the efforts with the general election and the Stuart by-election. That is going to be followed up with field work to chase up what happened at the Stuart by-election, which happened a year later.

CHAIR—Okay. I think the answer is that you have not been doing a lot, and I understand why. Let us move on. You have said—which was interesting, I thought—that the lack of engagement of young people is not necessarily due so much to apathy but due to a lack of engagement with the governance process. Have you got some advice to us on that? We have had students tell us that they could not care less: 'It doesn't touch our lives. Who cares?' I am interested in your view of that.

Mr Shepheard—My view is one that is not well researched; it is just one that is derived from my experience with young people in the school environment. There is a degree of apathy. I do not want it thought that we do not believe that. My wording in the submission would have said that it is not so much that. There certainly is a degree of apathy. Young people have apathy towards a lot of things that are seen to be establishment type issues. There is a strong element of a lack of engagement in the process and the belief that they will not actually have much say in something.

CHAIR—It does not touch their lives so—

Mr Shepheard—No, it does not—that is exactly right. I do not think it is a new thing. If people think back to the first time they voted, perhaps it was not such an important thing in their life.

Senator HOGG—Regarding your various focus groups, you mentioned young people and Indigenous people. One of the groups that interest me is the service personnel here. It seems to me that you have a large community of service personnel, probably ranked only behind your own electorate, Chair.

CHAIR—Correct. I have larger numbers.

Senator HOGG—That is right. Do you have any programs that are focused particularly on their needs? If so, what do you do? And, if you do not, why don't you?

Mr Shepheard—Yes, we do. We go to their orientations, expos and that sort of thing and we have stands there. We are always happy to identify any group that has a special need. Certainly there are several big-ticket occupational groups with a lot of turnover—the teachers, the medical fraternity and the defence group. We have been involved in setting up stalls and that sort of stuff and providing information to them. At election time we take exceptional steps. At the last general election we tried to make sure that people understood that for the Northern Territory elections you can fill in an application form for a postal vote well and truly before the election is announced. We actually went to quite extraordinary lengths to get votes to the soldiers in Iraq during that very tight timetable.

CHAIR—You have said that civics and electoral education are natural extensions of each other and you have called for a coordinated holistic approach from service providers. Who do you think should do that coordination?

Mr Shepheard—It is difficult from a state level. I certainly think there is a role for the Australian Electoral Commission in that.

CHAIR—Thank you. You say in your submission:

The delivery of electoral education through schools will never be really consistent and effective unless it is made mandatory in the school curriculum.

Who should do that?

Mr Shepheard—I guess that is up to the people who set curriculum. I understand that in New South Wales it is part of the curriculum and that in other states it is not. I also say in the submission that I am sure that the barrow we push is not the only barrow that is being pushed on a state basis and that someone will have to make an assessment on whether it is important enough to be elevated to the curriculum. I am just making the comment that, if we really do want people to understand the system and be engaged in the system—and that is a very high priority of ours—then that is the way to do it: make it part of the education curriculum.

CHAIR—You talked earlier about the servicing of communities over the border in Queensland and Western Australia. Is it principally Western Australia where that service would be needed?

Mr Shepheard—The most obvious is the Pit lands. It is a normal traditional movement area over to WA and South Australia. The South Australian locations run parallel to the Northern Territory border and in Western Australia they go out to Warburton. Back in the old days of AEEP and ATSEIS, that area was managed by a field officer. If you look at Centrelink or any of the other agencies, you will see they do the same thing. So that is a logical one. We are quite happy to look at Queensland, but it is not as prominent.

CHAIR—The Western Australian Electoral Commission told us that they were relatively active in, say, Warburton. Have you talked to the WA Electoral Commission about this?

Mr Shepheard—I believe it is really a matter for the Australian Electoral Commission. It maintains a joint role under arrangements between the Commonwealth and the various states. I have suggested to the Commonwealth that our office in Alice Springs could be used. I am quite happy if they are happy to use people in that office to go to the places and to use Alice Springs as the hub.

CHAIR—Have you had any indication from the AEC about how they feel about this proposal?

Mr Shepheard—Not specifically—although, to do them justice, I do not think it has been properly fleshed out. It will come more to the fore when we start to set up the new office in Alice Springs and see the modus operandi of that office.

CHAIR—You made a comment about the adequacy of funding for school visits to the federal parliament. Does the NT bring students from around the Territory to the legislative assembly here?

Mr Shepheard—Students do come in. I am not sure about the financial arrangements. That question would be best addressed to others who are aware of that. Certainly it is common practice for remote schools to come to Darwin and go to the parliament when it sits. In more recent times, the Northern Territory parliament has conducted sessions in Alice Springs and used that as a public awareness springboard for students who actually come in. Certainly, if we had an office in Alice Springs we would hope to put in a modest sort of replication of the sorts of things you see in Canberra. Students would come in, see parliament and also be taught a bit about the systems and all that sort of stuff at our office.

CHAIR—You said:

To ensure cost effectiveness, visits to remote communities should take a multi-pronged attack on all three electoral program areas ...

I am surprised that that is perhaps not being done already. Is that right? Is there not yet enough coordination to make that happen?

Mr Shepheard—I think it is a work in progress. It would be wrong to say that it has not been happening. I can say, from the Northern Territory Electoral Commission's point of view, that we started to really do that only in the last year. Our functions changed back in 2004. Until I actually took up the post, very little was done in looking at those other two areas of enrolment. Public awareness is part of our election delivery service. What I can say is that the working relationship on a day-to-day basis with the AEC has become very productive in the last 12 months. As I said, this is a work in progress. Certainly, we have had assistance on various little research things and some of our operational matters. Quite obviously, with the small resource base that we have at the moment, it is difficult. For instance, we are running I think eight community association elections in remote areas at the moment. These are enormous springboard opportunities for us to get out there, but we just cannot physically get out there at the close of rolls and then go out there again to run the election. It is very time consuming and very resource intensive.

In the long run—and this is a task for us on the NT side—I would like to actually look at all the community government schemes and try to get the close of rolls and the nomination periods simultaneous. That would make it a lot easier to go out and do all the integrated stuff in a more effective way. At the moment it is modelled on the legislative assembly's type of timetable: the close of rolls happens, a week later you have close of nominations and then it is so long until an election. If we can actually finetune that in the small jurisdictions, I think it would be a very great opportunity for us.

CHAIR—That requires a change of legislation.

Mr Shepheard—Yes. They all have their individual legislation. But that is something that we will be looking at in the new year. We have a fair bit of legislative stuff to do on the NT Electoral Commission's side. That is a little change that we could put in place which would actually make it quite effective. But at the moment—

CHAIR—Would you recommend that to the NT government?

Mr Shepheard—Yes, I would. I have to say, though, that this is a local government issue; it is not just what I think. There might be reasons why they want to keep it a certain way, but essentially it is an electoral process and I would not anticipate any great resistance to that. In terms of the cooperation we have had, if we need to go out to a community and cannot make it, very often the AEC will go out there and do some of the enrolment stuff and all that sort of thing. There have been times when the lines have been a little bit blurred, when communities have come in and asked for some extra assistance, particularly with the electoral roll, and the AEC has actually got into the driver's seat and gone out there and done it—even though it is more in our bailiwick, if you like.

The other thing I should mention is that, because there are a lot of community governments in remote areas, there is a little bit of a push—we do not know where it will go, and it might be in the next few years—for some sort of rationalisation of those, which again will make it a little bit easier for programming things. They have by-elections as well sometimes. They have a fixed election every three years, but they have a lot of by-elections as well—and it is very hard with the resources we have, as we find in all this stuff.

One of the things about public awareness, as I was saying before, is that a lot of issues are not at the forefront of people's minds until there is an election. But we do not operate in an environment where we have fixed elections, so it is very hard to target and program public awareness to that degree. Certainly, we can lock in things like visits on the show circuit and all that sort of stuff; we know that they are going to be repeated every year. But, certainly, if we had more of an idea about when elections were to be held, we could be a lot more effective, targeted and efficient in delivering that program.

CHAIR—Mr Shepheard, you must be a good witness, because we have gone way over time—and I apologise in advance to the next witnesses. Thanks very much for your attendance today. We will send you a copy of the transcript of the evidence. If there are any corrections, just let us know.

Mr Shepheard—Thanks very much, Chair.

[9.42 am]

TAPSELL, Mr Tony, Chief Executive Officer, Local Government Association, Northern Territory

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Tony Tapsell, Chief Executive Officer of the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory. We have received a written submission from you. Did you wish to make an additional submission or would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Tapsell—No, I do not wish to make another submission. Perhaps as an opening statement I could say that a lot of the things that Bill Shepheard said I agree with, and it would probably be clear to the committee now that electoral education and civics education is not well understood by a large number of Territorians. In our submission, we focused more on the adult population. Whilst there is plenty being done in schools and places like that, we do not think there is anywhere near enough work being done for the wider community. We also think there should be more marrying of the two: there is quite a lot of good material on civics education but not nearly as much good material on electoral education, I do not think. I think that is one of the main points we made in our paper.

Just taking up a couple of things, Bill talked about change in legislation for local government. That is going to happen. The government probably will amalgamate our 63 members down to about 12, and it looks like they will have uniform electoral processes, which is probably a good thing in lots of ways. It will certainly be a lot easier to organise. It will be easier for the electoral officers to handle and it will hopefully make electoral education and awareness easier to handle as well.

CHAIR—I just want to make sure I understand what you said. Did you say that there will be 12 councils?

Mr Tapsell—That is right. They will be very large shires. The government is about to appoint a local government advisory board and it will make recommendations about the make-up of local government in the Territory. The history of local government is such that our oldest council is Darwin, dating from 1957. You can compare that with Brisbane, which dates from about 1920. Local government has not had a long history of administration in the Territory. As you know, before 1978 it was run by the Commonwealth.

When we have constituted councils, we have tended to do it virtually by towns, so most of the Northern Territory is not incorporated. About 80 per cent is unincorporated. Most of the population however lives in the Darwin-Palmerston-Alice Springs area and the government has said that it is looking at perhaps having 5,000 persons per shire. When you take out Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs, you take about 160,000 people out of 200,000, so you do not have many left. If you divide 5,000 into the balance, you get about eight. If you add them all up, you get about 12 or 13. That looks like the way it is going to be.

CHAIR—Does your association agree with the government that that is the direction it ought to go?

Mr Tapsell—Pretty much. We know that we are in trouble. We know that a lot of the studies that have been going on around Australia suggest that financial sustainability for a lot of our small councils is a huge problem.

CHAIR—Have you finished your opening statement?

Mr Tapsell—Yes.

CHAIR—You heard me ask the NT Electoral Commissioner about the adequacy of education in Indigenous communities. Your paper says:

> ... electoral education in indigenous communities is sporadic at best and is unlikely to be very effective due to the infrequency with which it is undertaken.

I asked a tough question earlier basically about if it is worth the effort and if it will ever change. Will Indigenous communities ever come up to speed with the rest of the community? What is your view on that?

Mr Tapsell—We run elected member training and we have experimented with that over a period of time. The tools now that you can get, the new technology tools, are getting better. For example, we are trying to run education courses on things like how to use waste oil effectively. We have used a product called Marvin which uses figurines. We have found that people are responding better to that because they can see pictures and they can see the problems that you can have with waste oil and stuff like that.

We want to use it more for our own local elected member education. I think products like that could potentially be used for electoral education as well. We have found that even our own elected member education is limited unless we are out there often. You can run a course on elected member training but if you do not follow it up at periodic intervals then often the impact of the training can be limited.

Senator HOGG—How is that training funded? Do you get special grants?

Mr Tapsell—We did, but then we lost it. We are trying to get it back.

Senator HOGG—Who did you get those grants from?

Mr Tapsell—From the Territory government.

Senator HOGG—So you have had no federal funding?

Mr Tapsell—No, we have had no federal funding.

Senator HOGG—Is there a need for either—

Mr Tapsell—Sorry, we did get federal funding for the waste oil, yes; but not the elected member one.

Senator HOGG—So it really boils down to having the funds available to do these programs on a competitive basis so that you can reinforce the training that has, I assume, been drip-fed over a long period of time?

Mr Tapsell—That is right. I would think we can get the messages across, and I would be confident that if they are structured well with the AEC and the NTEC—and we are willing to be a partner in this—then we can do a lot better than we are doing at the moment.

Senator HOGG—Where the programs have worked, are you able to demonstrate that those councils that function better operate in a more democratic or transparent way than those where the training has not been taken on?

Mr Tapsell—We would have some difficulty with that. We would like to think that we have had some effect. It has been some time since we have been able to get into the field. I was at Yuendumu about three weeks ago and I delivered a course again. I noticed that a lot of the elected members were the same ones, and they were asking me really good questions about matters such as policy. I was thinking, 'At least we must have got some of this through in our previous training.' But I would not say it was widespread. As Bill mentioned, we have lots of community governments. They have frequent elections, so the turnover in members is enormous. With 63 members, even if we did have field operatives we would have to be out there almost 12 months of the year to have an effect. That is all going to change with 12 councils, of course, but if the electoral processes go towards more state- and federal-run elections then I think that will be a good thing, because it will bring them all into synch, in a way. We will not have all the variables between the different elections.

Senator HOGG—But surely if you changed it to 12 councils there is going to be the other side of it: that you will need an awareness program among the communities to make them understand what has happened to their previous system, why the previous system has folded from 63 down to 12 and how the new system will adequately represent their needs and their interests. Otherwise there will be scepticism, distrust and mistrust of the new system.

Mr Tapsell—Yes.

Senator HOGG—So it would seem to me that unless that is an integral part of the package the package will only go so far, in that it will do the obvious thing. That is, it will reduce the number of councils but it will not necessarily make people any more aware of how the system will operate and why it will operate in their better interests.

Mr Tapsell—Yes, that is a good point. We will have to do a lot of electoral awareness on it. We are holding a workshop on 7 December with our members to take them through what we believe the change is going to be. One of the things we are going to say on electoral representation is that CEOs in particular are going to have to put some energy towards letting people know what the potential outcomes of such an electoral process will be. I am not confident that all the CEOs have got the ability to do that, and it is one of the things that we are going to have to put quite a lot of energy into, hopefully with the Commonwealth and the NT. The reality is that it will probably go to wards, but the wards will have equal numbers of electors. A lot of towns that currently have a council may not even have a representative under such a system.

Senator HOGG—That is right, and that will add confusion in their minds. If they find the existing system difficult to understand, to cope with the new system will be even more death defying for them in some ways.

Mr Tapsell—It could be, but they do have a precedent in that ATSIC did operate in the Northern Territory and did operate across regions. There were 12 regional councils in the Northern Territory, so they have had an election that was similar to what is being suggested now.

Senator HOGG—Has the abolition of ATSIC and the structure that was in place there led to a despair in terms of how the representation should work—when they previously had a system that did deliver? One might question the validity of what was delivered. I am not getting into that argument; I just want to know about the process of delivering an electoral system to them.

Mr Tapsell—The electoral system was the same as for Territory and federal elections, so it was a preferential system. I, along with probably a lot of other people, was quite surprised when ATSIC was collapsed at the lack of objection to it going. I also note that from my own experience the turnout for the election at the regional council in Darwin was absolutely woeful. I think that, if you got the statistics on that, you would find that fewer than 20 per cent of eligible voters voted, or some horrible figure like that. The Electoral Commission might be able to give me better figures than that.

Mr Loganathan—It was a non-compulsory election.

Mr Shepheard—There was no Indigenous role, I thought.

Senator HOGG—So there were real difficulties in the conduct of that ballot.

CHAIR—Mr Tapsell, I draw your attention to the part of your submission which talked about the social unrest. I assume you were talking about Wadeye?

Mr Tapsell—Yes.

CHAIR—You said that there is no doubt that one very useful component that could be employed to bring change in this area is that of civics and electoral education, and that might help people. Could you expand on that? What feedback have you had?

Mr Tapsell—I just do not feel that the level of it is great. As I said, we do lots in schools and things like that, but we do not direct a lot of community education at adults. Even today I get people, even adults, saying to me: 'Why should I vote? You don't have to vote. You shouldn't vote.' I think we do far more to inform our immigrants coming into the country about citizenship than we do for our own people, particularly people who have not had the benefit of a school education aimed at citizenship. For example, during my lifetime when going to school I studied Latin, French and everything else. But I never got near anything like—

Senator HOGG—So did I. We can share some sad stories.

Mr Tapsell—My textbook said it was a dead language.

Senator HOGG—Yes, that is right!

Mr Tapsell—When I first started doing citizenship ceremonies in local government, I found that whole process very informative and enlightening. Yet we do not do it for our adults who may have missed out on that education. I do not think it is well understood. The rule of law and all that kind of stuff are important principles, but we have to get through to people where there is great dysfunction and things like that.

CHAIR—Do you think any of your member councils do anything to get young people along to council meetings?

Mr Tapsell—Some of them are much better than others, but generally—

CHAIR—So they actually do something?

Mr Tapsell—Yes. I was the CEO at Kunbarllanjnja council, which is in Arnhem Land, and periodically we used to get the school to come along. Mind you, some of our meetings were not worth looking at because—

CHAIR—They came to hear the CEO!

Mr Tapsell—We did eventually adopt a code of conduct.

Senator HOGG—We have one too!

CHAIR—How would you describe your relationships with the AEC and the NT Electoral Commission?

Mr Tapsell—They are pretty good but I think we can all do a lot more. I do not think we coordinate as well as we could. Usually every four years we do a roadshow on the election. We produce a document called *So you want to be on council?* which is a comprehensive document for people who are looking to stand for election. This is mainly for the municipal councils, the big councils. We go down the Stuart Highway to all of those councils and talk to people who are thinking of standing. We get pretty good turnouts for those. But I believe we do not do nearly enough on electoral education. Because our elections are out of synch for the majority of our 63 members—as I said, some have two years, some have 12 months, some have four years; their timings are all over the place—that makes it even more difficult. Having them in the future all at the one time along with the municipalities, like other states, will be a lot more useful.

CHAIR—What is your association's view on establishing the proposed electoral education centre in Alice Springs to improve Indigenous people's participation? Do you think that will work? What factors, like mobility of Indigenous Australians, affect the success of such a centre? Would you be supportive of this proposal?

Mr Tapsell—I think it would be a great facility. It would be a good idea to coordinate it with a lot of other things that are going on. For example, we have general meetings each year where we call all our members together. They would often be good times to do training sessions alongside the meetings. We have tried to run elected member training. We have contracted the Western

Australian Local Government Association, which runs a whole suite of courses. Rather than reinventing the wheel, we asked them to help us out.

CHAIR—My understanding is that SA does it as well.

Mr Tapsell—SA does it as well and so does New South Wales; they all do it to some extent. We do it ourselves with Indigenous councils, because we take a lot of what the WA people do and say: 'That is far too complicated to present it like that; we need to break it down. We need to have much more visual presentation of concepts and things like that,' and that is why we are going with this Marvin product. We want to use more of that to get messages across. We also try to do more role-plays and things like that. The idea of having a centre is a good idea. The big problem that we find, and we have been chasing the Territory government, is getting sufficient money.

A lot of the time, if you want to hit a lot of people with the subject matter, you actually have to go out there. Because the Territory is so big, travel within it is hugely expensive. I delivered an elected member training course at Kintore, which is on the Western Australian border. It cost about $2,500 just to get there and to deliver it. That is highly expensive. We are of the view that we are not going to get elected member training done by bringing people in, because you cannot bring 10 or 12 people in, it is too expensive. It is cheaper to send somebody out there, but the cost of doing so is—

Senator HOGG—Yes. I have a question on Indigenous women. Do you have any programs that particularly target Indigenous women and try to get them active in the local government area?

Mr Tapsell—Indigenous women are very well represented in local government. The Local Government Women's Association is now active in the Northern Territory, and it has tried to get women to meet and pursue mentoring and stuff like that. Off the top of my head, I think there are more women in electoral positions in local government than men at the moment. The participation rate amongst women is high. The mayor of Palmerston is a woman and so is the mayor of Alice Springs. The mayor of Minjilang is an Indigenous lady and so is the one at Warruwi. I should know more, shouldn't I?

CHAIR—Mr Tapsell, thank you for your evidence today. We do appreciate your coming. You have given us some very valuable ideas. We will send you a copy of the *Hansard* record and, if there are any corrections you wish to make, please let us know.

Mr Tapsell—Thank you.

[10.12 am]

LOGANATHAN, Mr Iain, Australian Electoral Officer, Australian Electoral Commission

BENNETT, Mrs Jeannie, Project Manager, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory

LIDDIARD-TARUMINGGI, Ms Debra, Manager, English as a Second Language, Literacy and Numeracy, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory

WILLIAMS, Mrs Colleen, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory

HEARNDEN, Mrs Julie, Head, Humanities Faculty, Kormilda College

CALDWELL, Ms Loraine, Education Coordinator, Northern Territory Legislative Assembly

TATHAM, Mr Michael, Executive Officer, Northern Territory Statehood Steering Committee

CHAIR—I welcome you all to the meeting. Thanks indeed for giving us your time today. This is a roundtable discussion and we should do it pretty informally. If that means that one of you is making a comment and somebody else wants to jump in, just do it. Do not wait to be formal. We are all friends. We do not require you to give evidence under oath, but these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and have the same standing as proceedings of the representative houses. We have called this roundtable today because we are interested in hearing about the specific challenges that might be faced in teaching civics and electoral education in the Northern Territory. Do any of you wish to make any additional comments as to why you are here today, what your position is or who you are representing?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—I am DEET's Northern Territory representative on the National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship. I also manage ESL, Literacy and Numeracy.

Ms Caldwell—I am Education Coordinator here at the parliament, but I also work for DEET as a civics and citizenship project officer.

CHAIR—And graduate of James Cook University.

Mrs Williams—I was originally the project officer for Discovering Democracy. I am now a primary school teacher at a primary school in Darwin. Originally, I won a national award in civics education and electoral education as well.

CHAIR—Did you? Fantastic!

Mrs Bennett—I cannot beat that. I work for DEET. I am a project manager. I look after resourcing—curriculum resourcing in particular for studies of society and environment.

Mrs Hearnden—I am Head of Humanities at Kormilda College, which is an independent school here, and have a love and enjoyment of civic education. I am trying to promote that in my school.

CHAIR—Fantastic. Did any of you want to make a short opening statement?

Ms Caldwell—Probably everyone is looking at me! Basically, we have given everybody the terms of reference for the committee and I have just brainstormed a few ideas that I had as we were going through them. I am talking about the context of providing civics education here in the parliament, but in recent times we have been working quite closely with the Australian Electoral Commission and the NT Electoral Commission to promote each other. If I have gone out to a school to do a role-play or conduct a program, then I have been promoting the Electoral Commission and what they can do, and vice versa. We have also been running student leadership programs. We ran one here at Parliament House for Julie's school, for all the year 10s, and again we invited the Electoral Commission along to that to present to the kids. The kids are in year 10. They are at that age when they have to start thinking about enrolment.

We also conducted a roadshow earlier this year where we linked up with the Australia Day Council, the parliament, obviously, and the Australian Electoral Commission. Three of us went on the road and basically drove from Darwin to Alice Springs, stopping at schools along the way. We conducted sessions with some town schools, some community schools—it was quite a varied context. It reinforced to me the need for us all to work together and the fact that it is all very well to talk about civics education and electoral education, but really they are part of the whole and we have to have a holistic approach to how we deal with it in schools.

I might just pass on to Michael. We have been working together on statehood programs in schools, and I think Michael has also been talking to the Australian Electoral Commission about how we can work together with that on a referendum.

Mr Tatham—That is right. Thank you, Raine. The Statehood Steering Committee has a very strong interest in civics and citizenship education because we need to try and tell people what statehood might well be and what statehood is. We have done some exploratory work over the last 12 months with schools. We have done a number of workshops. Earlier this year, Raine and I conducted an education session with the Northern Territory Open Education Centre, where six bush schools—regional schools, remote schools—came into Darwin and we engaged about what statehood might be. As part of that we have a storyboard that we use which, if the committee is interested, I can table for the committee.

CHAIR—Yes, please do.

Mr Tatham—It has some very preliminary basic questions. For example, the first page talks about 'What is the Australian Constitution?' We talk to people about what a constitution is, what rules might be and how things work. With the seminar we did with the six bush schools we found that there was a very wide diversity of levels of understanding and information. Some of those kids required interpreters. It was not going to be any good for us to try and communicate in

the English language with those children. Some of the other students were quite sophisticated. There was a group from the Bulman school who were really interested in rule making and how things worked. They were really right into talking about constitutional development and what might be in a constitution.

CHAIR—Do you think that was a function of whoever their teacher or teachers were—that they took a greater interest in that school in civics and electoral education?

Mr Tatham—It may well have been. It just really highlighted to us how difficult some of this work is going to be for us, because we do have a project next year to go out to bush schools. The interest level of the teachers and the educators in some of those schools is really high. There were teachers at that NTOEC seminar who were very interested in the issue of: 'How do we communicate these really quite difficult concepts about what a government is, what a constitution is, what a state and a territory are, and how different things work?' As I said, we have a very strong interest in it. As Raine said, we have started opening the doors with the Electoral Commission. We had a meeting recently with the Electoral Commission people, who have appeared before you this morning, just to talk about very basic cross-promotional opportunities such as: 'If you want to vote on statehood in the future—yes or no—you'll need to be enrolled to vote. You'll need to be engaged with the Electoral Commission process.' So we are looking at what we might do next year with the Electoral Commission on cross-promotional aspects of statehood.

CHAIR—Do you mean the state or federal Electoral Commission?

Mr Tatham—Both of them. I understand the federal Electoral Commission works closely with the NTEC here. It is about getting people to understand the importance of enrolling, what the age for enrolling to vote is and all those sorts of things. We are aiming a lot of our material at younger people, people under the age of 18, on the basis that statehood may well be an issue that comes up in five years time or further down the track. We do not know. We are subject to the variations of parliamentary process, elections and all sorts of other cycles.

As I said, we have a very strong interest in civics education. We have conducted a number of different sessions here at Parliament House and also in schools across the Northern Territory—Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin. As I said, they are the main schools; we will be going out bush later on. We have done sessions that last from an hour to a full day, and they have mainly been conducted with Raine. We are also reaching out to organisations such as the Council of Government School Organisations.

Senator HOGG—How do you find the level of knowledge of the teachers? Forget the students. One of the problems we have found is that many of the teachers are ill-prepared—ill-equipped to be able to talk about this area.

Mr Tatham—I found that a lot of teachers have also learned from the process of us going to the schools. When we have given our presentations to the students, a lot of teachers have sat back, looked at it and said: 'Oh, I didn't know that. That's interesting. Is that how the Constitution works?' In my experience, a basic understanding of the Australian Constitution is not something that is very common in educators. That is my limited experience.

Senator HOGG—That is quite right. I addressed a students' convention in Toowoomba earlier this year. They were all aiming to go to a convention in Canberra, but none of them had even seen the Constitution or knew what it looked like. It was quite surprising.

Mr Tatham—I think that is a very common experience. Whenever I have talked about the Constitution and I have said the Constitution talks about the rules and the relationship between the Commonwealth and the states, that it is all about federation and the states coming together, people did not really know that. I find those sorts of basics are really lacking.

Senator HOGG—If you were not going down the path of this statehood project, you would not be rolling this out, would you?

Mr Tatham—No, absolutely not.

Senator HOGG—So who would be rolling it out in the Northern Territory?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—The national statements of learning that have been developed for civics and citizenship, and which are also attached to a national testing program, are going to refocus the whole area of civics and citizenship education on the way we deliver and what we deliver in our schools. Although the Northern Territory curriculum framework clearly sets out outcomes that focus on issues related to civics and citizenship, the national statements of learning will clearly identify the particular knowledge and understanding, including about electoral education, that our kids from years T to 10 will need to know. There will be a three-yearly testing regime that will assess their understanding and knowledge of civics and citizenship, including electoral education. That will provide a lot of opportunities for the work that we do in teaching, learning and standards—for instance, to develop materials and provide programs and support for teachers to deliver excellence in electoral education.

CHAIR—Michael, you said that you were targeting young people principally.

Mr Tatham—Yes.

CHAIR—I ask all of you: nationally only 49 per cent of 18-year-olds who are eligible to be enrolled are enrolled. Why is that?

Mr Tatham—It is a hard question to answer with a quick grab, but I would say levels of disinterest and disengagement are high. When we talk to people about statehood, a lot of people switch off. We talk to young kids and talk about how you make a difference. It is very hard to get people to engage with the idea of making a difference from being a single citizen, and how the parliament works.

CHAIR—Julie, you are a teacher: what do you think?

Mrs Hearnden—In some ways students feel that they do not have a voice. Part of my brief with students in grade 10 is to develop the idea that they do have a voice and have a responsibility to express their ideas. Part of what we have done in Parliament House here is that year 10 students took part in a committee investigation on sport in the NT. They fed into a

parliamentary committee on that and that gave them a real voice. That is where I am going: active participation.

CHAIR—Well done. Who else has a point of view?

Mrs Williams—Through the Discovering Democracy program, when it ran for a little bit more than three years—I took over for three years—one of the things we realised was that teachers, particularly primary school teachers, needed to be skilled in these areas. We teach a lot of subjects across the board so we have knowledge in different learning areas. We found that teachers really needed the Electoral Commission people to come in and give in-services. Some teachers did not even understand the preferential voting system, so it was right back to basics. In primary school we start civics right in transition by simply making simple decisions. Around grade 5 they start going to the local council, and that is when we start looking at the Electoral Commission as well. We are hoping that at least our year 7 students understand the preferential voting system. At some schools, when they run their SRC elections and house elections, we have actually had children from year 3 up to year 7 using the preferential voting system and getting the Electoral Commission to come in. I do that for my school in teaching children what the preferential voting system is about.

CHAIR—Do you use the preferential voting system for the student representative council?

Mrs Williams—Yes.

CHAIR—Does everybody use it?

Mrs Williams—A lot of primary schools do now.

CHAIR—Do you find any schools where students feel that teachers have too much influence in the election of a representative council and therefore they do not trust the electoral system?

Mrs Williams—No, not in my experience in primary schools.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—I have had that experience in my school and in other states.

CHAIR—That is a function of various schools having their own individual ways of electing. We have had evidence that says that where their teachers do have an undue influence the students become quite cynical about the electoral process.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Absolutely, as you would expect.

CHAIR—Let me market research you. Who can tell me which is the highest court in Australia? It is the High Court? Does anyone disagree? Well, you are all wrong. What happened to your civics education? So, which is the highest court, if it not the High Court?

Mr Tatham—If we are wrong, you had better tell us.

CHAIR—Isn't that interesting? Have you heard of the bar of parliament? The parliament is actually the highest court in the country. So there you go; that is a bit of trivia. Back to you,

Michael: in relation to the teaching of civics in the Northern Territory—in fact, this question might really be to all of you—in Australia I suppose you talk about the birth of our country, Federation, the Eureka Stockade, Anzac Cove and all those sorts of things.

Ms Caldwell—The Darwin rebellion.

CHAIR—That is what I was going to ask: what are the specific NT issues that might be taught in civics education? You mentioned the Darwin rebellion. Would it be the bombing of Darwin?

Mr Tatham—We certainly talk about the fact that the Northern Territory was not represented in federal parliament between 1911 and 1922, and that resonates with people. When you talk about civics education with young people, fairness and equity really resonate. So we talk about the Darwin rebellion and Harold Nelson being our first member of parliament in the House of Representatives, but also having no right to speak or vote on the floor of the House. We talk about that history, and we talk about it in a Northern Territory context.

CHAIR—Do you find it is better to teach civics with stories that engage the youngsters? Is that the way it is done?

Ms Caldwell—I think it depends on the clientele and the age group that you are dealing with. For example, the storyboards were developed to take out to communities and work with adults, but of course they work really well as a teaching tool. Kids who are visual learners need to see things in a visual context; others need to have stories that they can relate to.

It really just depends. The key to it is that you do not just have one kitbag that you take out; you have several kitbags that you are delving into, depending on your audience, because one size does not fit all. It just depends on the learning styles of the kids and the age group. You really have to cater to that. You cannot just have text based materials, you cannot just have picture based materials and you cannot just have factuals: sometimes you have to use a bit of fiction and weave it in. It is how you engage. That is why it is important to have educators involved in the teaching of civics and electoral education, because that is what we are trained to do—we are trained to engage kids.

Senator HOGG—One of the things that has impressed me is that it seems that in middle primary and up to middle secondary, if I can use those broad terms, there is an amount of civics education, but once you get beyond that there is a vacuum, particularly in the last two years of high school, yet those are the two years when people are most likely to be eligible to get on the roll. Unless they are doing something like legal studies or a subject of that nature, they invariably have nothing to do with any civics education and are given no understanding of why they should be on the roll. It seems to me that it is probably one of the more critical times. You could lay the foundation properly in, say, the years 6 to 10 bracket, yet nothing is being done. What is your experience there?

Mrs Hearnden—I would agree with that, though in a lot of our curricular framework for the senior school subjects, especially in the humanities basket, there is an emphasis on participation. There is that sense of getting out into the real world. If it is legal studies or media studies, for example, it is focusing on how you can be interacting with the community.

CHAIR—Earlier today the NTEC gave us evidence and said that they believe that civics education and electoral education had to be treated together and that it should be a mandatory component of education across the country. Do you agree?

Ms Caldwell—In principle, yes, because I think it is really important, but in practice it goes back to what we were talking about before: who is actually going to deliver it, is it going to be delivered by the teachers in the schools or are groups, such as parliaments and the electoral commissions, going to get together and create and deliver the program? It is all very well to say, 'Let's make it compulsory.' In principle I would agree with that—I think it is important that the students have that sort of background—but it comes down to delivery: who is actually going to deliver it?

Senator HOGG—Are you saying that it is better not to deliver it at all than to deliver it poorly?

Ms Caldwell—No, I am not saying that. Rather than saying, 'Let us have a compulsory program,' I think we have to take one step back from that and ask, 'If we have a compulsory program, who would create it, who would develop it and who would deliver it?' and see if that is practical and then take it from there before we make it mandatory. If we made it compulsory without having all those basics organised—what is the content of the program, what are the outcomes—and having all those established first, you would probably have the negative effect. If teachers have to teach it and do not really want to teach it—

Mrs Hearnden—Or they do not understand it.

Ms Caldwell—or they do not understand it, then you could actually end up with a worse problem on your hands as far as cynicism is concerned.

Senator HOGG—That is the point I was trying to make.

CHAIR—Julie, do have senior students in your school?

Mrs Hearnden—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you think they would know who their state member of the legislative assembly was? Could they name that person and could they name their federal member of parliament? Be honest.

Mrs Hearnden—Across the board, no, they could not. Definitely, if we are talking about groups of students who are politically aware and active, I would say, yes, but on the whole, no.

CHAIR—On the whole, no. Is that your collective experience?

Ms Caldwell—My experience is that the students get the levels of government mixed up. Often when we are conducting a program in the chamber—we are allowed to have school programs in the chamber, which is really great, because the kids get that sense of 'wow'—they say, 'So where does John Howard sit?' We tell them and, sitting up in the public gallery, they

look at us very strangely when we explain to them the difference between the levels of governments.

CHAIR—Okay. Have you ever had any students go to Canberra?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Yes. I have taken classes for a week's trip, and it is very common amongst high schools.

CHAIR—Do you agree it is a very good experience for the students to do that?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Absolutely. Just seeing the building, seeing Parliament House, makes the whole concept of government come alive.

CHAIR—Did you go to the AEC education centre? Do you find that is good?

Ms Caldwell—I had a situation where I took year 12 politics students down to Canberra. I think that what was offered at the education office—and this was a while ago, so it may have changed—was really good for middle secondary students, but my students had actually gone beyond that in class. I did ring them up and I said, 'Look, these students are pretty aware.' So the students walked out and said, 'Well, at least we got our money for coming.' But, as far as actually learning anything new, they really did not. That was my particular experience there, but I do know that some of the year 10 students who have gone down to Canberra from the school that I used to be at had a great time and they got a lot out of it.

CHAIR—Debra, did you not take your students because you were not aware of that facility or because you could not get in?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—This was a group of kids in South Australia probably about 12 years ago. It was part of a week-long 'go to Canberra' trip, but I think they sat in on a sitting of the High Court.

CHAIR—Do you think that it would be of value for all secondary school students to visit Canberra, if it were affordable?

Mrs Hearnden—Yes. In 2005, we sent 30 students from our school who chose to go. We tried again this year, but more with an idea that if 30 should go the whole school should go. We found it was impossible financially to do that, so that is when we moved to our program where we use the local parliament house to try to deliver those ideas. We are trying again for next year, but the cost of one flight to Canberra is over $700 per child and that is nowhere near what the subsidy is, and that does not include food and accommodation. So I do not think we will be going to Canberra.

CHAIR—Do you think it is unfair that students from Sydney can easily go to Canberra but students from the Northern Territory cannot? Is that unfair? Should the federal government address that inequity, if it is an inequity?

Mrs Hearnden—It is an inequity.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—The tyranny of distance affects so much what we are able to do—for example, when we look at very remote communities that are inaccessible by car in the wet season and may have interrupted or irregular flights. So the cost of delivering any educational services in remote areas is enormous. And, yes, there are issues surrounding access and equity for the kids.

Senator HOGG—Has the tyranny of distance been broken down, though, by the internet and the facilities that are available through the internet?

Ms Caldwell—No.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—No. We have a lot of bandwidth delivery issues—those basic technological bugs that stop things happening the way they would happen in an ideal situation.

Senator HOGG—Did the teachers who are here today who are actually involved in face-to-face classes—I think that is Julie and Colleen, if I am correct—have in mind to bring a representative number of students here today to see this parliamentary committee in action? Did you think about that?

Mrs Hearnden—No, we—

Senator HOGG—Because that is one of the things that has happened with the committee: some teachers have brought their students along to see it, and it surprises them, firstly, to see that we do work outside of Parliament House and, secondly, that it is an environment where we actually sit and listen to the students when they do come along.

Mrs Williams—We have actually done that.

Ms Caldwell—Also, Julie's group that came into Parliament House actually spent part of the day with me to develop a submission to go to a parliamentary committee.

Mrs Hearnden—Not this one.

Ms Caldwell—No. It was the youth and sport committee, which was one of our legislative assembly committees. We focused on that. When the students come in it is something that we talk about. It is something that we are putting together for the new statehood education program. We are splitting the kids into different interest groups to appear before some other kids who are the committee. We are doing it as part of a role-play to get them to explore those issues. It is really important, as you said, to get them to understand that parliamentary committees are a great way to have a voice.

CHAIR—Where do years 11 and 12 students get their prime information about what is going on in the country and the world? Is it from radio, television, newspapers or internet?

Ms Caldwell—Television and internet, I would say.

CHAIR—Do they believe what they see or read?

Senator HOGG—Do they challenge and question it?

Mrs Williams—We do teach critical literacy at school. My year 7s would only look at internet sites at this stage—whether what we see on internet sites is actually correct or true and how we go about finding out whether it is a proper site. But it is 'on the surface' stuff.

CHAIR—Do you think that students get the wrong impression or are unduly influenced by the fact that television is a 30-second grab medium and that often you are not presented with the real story by television news programs? Do students get cynical about that? Do they pick that up?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—I think that the nature of the society that kids live in today means that they are constantly bombarded by short pieces of information specifically designed to grab their attention, whether it is advertising or anything to do with buying something that is technological. The whole idea of engaging deeply with something has to be explicitly presented, taught and delivered, otherwise it is very easy to just live according to these short grabs of information. Having said that, teenagers today are incredibly savvy. I think of myself as a 15- or 16-year old. These kids are incredibly worldly wise and able to access all kinds of information. I think they are a lot more selective, certainly more than I was at that age.

Senator HOGG—Based on your comment, are those young people more likely to want to go to the local divisional office of the Electoral Commission to pick up a form to register to vote or are they are more likely to want to do it by, say, getting on to the web, SMS-ing it or whatever?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Absolutely. I agree.

Senator HOGG—I have raised this before. It seems to me that part of the obstacle to these young people registering to vote is the fact that they do not speak the language. They go there, pick up a form and then there is a complex system whereby they have to fill out the form, return it and so on. It seems to me that they are all into email and SMS-ing—every second kid you see is trigger-happy!

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—I think we will be breeding a generation of huge thumbs!

Senator HOGG—That is right. I would love to be a thumb surgeon in 10-years time—I think there is a great deal of money to be made! Do we naturally look at things in the correct way or do we have a distorted view because of our upbringing?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—We really need to understand this cohort of kids: what drives them, what engages them, what they are interested in. Is turning 18 becoming just a right of passage or does it mean something more to them?

Ms Caldwell—This is just an individual thing, but at the school where I was teaching year 11 and 12 politics we had a little rite of passage when a student had a 17th birthday where they would fill out their enrolment card. It was one of those things where we did it only a couple of times, but after a while the kids were waiting for me to witness their card on their 17th birthday and we would have a little bit of morning tea to celebrate. That is how we dealt with it.

CHAIR—Jeannie, how influential are parents in forming a student's view on electoral matters?

Mrs Bennett—I think parents play a huge role. I think they are the models for a lot of the perceptions students bring to school.

CHAIR—Are they good role models?

Mrs Bennett—It depends on the context. In the Territory we have a number of contexts, as you are very well aware. It depends on what sort of context you are operating in—whether it is urban or remote, with Indigenous or ESL clientele, and the sort of education background parents have.

CHAIR—Here is a scary thought. We have received evidence that we should not baulk at asking teachers to teach students about the philosophies of the various political parties. We are not just talking Liberal, Labor and The Nationals; it could be Social Alliance, Greens or Family First. This is to try to give students an appreciation of what the parties stand for. Would you baulk at being asked to do that? Do you think you could do it professionally?

Mrs Hearnden—I would not baulk at it at all. In fact, in some ways, if we are not addressing the options, we are falling down in our roles as teachers.

CHAIR—Good point.

Mrs Bennett—That is actually built into our curriculum in the middle years. It is a compulsory part of our curriculum in the Territory.

CHAIR—So I am hearing general support for trying to give students an idea of the philosophies of the world?

Ms Caldwell—Absolutely, and it has been done by schools here in the Territory for quite a long time. In fact, that is one of the things that we have been doing quite well. Even prior to the Discovering Democracy years, the civics class would investigate some political parties and share that information. I think there is a culture here in the Territory where that is seen as an essential part of any civics program.

Mr Tatham—We were at a parents group meeting last week and we were briefing parents on what we are teaching students about statehood. There was a comment by a parent who was quite cynical about what we were doing. The parent said, 'Next thing you'll want us to do is have the Labor Party in here telling students what Labor Party policy is.' My thought was: 'Yes, why not? And then we could have the coalition and so on.' But there was resistance. There was a lot of reluctance from parents thinking that we were propagandising to their children to some extent.

CHAIR—Colleen, can you tell us about the award you mentioned in the opening statement? What did you do?

Mrs Williams—It was very simple. We got our students from year 3 up to year 7 to look at what made a good leader. We talked about the qualities of a good leader. From there we looked

at how we choose leaders. It was a primary program. We looked at engaging the children in writing up persuasive speeches. When we held an election, the candidates stood in front of an audience and gave their persuasive speech on why they would make a good leader for the red house or SRC rep. Then, once we had looked at the qualities of a good leader, we looked at how we go about choosing one and how adults vote for leaders in the community. That was when we brought in the Electoral Commission and looked at how preferential voting works.

At that time—and I think the Electoral Commission still uses this technique—we chose favourite foods or favourite chocolate bars or favourite bands to show the children how the preferential voting system worked. From there, we borrowed ballot papers and benches et cetera from the Electoral Commission and set things up to look as they would look on an election day. The children went in and did their preferential voting and then we had scrutineers—children had particular jobs—who watched a group of teachers and students count out the votes. So it was not left to teachers to do; it was all open so that the children could see what was happening and how we were choosing the leaders.

CHAIR—We visited a school in Cairns where their federal divisional returning officer kept as many of the booth materials as he could from the federal election. The teachers had an arrangement with him. He would take out the booth materials—cardboard stuff.

Mrs Williams—That is exactly what happens in a lot of schools.

CHAIR—It works really well.

Mrs Williams—We set up the staffroom so that when the children walk in it is like—

CHAIR—Like a polling booth. Fantastic!

Senator HOGG—It probably is during a real election anyway. That is the irony of it.

Mrs Williams—Yes. So it is treated very seriously.

CHAIR—Did those getting elected have how-to-vote cards?

Mrs Williams—Yes. We went through election campaigns, we went through the ethics of campaigning—we did the whole bit.

CHAIR—To come back to a whole-of-school approach to civics, the 1999 evaluation found that Discovering Democracy works best when embedded in the whole school culture. What do you personally understand by a whole-of-school approach to civics and electoral education, and do you think it is an effective approach?

Mrs Williams—I have always separated civics and citizenship. My view is that in our Northern Territory curriculum we have our key learning area Studies of Society and Environment, and that is where your civic knowledge is located. That is quite specialised and needs to be in a key learning area. But we also have our EsseNTial Learnings, where a lot of the citizenship outcomes are located. I think the way it is meant to work here is that the EsseNTial Learnings apply to the whole school, so the citizenship outcomes apply to the whole school but

the civics outcomes—the specific how, what, where, why, when and that sort of stuff—apply to the specific learning area. It obviously differs between age groups. So the mechanics of government or the mechanics of governing is looked at in specific detail at different stages of schooling.

CHAIR—In Victoria and Western Australia all students turning 17 are sent a birthday card and an enrolment form. Does that happen in the Northern Territory?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Yes, I think when she was 18 my daughter got a letter in the mail with an enrolment card.

CHAIR—The inquiry secretary has reminded me that in South Australia they have a privacy issue. They do not think that data from school enrolment records should be used to send that out. Do you think that is really a privacy issue? Do you think we should be able to use school data to send everybody a note or an enrolment form?

Mr Loganathan—In response to that, there have been recent amendments to our act which give us demand powers to have access to that information. Those amendments came through, I think, in the middle of this year. Using those demand powers, we have written to the head of the education department asking for access to that data. From next year we can send out birthday cards to 18-year-olds in South Australia.

Mr Shepheard—I just want to correct that because there might be a little bit of a misunderstanding. At one stage we did do something to send out enrolment cards with HSC reports. But there has not been any birthday card type of regime in place because of those privacy matters you alluded to before.

Senator HOGG—That is obviously why I do not get a birthday card either.

Ms Caldwell—My understanding is that the enrolment forms will be going out with the NTC results again this year.

CHAIR—I am advised that as of next year there will be a new schooling system in the NT with assisted middle schooling. Is that going to have any impact on the delivery of civics and electoral education in the NT?

Mrs Hearnden—I do not believe so. Our school is currently a middle and a senior school, and the majority of our civics curriculum education occurs at year 9.

CHAIR—Thank you. Are there any other comments?

Ms Caldwell—I think the philosophies of middle schooling lend themselves beautifully to civics and electoral education.

CHAIR—You are a positive person, Loraine.

Ms Caldwell—I am. Wearing my DEET hat, I sit with the middle year's team and I can see a huge amount of potential to use civics education as one of the organisers for a lot of other programs in the school.

CHAIR—Regarding the Commonwealth's requirement in relation to statements of learning, and there are statements that relate to years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in the areas of civics and electoral education, do you have a view on the school's overall ability to implement these statements of learning?

Mrs Bennett—We have just mapped the statements of learning to our curriculum, our NTCF. That exercise has just happened in the last month. We have had a look at any gaps because we will be going through a curriculum review process next year. We are looking at taking up any gaps within that. Our curriculum is our bible for schools.

CHAIR—We always leave the hard questions till last so we can run out the door if we need to. Strike that comment!

Senator HOGG—I would leave it in; it is true.

CHAIR—You have all heard the current debate on the proposed national curriculum. Do you think a national curriculum would improve the chances of having civics and electoral education taught in schools across Australia?

Ms Caldwell—I would go back to my earlier comment: it really depends on the training of the people delivering it. As I said before, you can have all the national curriculum you like, but if people do not know how to deliver it then it is not going to happen or it will happen in a way that is not going to be very satisfactory. It gets back to teacher training and developing resources to allow it to happen.

Senator HOGG—Civics is one of those areas where you need a positive spin because, if people take a negative attitude to it, then it tarnishes their view of democracy and democratic processes forever and a day.

Ms Caldwell—Can I just say that, honestly, there are a lot of teachers out there running fantastic civics programs who do not actually know they are running civics programs and would be horrified if you told them that they were. Sometimes we have this really narrow perception of a civics program being learning about government, parliament or whatever. I think it is a lot broader than that. It is about decision making, participation and how to do it appropriately. I think that there is a lot more civics education out there than people would admit to.

CHAIR—In previous roundtables we have had students present, and we have always invited them to ask us questions. So here is your opportunity. You have a senator and a member here. Is there anything you want to ask us?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—One of the situations in the Northern Territory is that 40 per cent of our learners are Indigenous students who come from a range of backgrounds: from very traditional to urban situations. Many of them have grown up understanding society in a different

way from somebody who has a Western tradition of understanding society and what their responsibility is as a citizen of that society.

One of the challenges that we are faced with in the Northern Territory is a bit like how we teach English to our learners. Do we use the bilingual method—the two-way learning program, which uses an Indigenous learner's first language as a springboard into learning English—or immersion in English only? For many Indigenous learners how do we balance the Western view of society with another view of society that they may have? That is a theoretical, philosophical position that needs to be explored here.

CHAIR—We could get into some very deep philosophy because you could be thinking of whether in 100 years time the Indigenous culture will be gone. It is a possibility. That might shock you, but it is a possibility. Who knows? Does the world change? I do not know. I am not putting a view, I am just saying.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—At this time we have many learners in our schools who have a different world view to a Western world view and we need to be thinking about ways to meet their needs as functioning, positive members of Australian society.

Senator HOGG—That gets down to the fundamental issue of how we define a democracy—

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Precisely, yes.

Senator HOGG—because if there are competing or even quite radically different views of what constitutes a democracy then you are going headlong down a path where you are going to have a great deal of trouble.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—Yes, and I certainly would not be advocating—

Senator HOGG—I know you are not advocating that, but that is part of our brief as well. What is the solution to the dilemma, given that it is never going to be static? It is always going to be changing.

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—I do not have an answer.

Senator HOGG—Dear me; I thought that is why you came!

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—We have a learner cohort that has more than one way of understanding how to be a good member of their society.

CHAIR—How significant is the problem that at about 15 years of age young boys go off and become men and all that sort of stuff and then do not want to come back to school because it is not the role of a man to go to school? Is that a problem in the NT?

Ms Liddiard-Taruminggi—To varying degrees. It depends which side of the fence you sit on. Some people see that as a problem; some people say that they have become a fully-fledged member of their society. I would not want to call it a problem, but it certainly removes them from the opportunities in our education system.

Ms Caldwell—To go on with that: one of things that we do in the statehood program is we point out to people that the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory is not diminishing; it is actually increasing. Going on the statistics, in about 10 years time 50 per cent of the NT's population might be Indigenous. One of the things that we talk about is representation and our parliament, which has six Indigenous members. We also talk about the federal parliament, which has nine Indigenous members. There are those issues of engagement for Indigenous people. Are they being adequately represented? Thirty-five per cent of our population is Indigenous and we have six Indigenous members out of 25 in our parliament. It is still not a balance, but it is better than anywhere else. Those are real issues.

CHAIR—This has been a really useful roundtable, even though it is not a round table. All of you have been really good and I thank you for your advice and your comments. I also thank the gallery for its advice and comments.

Senator HOGG—Hear, hear! It was a very active gallery. I was very impressed with the gallery.

CHAIR—This has been an hour well spent. Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Hogg**):

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

Subcommittee adjourned at 11.05 am