



**THE AEU SUBMISSION
TO
THE INQUIRY BY THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE
ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS INTO CIVICS
AND
ELECTORAL EDUCATION**

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Pat Byrne
Federal President

Susan Hopgood
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union
Ground Floor
120 Clarendon Street
Southbank Vic 3006

Telephone: (03) 9693 1800
Fax: (03) 9693 1805
E-mail: aeu@aeufederal.org.au

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Australian Education Union is an industrial and professional organisation representing approximately 165,000 members nationally. Membership of the AEU includes teachers and other educators working in TAFE, public schools and early childhood centres.
- 1.2 We welcome this opportunity to express the views of teachers on the matter of civics and electoral education.
- 1.3 The AEU believes that before the Committee issues its report it should note the findings of the first national assessment in civics and citizenship education of students in year 6 and year 10 conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research and due for release later in 2006. This report will provide evidence-based data which will analyse both strengths and weaknesses in student learning on a national scale. (MCEETYA /ACER, 2006)
- 1.4 This submission will first provide some background on the approach which the AEU takes to civics and electoral education before addressing each of the terms of reference in turn.

2 Background

- 2.1 The teaching of Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) in Australian schools over the past 10 years has been largely driven by the Federal Government's "Discovering Democracy" program. While this program has enhanced the status of CCE in schools, the extent to which it has affected students' learning and their attitudes towards participating in the processes of a democracy is questionable.
- 2.2 Increased levels of threat being experienced by civil societies in recent years have changed the context in which discussion of both citizenship and CCE occur. Linked to these changes has been a revisiting of concepts and practices that are associated with notions of citizenship, such as rights and responsibilities, access, belonging, and national identity.
- 2.3 Changes in world context have also affected how young people develop their understandings about their roles as citizens. They develop their understandings through a number of activities and experiences largely within the contexts of home, schools and their communities (including the whole range of media options). Because the teaching and learning of CCE in schools is only one context, any discussion about how to get young people more interested in civics and electoral education needs to take into account a range of possible learning environments.
- 2.4 This also underlines the importance of including education for global citizenship as part of civics education.
- 2.5 The AEU expresses concern that the terms of reference suggest a narrow focus on civics as "electoral education". This is not the perspective which the AEU feels is the appropriate one and underemphasizes the broader notion of citizenship education. The AEU's usage of the terms 'civics' and 'citizenship' distinguishes

- between notions of civic knowledge, such as electoral processes, and citizenship dispositions, which involve a desire to **actively engage** in community activities.
- 2.6 A conundrum therefore is for communities to articulate what civic knowledge is central to being a 'good citizen' and to recognise that definitions of what constitutes 'active' engagement may well be contestable.
 - 2.7 Democracy is a living, breathing, system of deciding things in communities for the common good, and the best way to learn about it is to be actively participating in it, and this should begin from day one in schools.
 - 2.8 The AEU can find no research data that directly links the learning of civic knowledge and 'electoral education' per se to positive dispositions to become active citizens contributing to a dynamic democracy.
 - 2.9 The AEU is therefore supportive of the teaching of civics and electoral education set in a wider context of education for active and transformative citizenship. The rationale for this approach is encapsulated in the following quotation:

In sum, citizenship education programs focusing on the provision of general information about the law, the nurturing of civic virtues and the development of enlightened citizens certainly contribute to promote a more democratic culture, and are of foremost significance in any democratic society. However, they constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the realization of a truly democratic citizenship, because they do not sufficiently emphasize the nurturing of a consistent engagement in the political process, are not usually connected to the development of policies and practices of participatory democracy, and do not pay sufficient attention to issues of power, which limits their possibility to contribute substantially to the equalization of the political world. If citizenship education implies the double capacity to critically understand social reality and to influence political decisions, bringing back the concept of political capital into the discussion has the potential to illuminate the connections between democratic learning and actual governance. (Schugurensky).

- 2.10 There are a number of emphases in this approach.
 - At its core, citizenship, civics and electoral education is about 'active citizenship'. Active citizenship is not just about being well informed about institutions and decision making processes, but is also about a desire to participate and directly engage in those decision making processes.
 - To be learned, democracy must be experienced not just taught. This has considerable implications for the way schools operate and for curriculum and pedagogy.
 - Real citizenship education is more than learning about the processes of parliaments and elections. It is about the capacity to make informed judgments and exercise democratic rights to influence processes.
 - This includes being appropriately informed, knowing how to obtain information, and having an appropriate knowledge base (including, for instance some understanding of economics).
 - It also includes an understanding of human rights, the way in which power is exercised and asserted, the relative power of different groups within society and an appreciation of equity, social justice and social harmony
 - Students must be allowed and encouraged to form their own opinions.

- 2.11 It is also important that students learn that democracy is something that has been gained by some, but not all, countries, often after struggles. Similarly some groups of people, such as women or Indigenous peoples did not gain democratic rights at the same time as others. There are also instances where democratic rights are lost. Students need to see that democracy may take different forms, that aspects of it are fragile and under threat and permanent vigilance is necessary to maintain it.

A report prepared by the British Columbia Teachers Federation in 1994 makes the following important points about this and the role of public schools in maintaining it:

Democracy is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It cost lives to attain, more lives to defend, and its preservation requires an educated and vigilant citizenry. Schools have a crucial role to play in teaching students what democracy is, how it came about, how to practice it, and how to ensure its continuance through the exercise of “eternal vigilance.”

To ensure the survival of democracy, though, our society needs more than just schools. It needs public schools. Democracy is about the equal value of each member of society. It is about every person’s right to become, and be, the best that she or he can be; to reach her or his fullest potential, unencumbered by notions of class or caste. Public schools help to ensure that, “regardless of aptitude or background,” every child has equal access to a quality education, so that every child may become a “self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating member” of society (BCTF Policy 9.A.01).

Even having public schools, though, is not enough. Children emulate adults. To be most effective, the adults within our schools should be teaching democracy by example, and should be giving the students incremental opportunities appropriate to their age, and stage of learning, to practice the democratic principles about which they learn. In short, schools should model the democracy they teach.

But what kind of democracy should we teach? The democracy our society is evolving towards is something beyond the liberal democracy we inherited from the past. Many citizens are no longer satisfied simply to elect representatives to govern them, unanswerable to them until the next election. They want to be able to have input into government, and to hold their representatives accountable for their actions while in office. If this is going to be a lasting trend, the task force believes that we should teach, and model, a more participatory form of democracy than the version our forebears passed on to us. (BCTF, 1995, p.34)

- 2.12 A school’s ethos, culture and policies model for students important indicators of their potential engagement. From this general policy derives the school learning experiences offered to students which contribute to their civics and citizenship understandings. These include classroom organisation and management, the classroom and cross-curricular activities, the instructional processes, the resources and technologies employed and the assessment strategies undertaken. The relationships among students and between teacher and students form another aspect of the school context and these are impacted upon by the school’s decision making processes, and the opportunities for participation in formal and informal governance processes.

School interaction with their local communities, with other school stakeholder groups and with other schools and the links they establish with other civic and political institutions also impact on students' perceptions of their relationship with the wider community and what roles they might play in that world.

- 2.13 Citizenship education programs should be developed by whole school communities, including teachers, parents and students, and should take the form of a whole school approach, rather than belonging to one curriculum area. Research (Prior, 2004) clearly indicates that a single unit approach, the random inclusion of some community based activities or single actions like flying the Australian flag, are not, in themselves, likely to contribute to young people feeling positive about engaging in active citizenship.
- 2.14 The citizenship education program should develop understanding of the following:¹
- rules and ways of making decisions are present in all groups, communities and societies;
 - individuals and groups have varying abilities to influence decisions;
 - all decisions have consequences, intended and unintended, fair and unfair;
 - all societies develop economic and political systems which affect the life opportunities of their citizens;
 - the production and distribution of resources is organised in a variety of ways;
 - economic, political, legal and social systems are interdependent;
 - there is an increasing tendency for systems to be global;
 - citizenship involves decision-making and active involvement in areas beyond politics including the economy, business and the wider society.
- 2.15 The citizenship education program should develop the following skills /competencies:
- a capacity to make appropriate personal decisions;
 - a capacity to make responsible choices about wants in relation to limited resources;
 - competencies in analyzing and making judgments, engaging in problem solving, communicating opinions, reflecting on outcomes.
- 2.16 The citizenship education program should enhance the following attitudes/values :
- a willingness to participate in group activities;
 - a sense of efficacy, self worth and resilience;
 - commitment to work towards more just decisions and systems, both locally and globally;

¹ Sections 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15 are based on Part 15.4 of the Queensland Teachers Union Curriculum Policy.

- the confidence to use the legal processes;
- a willingness to participate in community decision-making, to assume responsibility for carrying out individual or group decisions and to accept the consequences of such action;
- an appreciation of rights and responsibilities and of laws which affect the individual;
- awareness of and sensitivity to members of local, national and global societies.

2.17 The citizenship education program should be implemented in schools on the following conditions:

- The policies and practices of the school should enable students to have opportunities to investigate formal and informal decision-making in a wide variety of settings, including the family, the school, the local community, and at national and global levels. From early years they should explore questions relating to needs and wants, the setting of rules and sanctions, and the consideration of consequences.
- The curriculum should enable students to understand the nature and origins of Australia's legal, political and economic systems and the issues associated with them, and be able to compare them with those of other societies. An important focus is how these systems attempt to balance rights, responsibilities, and human needs and wants.
- The curriculum should also enable students to investigate the role of the Constitution and the three levels of government in the formal structures of decision-making, power and authority in Australia. Investigation of decision-making, power and authority should also include the role and varying influence of groups such as trade unions, commercial interests, the media, lobby groups and transnational corporations.
- Students should develop awareness of:
 - industrial and human rights and how they vary from country to country;
 - the history and role of trade unions and the politics of workplaces;
 - the history and role of rights and non government organisations (such as Amnesty International) and international organisations (such as the United Nations and International Labor Organization);
 - the part that gender has played in the history of democratic development, and the role of women in citizenship, non government organisations and politics;
 - the place of public and private interest in democracy, and the difference between them.

2.18 Particular emphasis in the school curriculum should be given to decision-making in such significant issues as:

- environmental degradation;
- the implications of a diversity of lifestyles, values and beliefs;
- the distribution and control of wealth and resources;
- the development and application of technology;
- ethical and moral issues;
- questions of rights and discrimination;
- industrial legislation;
- access to information;
- equality before the law;
- global inequalities and issues of development;
- the nature and role of the education system;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and the impact of non-indigenous cultures; and
- poverty and homelessness.

2.19 It should be noted that much of this is potentially controversial, is reflecting the fact that education is not the purveyor of a set body of knowledge. This, however, is the very nature of a healthy and dynamic democracy and any civics and citizenship education program should reflect the contestable and fragile nature of being a citizen. The fostering of non-critical and compliant students who are uncritical of the world in which they live is inimical to the development of good citizens in an active democracy.

2.20 It should also be noted that the concept of active citizenship requires a whole school approach. It applies to the practice of all teachers at all times. This is much more involved than locating it within a single subject such as Studies of Society and Environment. This has considerable implications for professional development and teacher education.

2.21 There are, of course, many examples of Student Councils with varying degrees of student participation and engagement. Without implying that these are not worth continuing, they do fall well short of the kind of whole school approach we are talking about. In particular, there is concern they often involve the “better” students, and imply that democratic participation is for the selected few, rather than mass participation.

3 Terms of Reference

3.1 The current status of young people’s knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system

3.1.1 As noted above, it is important to make a distinction between “civic knowledge” and the development of “citizenship dispositions”. The former concentrates on

knowing such matters as the way parliament is elected, the names of current and historical parliamentarians or electorates, and the functioning of elections. The latter requires the development of a moral and ethical understanding of democracy and the way it works, and of human rights. Whilst both are important, the first is only of real value if incorporated into the second.

- 3.1.2 This term of reference is firmly positioned at the “civic knowledge” end of the spectrum. Measurement of student knowledge based on such a focus is likely to provide disappointing results. Various assessments over a long period of time and a wide range of countries suggest that students rarely score highly on factual tests of electoral knowledge. Any expectation that this can be remedied by some simple learning and testing process will add further to the disappointment, since this generally fails to engage the students.
- 3.1.3 On the other hand, students often score more highly on assessments that measure the “citizenship disposition” elements of civics education. Furthermore, this element offers greater capacity to engage students, and it is often the case that this is more likely to lead to interest in more mundane factual electoral information.
- 3.1.4 Considering the question within the context it appears, aspects of electoral knowledge are embedded in many parts of the curriculum as it currently stands, most notably Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). State and territory curricula generally include considerable material on the workings of parliament within SOSE and elsewhere.
- 3.1.5 The new curricula being developed in several states and territories also give considerable scope for focusing on the more desirable approaches to civics and electoral education. For instance, the New Basics curriculum in Queensland includes Active Citizenship as one of the four Curriculum Organisers and ‘Social responsibilities’ and ‘World Futures’ are two of the five Essential Learnings strands in Tasmania. In Victoria, the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) curriculum framework for the first time has identified a much broader definition and role of Civics and Citizenship as a key domain of learning with two dimensions – civic knowledge and understanding and community engagement.
- 3.1.6 There are a number of tensions about this inquiry. The first is that it appears to be self-driven. That is, the members have a perception (only) that young people in Australia have an inadequate understanding of civic and electoral matters. There is some evidence for this, but this data is now dated, and, as mentioned above, the most recent study will not be released until later this year. The arena for this debate is often in the media or in the interests of particular politicians.
- 3.1.7 The second tension is that having civic knowledge per se is an important characteristic of being a ‘good’ citizen. Being well informed about political and electoral processes, civic institutions and decision-making strategies is clearly a precursor to engaging effectively in any community. However this knowledge is merely instrumental and not an end in itself. Traditionally schools have approached this area as an end in itself and have taught it out of cultural/community context and have not given students opportunities to practice it. The classic example is in American secondary schools where students have compulsory ‘civic education’ classes and where every school has iconic national symbols displayed in school entrances and, even in the context of non-compulsory voting, only a minority of

young eligible people register to vote. The inclusion of civic education programs per se and in isolation of other broader education goals is an ineffective strategy.

- 3.1.8 The third tension about this inquiry is that it assumes that having greater civic and electoral knowledge is what the key stakeholders in schools want. Research (Prior, 1999, 2005) clearly indicates that this is incorrect. Drawing on a sample of teachers, students and parents Prior's study showed that civic knowledge as a dimension of a 'good' citizen was not valued by any of the stakeholders. Rather, all three stakeholder groups placed sensitivities to social issues and broader citizenship issues as being the critical dimensions for a 'good' citizen. Parents, as voters, do not believe that greater civic knowledge per se is important. They want their children to be caring, sensitive global citizens with values like social justice.

3.2 The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education

- 3.2.1 This has been elaborated in considerable detail, above.

3.3 Term of Reference 3: The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities

- 3.3.1 Within the limited context and expectations of current teaching, the curricular is generally adequate in government schools.
- 3.3.2 The Civics and Citizenship Program from the Federal Government has provided some useful materials and development.
- 3.3.3 Achieving "active citizenship" schools, on the other hand, would require considerable change and resources.
- 3.3.4 The AEU notes the work of Roger Holdsworth (see References and Additional Sources) and his work on active citizenship and student action teams. Such work provides a vision of what might be. It also provides some measure of how far it is from being achieved at present.
- 3.3.5 To begin to achieve it would require a whole-of-school approach which would have major implications for the way schools operate and consequently for professional development and initial teacher education. It would take a number of years, and teachers would need considerable support and time to develop processes appropriate to such an approach.
- 3.3.6 However, there are already formative moves under way and these could and should be built on.
- 3.3.7 Changes to VET with the advent of Training Packages have seen a narrowing of the focus of education in TAFE to training in technical and enterprise-specific skills. Whereas when there were courses and curriculum, things like that were, or could be, built in, the ascendancy of the employability skills agenda in this area has allowed the notion of "generic skills" to be captured entirely by employers, whose focus has been on the individual's preparation for the workplace rather than for active citizenship. There is therefore nothing that appears to resemble civics and citizenship education in TAFE.

3.4 The school age at which electoral education should begin

- 3.4.1 Within the approach which the AEU advocates, this question becomes redundant. Education for active citizenship becomes integral to all schooling. In the early years this might consist of becoming aware of the idea of decisions and how groups make them, the concept of voting, and some exploration of the idea of fairness. This would be built on with greater complexity and depth as students became older.
- 3.4.2 The program “Philosophy in Schools” run in many schools is an excellent example of a program which involves developing students capacity to think and make values based decisions.
- 3.4.3 Actual state and territory and Federal Elections are held in primary school buildings, and teachers often use this as an opportunity to show the electoral process itself using the actual booths etc.

3.5 The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

- 3.5.1 The AEC and the Federal and state and territory governments have a really important role in providing the settings and facilities that through school visits bring alive the curriculum in the area of electoral knowledge.
- 3.5.2 In general, they fulfil this role with some excellent programs and resources which teachers are able to use to enhance the experiences of students.
- 3.5.3 These are readily available, particularly for those in metropolitan areas and/or able to visit Canberra.
- 3.5.4 Many of these programs benefit from the secondment of teachers into the education sections of the relevant institutions. These teachers are able to develop age-appropriate materials, curriculum, and activities which teachers in charge of visiting classes really appreciate. This helps ensure that such visits have a positive education impact and encourages schools to undertake such visits. The AEU is strongly supportive of such secondments, and urges the committee to encourage their continuance and further development.
- 3.5.5 It is, of course, more difficult for schools and students in rural and remote areas to take up the opportunity to visit.

3.6 The adequacy of electoral education in Indigenous communities

- 3.6.1 There are clearly particular problems in relation to Indigenous communities associated with their remoteness which are difficult to overcome.
- 3.6.2 However, there is equally a need to consider the cultural aspects and the difficulties and opportunities these pose.
- 3.6.3 Western ideas of “democracy” tend to focus on the individual and his/her role in civic society. This can be at odds with the experience of many Indigenous students who come from a cultural background of families and extended families in which the emphasis is on group processes, and in which group benefits and the well being of broader society are more focussed upon.

- 3.6.4 This is particularly difficult where the focus is upon “Electoral knowledge” of an essentially western form of democracy.
- 3.6.5 At the same time, the very cultural processes which exist in Indigenous communities provide experience which works towards “citizenship disposition” within the community.
- 3.6.6 It would be valuable to investigate developing innovative programs which investigate ways of building upon the cultural experiences of young Indigenous peoples in ways which facilitate their understanding of the legal electoral processes whilst also respecting and facilitating their cultural development within their own communities.
- 3.6.7 It should also be remembered that it is valuable for all students, whether Indigenous or not, to study other cultures, especially those of our Indigenous peoples, as part of a wider understanding of different ways decisions can be made and democracy operate.

3.7 The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens

- 3.7.1 The AEU is supportive of programs which give newly arrived migrants background information and preparation which enables them to participate more fully in Australian society. This, of course, includes the capacity to participate in the democratic and electoral processes.
- 3.7.2 However, there is a very strong need to distinguish between this and some of the current proposals being floated to re-impose tests of language and electoral knowledge as a condition of either migration or citizenship. The AEU will not support any such policies, which are racist and mirror the thinking behind the White Australia policy.
- 3.7.3 The distinction is between policies for inclusion and those for exclusion.
- 3.7.4 English as Second Language (ESL) courses used to contain considerable time allocation for learning about Australian culture and democratic processes in an appropriate way. The funding regime instituted over the last ten years or so has limited teachers’ capacity to continue this. There has been an increased emphasis on improving English language skills at the expense of cultural understandings.
- 3.7.5 This has been part of the general lowering of expenditure on activities associated with multiculturalism.
- 3.7.6 The AEU would support the re-integration of more time and greater resource provision for citizenship type activities into ESL programs at both adult and school level.

3.8 The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education

- 3.8.1 The AEC plays an important and valuable role in providing excellent resources and facilities which teachers are able to use.
- 3.8.2 The Electoral Education Centre at Old Parliament House in Canberra, for instance, is state of the art in its presentation, and links well with Federal Parliament.

- 3.8.3 Similarly, the AEC provides useful facilities in other capitals cities.
- 3.8.4 The reduction in funding to the AEC has meant that visits by officers to teacher education institutions has stopped. Research by Prior (2005) and others clearly indicates that student teachers have a very low understanding of (and interest in) electoral education. The IEA (2000) study also showed that experienced teachers too had very limited civic knowledge.

3.9 The role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education

- 3.9.1 As noted above, most state and territory governments provide useful resources through the education sections of their respective parliaments. These are generally found very useful by schools. Visits to parliaments are generally available and schools utilise them and find them of benefit to students. For example the Victorian Parliament has an education officer seconded from the state Department of Education and Training. A few local Councils have employed a citizenship education officer
- 3.9.2 The Federal Parliament similarly provides excellent resources and facilities for visits.
- 3.9.3 The Federal Government also provided funding under the Civics and Citizenship Education Program from 1997 to 2004.
- 3.9.4 The philosophy of that program was that:

To be able to participate as active citizens throughout their lives, students need a thorough knowledge and understanding of Australia's political heritage, democratic processes and government, and judicial system. Civics and citizenship education is underpinned by Australian history, and the history of other societies which have influenced that historical tradition. Civics and citizenship education also supports the development of skills, values and attitudes that are necessary for effective, informed and reflective participation in Australia's democracy.²

- 3.9.5 The AEU was generally supportive of this philosophy. The focus for about the first 5 years was on civic knowledge. It later shifted in emphasis to citizenship/participation/community.
- 3.9.6 The three strands of the program were:
- development of curriculum materials and professional learning resources
 - funding for professional development programmes in all States and Territories;
 - a programme of national activities that included funding for principal, parent, academic and key learning area groups, as well as the initiation of *Celebrating Democracy Week* and the *National Schools Constitutional Convention*.
- 3.9.7 The first of these produced a range of materials which were distributed to schools. Whilst the materials themselves were generally useful and well

² Downloaded from <http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=8985> May 2006

- prepared, the experience is that such wholesale distribution does not lead to widespread use. Less emphasis was placed on this element later in the program.
- 3.9.8 The second element of funding for professional development, which gained more emphasis as the program developed was the element found generally most useful. It was encouraging innovative and practical approaches to teaching.
- 3.9.9 The third element was also appreciated, though less general in its application. The NSCC has been operating since 1995 to promote civics and citizenship education and stimulate learning about the Australian Constitution for senior students. The National Civics and Citizenship Forum is another offshoot of the program. Both of these are valuable experiences for those involved, although obviously the number of participants is limited.
- 3.9.10 Evaluation of the program showed that it did produce some very worthwhile activities in schools. However, there was not a marked direct improvement in “electoral knowledge”, although there was increased awareness in the “electoral dispositions” context.

3.10 The access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament

- 3.10.1 As noted above, the Federal Parliament provides an excellent program for school visits.
- 3.10.2 Obviously there are geographic barriers to the participation of some schools to this.
- 3.10.3 The increased funding made available in the Federal Budget through the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate will increase the access for some and be appreciated.
- 3.10.4 However, there is a limit to the extent to which the AEU would support funding for such programs and give them priority within the general education budget.
- 3.10.5 The state and territory based AEC programs offer some alternative and other options such as virtual visits should be investigated.

3.11 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.

- 3.12 The AEU supports a process of discussion and consultation among education stakeholders which considers both the desirability and possibility of using approaches from other countries, including but not limited to those listed. We include a set of references and other useful sources of relevance to the broad topic.

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