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# INFORMED AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Democracy's success comes through the resilience and the intelligent, active participation of a broad base of citizens. In an effective democracy, problem solving, negotiation and cooperation to achieve a solution that as many people as possible accept, is an ongoing activity.

In this chapter, after looking at some of the ways a citizen can take action democratically, some of the ideas, actions and methodologies are brought together in considering educating for active citizenship.

## TAKING ACTION

Every citizen has the right and opportunity to play an active part in the decision-making processes of government and the Parliament. Most of the suggestions that follow have been referred to in previous chapters, but this summarises some of the forms of access to government and the Parliament that are available to citizens. To be effective in achieving your goal, develop an action plan and act within the law. Some of the methods below will be more effective than others on particular issues. Don't waste energy - clarify the desired issues and the outcomes; select the strategies and time frames which seem most effective for the particular purpose. Try to keep the message simple, at least initially.

### Voting

Voting, in state, federal and local elections and in referendums, is an important method of expressing one's view in a democratic system. In Australia voting, using the secret ballot, is compulsory for citizens 18 years and above. Through this process, citizens freely exercise their choice and give the authority to their elected members to represent them in Parliament and to form governments based on the majority decision of the people. Voting for Parliament keeps the people at the centre of the democratic system.

### Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary committees are formed to investigate complex issues in society and their reports influence government and parliament decisions. Most committees undertake public inquiries and invite community submissions. Expressing views to a committee, either in writing or in person, is a direct way of having a case taken into account as new legislation, policies or decisions are being developed.

### Petitions

A traditional way of bringing an issue to the attention of parliament, and mobilising some public opinion in the process, is to present a petition to parliament through a member. Petitions have a set format which should be followed.

### Lobbying

Any attempt by individuals, groups or organisations to make their views known to politicians in order to influence political decisions can be called "lobbying". It is a legal and accepted practice within a democratic system. Effective lobbying involves a clear understanding of the issues, awareness of the particular members' politics and interests, understanding of government and parliamentary processes, understanding of how the issue could be resolved by parliament, and effective communication skills. There are many worker, employer and particular interest organisations that represent their interests to government and the media. Some individuals or firms operate as professional lobbyists, offering their skills and knowledge to organisations which want their case put effectively.

### Contacting Members of Parliament

Phone, write, fax, email or visit a member of either house of parliament, especially local members, to express views, concerns and proposals. In many cases, members can assist with problems, take action on behalf of, or represent people, or refer them to someone who can assist. Hearing from constituents helps them understand community feelings about issues. They will often pass the concern on to an appropriate minister or officer. In some cases, they will raise these concerns in the parliament. All parliaments have websites with full contact information for Ministers and members.



**Contacting Ministers**

On some issues people may wish to phone, write, fax, email or seek to visit the Premier or an appropriate Cabinet Minister. Written contacts are usually most effective, initially, as actually getting appointments to visit may be difficult.

**Working Through Political Parties**

Political parties generally develop policies through formal and informal consultative processes at local, branch and state or local levels. These are often formalised at party conferences. Development of policies and issues can be promoted or influenced from both within (by party members) and from outside, by contact with members and officers of the party. This may involve supporting particular candidates who would promote the issue. Most political parties have websites with full contact information.

**Working with Independents and Minor Parties**

Much the same applies as with other members or parties. However, while independents and minor parties may not be as well resourced or part of government, they are sometimes in a better position than major parties to promote particular issues. In particular, the proportional electoral system through which the Legislative Council (the Upper House of the NSW Parliament) is elected means that minor parties are more likely to be represented in that House.

**Standing for Parliament**

An option open to all citizens is to stand for parliament - either as an independent or as a party candidate. The NSW Electoral Office will provide advice on the process of registration and standing.

**Freedom of Information**

NSW, like most Australian Governments, has legislation to make government more open. Information is the key to an effort to make a change or to take effective action. Many government decisions are made in secret, and certain documents (such as Cabinet papers) are exempted from release, but it is possible to access much information, particularly in relation to records held about you. Most government agencies have a Freedom of Information (FOI) officer to whom applications are made. Forms and fees are required.

**Taking Action Through Government Departments**

In many cases, the most appropriate way of resolving an issue is to directly contact the government department or agency involved (or the minister responsible for it) by mail, phone or personal visit. All agencies have personnel and procedures to assist or deal with issues, and all agencies have websites with contact information. The Internet and telephone book are helpful in locating appropriate departments.

**Using Administrative Courts and Tribunals**

A variety of courts and tribunals exist which are accessible to the public and can deal with specific disputes with public bodies and agencies. The Equal Opportunities Tribunal, the Anti-Discrimination Board, the Administrative Appeals Tribunal and specialist compensation boards make determinations in the same way as courts after hearing disputes specific to their areas of concern. The Office of the Ombudsman, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and the Police Integrity Commission can be accessed by members of the public concerned that issues of injustice or corruption have arisen. The Land and Environment Court hears disputes in relation to planning, development, heritage and environmental concerns.

**Taking Other Legal Action**

The legal system, particularly the Supreme and High Courts, can be used to challenge the actions of government. Courts decide whether the laws passed by parliament are valid, and interpret what these laws mean in practice. Whilst legal action can be very effective, it can be expensive and is usually a last resort when other approaches have failed. Under some circumstances, legal aid may be available.

**Using the Media**

Newspapers, radio and television cover parliamentary and government affairs closely, and play a significant role in publicising issues or exposing problems. The media can influence government by



reflecting or promoting public opinion. Taking issues to the media can provide effective publicity for an issue although it can also be frustrating or have unexpected results. The internet offers an important alternative which is open to most people and can be used to provide information and influence people, generate support and action on issues.

### **Direct Action**

Reasonable freedom of speech and action within the law are an important and colourful aspect of traditional Australian democracy. Demonstrations, public speechmaking, pickets, street marches, public meetings, use of signs and banners, handing out pamphlets to the public, and so forth, are legal ways of attempting to generate and demonstrate public support for an issue and influence decision-makers. The action should stay within the law, respecting the usual rights of individuals and protection of private and public property. Such actions may gain media coverage (though not necessarily the kind of coverage hoped for) but rarely have much immediate direct impact on parliament or government. They will be most effective when part of a larger strategy.

### **Networking**

Taking action on a larger scale requires building support through networking - to let others know what is happening, or to locate others likely to be concerned about the issue. Apart from all the other methods referred to so far, internet-based social networking is a powerful tool which is beginning to have a huge impact on public action.

### **Other Sources of Advice**

Most of the agencies mentioned in this material will provide advice on action that can be taken. However, many additional sources of advice are available, often free. These include the Legal Aid Commission, Community Legal Centres, trade unions and employer organisations, the Law Society and, of course, private solicitors and legal practitioners.

## **EDUCATING FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

Civics and Citizenship Education sets out to help students see how important political and legal systems are to their everyday life. More than that, however, is its intention to assist them to develop the skills and ability to participate as informed, reflective and active citizens in a strong democracy. Underpinning this is the development of attitudes and values supporting the democratic system and the student's involvement in it. An active, participative citizenship is essential to the survival of Australian democracy.

If students are going to become active citizens, this involves much more than simply knowing about democratic institutions and being able to answer exam questions about them. Students also need to become skilled and confident in the processes of participation. They are much more likely to do so if their experiences in the classroom and in the school support those processes.

David Owen (of the University of Tasmania's Centre for Citizenship Education) writes: "... it is how we run our schools, rather than what we teach in them, that will determine levels of active citizenship."

Opportunities for (and recognition of) student participation can enhance learning outcomes by increasing students' sense of connectedness with school and developing leadership skills and social responsibility. Classroom strategies and learning methodologies which reflect the values, skills and practices of active and involved citizenship are likely to be very effective.

Some educational strategies through which this skill in participation (in active citizenship) can be developed include:



- **Appropriate pedagogy:**

These include active forms of pedagogy which tend to model or encourage the intended outcomes include: role plays and simulations; action research; group activities; discussion; real decision-making opportunities; excursions; cultural activities; guest speakers; interviewing and surveys; questioning; consequence charts; undertaking conflict resolution processes; using mind maps and brainstorming; values analysis and clarification; inquiry-based learning.

- **Opportunities to discuss current issues:**

This involves “the capacity to have dangerous conversations in safe places” - as in parliament. The more “real” the issue is (and often the more relevant it is to students) the more effectively it might engage students. This involves accepting controversy and challenge, often to well-entrenched views. However, as with parliamentary debates, agreed rules and standards must operate to ensure that challenge is within tolerable limits – in particular that the rights of all participants are respected and the discussion is not personally offensive, intimidating or damaging. Such opportunities include: debates; public speaking; participating in conventions, conferences and similar programs both within and beyond the school.

- **Building community links:**

The community around and beyond the school is a rich source of resources and models for civic learning and participation. There are also many opportunities to share events and celebrations with the community. Projects which focus on the community (local, national and global), which work with, use, support or create community resources and services, can build bridges and develop community support for the school in return. Community groups or issues can be the focus of connected activities, and community speakers or organisations can support curriculum outcomes. Links which students make with community groups may be long-lasting in themselves, and often support understandings and skills and values which will transfer to greater involvement by individual students in the future.

- **Participatory school governance and organisation:**

Schools often seek to further develop students’ skills in civic participation and leadership by enabling them to have an active role in making decisions about, and in implementing, educational policies and practices. This involves higher levels of self-management, through bodies such as School Councils, SRCs, School Parliaments, and so forth. To be effective, such bodies must have a meaningful impact and role with a serious place in the overall school curriculum and timetable. They will have little – indeed possibly negative - impact when they are little more than window-dressing. The process can be even “deeper” through involving students in school curriculum committees, and embedded school decision-making processes. Opportunities arise, for specific skills training to equip students for these roles. However, the development of leadership skills may be counterproductive to democratic (and educational) values if it does not provide opportunities for a broad-based participation.

- **Opportunities to participate in student networks:**

There are also opportunities for schools to participate in external programs which offer students wider experiences and skills but also give students opportunities to meet with like-minded students involved in community and leadership activities and to develop student networks. Civic participation is specifically fostered through regional SRC meetings; youth parliaments, forums and summits; leadership camps and training groups; issues-based meetings. Internet and email activities can also significantly contribute to or support networking.

- **Accreditation and recognition:**

The concept of “service learning” is not new but few Australian systems incorporate this as part of an accredited syllabus. In Tasmania, the “student participation” syllabus involves active research and a project in the community. Many schools have their own forms of service and community involvement programs. A range of community based recognitions and awards for youth participation are available (from service organisations, local government, local Members of Parliament, etc), and schools can ensure that information about these is available to students. Within the school, specific recognition and encouragement of student participation and citizenship may range from undertaking formal celebrations and awards, to recognition at assemblies or recognition on school reports, or inviting students to talk with assemblies, class groups, teachers or community members about their activities.



**Activity:****Citizenship Audit**

Start with what you already do - a whole school audit of school practices that relate to active citizenship. Most schools are already engaged in many activities which do this.

Identify as many activities as possible in and around the school which support civics and active citizenship. Almost certainly this will show that a great deal is already happening. Then analyse each activity using the SWOT approach:

<b>Activity:</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	
<b>Weaknesses</b>	
<b>Opportunities</b>	
<b>Threats</b>	

This may allow for activities to be more easily recognised and considered and coordinated as part of a cohesive school policy. It may also identify any gaps in programs which could be addressed or programs which are less successful or overlap with other activities. This may have implications, too, for teacher professional development and even wider system policies and practices.

*For example:*

<b>Activity:</b> <i>Election of School Representative Council</i>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<i>Provides experience of democratic processes and representation for students; selected students have support of student body; increased student commitment / empowerment.</i>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<i>Elected students might not be appropriate or capable; time consuming process; actual role and powers of SRC needs to be well defined.</i>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<i>Extend education experience - could use Electoral Commission officers to run election; can be integrated with other curriculum activities (eg literacy, numeracy).</i>
<b>Threats</b>	<i>Staff vetos or interference in process (actual or preceived); process may be divisive or disruptive.</i>

