

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL
MATTERS**

INQUIRY INTO VOTER ENROLMENT

At Sydney on Tuesday 25 July 2006

The Committee met at 10.15 a.m.

PRESENT

Ms M. F. Saliba (Chairman)

Legislative Council

The Hon. Dr A. Chesterfield-Evans
The Hon. J. A. Gardiner
The Hon. D. T. Harwin
The Hon .P. G. Sharpe

Legislative Assembly

Mr M. J. Daley
Mr P. R. Pearce

CHAIR: I declare the hearing open and ask an officer of the Secretariat to read the Committee's terms of reference.

Terms of reference read by the Committee Clerk.

CHAIR: I understand that Mr Simpson has been given a copy of Legislative Assembly Standing Orders 332, 333 and 334 in relation to the procedure for the examination of witnesses by the Committee. Copies are available for other interested persons.

Standing Order 332, 333 and 334 read by the Committee Clerk.

MICHAEL SIMPSON, General Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Vision Australia Ltd, 4 Mitchell Street, Enfield, and

EBRU SUMAKTAS, Policy and Advocacy Officer, Vision Australia Ltd, 4 Mitchell Street, Enfield, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before the Committee?

Mr SIMPSON: I appear as General Manager of Vision Australia Ltd.

CHAIR: The Committee received a submission from your organisation. Is it your desire for that submission to form part of your formal evidence?

Mr SIMPSON: Yes, please.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr SIMPSON: Yes, and then I will pick up some issues in the submission made by Vision Australia. I particularly want to give a bit of history about Vision Australia because many of you will know of the Royal Blind Society but Vision Australia is not widely known as yet. Vision Australia is only a very young organisation—it was only formed two years ago in July 2004 as a result of a merger between the Royal Blind Society, which was essentially New South Wales, the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and the Vision Australia Foundation, which were both primarily Victorian organisations.

Now, as a combined organisation, Vision Australia is the largest provider of services to people who are blind and vision-impaired throughout Australia and, in that context, is constantly in touch with people of all ages who are blind or have low vision, and others with a print disability. It is in that context that we made the submission to this inquiry because one of our aims is not only to provide people who are blind or vision-impaired with services but also to eliminate the barriers that people who are blind or vision-impaired have in either accessing or participating in the community, including asserting their rights and obligations as citizens.

In particular, one of the rights that we have as citizens is to be able to participate in the democratic process of our State and country, and part of that, of course, is to vote for people of our choice. Of course, people who are blind do have a barrier in terms of participating in the electoral process because many aspects of that process are inaccessible to people who are blind or have very low vision. Those barriers pick up from the point of enrolment or even being aware of the need to enrol for voting right through to the process of actually lodging a vote in any poll.

Vision Australia has an aim to eliminate the barriers that blind or vision-impaired people face so we are particularly interested in one of the most basic and democratic rights that we have as citizens. So we are here to ensure that new processes are put in place so that people who are blind or have very low vision can participate equally along with their sighted peers. In our submission we made a number of points about information access and it is not widely known but only 3 per cent to 5 per cent of information that is available to people in print is available to blind or people with low vision in alternative formats such as Braille, large print, audio material or now electronic text.

So one of the key barriers that we face is the inaccessibility of information. In our submission we talk about the process of informing people about their obligation to enrol as voters, and how we might better be able to reach those people, not only to inform them about their obligation to enrol as a voter, but also so that they can enrol in a way that allows a person who is blind or vision-impaired to complete the process. Most of the processes we have had in the past, and still have to a large degree, are based on printed material and on filling out forms using pen and paper, which, of course, is inaccessible to people who are blind.

We also state in the submission that we know that some blind or vision-impaired people have chosen not to enrol because they do not feel they have the same rights as every other citizen in the community and because at the point of lodging a vote in a polling booth they cannot do so independently and privately. We must engage the services of others, whether those people be polling officials or someone of our own choice—a friend or a relative. We still have to engage someone else. We strongly believe that having a fully accessible process, from the point of providing information about the need to enrol as a voter to the point of being able to lodge a vote privately and independently in a polling booth, will encourage people who are blind and vision impaired to enrol as voters in the New South Wales parliamentary system. That is my opening statement. Ms Sumaktas and I are happy to answer any questions from the Committee.

CHAIR: Vision Australia's submission notes that it consults with the State Electoral Office. Has this process identified ways of improving the level of voter enrolment for people who are blind or vision impaired?

Mr SIMPSON: Particularly over the past 12 months we have had very good interaction with the State Electoral Office, and Colin Barry, the current commissioner, has strongly engaged with the disability community, including the blindness community through Vision Australia and other blindness organisations. A number of recommendations have resulted from that engagement, particularly relating to access to information and to the voting process. We have a very positive relationship with the State Electoral Office.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Has Vision Australia looked into electronic voting and whether it makes equality of access better in the sense that presumably one could use Braille? If one pushed the requisite button the machine would at least say that a vote had been cast. The Committee looked at electronic voting in Ireland, and it seemed to be okay.

Mr SIMPSON: We have looked at a number of different processes that make the voting experience more independent and private for people who are blind. The Australian Capital Territory has had two elections using a form of electronic voting. In the first trial about 14 per cent of voters chose to use the electronic voting system. In the second trial, a year or so ago, just over 30 per cent of voters in the ACT chose to use that system. The Victorian Electoral Commission will be trialling electronic voting at the November state election at six polling places. Vision Australia has also talked with the Australian Electoral Commission about potential trials.

We understand the hesitation about electronic voting, because the connotation is that the current system of going to a polling place and being actively engaged in the voting process disappears with electronic voting. That is why Vision Australia has also talked about electronically assisted voting. That is more akin to the comment about using a device to give the voter the information about the candidates and the parties that the candidates might be linked to and then, by using that electrically assisted system, the vote can be produced and then either stored and counted electronically or a hard copy provided to the voter who then deposits it in the ballot box along with every other voter at that polling place.

We have also trialled different forms of template that might sit over a standard voting paper. At the last Victorian state election Vision Australia trialled a Braille template that sat over the top of the voting paper. The vision-impaired person could read information about the candidates and there was a cut out that allowed a mark to be made for the candidates chosen. That was not terribly successful. It was an important trial and it proved it was not a feasible system to pursue. That is why we have pursued both electronic and electronically assisted voting for the future.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: When you say "electronic", do you mean from home—as in not having to go to a polling place—and electronically assisted whereby a voting machine is provided in the booth?

Mr SIMPSON: No, electronic or electronically assisted could both be at a polling place. "Electronic" in its widest interpretation could mean from home. However, Vision Australia has not anticipated that electronic voting would take us to that level. We simply want to participate alongside every other citizen. If that means at the polling place, then we are happy to have either electronic or electronically assisted voting so that we can vote alongside other people. To a certain degree the Victorian trial will be electronic because the electoral commission will be storing the votes cast at the six polling places electronically, taking them back to a central point to produce the ballot papers and then taking them back out to the polling place for counting. The Australian Capital Territory system is electronic; it does not actually produce a voting paper.

CHAIR: During your opening statement you referred to the lack of information and access to information. That has also been noted in a number of other submissions the Committee has received. Do you think that is the most significant factor in determining whether blind or vision-impaired people enrol to vote?

Ms SUMAKTAS: Vision Australia believes that is a fundamental barrier for people who are blind and vision impaired because, unlike our peers, we cannot access information in a conventional way—that is, in print. We must alleviate that barrier for people who are blind and vision impaired. We must provide that information in alternative formats and access Vision Australia's communication methods, such as 2RPH and various chat lines. We must also provide the information in alternative formats such as audio, Braille or e-text, which is accessible to synthetic speech screen readers. Those methods can alleviate that problem. How can a blind or vision-impaired person who is about to turn 18 find out that enrolment information is available in an alternative format? A letter could contain details about how to access the relevant information in a preferred format.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: A number of submissions have indicated that the level of voter enrolment is linked to how informed people are about the electoral system. Do you feel that this question of information is more applicable to blind and vision-impaired people, or are other barriers more significant in determining why they do not vote?

Mr SIMPSON: There are probably three key areas. One is access to information. It is evident that people who are blind or vision impaired do not have the same access to printed material as sighted people. That is the world we live in. Vision Australia is trying to narrow that gap because about 95 per cent of printed information is not accessible. We would love to get to 100 per cent of information being accessible. It is only one of the contributing factors that we see. Another is the actual process itself, and that is that to enrol for voting or to even get into a polling place or get to a polling place it can sometimes be difficult with sight or without sighted assistance. So some people choose not to engage because of the difficulty of the whole process.

But, more philosophically, I think there are a number of people who believe that if they cannot fully exercise their rights as citizens they will not engage in the process. I know personally a number of people who have chosen not to enrol because they cannot lodge a vote independently and privately. So, for them, it is a fundamental issue of not being able to assert their rights as citizens that takes them out of the process. But for most of us I think it is about the difficulties that we encounter along the way. It is about access to the information, about getting to and from polling places and about being able to participate in a way that is easy and has some dignity about it.

CHAIR: Mr Simpson, you mentioned involvement in the enrolment process. Do you think the new requirements for identification upon enrolment or when a person wishes to change their details on the electoral roll will have a significant impact on blind and vision-impaired people?

Mr SIMPSON: The real impact will be one of having enough identification. As with all sectors in the community, there are people who are blind and vision impaired who are very private about their identity and their personal information and have fundamental reasons for not wanting to share that information. But for most of us it is not a matter of having a fundamental barrier about sharing that information; it is actually about having enough identification to prove. That is why Vision

Australia as its former entity Royal Blind Society was most supportive of the New South Wales State Government introducing a photo ID card, with the bill passing through Parliament in 2004, I think. The most ready form of identification for people—and the one that most people ask for—is a driver's licence and generally people who are blind do not have a driver's licence. So we actually have problems having enough proof of identity. We do not believe that the new arrangements are terribly onerous and we believe that as long as some governments are prepared to provide forms of identification like the New South Wales photo ID card blind people will be prepared to prove their identity along with anyone else in the community.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I was wondering what Vision Australia does actively in your community to encourage people to enrol. Do you do anything specific prior to elections that is not being picked up by the SEO?

Mr SIMPSON: Vision Australia has worked with the various electoral authorities in many States and Territories as well as the Federal Government particularly to provide information to blind and vision-impaired people. But of course they are the people whom we are engaged with and the ones whom we are actively providing services to or have provided services to in the past. There would be a segment of the community that we would not be reaching. At most elections—State, Federal and Territory—we make approaches to the various electoral commissions, offering to put information into various formats. From time to time blindness organisations have also approached political parties to offer them an opportunity to reach people who are blind or vision impaired in formats that they will be able to access.

One thing that we have not actively engaged in is trying to engage with young blind people when they turn 18, or when we first learn about a person who is young and blind, and encouraging those people to enrol as voters. Ebru made the point before about people turning voting age and receiving information encouraging them to enrol and informing them of their obligation to enrol. Unless there is somebody there to read that to a blind person they will not hear about that information. I do not know whether it would be possible to somehow, as the electoral authorities are trying to inform people who are turning voting age that they have an obligation to enrol, identify young people who are blind or vision impaired who would require information in other formats. It would be better to send that information in other formats so that they could then access the information.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Mr Simpson, you mentioned that you have worked with Mr Barry, the electoral commissioner, and the State Electoral Office to date. Are there any things that you can suggest that the State Electoral Office has not been doing that you think it could do to assist your constituency to enrol to vote and to vote?

Mr SIMPSON: Other than the recommendations that we made during the community consultations they have been holding, where there was a very strong message that electronic or electronically assisted voting was not going to be an option for the upcoming New South Wales State election, we would strongly encourage the New South Wales Government and electoral commission to work as soon as possible towards electronic or electronically assisted voting and a whole end-to-end process that would be accessible for people who are blind or vision impaired. One way to do that, if it is not going to be possible for the 2007 State election, may be to start to introduce an accessible process, particularly the voting process, for local government elections, which can then lead up to the next State election, which I think is in 2011. They would be the things that we would be encouraging. The electoral commission is already looking at using some of our premises as polling places because they are places that are frequented by people who are blind and vision impaired and are easily accessible to people who are blind and vision impaired. So the electoral commission is actually looking at using some of our sites.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Is that the State Electoral Office or the Australian Electoral Commission?

Mr SIMPSON: Sorry, it is the State Electoral Office.

Mr SIMPSON: So they are looking at using some of our sites for the 2007 State election.

Ms SUMAKTAS: In addition to that, they are looking at using our staff and equipment—our closed-circuit television and magnifying glasses, as well as staff, who will be able to assist in the voting process.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: I have two points. The first is in relation to electronic voting methods. Do you have any comments about concerns that have been expressed regarding the utilisation of electronic voting methods, particularly in the United States, and the security of the vote without a paper trail? Secondly—you alluded to this point earlier in terms of polling places—despite the best efforts of the State Electoral Office to ensure that they are generally accessible there is an issue in terms of the number of polling places and the practicalities of using schools and so on for voting. Have there been any discussions with the State Electoral Office about these arrangements? You referred to your offices and various other places where people with vision impairments come on a regular basis and where you have the necessary facilities. What about the divisional electoral offices within each seat, making sure that they are accessible, and the level of assistance around there—those sorts of issues?

Mr SIMPSON: We have worked both with the State Electoral Office in New South Wales and the other electoral authorities to incorporate aspects for people who are blind or have low vision into the checklists that they use for assessing polling places. As you have indicated, one of the real problems is that a range of places are used, from school auditoriums to community and church halls, but the number of accessible polling places seems to increase with every election. It is at least on the up side. We now know that, with the advice that we have given the State Electoral Office here and other electoral authorities, issues around colour contrast, lighting, magnification and tactile markings are now taken into account when the electoral authorities look at polling places. We have not been engaged, however, to do audits of polling places and to inspect the hundreds of sites that are used across the State for each election. I do not know whether we would have the capacity to do that.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: That is what I was going to ask. Do you think that would be advantageous?

Mr SIMPSON: I think it would be advantageous from a number of disability perspectives to at least audit a percentage of sites—whether it be 5 per cent or 10 per cent—because that would be a reality test of accessibility. One of the problems that all electoral authorities say they have is that, whilst they may have a checklist and guidelines, it is different when there are hundreds of polling officials looking at places and assessing places as there may be different interpretations. One of the things we have tried to do to alleviate that is to provide training through electoral authorities. In fact, during August and September Vision Australia is providing training through the State Electoral Office to polling officials for the 2007 election. So hopefully that will also address some of those issues.

Ebru made the point a moment ago about closed-circuit television magnifiers. We have recommended to the State Electoral Office that they use CCTV magnifiers in polling places so that people with low vision can put the voting papers under the camera and it enlarges the paper onto the screen so that you can see what you are reading and what you are writing. We have done that with the SEO.

CHAIR: Thank you both very much for appearing before the Committee this morning.

(Short adjournment)

MATTHEW ROBERT GEORGE BOWDEN, Deputy Director Advocacy, People With Disability, Inc., and

DIGBY ROBERTSON HUGHES, People With Disability, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have received a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and a copy of the Legislative Assembly's standing orders 332, 333 and 334. The Committee received a submission from you. Is it your desire that that submission form part of the evidence?

Mr BOWDEN: It is, thank you.

CHAIR: Would you care to make an opening statement?

Mr BOWDEN: Absolutely. Thank you very much. People with Disability Australia Incorporated [PWD] is a national disability rights and advocacy organisation. We have been running for about 25 years. First of all we were a New South Wales-based organisation. We were set up by a group of people with disability who were leaving a government-run institution. In the International Year of Disabled People we became our organisation. We have a primary membership made up of people with disability. We also have an associate membership made up of many disability organisations and people interested in the disability rights movement. We very much welcome the opportunity of addressing you today.

For a number of years PWD has been interested in and concerned about the issue of access to the electoral system in New South Wales for people with disability. We have communicated for many years with the New South Wales State Electoral Office [SEO] and we have raised our concerns over that time. We believe there are many issues relevant for people with disability. Our organisation represents the interests of all people with disability, not just one diagnosis group. We believe that the best way forward is for the enrolments and other access issues for people with disability to be part of a broader disability access plan where all those issues can be addressed. We also think that the SEO staff would benefit from disability awareness training so that they know what the issue is, how they can be implementing the plan and how access services can be delivered in a flexible way through the SEO staff, including the staff who work on the booths on election day, so they can provide a service which is responsive to the needs of people with disability.

We also think that the provision of information is one of the key issues and should be accessible to people with disability. As Vision Australia has spoken to you about the provision of formats for people who are blind or vision impaired, we also think that work needs to be done on the provision of information that is accessible for people with cognitive impairment, so that information is provided in an easy-read format or pictorial format so that people who have difficulty engaging information in a written form are able to understand and engage with the election process.

We also think there needs to be outreach and community education to some of the most marginalised people with disability who live in New South Wales, people who live in institutions, people who live in licensed residential centres or boarding houses. Those people are very underrepresented in the electoral system. They had a very poor enrolment rate to vote, yet people with cognitive impairment make up between 2 per cent and 3 per cent of the adult population of New South Wales. So, it is a significant group of people we are talking about.

We also think adjustments need to be made to voting instructions and ballot papers so that people who have cognitive impairments are able to understand the process. We also think that Auslan interpreters, interpreters who are able to communicate with people who are deaf, and should be available at voting booths. We also think that arrangements should be made for people with other hearing impairments; for example, hearing loops being made available at polling booths. We also would agree with Vision Australia around the adjustments made for people who are blind but also for people who have a physical disability that might have an impact on someone's ability to use a pencil or to use a pen in casting their vote, so that the issue of secret ballot and having a ballot which can be independently verified is afforded to those people with disability.

Physical access to polling booths is also one of our concerns. Some of our members have reported to us that when booths or polling stations are advertised as being accessible, when they turn up to make their vote they are not accessible and that the booths are not complying with the Australian Standard 1428, part 2, which describes the accessibility and the physical dimensions of a polling booth so that the person who uses a wheelchair is able to get to cast their vote in the booth. I think that sums up our submission to you today.

CHAIR: In your experience have you found that people with an intellectual disability have significant barriers? You have mentioned that people who live in institutions and group homes are poorly represented in the voting process. Can you identify any barriers preventing them from enrolling to vote?

Mr BOWDEN: The barriers are around the way that information is provided. It is either very text heavy or provided only in text format; it is not provided in easy-to-read or plain English formats. It is not provided in another format, a pictorial sense. For many people with an intellectual disability their disability impacts on their learning and their ability to read and write. With having something arrive in the mail they are not able to engage with that, whereas if it was provided in an accessible format the person would be able to understand that information. The saying goes "a picture tells a thousand words", well pictures really do that for a person with an intellectual disability. The whole process can be explained in a series of diagrams; what information needs to be relayed.

Mr HUGHES: As we put in our submission, many people live in institutions. Because of the very nature of institutional living they are not encouraged to participate, especially the licensed residential boarding houses that are managed by a proprietor and the staff live on the site. They do not encourage the residents to participate in the community. They do not encourage the residents to get out and participate in everyday community activities. Often people are heavily medicated, which does not allow them to leave the premises on many occasions.

Mr BOWDEN: That is where the community education for people is needed, so that their citizenship rights are explained to them and the benefit of participating in electoral processes and what comes from that, and what having your say is able to influence.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: Following on your point about the rights of citizenship, firstly do you have a view on the identification requirements being introduced federally? Do you see that as a problem for persons with a disability? Secondly, in relation to boarding houses, given that there are a number of instances when there is a manager on the site—as you say it is virtually an institution, albeit it outside the traditional form of an institution—does the existence of that management role on persons within the boarding house adversely affect the residents' capacity to exercise their civic rights?

Mr BOWDEN: I will address the second part of your question first. The influence of proprietors of boarding houses cannot be underestimated. Some proprietors enable people to make choices freely and support decision making of the people who live there, but we do not always see that. We do see people's decision making being undermined and we see coercive powers used so that the decision is made for the person rather than by the person. That can occur also in other institutional settings and boarding houses where staff members can use their power in a way that is not supported by the Disability Services Act, for example. Obviously there are complaints mechanisms that allow us, when we are aware of it, or allow people with a disability to make complaints, to be checked and kept in check.

Mr HUGHES: The identity card creates some issues for some people with a disability, similar to the points raised by Vision Australia. A lot of people with a disability, especially a cognitive disability, do not have a drivers licence, do not have many points of identification. In some indigenous communities, indigenous people with a disability are very apprehensive of having identification imposed on them for historical reasons. PWD does a lot of outreaching into western New South Wales into and regional communities and have a number of clients with a disability out there. This is an issue for them. We do support the State Government's introduction of the RTA card, we think it is a good thing. For people who wish to have identification they can have it easily with that card. The other people it can impact on are those with a disability who live in institutional settings. Again, they are

often loath to have identification forced upon them because of their historical background, where they have come from.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In your submission you noted the new plan by the State Electoral Office. Are you quite happy about that? Would you like that to be taken further?

Mr HUGHES: Yes, there are some things. I have been on the record as congratulating the new commissioner and the SEO for engaging with the disability sector. It is fair to say that the SEO is starting a number of years behind other electoral authorities in Australia. As raised earlier, in Victoria in November this year they are going to have a trial of electronic voting. The Australian Electoral Commission will possibly have a trial at 30 sites around the country next year. They are starting from behind. I think if we start from that perspective, there have been tremendous improvements in the last 12 months under the new commissioner. Obviously we would like to see a continuation of that. To use the 2007 State election as a springboard, as stated by Vision Australia, to the September 2008 local government elections and then going ahead to 2011 would keep every election utilised and run by the State Electoral Office—to use that as a stepping stone forward.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Mr Hughes, apart from the electronic trial in Victoria in your State's jurisdiction, which might be the model, does anything in particular stand out?

Mr HUGHES: Not really. In my conversation with the Australian Electoral Commission they are moving, they are struggling, to find a model anywhere around the world that they can utilise between now and next year. They might develop their own software package. It is obviously fraught with issues. It is a problem. Mostly, electronic voting has often been used in jurisdictions that people do not rank as important as others. That is why people never objected to it for local government. In Ontario they used it for local government elections. The Australian Capital Territory has used it but there has not been an awful lot of push for it at Federal, provincial or national elections.

CHAIR: What role do you think the State Electoral Office can play to encourage people with a disability to enrol to vote and to ensure that their details are kept up to date?

Mr BOWDEN: Again, through the provision of the information in plain English formats, using pictorial formats; community education to follow that through so that people are encouraged to enrol to vote and to exercise their civic rights and also for the office to receive disability awareness training that is broad so that when a person with a cognitive impairment and an intellectual disability perhaps turns up to vote that the person is again welcomed to the booth and that any adjustment be made so that they are able to cast their vote.

Mr HUGHES: To go back to the licensed residential centres and using them as a case study, PWD currently has a working group, I suppose you would call it, with the Australian Electoral Commission to improve voter access for residents of boarding houses in New South Wales and we are running a pilot program hopefully at the next Federal election. So to have the State Electoral Office come on board on that would be very useful because it is an identifiable group of people whose civic rights are often ignored. So to have the State Electoral Office come on board and assist with a project would be very useful.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: Has there been an indication from the State Electoral Office that it is prepared to?

Mr HUGHES: There has not been an indication, no.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: When is this project under way?

Mr HUGHES: It is under way currently and the aim is prior to the next Federal election. We have targeted licensed boarding houses in the inner west, about 300 residents. In some of those boarding houses enrolments are about as low as one or two people out of 30. Again, the ones that are differently managed, it is up to about 70 per cent of the residents are on the roll. So the aim is to develop electoral material that is in an accessible format. What the Electoral Commission is using as its basis for some of this is the information it is using for people from cultural and linguistically diverse communities because again it is people who are having trouble just understanding it in the

written format. I had a meeting with them two weeks ago, the AEC, and it is taking this forward now and it is using as a base point the information from the court communities and then some minor modifications to it is often all that is required.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: This reflects a little on using boarding houses. Some of the submissions we have received are suggesting that a broader interagency approach through the RTA for example or through the Tax Office In terms of getting people on the roll would be useful. Do you have any comments on that, particularly through DADHC and other organisations that people with disabilities are interacting with, where there are points in the process where we could be encouraging them to vote or get on the roll and providing assistance that way?

Mr BOWDEN: It is a good idea to be using the organisations that people are engaged with, either through the provision of case management services or through the licensing of boarding houses, as a mechanism of encouraging people to think about whether or not they would like to enrol to vote. The issue of voting currently, I would suggest, is fairly low down on the issues that case managers would be looking at for people who they are engaged with but I think if we were working with senior officers of the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, that could slow down to the level where direct staff are working with people either in supporting people in accommodation, in group homes, or through the case management service for people who are living in the community. That could be quite effective in getting more people to enrol.

(The witnesses withdrew)

STEPAN KERKYASHARIAN, Chair, Community Relations Commission, 172 Castlereagh Street, Sydney, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and a copy of the Legislative Assembly's Standing Orders 332, 333 and 334 that relate to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: That is correct.

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I am appearing in my capacity as chair of the Community Relations Commission.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes. I thank the Committee for the invitation, and I want to state up front that the Community Relations Commission of New South Wales contends that the right to vote is at the very heart of our democratic political process. It is essential that all Australian citizens are provided with the opportunity to exercise the right to vote and to participate in political processes regardless of their cultural background or their level of English language proficiency. People from language backgrounds other than English, and particularly those who for various reasons have limited or no proficiency at all in English, are clearly a special needs group within the terms of this inquiry. Many people from non-English speaking backgrounds already experience difficulty understanding the requirements and processes for enrolment on the electoral roll, so it is important that any strategies that may arise from this inquiry assist them, rather than add to the complexities of the system.

Disabilities may in particular be experienced by women of non-English speaking backgrounds who for family and domestic reasons have been unable to acquire language proficiency, and also by ageing members of our non-English speaking community. There is a tendency referred to as regression to first language; for some to lose their acquired language and to be able to communicate only in their mother tongue as they get older, particularly if age is compounded by illness. In our written submission, which I commend to your attention, the commission put forward a range of community information strategies which, in our view and from our past experience in engaging with the communities, are effective.

Apart from using electronic and print media and advertising in community languages, radio and television, the commission particularly points to the value of using multilingual call centres in association with any advertising campaign, and the need to ensure that interpreting services are available where it is necessary to assist those seeking to enrol. The commission is particularly concerned about the proposals being put forward by the Commonwealth as set out in the electoral and referendum amendment Act. Two elements in particular would appear to add unnecessary complications to the electoral process, and they will impact on voters from non-English speaking backgrounds. The first is the requirement that new enrolments or people wishing to change their enrolment details will be required to produce a drivers licence. If an elector does not have a licence, then their application will have to be countersigned by two electors who know the applicant.

The reason advanced for this measure is that will help prevent electoral fraud. However, according to one media report—and I refer the Committee to an article by Brian Costa in the *Age* on 3 July 1996, published in Melbourne—and I quote: "Since 1990 more than 66 million votes have been cast for the House of Representatives yet 71 attempts at multiple voting have been detected." So that is 71 out of 66 million. "The 2001 National Audit Office review of the Commonwealth roll described it as being of high integrity." The measure would therefore appear to be an unnecessary complication which will impact particularly on women of non-English speaking backgrounds while less likely than most to have a drivers licence and therefore will be required to seek countersignatories.

Any increase in the complexity for proof of identity requirements could deter some eligible voters from non-English speaking backgrounds from enrolling or, if enrolled, from changing their enrolment details. In reference to women from non English-speaking backgrounds, there is also an

added complexity when you refer to women of non-English speaking backgrounds living in remote and regional areas. You will find that in many cases these women not only do not have a drivers licence but they live on properties where the nearest neighbour might be at least half a kilometre away and therefore they are isolated in terms of social interaction as well and therefore might find it very difficult to even find two people who will countersign their electoral form.

The second element is the proposal that the electoral roll be closed at 8.00 p.m. on the day that an electoral writ is issued, with no enrolments except people turning 18 and people granted citizenship before the election day being permitted. As we stated in our written submission, "Advice from the Australian Electoral Commission indicates that the early closure of the electoral roll has the possibility to disenfranchise tens of thousands of Australian citizens." In the 2004 election, 78,000 first-time voters enrolled and 345,000 people updated their details in the seven-day grace period. That is a lot of people. This measure could particularly disadvantage new Australian citizens who are first-time voters. As we pointed out, this group typically enrolls in greater numbers during the period of grace, the period of seven days after the issuing of the writ, which has been the practice in the past.

One reason for this is the lead time that is sometimes needed for getting information through, particularly to smaller language communities which have limited, sometimes only weekly, publications, or radio programs once a week in their own language. Another is that new citizens, like their Australian-born counterparts, are often highly mobile and I suggest even more so because they are looking for jobs and they are going through a settling period in a new country. As immigrants become more settled and successful, there is also often a tendency to move house, and it is often at this time when reliance on the community is lessened and new horizons are being explored, that people consider taking out Australian citizenship. Change of address is a fairly common feature of Australian society and particularly of upwardly mobile newcomers.

Perhaps one practical strategy which could be used generally is to have the post office include on the change of address forms a reminder to customers of the need to re-enrol in their new electorate. Basically, to recap, the Community Relations Commission believes that the integrity of the electoral roll is best maintained by retaining a period of grace such as seven days following the issuing of an electoral writ, and in ensuring that the enrolment process is as uncomplicated as possible. It seems peculiar that while the Commonwealth expends considerable funds in actively encouraging people to become Australian citizens, it is now introducing legislation that will make it more difficult for them to practice the main privilege and responsibility of citizenship, which is the ballot.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from you. Is it your desire that that submission form part of your evidence?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes.

CHAIR: Does the Community Relations Commission consult with the State Electoral Office about strategies to assist people from non-English-speaking background [NESB] to exercise their right to vote?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: The Community Relations Commission, [CRC] by virtue of its legislation, has responsibility to assess the effectiveness of government agencies and public authorities, that is any authority that has been created under an Act of the Parliament of New South Wales, and to assist them in their responsibility towards a culturally diverse society and also to monitor their progress and report to Parliament at the end of March every year through our Minister. That is done through the Ethnic Affairs Priority Statements Program [EAPS]. In that context from time to time we do hold discussions with agencies which deliver those kinds of services and we have done that with the Electoral Office on a number of occasions and we report on that.

CHAIR: Has that process identified specific areas that need to be addressed and has the process been useful?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: We have identified areas that need to be addressed. Following the tabling of the State Electoral Office's annual report in 2003-04 the commission raised a number of issues with them, which were addressed during the 2004-05 period. The State Electoral Office's latest

annual report indicates that a number of initiatives to meet the needs of people of non-English-speaking backgrounds have been introduced and we find that very encouraging.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: In your written submission and also in your opening statement you say that "This group"—being new Australian citizens—"typically enrolls in greater numbers during the grace period." On what do you base that? Is there a study you can provide to the Committee as evidence to back your assertion?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes, I will get that and provide it to you.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: What is it?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: The data?

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Yes?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I will get that for the Committee.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: It is not a specific study conducted by the commission?

CHAIR: We would like to know how you gathered the data?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: It is not a study that the commission itself did.

CHAIR: Who did it?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: It was the Australian Electoral Commission.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: You also talked about the relationship between citizenship and enrolment, which is important.

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Certainly at all of the citizenship ceremonies that I have attended the AEC typically sends a representative and at most ceremonies each new citizen is given an enrolment form. Is that practice useful or, given that according to the evidence you have given there is a tendency for new citizens not to enrol but to leave it to the grace period, what do you think is wrong with that procedure of AEC people attending, and can that be improved in any way?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I think that is a very good initiative. I have been to a number of citizenship ceremonies where the forms are handed out but I think there needs to be some sort of follow-up. Obviously people take these forms away from there; they do not usually fill it in on the spot. In a number of cases many of those people would not be fluent in English and probably would not be in a position to understand the importance of filling them in as quickly as possible and that is why you will see that when an election is announced and there is a lot of publicity around the fact that an election is going to take place, that is when people suddenly realise that they need to participate.

Where the Electoral Commission attends citizenship ceremonies; perhaps there should be some tripartite arrangement between the Electoral Commission, the Immigration Department, which oversees the administration of citizenship ceremonies, and local government, which administers the particular citizenship ceremony, to have strategies in place to provide interpreters on the day and also probably have people who might assist.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Multilingual material?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Multilingual material and people who might network with the newly created citizens after the ceremony, and say to them, "Look, you had better do this quickly. Let me explain to you what this form is all about."

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Through the EAPS I suppose you have had a lot of discussions with the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] about drivers licences and the ease with which Australians of a non-English-speaking background can obtain their driver's licence, and you certainly referred to that in terms of the difficulties undoubtedly that women from a non-English-speaking background have. Can you provide a little bit more specificity about the degree of overrepresentation that NESB people might have amongst the less than 10 per cent of the Australian population that does not have a driver's licence and what strategies that you, through the CRC have been encouraging the RTA to undertake to increase the ease in which people from a non-English-speaking background can obtain a driver's licence?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I am not sure if data would be available. Perhaps we could dig deep into some of the—

The Hon. DON HARWIN: So in other words you do not have any data to back your assertion that women from NESB are overrepresented among those who do not have a driver's licence?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: No, just let me finish what I was saying. I do not think there is definitive data saying how many people of non-English-speaking background do not have a driver's licence, but I am quite confident in stating that from our interaction and from the anecdotal evidence that we have—and I stand by my statement—that many women of non-English speaking background, the proportion among the non-English speaking community would be different to the broader community and that many of those women would probably not have a driver's licence.

I am extremely confident in making that statement, particularly in some regional and rural areas; in places like Grafton, for example, where some years ago the commission was approached by the local community to provide funding for a driving instructor to be employed to promote to the women who had gone into that particular area north of Coffs Harbour because they were very isolated and they were trying to get those women to obtain their driver's licence to in some way alleviate their isolation, so I am very confident when I make that statement.

In terms of what the RTA does, I do not think that the RTA is expected to just go out there and promote and say to people, "Please get your drivers licences". The RTA has been proactive in making sure that people of a non-English speaking background can obtain drivers licences and they can be tested in terms of their skills and their knowledge even though they may not be fluent in the English language. One of the examples is that a few years ago the commission produced a whole series of audio material, which has been integrated into the computer programs, so that people who are not fluent in English can do their driver's test, both practical and the theoretical and knowledge side of it, through a computerised system in an audio visual manner so I think that the RTA has done a lot of positive work in that area.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: That sounds really good. What do you think are the remaining barriers?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I think the barriers are probably issues of settlement, where the priority is to settle down and to re-establish the family. I think in some cases the female member of the family tends to stay home in the initial period.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Cultural issues.

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: There are cultural issues involved. I think those are the main issues rather than barriers. I do not think they see it as a barrier. I think they just see it as a normal evolution of the settlement and integration process.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: There are no real barriers as such?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: There are no legal barriers.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: I attend a number of citizenship ceremonies and there is a significant inconsistency from ceremony to ceremony as to how each ceremony is handled by the Australian

Electoral Commission. Waverley Council has forms filled out as part of the ceremony and they are collected by the AEC official and that person is there to assist in filling out the forms. With my neighbouring council, Randwick Council, as Mr Daley would be aware, the presence of the official is known and people are encouraged to fill out the form whereas with Woollahra Council, the form is in the package and you can go and see the AEC official if you wish. Have any measures been taken to try to seek some consistency in the process.

Second, given that you have already identified that there is considerable mobility with people who are taking out citizenship and moving around, looking for work or because they have not yet become established, what studies are there to indicate that people essentially get dropped off the roll when the AEC does a sweep of an area and identifies who has moved? They are the ones, you would suggest, who would be significantly disadvantaged by the rolls closing at the time on the day, am I correct?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes, they will be, but also those who have not yet enrolled at all. A very simple idea regarding citizenship ceremonies or a follow-on from citizenship ceremonies is that probably the Electoral Office could send out a letter, say within three weeks of a citizenship ceremony to all the people who participated because they have their names and addresses; it is a matter of public record.

CHAIR: What about going one step further and automatically enrolling people who are granted citizenship. It has been suggested that a system could be developed, for example, where people who are 16 automatically go on to an electoral roll they are on there for the future. What do you think about a similar system for people who are granted citizenship where automatic enrolment is part of the process?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Personally I think that would be great. I do not know whether there are any issues about the individual having the right to make a choice whether they participate or not. I assume that is the question that can be asked during the process of assessing the person's citizenship application. At that point in time any privacy matters can be sorted out when someone applies for citizenship where the questions put to that person would be, "Well, you realise when you become a citizen you will have the right to participate in the political process by voting. Do you want to go on the electoral roll?" and if the person answers "Yes" and then if the application for citizenship is successful, that person should automatically be put on the roll, but I think they should have the choice of saying, "Well, I would like to consider that later." I think that freedom of choice should be there.

Mr MICHAEL DALEY: On the second page of your submission you state that in the 2004 Federal election 78,000 first-time voters enrolled and 345,000 people updated their details in the seven-day grace period. Have you obtained that information from the Australian Electoral Commission?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: Yes.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: In relation to the new photo identification cards, a very good initiative introduced by the Parliament in recent times and which is issued by the Roads and Traffic Authority, are there the same cultural issues of people from non-English speaking backgrounds taking up the photo identification card?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: My personal view is I do not see any cultural issues in general. There may be individuals who may not want to have an ID card but I do not see any cultural issues per se.

CHAIR: Would it be an issue for the Islamic community some of whose members wear the headress? The photo identification is to be able to identify the person on the photograph. Would that be an issue for Muslim women?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: It was an issue in the late 1980s early 1990s, but my understanding is that the Islamic community accepted that the face must be open and identifiable and the RTA has accepted that the hair may be covered. I think a good balance has been struck and I

would not support a shift in that. Returning to the question asked by the Hon. Don Harwin it is whether the amendments to the electoral commission Act allow the RTA-issued ID cards to fall within the description of a driver's licence.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Do you suggest that they do not; that they are not adequate?

Mr KERKYASHARIAN: I am not sure. I do not know.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I think that will be a matter for the regulations when they are issued.

(The witness withdrew)

PAUL VERSTEEGE, Policy Co-ordinator, Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association, of 25 Cooper Street, Surry Hills, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a copy of Standing Orders 332, 333 and 334 of the Legislative Assembly that relate to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Mr VERSTEEGE: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before the Committee?

Mr VERSTEEGE: I am policy co-ordinator.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from you. Is it your desire that the submission form part of your evidence?

Mr VERSTEEGE: Yes, it is.

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr VERSTEEGE: Yes, I would. The Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association [CPSA] submission to the Committee put on the record, CPSA's civil liberty concerns about the changes to the Commonwealth electoral legislation and the effect on voter participation. I will focus on legislation still actively under review, that is, the New South Wales Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Act. CPSA is, I guess, critical of that review because up to now it fails to take into account the circumstances of people without access to appropriate transport on election days. As you can imagine the ageing population in New South Wales is particularly affected by that issue.

Of course, effective voter enrolment depends entirely on a voter's ability to get to the polling booth or to lodge an absentee or pre-poll vote. The New South Wales Act makes very elaborate provisions for postal and absentee voting. If you live more than 20 kilometres away from the nearest place of voting you can lodge a postal vote. If you are interstate or overseas you can do the same, or if you are seriously ill in hospital or at home, or if you care for somebody who is seriously ill; if you are in prison, if you are unable to sign your name, if you are a silent elector or if you have religious beliefs that prevent you from voting on polling day.

Just going through the proposed amendments, the Act even provides for detailed arrangements for voting at Antarctic stations. Division 18 of the Act provides for the appointment of not just an Antarctic returning officer, but also of an assistant Antarctic returning officer for every single Antarctic station there is. But the Act ignores the fact that all over New South Wales older people cannot get to the polling booth.

I will quote an example of Mrs Kate Johnson. Her circumstances are a case in point. Mrs Johnson has no transport of her own, except her feet, and the area where she lives is not serviced by public transport or community transport at all. Mrs Kate Johnson does not live more than 5,000 kilometres away from civilisation at Mawson, for example, one of the four Antarctic stations, but in the Western Sydney suburb of Canley Vale. Mrs Johnson does not fit into any of the categories that would allow her to post her vote: she lives well within 20 kilometres; she does not go interstate or overseas; she is not seriously ill or infirm, no disability, she can sign her name; she has no religious beliefs that prevent her from voting on election day; she also has no criminal record; or she has never been to prison. She simply cannot walk to the nearest polling booth.

Her feet are her only means of private transport and public and community transport do not come within walking distance of her. Mrs Johnson has to catch a taxi to go anywhere, and she is on an aged pension of less than \$13,000 a year. She cannot get out of the house, in other words. Once a week she does her grocery shopping by taxi in Cabramatta just four kilometres away. For the rest of the week she cannot go anywhere. There is no way that she could afford a taxi on election days—it would be a second taxi during the week because she does not shop on a Saturday when it is too

crowded and she is afraid that she might get run off her feet. There are many people like Mrs Johnson not only in Sydney but certainly in the bush.

CPSA believes that the lack of appropriate public and community transport is the most important factor that will prompt older people to opt out of the electoral process. It is probably not just the physical problem of getting from their house to the polling booth that is putting them off; people like Mrs Johnson are stuck at home and largely unable to participate in community life so it is not that strange that they do not think much of politics or voting. It would be easy to say that the State Electoral Commissioner should allow older voters without transport to vote postal or to lay on mini-buses on election days but, as I said, the real cause of older people not turning up to vote is because they are disenfranchised generally. To come back to my earlier point, if it is easier for a scientist in Antarctica to cast their vote than it is for people like Mrs Johnson of Canley Vale, no wonder so many older people give up on the electoral system.

CHAIR: In your experience have you found that pensioners and other elderly people have a low level of participation in the electoral system?

Mr VERSTEEGE: I do not have a statistical study to back up my comments so the evidence I give is anecdotal. I do receive quite a lot of calls in my position of policy co-ordinator from older people who have transport problems. They ring up, not to complain that they cannot get to the polling booth but to complain that they cannot get anywhere. Of course, since I have known that this inquiry was coming up I have been asking the supplementary question, "How do you get to the polling booth?" The answers are that sometimes a neighbour gives them a lift, sometimes they do not go and sometimes they end up with an infringement notice—I do not know the exact term but a fine from the electoral commissioner which is then waived or is not waived. But basically that is the only thing that I could identify that is stopping older people from participating in the elections. It would be great, of course, if the electoral commission could do a study and see what the participation rates for older people actually are. I have not come across any of those studies.

CHAIR: You read out a list of reasons why some people cannot vote on election day and need a postal vote. Perhaps on such a list could be a box that says "other" and the information "unable to get to a polling booth" would resolve the problems as far as elections are concerned for older people?

Mr VERSTEEGE: It would resolve the immediate administrative problem of making arrangements so that people can still vote but I go back to the comment that I made earlier, I think the fact that people should have to tick such a box is indicative of the poor state of public and community transport in this State. I believe it is one of the leading causes why older people feel disenfranchised. So you might be able to solve the administrative problem but you do not solve the underlying problem which, of course, is not the business of this Committee—I understand that—but you get my drift?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In relation to the new requirements for identification on enrolment and when a person wishes to change their details on the electoral roll, can you outline the specific impacts you think will have on your membership?

Mr VERSTEEGE: Obviously the new requirements are more stringent than they were before but it is not a specific issue for people who are older. It is an issue that affects everyone and I think everyone—young, old, middle aged—will deal with that with varying degrees of frustration and reasonableness. Older people generally, I would say, do not move as much as younger people so it would be less onerous for them because they do not have to go through that process of changing their details so often. And when they move it generally is a big thing so they tend to make a list of everything that needs changing from utilities to the electoral roll.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It is your evidence that people moving from their homes into nursing homes, for example, take into account that? You do not believe there could be benefits in working with nursing homes to ensure that that is on the list as well?

Mr VERSTEEGE: Certainly, it would be quite simple to make arrangements. Obviously aged care providers have a whole range of obligations towards the people they care for and it would be, I imagine, quite a simple matter of including in the accreditation standards for residential aged care

a requirement for the providers to make sure that their residents have the opportunity to change their electoral details.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: The nursing home sector is a growth industry—there are more and more of them. Has your association reviewed that area in terms of the number of mobile polling teams to ensure that as many people as possible in those places have the opportunity to vote? Have you come across any problems with the number of teams and the way they go about their business?

Mr VERSTEEGE: I cannot claim any specific knowledge of those issues. However, I restate my previous suggestion that accreditation standards could be amended to achieve the necessary changes.

CHAIR: What about the nomadic tribes who have mobile homes and who travel up and down the coast of Australia? How do you see the impact on them? They can be away from their primary place of residence for perhaps six or eight months of the year. What are the implications?

Mr VERSTEEGE: The Act and the amendments provide for those people to cast a postal vote. I am sure that people who are organised enough to travel around Australia for six or eight months would be able to make such arrangements. I do not see a problem with that.

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today.

(The witness withdrew)

JENNY COMPTON, Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics, Faculty of Education, University of Sydney, Sydney, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. Honourable members are pleased to hear your evidence. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the terms of reference and Legislative Assembly Standing Orders Nos 332, 333, and 334, which relate to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Ms COMPTON: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing today?

Ms COMPTON: I am an intern to Associate Professor Murray Print, who is the Director of the Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from Associate Professor Murray Print and you. Is it your desire that the submission form part of your evidence?

Ms COMPTON: Yes, it is.

CHAIR: Would you care to make an opening statement?

Ms COMPTON: We are very grateful for the opportunity to present oral evidence to the Committee. The submission presented to the inquiry and the oral evidence that I will be giving is largely based on research conducted by the Centre for Research and Training in Civics. This research, which is entitled "The Youth Electoral Study" and was completed in 2004, was undertaken in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission. It has been published and is available from the commission.

CHAIR: The submission notes that approximately 81 per cent of young people participate in elections. Has your research indicated which factors influence young people to enrol to vote?

Ms COMPTON: Most are influenced primarily by their parents and, secondly, by the media—most likely television. That is also their greatest source of information, not only about how to vote but also about political parties and issues. Beyond that, voting is a low priority for many young people. Despite the fact that civics and citizenship education is included to some extent in school curricula—although it is not a specific subject in its own right—many students are unaware of their eligibility to enrol at 17, and given that there is no prompt once they turn 18, most students do not enrol. The research suggests that about 400,000 18 to 25-year-olds in Australia are not on the electoral roll despite being eligible and being aware that voting is compulsory and that there are penalties for not voting.

CHAIR: The submission notes that New South Wales consistently has a lower than average rate of enrolment for young people compared to other States in Australia. What factors may contribute to this lower than average rate of enrolment?

Ms COMPTON: We believe it is closely related to the implementation of civics programs in schools. The Discovering Democracy Program, which is a Federal initiative, has been quite successful in terms of content, but it has been implemented to varying degrees in different schools. The States that have done consistently better than New South Wales may have had a stronger focus on its implementation. Research indicates that implementation is extremely varied in New South Wales and that it depends on the motivation of individual teachers who are interested in the subject area.

CHAIR: Do you support automatic enrolment of young people, for example, based on their birth certificate?

Ms COMPTON: Automatic enrolment would do a lot to address the immediate issue of non-enrolment. However, The Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics is also concerned that be a reasonable level of civics education to complement that. Apart from being on the roll and being entitled to vote, young people need to know how to participate. The study contained a direct question

about how prepared young people feel and on most issues, such as understanding political parties, the political issues, being able to make a decision to vote and knowing how to vote, less than 50 per cent said they felt prepared. That is a big barrier to participation and it might also be an issue apart from simple registration.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Have you ever done with the same survey with a control group of adults to compare with young people?

Ms COMPTON: That would be a fantastic avenue to pursue, but, no, we have not. The study we undertook involved only secondary school students aged 15, 16 and 17. There were just less than 5,000 respondents.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The data provided indicates a significant gender gap in the way in which young women and men believe they are eligible to vote, with young women feeling significantly less eligible. Can you comment on some of the reasons for that?

Ms COMPTON: We are unsure of the reason for the gender gap. Again, this is an avenue for further research. This study was the first of its kind undertaken in Australia; it is very comprehensive and it has generated ideas for further research. It is interesting to note that although women feel less confident in their knowledge they also indicated that they would be more likely to register under the present system and be more likely to vote if voting were not compulsory. Although they are less confident, they are more likely to participate.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Once they take that step?

Ms COMPTON: Yes, although the reasons for that are largely still unknown.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: I note that there are two points of emphasis in the submission. One relates to the teaching of civics up to year 10 and the lack of teaching thereafter. Clearly you feel the topic should be integrated in the senior school program as well. You have also identified levels of enrolment and participation in the process. Is there any correlation between the level of participation and the level of enrolment and those students who did not go on to the end of year 12? Has the retention rate issue been identified and does that correlate to reduced enrolment?

Ms COMPTON: We have not specifically designed a question to identify a correlation between those two factors. However, students who go on to years 11 and 12 tend to participate in more formal activities in the school, such as school elections, school representative councils and so on. We have shown a small correlation between those who participate in those processes and the likelihood of voting in the future. That is probably the extent to which I can answer that question at this point.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: Has any thought been given to how one reaches those who do not go on to year 12?

Ms COMPTON: There has been much discussion about that. At the moment we believe that about 90 per cent of students move from year 10 into year 11, but only 70 per cent finish year 12. Some arguments suggest that a serious consolidation of civics education at either the end of year 10 or perhaps at the beginning of year 11 would reach a large target audience. That is one option. Some countries have compulsory civics education in the equivalent of years 10, 11 and 12 and also at the pre-university entry level.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: You said you have not done much work on TAFE yet. Have you considered how the TAFE sector could assist?

Ms COMPTON: It could certainly offer civics or citizenship education programs. Our research primarily focused on secondary schools, but we could undertake further research in that area.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You referred to civics education being the driver of increased enrolment in other States. Did you find other structural factors, for example, information being

provided when a young person gets his or her licence? Have you considered the key points at which people can be encouraged to enrol? Which State is doing that most effectively?

Ms COMPTON: That is tough. Statistically Victoria tends to perform quite well compared to the national average and New South Wales. There is no research to back this up, but it could be related to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, which are issued by that State's equivalent to the Board of Studies. The standards cite certain civics outcomes expected from students within the curriculum offered at schools. At the moment in New South Wales most civics education is achieved through cross-curricula strategies. Students would be learning about civics in history, geography or cultural studies, but not specifically through a course entitled "civics and citizenship". Victoria has done a little more to address this issue, and that could be one of the reasons. The Victorian Electoral Commission also sends birthday letters to young people when they turn 17. That might prompt them to enrol.

CHAIR: Enrolment cards could be distributed at schools. Some schools obviously do it. My son brought one home only recently. Some schools go to great lengths to educate their students about electoral matters through parliamentary clubs and so on, and others that do not.

Ms COMPTON: There are some exemplary schools that have gone out of their way to encourage a sense of citizenship in students. That often includes the distribution of enrolment cards. It largely comes down to the school. At the other end of the spectrum some schools do not distribute that sort of information because it is not compulsory. Enrolment card distribution would be an option. The Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] network has also been suggested as an option in the enrolment process. When listing the significant events in their lives, young people rated being able to drive and drink very high. To be able to drink they often need a driver's licence or a proof of age card. Both are issued by the RTA, so it has the opportunity to reach many young people. That may be a potential option, but I again stress that getting students to enrol is only one part of the equation, because their knowledge needs to support their right to vote. They must understand what they are doing when they engage in this process.

DANIELA GIORGI, Private Citizen, 1/58 Brighton Street, Petersham, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters today. The Committee is pleased to hear your evidence. I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a copy of the Legislative Assembly's standing orders 332, 333 and 334 that relate to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Ms GIORGI: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

Ms GIORGI: I am the Education Officer for the New South Wales Parliament, working in the Education and Community Relations Section. I am on a three-year secondment from the Department of Education and Training. But I am appearing before the Committee as a private citizen.

CHAIR: The Committee received a submission from you. Is it your desire that the submission form part of your evidence?

Ms GIORGI: Yes.

CHAIR: Would you care to make an opening statement?

Ms GIORGI: I would like to thank the Committee very much for inviting me to speak to you today but also, in particular, for holding this inquiry into such an important area. Thank you for that.

CHAIR: A number of submissions have indicated that the level of voter enrolment is linked to how informed people are about the electoral system. You would have heard some of that this morning. Do you feel that information is a major factor influencing young people to enrol to vote?

Ms GIORGI: Do I feel that they do not have enough information and therefore do not enrol?

CHAIR: No. Do you feel that information is a major factor in influencing young people to enrol to vote?

Ms GIORGI: I do, and I believe some of that information influences them not to vote—for example, perhaps the cynicism towards Parliament and elected representatives that they may see in the media, in particular—so it makes enrolling to vote something that is not a rite of passage. The previous witness said that getting a driver's licence is often seen by young people as a rite of passage—something that they are proud to do that is a right but also a responsibility. I believe if there were more information in schools about enrolling to vote—not just enrolling to vote but a civics and citizenship course based in the post-compulsory years that included knowledge of electoral education and also political parties, their philosophies, a chance to meet members of Parliament and a chance to talk to people from various political parties; perhaps the Australian Electoral Commission could come in and show students various voting methods—that level of information would give students the ability to ask their own questions and gain their own information from what they are hearing.

At the moment students are taught in schools to analyse and to get information from a variety of sources. They are also taught communication skills. To be able to put these into action at a political level, where they are actively engaging with people and asking them questions and actively getting the information they need, I think is very important. So some sort of civics and citizenship information at that post-compulsory level I think is essential in the form of a course. I think it should also include the opportunity to take part in democratic decision making perhaps at the school governance level. Currently student representative councils operate in most schools—they are voluntary—and some of the students will vote on those councils. Some schools have school parliaments or class parliaments. I think something like that should be made part of a civics and citizenship course so that they are not just getting the knowledge about elections and our political system but also taking part through

decision making at their school level. I know that is something that would take a lot of structural change in schools and would be something to be implemented. But I think it is important.

There should also be an opportunity to work with outside organisations. Perhaps students could look at an issue in school that they feel needs something done about it—something that the school community needs—and take part as a group, working with outside organisations to come up with a plan in order to get something done for their school or their community. Students should not just be given information. I think that is passive and information is available at the moment. Young people should be enticed to think, "Yes, I am looking forward to this; I want to take part in our society in this way."

CHAIR: What role do you think the State Electoral Office should play in electoral education, particularly in relation to young people?

Ms GIORGI: I think they should have perhaps a more active role in going into schools and providing electoral information at the school level. Perhaps they might need more funding in order to do that and in order to train people to go into schools. I know that the Australian Electoral Commission does a fair bit of that at the moment but I do not think the State Electoral Office does very much. That would perhaps take the pressure off many teachers who might not feel that they know enough about elections or our political system to be able to do it themselves. It is not just teaching students about the role of the State Electoral Office but also professional development for teachers. I think they have a very large role to play there, where they train the teachers about elections and how elections are held—the ins and outs of it. Teachers could then feel more confident and comfortable in their own classrooms talking about this and teaching students about it.

CHAIR: It has been suggested that the age of voting should be lowered to 16. What is your view on that? Do you think it would encourage more young people to enrol to vote?

Ms GIORGI: I personally believe that would be a good idea. I would like to see the age of enrolment and voting lowered to 16—probably not as a compulsory thing but perhaps as an optional choice for them at that stage, although I am not sure. In my work we have often held forums and discussion and debate events for students, usually in year 10. One of the debating points that we put to them or that they come up with themselves is often, "Should the age of voting be lowered to 16?" Many of them are a little ambivalent about that. Some of them suggest, "Yes, we would like it lowered" but most of them say, "No, because we don't think we know enough about that." So if the age of voting were to be lowered to 16 there would definitely need to be electoral education at that age, in year 10.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Daniela, you have spoken about some of the changes that you would like to see in civics education. I think you also talked about years 11 and 12 in your submission. Is there anything more you would like to suggest in terms of possible changes to civics education that might assist with increasing enrolment among young people?

Ms GIORGI: I think there should be a continuation of the recent civics and citizenship program, such as the Discovering Democracy Program, which was a Federal and State initiative, and involved funding for teacher professional development. That has now come to an end. I really would like to see that extended as a Federal and State initiative, with more funding for more teacher professional development. But also there should be funding for student programs, such as the State Constitutional Convention and the National Constitutional Convention, which is a current program that allows students to debate the Australian Constitution and come together to meet each other on those issues. I would like to see that sort of program extended into years 11 and 12. I would like to see a Board of Studies course in civics and citizenship—perhaps legal and political studies; it would not matter what it was called—that looked at knowledge for informed citizenship but also skills for active citizenship and the kinds of values that we want to promote in a democratic society. So, yes, I would like to see an increase in civics and citizenship education at those two levels.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Do you have any comments about the evidence of the previous witness, Jenny Compton, on the implementation of Discovering Democracy in New South Wales?

Ms GIORGI: I agree with her comments. I think there have been some very good methods of implementation, particularly in teacher professional development run by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. I do not have the numbers but quite a few thousand teachers have gone to those courses—many of them held here in Parliament House. But I agree with her: I think it does depend on the interest level and confidence level of teachers whether or not those resources that were provided in the Discovering Democracy Program are actually used in schools. I believe those resources often went to schools without professional development at the time and were grabbed by teachers who were interested or the librarian popped them into the library so they have not been seen. So the aim of the professional development courses—some of which I have helped to run and am still running—is to get those resources out and get teachers, many of whom may not have seen those resources before, looking at them.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: When you said that funding should be continued for Discovering Democracy did I understand you to say that you think it is a useful way of increasing the level of awareness among young people about the need to enrol to vote?

Ms GIORGI: Yes, I do. It was a very useful way of increasing the level of knowledge among teachers and increasing resources for teachers to teach the civics and citizenship courses that have been implemented in years 9 and 10, in particular, in New South Wales but also in years 5 and 6. Through that and through speaking to teachers and students I understand that more students now—I was a teacher six years ago—have an interest in and knowledge of politics and democracy, and hence I believe they will have more interest in enrolling to vote. But that is an opinion.

CHAIR: It has been suggested that a system should be developed that enables the automatic enrolment of young people when they turn 16. Do you think such a system is workable?

Ms GIORGI: Yes, I do. There are many systems in our society that we have implemented to ensure that people follow laws. Because we made voting compulsory I think we should implement a system that will ensure that they are able to follow it much more easily. But I think it has to be attached to an education system as well, where we encourage people that it is a right and a responsibility in our society to vote. It is something that means they can take part in their society and have a say rather than something that is punitive simply because it is automatic.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: Daniela, I notice in your submission that you indicate that the Federal Government should fund very specific advertising relating to the closure of electoral rolls in an election year before an election is called. How do you perceive that that would work when we do not have fixed terms?

Ms GIORGI: I hope that there would be funding that would become a regular part of television advertising that encourages people to enrol to vote at any time. I know what you are saying. It would have to happen in the three years between elections the whole time. But, for example, we know at this stage that there will be a Federal election next year.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: There might be one at the end of this year.

Ms GIORGI: That is exactly right, so the sooner the better. In fact, I suppose straight after a Federal election I would like to see advertising for the next election.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: So you would like an ongoing process of encouragement.

Ms GIORGI: Yes. Perhaps that would have been a better way to put it.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Daniela, in your submission you talk about the desire to have all government departments include some reference to supporting democratic processes in their mission statements or objectives. Are there any particular models that would be benchmarks for such an important part of their mission statement?

Ms GIORGI: I think a lot of professional development occurs in a lot of industries, particularly in government departments as well. I think we should encourage that professional development to include ideas about citizenship as well as ideas about work. A person who is at work

is also a citizen at those times. The Education and Community Relations Section here has run seminars for various government and non-government departments—NSW Planning, Sydney Water and the Cancer Council—because many of those government departments and organisations have had to do with members of Parliament and Ministers and their officers and with particular legislation. We have run seminars where staff come to Parliament, watch Parliament sitting if it is a sitting day, speak to particular members of Parliament and sometimes Ministers or parliamentary secretaries, and speak to committee members and committee staff. They are also shown the media room and sometimes have an opportunity to speak to journalists. They get an overall view of what happens in Parliament and how it links to a lot of outside organisations and bodies.

It is specific to particular organisations—I do not think that one thing would cover everything. But making government departments aware that these things are available through the Parliament, or specifically creating programs and targeting government departments and letting them know that they could do this for their staff, I think would be important. We have done a few of these things but we do not have a role model at this stage.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Obviously you are appearing as a private individual, but can you tell the Committee about the resourcing that is available to projects you undertake on behalf of Parliament?

Ms GIORGI: The main resource would be me, because I am seconded from the Department of Education and Training, so my salary is paid by the department rather than by Parliament. Then, the Education and Community Relations section has a budget for teacher professional development for civics and citizenship for student programs and also for public programs as well. So, we run various things, such as once a month a free lunchtime tour to Parliament, programs like A Little Night Sitting, where, on sitting nights, four or five times a year, members of the public are invited in to see the House sitting and to meet with members of Parliament.

CHAIR: As we know.

Ms GIORGI: As some of you certainly know, and we work with various community organisations such as community colleges, the WEA College as well, to promote and advertise those courses. Funding is available at this stage but most from the Department of Education and Training is in the form of me. There is the curriculum support section of the Department of Education and Training which has another civics and citizenship curriculum adviser there who also runs professional development programs, and that section creates resources for teachers for civics and citizenship as well as other human society and environment subjects and courses.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: With the current budget cuts for Parliament, will they possibly impact on those programs?

Ms GIORGI: We hope not. We do not have anything definite on that at this stage. I feel it would be a great pity if that were to happen.

(The witness withdrew)

AMY McGRATH, President, H.S. Chapman Society, Box 39 Post Office, Brighton-le-Sands, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have received a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also a copy of the Legislative Assembly's standing orders 332, 333 and 334, is that correct?

Dr McGRATH: Yes.

CHAIR: Please state your occupation and in what capacity you are appearing before the Committee?

Dr McGRATH: I am a writer. I appear before the Committee as President of the H.S. Chapman Society.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: I would like to make a declaration. I am a member of the H.S. Chapman Society. I would like it noted on the transcript that the contents of this submission were not discussed with me prior to being lodged. While I agree with a large part of it, it should not be taken that they necessarily are my views.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from you. Is it your desire that this submission form part of the evidence?

Dr McGRATH: Yes.

CHAIR: Would you care to make an opening statement?

Dr McGRATH: Yes. I have not seen this before. It is more restrictive than I expected. I thought you were dealing with ID on enrolment. That is what I was told, but it is not mentioned here. I presume that has to be an integral part of the discussion. It does not say you are relating this to whether ID enrolment should be introduced or not. This is just the impact on voter enrolment.

CHAIR: We will hear your statement and then we will ask questions relevant to your submission.

Dr McGRATH: In order to make the statement I have to know if I can take it as read that ID enrolments are involved.

CHAIR: Yes, they are involved.

Dr McGRATH: Okay, thank you. In that case, I wish to say I have been following this discussion for 10 years and looking at the documents for 20 years, in which both the ALP and the AEC largely oppose ID enrolments. In looking at the arguments advanced, I find that the argument is always emphasising the level of enrolment of minority groups rather than looking at the central question on which everything pivots, and that is whether there is any fraud in enrolments. That question is never properly answered. This question cannot be answered without considering the other question: Is there any fraud in enrolment? On this subject the ALP and the AEC have given their answers, which I list in my books. I have even had the CEO, Andy Becker, in front of Mr Bradley, a former Chief Electoral Officer of Northern Ireland, say there is no fraud in Australia. I find that these questions must be answered because that is the big question. If there is no fraud in Australia, that is a negative, they then turn that into a positive to say there is no need for ID enrolments, so we must look to see whether there is fraud in Australia or if it is a question of do not know.

I have answers on all of those things. Mr Lammerton, a divisional returning officer of many years standing, in December 2000 said that all the divisional returning officers know there is fraud. In other words, the chief may say there is none but the divisional returning officers are the people who keep the roll. They said there is fraud—they gave evidence under oath to the joint standing committee in the Commonwealth—but they do not know how much. That is why they have come up with a

proposal for barcode scanners in Queensland, supported by all the divisional returning officers, so they will be able, for the first time, to determine how much fraud there is.

One of the reasons that excuses the Electoral Commission is that it is given no policy. There is none in the divisional returning officer's manual, although they have manuals for everything else. They have no resources at the level at which fraudulent enrolment would occur—and I talk not only of enrolment as people usually do, but re-enrolment, because two-thirds of the mass enrolments at the last minute, which is quite illegal after the issue of the writs, is re-enrolments. I think they have now included in the bill, for which I am very glad, that re-enrolments will demand ID as well, and provisional enrolments, on polling days.

The Electoral Commission would have to have resources to investigate each election. It is not required by the Act to do so, as it is in union elections when the Act requires it to be investigated. Therefore, it does not do so. There is the other equivocal position of the Federal Police. If cases are found—and let me tell you, the Electoral Commission can only get one out of 10 methods of multiple voting. It put that to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in 1993 on a special investigation on ID enrolments with which you might be familiar and which relates to what you are doing today. It said we can only detect multiple voting in the same name. The nine other ways of multiple voting in different names, they cited each one, they listed what each one was. They just said there were not nine other ways.

They have been less than honest in all their submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in that when they quote figures of multiple voting after each election that say that it is only multiple voting in the same name. They claim the scanning centres to the Parliament will discover all multiple enrolments, and multiple voting, which of course, leads to multiple enrolments. They say scanning centres will discover it. That is a lie. Scanning centres will only—and often they are only spot scanning—detect, again, multiple voting in the same name.

On the question, therefore, of false enrolments, you must look at certain conclusions of the Shepherdson inquiry, the 1989 report of two electoral commissioners in New South Wales past and present, who recommended ID on enrolment. You must also look at two or three serious cases of fraudulent enrolment, and I cite one—Swan, 1993. Kim Beazley was elected by about 270 votes. The Australian Electoral Commission was told there were 7,000 return-to-sender letters, to Senator Crane. I have statutory declarations for this. An Aboriginal who joined the Liberal Party in recent years admits to putting 1,500 Aboriginal names on the roll, most with existing addresses. The Australian Electoral Commission was told, and did nothing.

In the days when there were royal commissions—there were a number of royal commissions up until World War II—a lot of this material surfaced. There have been no royal commissions since, except for the two I have cited. I remind this Committee that disputed elections were not sidelined as they have been with the Australian Electoral Commission, or the Commonwealth Electoral Office before it. Certainly until World War II they were run by Speakers of the House. If you look at the history of this Parliament you will find that there were 100 cases settled by multi-party committees, such as this, equitably and without party bias. The Labor Party did not want the Speaker's committee abolished. They said it was so fair.

CHAIR: Your submission argues that the new requirements for identification to be provided on enrolment, or when a person wishes to update their details, will not be a barrier to purported disadvantaged groups. Why do you think that is the case?

Dr McGRATH: That was re-enrolment. My duty is to provide specific examples. I have always done that. The specific example is the statement, of the Australian Electoral Officer in Queensland, Bob Longland, on 8 December 2000, when he said that the roll was in perfect condition. You must remember that at that point the roll was compiled by the easy-enrolment system; in order to entice all the categories that you are looking at today to enrol. The test of that was the fact that having told them that the roll was in perfect condition, six weeks later, the day before the issue of the writs for the Queensland election, Bob Longland, the Australian Electoral Officer, said that the roll was in such bad order that he had had to send out 650,000 notices—that was the day before the issue of the writs for Beattie's election.

Of those, 250,000 were to young people, which is the biggest category that you are looking at. Of that, 35 per cent, under the open system, had enrolled. That is despite the divisional returning officers going out to the schools constantly to educate them. They are, as you know, provisionally enrolled when they are 17. The education system in the schools picked up the slack on that. With all that, only 35 per cent enrolled, up to about 30 years old.

CHAIR: In your written submission you argued that the new requirements for identification that are to be provided when a person wishes to update or enrol, will not be a barrier to the purported disadvantaged groups. Can you outline why you think that is the case, not so much your examples but why you think that is the case?

Dr McGRATH: Because I have been around longer than all of you, much longer. Can I continue with my answer?

CHAIR: I am sorry I thought you had concluded your answer.

Dr McGRATH: No, it is not my answer; it was just a bit of frippery. My answer is that until 1983 everyone had to go into the DROs office. We all thought it was a privilege. We had not been told that we could go in, and pick it up from the post office and everything else, with less identification than you have now. I cannot recall anyone I ever knew failing to vote, because we all had been told in school, which they are not any longer, the history of the country and how important it was. Fortunately, I think they will bring back the history of the country. All the kids saluted the flag in the morning, and all the rest of it. Every teacher thought it was their duty to teach them, maybe you could encourage them to do that.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: In your submission there is a dot point that special arrangements for homeless people can be made as in Northern Ireland. I would like to know what they are. Secondly, you referred to professional or preliminary enrolments, that is as 17-year-olds. A significant number of young people do not go on to years 11 and 12. How do you pick up those people? They have a right to participate in civics as well.

Dr McGRATH: The divisional returning officers do not speak to just the 17s or 18s at school. They go to the school and address the assembly, or something like that.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: But they are not at school. People can leave school well before the age of 17.

Dr McGRATH: I will think about that for a moment. I think you are getting to a level that is constantly a problem with any system of any kind. Do you change an entire system for the small minority? It would be a small minority, because the Australian Electoral Commission has never complained about this. The system in Ireland for getting people enrolled is probably slightly different, because they do not have such a distance to go. We have distance factors here. The other thing one has to remember, if you want to make provisions to make that more open in order to get the small numbers of people - that it is compulsory to enrol.

Under law any of those kids, who do not enrol, are liable to a fine. People forget this. It is a compulsory system. The failure to prosecute them is part of a problem with the AEC. They do not prosecute them when they catch them, or if they fail to vote, and that has become very slack. They are supposed to turn up and have their names crossed off.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Amy, could you outline the arrangements in Ireland?

Dr McGRATH: Yes. They have arrangements under which people feel they have to vote. They are very proactive in going around. They still do the habitation reviews, and I think this is where it has all fallen down. Habitation reviewers go around and knock on doors of the homes. If they are not answered and they go back, they are paid to do it. That was the system up until 1997. If they find there is an under-age person, or a person about to become a voter, you tell them they must vote. It is compulsory. They must enrol and they are told they have to do it. That system has been taken away. I suggest the cure is not to make it an easy system because it is compulsory for them to enrol, but to put habitation reviews back.

The divisional returning officers themselves have been at war with the electoral commission over abandoning habitation reviews. Some of them have risked their own careers to go up to Canberra and say that the continuous roll review is not working and that they must put back habitation reviews.

CHAIR: How does that help homeless people on the electoral roll?

Dr McGRATH: One thing I would like to know, and I have never heard in 20 years, as no statistics are ever given by the Australian Labor Party for these homeless people.

CHAIR: You only have to walk down Martin Place any night of the week.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The ABS said there are 100,000 who have nowhere to live.

Dr McGRATH: Pardon me! I know about them, but I am answering in relation to itinerants, and there are provisions for itinerants. Equally I am saying that I would like a statistic from the bodies that say you have to make the whole system open because of homeless people, how many homeless people they think there are. They do not tell you. I can tell you about itinerants, which is what they are. The Electoral Act is very generous for itinerants. And they should know before they get onto the plonk or lose their homes through marriage breakdown that they have to enrol. They are allowed to nominate a place of residence that they would prefer, such as their birthplace or the home of their sister or brother or whatever when they enrol. They can cite that address when they vote. That has been in the Act for some time. The numbers are not very great.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: You were going to outline the arrangements in Ireland for homeless people.

Dr McGRATH: Yes, I have mistaken the question a bit. It was more about relating to people who cannot get out from home, but they do give them a special card. Also for the residence, they nominate the residence and are given a card to take when they vote. They go to the people and give them a card. That could be done with these people.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Could you give a summary of the cost of roll review processes as conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission?

Dr McGRATH: Yes, I could give you a cost from further back. It would be more now. It is much cheaper than the continuous roll review, because it costs \$25 for every letter that they send out. In 1987 I was looking at that figure for the last book I wrote, *The Stolen Election*. The figures for four or five years are in that book. I think they were about \$1 million. They gave them a budget. It might have been for more than one habitation review. There was a \$1 million budget for Australia to do that before the 1987 election and the Labor Party did not do it. They cancelled it.

The 1987 election had to be run on the 1984 roll. I do not know how much it has gone up since then. It can be done for right across Australia. Democracy depends on the honesty and accuracy of the roll. If it is inaccurate for any reason, and I add that the roll has been oversubscribed for quite a few years—which I put in the submission—with inaccuracy, false enrolments for one election, and people who die stay on as deadwood. There was no correlation between deaths and births on the roll until the 1990s.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Your submission alleges that political parties benefit from the fact that no identification is required for people to vote. Can you give evidence about how you believe political parties have benefited?

Dr McGRATH: Can you repeat the first part again?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In your submission you argue that political parties benefit from the lack of identification required when voting and on enrolment. Can you give specific examples of how that happens?

Dr McGrath: I think you have to go back to the Queensland electoral scandals. The article evidence that came out from that. The problem was missed by Professor Williams in a newspaper recently when he did not realise how these worked. He said that they have to give more money to the electoral commission. Before an election, after the issue of the writs in the seven days, three-quarters of a million people enrolled in 1987. Since then it has been about half a million. Most people do not realise that elections are run by 60,000 casuals, and they have to be trained before an election. Most of the Committee members would know, because you are members of Parliament.

The problem is the pressure of training people, organising polling booths—and quite a few electorates have 70 or 100 polling booths. They do not check one of those, not one, they do not have the time. This is what is inherent in the issue of the writs on the close of roll at the same time. The problem is that roll stacking is so easily done. For example, rather than talking in generalities, in the 1987 election 100,000 names were taken off the roll immediately after because they were wrong. That was a very closely run election. The results changed during the counting in 13 marginals. Sixty thousand were taken off in New South Wales, 40,000 in Victoria because they were wrong. They were roll stacked.

The Hon. Penny Sharpe: Are you alleging that all 60,000 votes were taken off because they were stacked?

Dr McGrath: Yes. This does happen. After an election people lose their seats and the whole thing dies away and the electoral commission is not required to investigate any of that. The Swan case I told you was specifically one where the electoral commission refused to investigate.

(The witness withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

JOHN FERGUSON, Policy and Training Officer, Youth Action and Policy Association, 146 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, and

KRISTY DELANEY, Executive Officer, Youth Action and Policy Association, 146 Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and a copy of the Legislative Assembly's Standing Orders 332, 323 and 334 that relate to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Mr FERGUSON: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today?

Mr FERGUSON: As the policy and training officer for the Youth Action and Policy Association.

Ms DELANEY: As the Executive Officer of the Youth Action and Policy Association.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from you. Is it your desire that the submission stand as part of the evidence?

Mr FERGUSON: Yes.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms DELANEY: Yes. We believe that governments must be accountable to young people and that young people have a right to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. So we would like to see young people given every possible opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote.

CHAIR: In your submission it is noted that approximately 80 per cent of young people are enrolled to vote. What factors do you think prevent more young people from enrolling?

Ms DELANEY: I think one of the big issues is that young people are quite transient in their lives at the moment. Lots of young people are moving out of home for the first time, they are going to university or to TAFE, or they are looking for more employment opportunities so often young people will leave enrolling until the last minute. Also because they have a lot of other things happening in their lives, their job or their study, often they are just leaving it until an election is announced to get around to enrolling to vote. So that is one of the major issues. Also I think it can be difficult for young people to know how to go about enrolling. Lots of young people do not know where to get the form from. They do not know that it is available on the web site. They do not know it is available at a post office. So it can be difficult for young people to know, first of all, how to get that information but also to physically be able to get it so if they do not have Internet access to be able to get time off work or time off TAFE or university to go down to a post office to pick up a form. That can be difficult for young people to do. So they are some of the major factors why young people sometimes leave it until the last minute or do not get around to enrolling to vote.

CHAIR: What would your views be on automatic enrolment?

Mr FERGUSON: That would be something that we would definitely support. It is something we did want to talk about today. It just takes out all the guess work and all these issues and all these factors. Somehow whether it was attached to Medicare or Centrelink, when people have to provide certain levels of identification, that would be the perfect time to have automatic enrolment. Then all these factors are overcome.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We have had evidence today that has been supportive of automatic enrolment. The additional information that has been provided about that has been a requirement for civics education in the lead up to that. Would you like to comment on that idea?

Ms DELANEY: I think civics education is important. Of course, it is in the curriculum at the moment. However, there are a number of issues that we have at the moment. First of all, young people are often learning that education quite a long time before they are actually voting for the first time. Young people are learning that in primary school or in early years of high school but by the time they turn 17 or 18 there can be some time lag before they actually vote. There are also lots of opportunities with student elections and mock parliaments for young people to see first-hand how a parliamentary system works, how votes are counted, how preferences are distributed. I think there is some level of concern in some schools that perhaps the voting is rigged or they do not fully understand how the voting system works. I think we can practically demonstrate some of those things happening within the school.

CHAIR: I guess that leads on to the fact that a number of the submissions have indicated that the level of voter enrolment is linked to how informed people are about the electoral system. Do you feel that that is a major factor in influencing young people to enrol?

Mr FERGUSON: Yes. I think that the level of awareness and knowledge—as understanding increases, I think enrolment would also increase. We have discussed issues and read other things when people suggest the Electoral Commission sending out not just confirmation but more detailed things about how preferences are distributed and so on. Those small things would all increase understanding and would therefore increase enrolment. The other matter is that we feel some young people, although they have political interests or have ideas and that sort of thing relating to politics, some of them feel a bit disfranchised or disempowered and that may come from the lack of understanding, and those things will actually address those. If they felt their voice was heard a bit more and they understood the process a bit more, then that would contribute to better enrolment as well.

Ms DELANEY: I think we need to look not just at young people themselves but also the systems that we have in place and how much they encourage young people to get involved. For example, at the national level we do not have a youth policy, we do not have a youth Minister, and we have extremely limited youth consultations. So young people are given the message that their views do not really count. So we need to not just look at why young people are not participating but how we encourage them to participate, and voting is just one mechanism for young people to have their say. I think there are lots of other ways that young people voice their views in the community. Although young people might have a lower participation rate in voting, I think we need to look at the full picture and see how young people are actually involved in having their say. We quoted some of our research in our submission and some of that was that 90 per cent of young people said that they wanted to be consulted more by the government and overwhelmingly in a lot of our other studies young people really want the chance to have their say about issues that affect them.

CHAIR: Do you think that the new requirements for identification of enrolment or when a person wishes to change their details on the electoral roll will have an impact on young people?

Ms DELANEY: Definitely. I think it is really concerning how this will impact on disadvantaged young people. It is our understanding that under the new system people will have three options for enrolling; first, if they have a driver's licence. Of course, lots of young people do not have a driver's licence to start with. The cost of actually getting a driver's licence is quite high. It presumes that people have access to a car, and lots of young people may have a family in which no-one drives because they have no access to a car, so straightaway lots of young people are removed under that form of enrolling.

The second system is around having other forms of identification such as a passport. Again, a lot of disadvantaged families and young people are not going to have a passport because they simply cannot afford to travel overseas. There are also issues around having a birth certificate. I can give you a case study that we know about of a young man who had lived in quite a few different homes and found it incredibly difficult to get his birth certificate because he had changed his name. When he had lived with different families he had adopted their last name and then when he went to get his

identification he found that very difficult. I think it is the young people who are most at risk and most disadvantaged that it is really going to impact on.

The third option is around having two other people who have their drivers licence. Again, a lot of young people do not know other adults apart from family members who have a driver's licence. I really feel very strongly that it is going to be really difficult for some young people to be able to vote and we should be taking every possible step to encourage young people to vote and to have their say.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I wanted to bring up an issue about homeless young people and something that I am not aware of. Many young people who are homeless actually move from refuge to refuge and live in different places. Is it your experience that that seven-day period in terms of the close of the rolls is important to get them on, and can you tell me about any programs you are aware of that the SEO or the Youth Action and Policy Association does in terms of enrolment for young homeless people?

Ms DELANEY: I think it can be really difficult for people to even know that an election has been called. If you watch the news every night you are probably aware of it, but lots of other people are not interested in watching the news or are not interested particularly in politics, even though they are very interested in the issues. It can be difficult at the moment for people. By the time they actually hear that an election is announced, it does take them a couple of days to be able to work out, "How do I actually enrol? How do I update my details?" So that change is really disappointing.

It is our understanding that the enrolment forms are not widely available at the moment. We have certainly requested those before and have been told that we are not able to distribute the enrolment forms. We would really like to see those available at a wide range of places. For example, when you are going to get your Ls or your Ps at the RTA they should have an enrolment form or when you are signing up for Centrelink benefits there should be an enrolment form until such time as there is automatic enrolment.

We would really like youth workers, community groups and football clubs to be able to say, "Here is an enrolment form. Make sure that you enrol to vote." But at the moment it is really difficult because when we request these, we are just told that we are not able to do it; they are just available from so few places at the moment that young people have regular contact with. There are some radio programs like Triple J, which encourage people to enrol to vote, but I am not aware of a larger number of programs that actually do that.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: One of the things you said earlier in your evidence concerned young people and driving. You gave some evidence about the fact that young people were less likely to have a driver's licence, if I understood you correctly. Given that the rate in the community of people having drivers licences is about 90 per cent, does the association have any evidence available about what degree of people in the younger age bracket—18 to 25, which is your principal focus—have drivers licences? Is it significantly less than the 90 per cent?

Ms DELANEY: We do have information but I do not actually have that with me today. I will take that question on notice and provide that information.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: That would be very helpful.

Ms DELANEY: I think a lot of young people—

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Sorry to interrupt but can you remember approximately what the figure is?

Ms DELANEY: No, I am sorry. It was sometime ago that I looked at that information. At the time when the young driver curfews were being discussed we had some information around that. I think for a lot of young people, if they are moving out of home and they do not have their own car, they put it off until such time as they can afford to actually get a car. So although they will get their drivers licence eventually, for a lot of those young people, they might not necessarily go for it when they are 17 or 18, but I can provide that information.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Given that a State election has been called for on 24 March next year, are there any measures that perhaps the State Electoral Office could take to inform young people of that fact and, secondly, would you mind giving us a snapshot of your organisation; who it represents and how it operates?

Mr FERGUSON: If I could just start about our organisation? We represent the young people and youth services of New South Wales. We do have a membership consisting of some young people and a lot of the youth services but I think it is really important that we represent and try to consult with all of those people so in a sense that we do represent young people and youth services of New South Wales.

Ms DELANEY: We cover a wide number of youth issues and provide advice to government, local, State and national government, on youth issues. There are so many differing youth issues in our community, whether that is education, employment, health or transport—we cover a wide range of youth issues.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: Can any young person join up, so to speak?

Ms DELANEY: Yes, that is right, but a lot of our consultations, like some of the ones we have mentioned in our evidence, they do not need to be a member to participate in our organisation.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: What about the March election and promoting that date as a date to work towards to make sure people are on the roll sooner rather than later?

Ms DELANEY: I think there are lots of opportunities for the office, even things like going to the Big Day Out festival, for example, where there are 40,000 or 50,000 young people at once; going out to where young people already are at, such as, football matches, for example. There are a lot of outreach opportunities. Instead of asking and waiting for young people to actually come into an office that they do not know about, there are plenty of outreach opportunities. Also, schools can play a really important role, particularly with 17 year olds, in providing forms to those young people and encouraging them to enrol.

Mr FERGUSON: Some of the strategies that Christy mentioned earlier around sporting clubs, Scouts and so on, if those people were able to hand out enrolments forms or be part of that process then that may also be able to address the ID requirements because as we discussed earlier some young people may not have that many adults that they can request to participate in that ID requirement. But if it were part of a football club or a school and there are teachers there with driver's licences then that may provide the opportunity to get more young people on the roll.

Ms DELANEY: Obviously teachers are in a great position to confirm the identity of a student so not just schools, also TAFEs and universities.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Do you say that when you have requested forms from the AEC or the SEO it is denied? If that is the case is a particular regulation or reason given or is it just because they do not distribute beyond post offices?

Ms DELANEY: It has certainly been denied. We have requested forms a number of times. We do outreach to places and particularly in the lead-up to elections we do like to take some forms with us. Generally we go to the post office and pick up a whole bunch ourselves. I do not know why they have not provided those before but they have just said we are not an official organisation to be providing them. So I really cannot see why we should not be taking every opportunity to enrol young people. It is not voting. We are not encouraging them to vote either way. I think enrolment is a really good thing. We should be getting a whole lot of people to encourage young people to enrol.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was it the AEC or the State Electoral Office to whom you made the request?

Ms DELANEY: I could not say off the top of my head.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: Could I suggest that issue be noted to raise it with the Electoral Commissioner because that sounds to me as if it is an administrative convenience rather than any regulation that would prohibit it. Anyone can walk into a post office and grab a big bundle if one is so inclined and I am sure a number of people in this room have probably done that.

CHAIR: Yes. Your submission recommends that the age of voting should be lowered to aged 16. What are the benefits of that proposal in relation to the level of voter enrolment?

Mr FERGUSON: I see that that initiative would be a benefit to both young people and the electoral system. One of the best examples of that would be getting habits of electoral participation in earlier. I would estimate that those participation rates would then increase in the age groups that go up above that. I see that it would also support young people, giving them the right, as we discussed before, and yes, if we had those other initiatives and that sort of thing in the schools then all those things combined would really increase the level of voter enrolment.

Ms DELANEY: We ask young people to fulfil a lot of adult responsibilities at the moment. We have more and more young people working, particularly working and combining that with school studies at the moment. Young people can drive. Young people are fulfilling a whole range of adult responsibilities, paying tax et cetera, and it is just one more adult responsibility that we can give young people in addition to the ones they already have.

Mr FERGUSON: For example, young people are impacted upon by a lot of issues that obviously come out of both State and Federal WorkChoices and so on and a lot of young people are interested in these issues and, like I said, greatly impact upon them. So to give them a right in that process I think would be very beneficial.

Ms DELANEY: The other issue as well is that we need to remember that Australia has really led the way with some electoral reform. We were one of the first countries to give women the vote, and that is something that we should be really proud of. It was certainly way ahead of the United States of America and the United Kingdom in giving women the vote and we can be one of those countries that was the first in the world to give 16-year-olds the vote as well.

CHAIR: What role should the State Electoral Office play in electoral education, particularly in relation to young people?

Ms DELANEY: It is my understanding that other State offices are mandated to do education but the New South Wales one is not. So that is certainly something that should be a requirement to start with—to do education not just in schools but in other places where young people access because, of course, we have a lot of young people who are leaving school early, particularly in rural areas and particularly within our indigenous populations as well. So I think community education is a really big part of that. Outreach, as I mentioned before, to places where young people actually go to and also provide information, as John mentioned before, not just that you are enrolled to vote, but here is an example of how you actually vote. So whether that is with fictional characters, for example, a way of actually looking at how a filled out vote actually looks—some more education such as that.

CHAIR: In your submission you also suggest using an interagency approach to encourage young people to enrol to vote such as requiring the ATO office or the RTA to provide information on voting to people. Do you see any disadvantages with that interagency approach?

Ms DELANEY: No.

Mr FERGUSON: No, I do not. I only see positives of that approach, really being able to address young people at a lot of different stages in their lives, different backgrounds, different areas. It would only be positive as far as I could see.

Ms DELANEY: We all have a lot to do—doing your tax return, doing a whole lot of compliance and I think if people were automatically enrolled, or did it at the same time as they filled out their Medicare card or got their driver's licence, when the election comes around they will say "Great, I've already done that." That is something else they do not have to actually go and do.

CHAIR: Do you think there would be any issue with privacy passing on their information?

Mr FERGUSON: I do not think so. I am not an expert but I cannot see how the privacy issue could not be overcome in this regard.

(The witnesses withdrew)

MICHAEL JAMES MEURER, President, New South Wales Young Labor, 5 Allumba Grove, Cordeaux Heights, 2526, sworn and

ELIZABETH ANNE LARBALESTIER, Women's Officer, New South Wales Young Labor, 4 Oyster Bay Road, Oyster Bay, 2225, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: I am advised that you have been issued with a copy of the Committee's terms of reference and also with Standing Orders 332, 333 and 334 of the Legislative Assembly relating to the examination of witnesses. Is that correct?

Ms LARBALESTIER: Yes.

Mr MEURER: Yes.

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before this Committee?

Mr MEURER: President of New South Wales Young Labor.

Ms LARBALESTIER: New South Wales Young Labor Women's Officer.

CHAIR: The Committee has received a submission from you. Is it your desire that your submission form part of your evidence?

Mr MEURER: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr MEURER: Yes. New South Wales Young Labor is a youth political organisation representing youth in the Australian Labor Party. Our members are aged between 15 and 26 and we are based from all over the State of New South Wales. Young Labor is a political body that engages in campaigns and debate about the political process. New South Wales Young Labor decided to make a submission to this inquiry because members felt passionate that currently young people are not engaged enough in the democratic process and the recent laws disenfranchised young voters.

Young Labor believes in a democratic society where all Australians not only have the right to vote but are able to carry out that right. Our submission discusses ways to improve young people's involvement in democracy and ensuring that young people are not disenfranchised from the democratic process. Our submission makes several recommendations including condemning the amendments to the Electoral Act by the Commonwealth Government, strengthening civic education programs and lowering the enrolment and voting age. Young Labor believes that those recommendations will give young people more informed and comprehensive understanding of the political processes, and encourage voter enrolment and voters to carry out their right to vote.

CHAIR: A number of submissions have indicated that the level of voter enrolment is linked to how informed people are about the electoral system. Do you believe information is a major factor influencing young people to enrol to vote?

Mr MEURER: We believe that education is an extremely important system where people are informed about what voting is and what the processes of government are so they are informed of what their decision is making. So in terms of young people at school, understanding the political process, understanding what MPs do, understanding what Ministers are about, understanding what effect they have on the overall system. Young people want to know that what they do and the things they do are making a difference. They want to know how that works and simply how the system of government works. We believe that education is a very important part of making sure that young people are informed of those particular systems so that when they do make a choice to go out there and exercise their right to vote, that they are making a choice knowingly and that they are informed of what their choice is going to do.

CHAIR: What other factors may encourage young people to enrol to vote?

Mr MEURER: We believe the main factor that encourages somebody to vote is to go out and vote because of a particular issue if they are passionate about something they want to make a difference about. In terms of a current affairs issue or something that relates to them personally, the reason why they take any engagement in voting is because they are passionate about a particular issue. We see it to encourage people to be involved in issues at schools, whether it be things in the local classrooms or about world events, current affairs issues, that is the reason why people get to vote. What we find in our organisation is that people join our organisation because they are passionate about a particular issue. They get involved in the political process and the democratic process, that is, Young Labor and broadly the government because they are passionate about how they feel about a particular issue. People are joining our organisation because they are passionate about the WorkChoices legislation so that motivates them to go and do something about it.

Ms LARBALESTIER: More specifically with young people who are not going to take the extra step to join a political party to show their views and take it to a vote, just by getting young people to simply take the step to enrol in voting. I think they need to be aware of the local process of government in their area. Even the ability that they should be aware of simply writing letters, knowing that they can walk in the door of their local State or Federal MP is another avenue of them finding information about how to take it on the local level, and knowing that they are involved in the process even if they do not take the next step to joining a political party.

The Hon. DON HARWIN: Your submission contains a member of recommendations. I am interested in the suggestion that youth participation in the voting process could be strengthened by supporting local members of Parliament to engage with young people. What ideas do you have about that?

Mr MEURER: MPs now engage with the voter population, which means 18 years of age and upwards. We are suggesting that MPs engage with younger people; that is, before they have to make an informed choice about whom they want to represent them. That could be engaging in local SRCs and ensuring that SRCs and youth representation is supported whether it be at schools, universities, TAFEs or whatever education these young people are involved in. They should also be engaged about issues by asking them what they think about things and ensuring that young people are consulted about what is happening. They may not be able to vote, but they are interested in what is going on.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Your submission argues strongly for people 16 and over being able to vote. How do you see that working?

Mr MEURER: We want to see 16-year-olds being able to participate in the process so that when they are compelled to vote at 18 they understand what it is about.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It would be voluntary enrolment from 16.

Mr MEURER: We suggest that it be voluntary from 16 so that people are entitled to vote but not compelled to vote until they turn 18.

CHAIR: Do you think the new requirements for identification on enrolment or when a person wishes to change their details on the electoral roll will have an impact on young people?

Mr MEURER: We certainly think it will have an impact on young people. We also support the idea of people proving their right to be on the roll. Our submission suggests that people be able to enrol from 15. People aged 15, 16 and 17 may not have the required identification to enrol and we see that as an issue, specifically for young people.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: The submission refers to giving more support and responsibility to student representative councils. How might that happen, apart from parliamentarians participating in meetings? Are there other ways that they could be assisted? Is there any consistency in the level of operation of SRCs across the State? Are they operating well across or is it haphazard?

Mr MEURER: I cannot comment on how well they are operating; I am no longer at school. However, my experience was that the SRC was a token body and a popularity contest. People did nothing other than put it on their CV when they left school. Giving young people the responsibility to make decisions also gives them an understanding about being involved in a process and proving that they can make a difference. Ensuring that SRCs or representative bodies at school have the ability to make decisions and to make a difference will make young people a little more faithful throughout the process and assure them that if they make a decision and participate in something they will make a difference.

Ms LARBALESTIER: Some of our members who are in year 10 are involved in the SRC. Because they are people who have taken the next step to be involved with a political party they are willing to be more involved in their SRC. They need to be given more direction from their school; for example, about how to address their local MPs and to get involved in that process. The SRCs focus very much on their school community and do not openly engage in the political process or government representation.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: You have made reference to the issue of identification, particularly as it relates to young people. The previous group that addressed the Committee stated that some young people do not have a driver's licence. Probably more significant is the removal of the seven-day enrolment period. Given that not everyone watches the 6.00 p.m. news and can rush out and enrol by 8.00 p.m., do you think this change will adversely affect young people's enrolment? What measures do you think will address this, apart from repealing the changes?

Mr MEURER: Young people are particularly transient in their living arrangements. They have never voted before and sometimes they are not aware of the need to enrol. Closing the rolls as soon as an election is called disenfranchises up to 70,000 young Australians. That is a sad situation. If we do not address it, this will be a big issue. In terms of what other things we can do, it is about encouraging people to enrol. Young people should be informed and educated about government and the political process. They should also be consulted so that when an election is announced they are informed that they should enrol. We completely agree that the law should be repealed and there should be a grace period for people to enrol because if the election is not held on a set date they may miss the opportunity to vote.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: It is a set date.

Mr MEURER: For the State but not federally.

The Hon. JENNY GARDINER: That is right. So, what would be the best way for the State Electoral Office to communicate to young people in the period remaining to get as many of them on the roll as possible?

Mr MEURER: We referred to the State Electoral Office visiting schools or being involved in signing up people at schools. We are talking about lowering the enrolment age to 15. Students could enrol when they were doing civics and citizenship courses and other subjects at school and learning what it is about. I understand there are logistic and resources issues for the SEO in trying to facilitate that. Providing schools with enrolment forms to be distributed by staff who teach civics and citizenship topics could assist.

Ms LARBALESTIER: It would be a great component of the civic education curriculum for students completing the course to get their voter registration form. That would solidify what they had learnt in the course.

Mr PAUL PEARCE: You would be looking at some form of preliminary enrolment during that period of compulsory education and dovetailing with the civics courses?

Mr MEURER: Yes.

Mr MICHAEL DALEY: When they turn 18 their enrolment would automatically activate as it does for 17-year-olds.

Mr MEURER: We suggest that they could vote from 16.

CHAIR: Fortunately some schools encourage students to apply for a tax file number and to enrol to vote. A number of submissions have suggested using an interagency approach to encourage people to enrol to vote, such as requiring the ATO and the RTA to send out enrolment forms when people apply for tax file numbers and licences. Do you think that other agencies—and you have identified schools—should be involved in the enrolment process?

Mr MEURER: Perhaps the rental bond agency could be involved, particularly for people attending university and people who change their residential address. When they change address they could be sent an enrolment form to ensure that they understand that they have to change their details or if they are moving out of home and have not previously enrolled that they must now do so.

CHAIR: Are there many people in public housing that the Department of Housing could inform?

The Hon. DON HARWIN: We have evidence that it does that.

CHAIR: Thank very much for appearing before the Committee this afternoon.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 2.56 p.m.)