

**Submission
in response to the
Electoral Reform Green Paper:
‘Strengthening Australia’s
Democracy.’**

Chapter 9:

Education for Electoral Participation

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(EEC) 2005- 2009

Letter of transmittal

This Green Paper submission was written against the background of the AEC's decision in 2009 to refocus its electoral education and public awareness activities – which led to the closure of the Melbourne and Adelaide Electoral Education Centres.

As manager of the Melbourne Electoral Education Centre (EEC) since 2005, the author project managed the relocation and redevelopment of the new EEC in 2006-2007. (Note: the new EEC was officially opened on 1 February 2008. it was officially closed on 30 June 2009.)

The author – who left the AEC in September 2009 - aims to present an objective and constructive overview; while incorporating relevant background and historical information.

It is not the intention of the author to criticise the federal government's decision to cease funding the Melbourne EEC – but to provide commentary based on her experience as manager of the EEC and previous experience as a public relations practitioner and lecturer in communications at RMIT University. The author has a keen interest in community issues and the democratic process, having previously served as a councillor (1999 – 2004) and mayor (2002 -2003) with an inner suburban council, the City of Stonnington.

Sally Davis
25 November 2009

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Executive summary

After nearly twenty years - on 30 June 2009 - the doors closed on electoral education in Melbourne.

From 1991, the Melbourne Electoral Education Centre (EEC) grew to become a highly respected and valued service. Yet, funding was withdrawn just 18 months after the relocation and redevelopment of a new EEC in the parliamentary precinct.

Amidst AEC claims that the EEC visitors numbers were falling - when this followed a conscious decision by the AEC to downsize the facility when it relocated in 2006 - the author believes the decision to close the EEC was an error of judgement.

While the author is not using this as an opportunity to suggest the EEC be reopened – certainly not without extensive research – she does recommend the AEC consider establishing accessible ‘**community electoral education centres**’ throughout Australia that would be available to all eligible electors – not just school students. Such centres could provide a much needed resource for the various target groups the AEC is trying to reach and they could be jointly financed with state and/or local governments.

Establishing ‘community electoral education centres’ would also meld with the **federal government’s Social Inclusion Policy**, assisting Australians to: “Learn by participating in education and training; engage by connecting with people and using their local community’s resources and have a voice so that they can influence decisions that affect them.”¹ (*Author’s note: Australia’s inaugural Social Inclusion Week was conducted from 23 – 29 November 2009.*)

The author confesses to asking more questions in her submission than providing answers - because she believes the AEC needs to research the effectiveness of its current programs. In particular, the author has concerns about the existing School and Community Visits Program (SCVP) and whether it does actually engage school students and encourage young people to increase their participation in the electoral process.

More especially, the author has one final question for the AEC: is educating the community a role it genuinely wishes to embrace?

¹ www.socialinclusion.gov.au

Introduction

Melbourne EEC - Setting the record straight:

1. Following the federal government's decision to close the EEC Melbourne, a Senate Estimates Committee was informed during May 2009 that the usage of electoral education centres in Melbourne and Adelaide "has been falling."²
2. This comment did not reflect an accurate picture of the situation in Melbourne. When the author joined as manager of the EEC in **2005**, the annual attendance was **13,637**, while the following year – **2006-2007** attendances increased by 47 per cent to **20,126** due to increased marketing and promotion strategies and a change in booking procedures.
3. In late 2006, AEC management decided to relocate the EEC to a much smaller premises – a decision that led to a significant reduction in attendances initially because of delays in re-opening and later, because the EEC could not accommodate the same numbers.
4. Early in 2008, citing budget restraints, AEC management³ requested the EEC reduce the number of sessions between March and June which contributed to the participation numbers for 2006 -2007 reducing to 16, 676. From early 2008– until the EEC closure – the manager was instructed not to spend any of the allocated budget on advertising or promotional campaigns.
5. Inevitably, the participation numbers for 2008-2009 continued to fall – and at the time of the EEC closure, 14,886 participants attended the EEC.⁴
6. **However, because the author believes the decision to close the centre impacted on her professional reputation - she wishes to have it recorded that this 2009 figure was still higher than when she took over in 2005 (when the annual attendance figure was 13, 637).**

7. Melbourne EEC participation numbers 2005 - 2009:

2008 - 2009	14,886
2007- 2008	16,676
2006 - 2007	20,126
2005- 2006	13,637

² Electoral Commissioner, Mr Ed Killestyn Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee (Budget Estimates) 28 May 2009 Hansard.

³ The EECs in Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide were overseen by South Australian management during this period.

⁴ Other factors impacting on attendances for 2008- 2009 were the cancellations of schools closed (or relocated) by the Victorian bushfires and train cancellations/delays.

History of AEC electoral education

Canberra EEC

8. In 1987, the Canberra EEC opened in a suburban primary school (in Lyons) and the visitor numbers quickly rose to 50,000 per annum.

9. After obtaining a federal grant, a new Canberra EEC was built within Old Parliament House and officially opened in 2001. It now averages over 90,000 each year, with the EEC having already reached capacity as it is booked well in advance during peak periods.

EEC expansion plans

10. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the AEC considered opening EECs in Brisbane and Melbourne; however, due to funding constraints, Brisbane never eventuated. In 1992, the Western Australia State Electoral Commission opened an EEC for which the AEC provided funding; this arrangement ceased following the 2009 federal budget.

Melbourne EEC

11. In 1991, the Melbourne EEC began operations in the AEC's existing storage facility in South Melbourne; its popularity led to the relocation to the Melbourne CBD (in Bourke Street, near King Street) in 1997 where annual participants increased from 14,000 in 1996-97 to 27,000 in 1997-98.⁵

12. Attendances at the Melbourne EEC were steadily increasing until 2002 when the AEC's Victorian State Office decided to close the EEC. However, the Canberra AEC's national office decided to adopt responsibility for the EEC in Melbourne (and Canberra) under the auspices of the then Information Education and Research branch. (The EEC Adelaide, which was established in 1996, was overseen by the AEC's South Australian State Office. In 2006, South Australia was given responsibility for all three EECs.)

⁵ Author's note: these figures were inflated as they included outreach visits to schools, conducting elections, etc. Since November 2005, Melbourne EEC was directed to cease outreach or school elections; the policy direction instructed that DROs take more of this role through SCVP.

Meeting a need

13. Prior to 2008,⁶ written evaluation from participants (collated after every session) indicated the Melbourne EEC was well received by teachers, students – and parents. Often two – sometimes three - parents would accompany primary schools to assist teachers with the city excursion, and this enabled the EEC to reach ‘eligible electors,’ if by default.

14. Feedback indicated that teachers and parents – as eligible electors – also learned more about the Australian voting system after attending the EEC. Another interesting aspect is the majority of these participants told staff they discovered more about the AEC as an entity and its role in organising federal elections.

15. It is important to note that the Melbourne EEC also provided information sessions for student teachers from several high profile universities.⁷ As student teachers visit many schools during their internship period, these sessions subsequently generated significant exposure for the AEC as an organisation.

16. The author was project manager of the relocation and redevelopment of the new EEC, and during 2007 initiated discussions with students and teachers through focus groups and other face-to-face communication before deciding on the audio visual presentation and interactive equipment for the new EEC.

17. This research suggested that young people were frustrated learning about the electoral process because they were not eligible to vote. This led the author and staff to liaise very closely with the EEC designers to develop an interactive that provided guidance for students on how they could approach their appropriate elected representatives about issues of concern. This proved to be a very popular interactive – particularly with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups.

18. During the four years as manager of the EEC, the author often engaged in discussions with young people to gauge their opinion about EEC’s services and equipment. This opportunity opened up other avenues of conversation about their expectations from a democracy.

19. It was also apparent to EEC staff – and most rewarding - that many cynical teenagers exited the EEC with a renewed sense of optimism about their role in a democratic society.

⁶ This evaluation form was later altered by AEC National Office and this did not generate the same information.

⁷ Melbourne EEC also delivered ‘Your Vote Counts’ sessions at various university campuses in conjunction with AEC’s national education office

AEC's role in educating the community

20. Based on observation of previous public awareness and education programs conducted by the AEC, the author believes the AEC's role in educating the community now requires significant clarification to enable a cohesive, consistent program be adopted throughout Australia.

21. In the author's view, it was not appropriate for EECs to be overseen by individual state offices of the AEC; it should have been a national responsibility and an integral part of the AEC's public awareness program.

22. Lack of direction – or vision – has led to 'ad hoc' management of electoral education over the past decade, as the EECs were considered separate entities and not seriously regarded as part of the overall public relations/ communications strategy.

23. Yet, for an annual outlay of \$310,000,⁸ the Melbourne EEC was the 'face' of the AEC and considered accessible to the community. Melbourne's clientele included increasing numbers of new citizens, student teachers and passers-by requiring general information. In 2007, a leading Melbourne recruitment firm (Hudson) arranged an information session for 20 of its consultants - while other organisations had made similar requests to the author.

24. In the lead-up to the federal election in 2007, the Melbourne EEC also received so many 'walk in' requests from voters that the author organised several 'after work' sessions. The positive response from these sessions reaffirmed the author's belief that there are many eligible electors – outside the segmented groups - who want to know more about Australia's electoral system and want to have it explained to them in an easy to understand manner.

25. The Melbourne EEC was not just a learning centre, but an effective public relations tool for the AEC – but was never acknowledged as such. Formal and anecdotal evaluation revealed that teachers and parents often did not realise the extent of the role of the AEC until their visit to the EEC. And invariably, most participants did not fully understand the preferential voting system until it was explained by EEC staff in the 'role play' election.

26. The question the AEC should consider is whether it genuinely believes it should continue this role - as currently stipulated in the legislation.

- **Are "education and information programs" only to provide guidance on when and how to enrol?**

⁸ The author will not breach confidentiality and state the actual budget in this report, but provides this figure that was provided at the Senate Estimates hearing.

- **Is it the AEC's role to encourage Australians to understand their democratic prerogatives and/or entitlements? If not, whose role is it?**

Or

- **Does the AEC see its role only to educate electors about their legal obligations just to ensure they enrol and vote?**

27. It is the author's view that the AEC should conduct a comprehensive overview of its existing tools to ascertain whether they are having the desired impact. It is too easy for the organisation to outlay millions of dollars on advertising campaigns, without knowing what has been more effective in reaching the desired demographic/psychographic audiences.

The Green Paper discussion points

28. The Green Paper invites respondents to address discussion points - as listed on page 141, 9.54 - and some of these are detailed below.

29. At this point, readers of this submission would probably expect the author to recommend the reintroduction of EECs; however, such a suggestion should not be considered without implementing thorough research and evaluation to ascertain the value of education centres. The author also wishes such a process had been introduced *prior* to closing the two EECs.

30. While the author believes the Melbourne EEC was considered a valuable resource as an adjunct to civics and citizenship studies in Victoria – and this was verified by formal and anecdotal feedback from the Melbourne Civics and Citizenship Network – there are several issues that should be addressed – in particular, access and equity requirements.

Access and equity

31. The author was often informed⁹ that many state schools could not afford to visit the Melbourne EEC. The author raised concerns with AEC management about the EEC becoming an elitist service – and suggested ways this could be improved. ¹⁰ This opinion was formed against a backdrop of many private/independent schools being repeat clients - while teachers from state schools would later cancel their school bookings because they could not finance the visit.

32. Although entry to the EEC was free, schools required funds to transport students to the city. In some instances, parents were asked to contribute to the cost of hiring an emergency relief teacher which made the proposed visit even more expensive (the author brought this to the attention of the Victorian Early Childhood and Education Department).

33. It is important to note that in now providing the one EEC, this service is only available to schools throughout Australia that can afford to take students on excursions to Canberra. The EEC Melbourne also built up a regular clientele of Work Education students¹¹ from several TAFEs and this group of eligible electors no longer has access to such a service. These factors highlight the need for the AEC to consider its role in conforming to access and equity requirements.

⁹ The Melbourne EEC kept detailed records of booking cancellations.

¹⁰ The author visited several tourist education centres in Melbourne, including the Melbourne Museum which provides an outreach service across Victoria.

¹¹ Work Education tertiary students have special learning needs: www.disability.vic.gov.au

Recommendation

34. If the AEC should ever consider re-opening an EEC, it should initiate a comprehensive feasibility study beforehand.

35. Such a study should incorporate the federal government's access and equity policy to ensure the AEC provides service delivery that meets the needs of its constituency. Admittedly, this includes various sub-sets which have already been listed in the Green Paper.

36. Surely it would be pertinent to assess their requirements before embarking on a particular strategic direction?

Community engagement

37. The author believes the AEC should embrace community engagement principles before introducing new electoral education strategies. Now an accepted communication methodology, community engagement programs provide a more systematic approach and often lead to more relevant and efficient services.

38. The AEC should consider implementing a community engagement strategy incorporating the Green Paper submissions as a guide.

39. It is a futile exercise suggesting, or adopting, strategies that the AEC assume might work; it's preferable to establish the parameters based on preliminary research involving consultation with various stakeholders.

40. While inviting submissions for a Green Paper stimulates further discussion, it is **not** consultation.

What changes should be made?

("Do you think any changes should be made to existing electoral education programs?")

41. It is presumptuous of anyone to provide a list of suggested changes without knowing what programs have proven to be successful in "improving the participation, knowledge and support for Australia's electoral system"¹²

¹² As stated in the Commonwealth Electoral Act

42. For example:

- Is the current SVCP (School and Community Visits Program) having the desired impact? Is it meeting its objectives? Is it considered a valued service? The AEC claims “a very active school and community visits program...delivered electoral education to more than 100,000 students.¹³— but how effective is this program? Do schools believe this is more beneficial than a visit to the EEC?
- Is the ‘Your Vote Counts’ program meeting the needs of student teachers throughout Australia? Is the program still relevant? If not, what changes should be made?
- Do school teachers use “Democracy Rules.”¹⁴ If not, why not?
- Are school teachers readily able to access resources from the AEC website? If not, what format would they prefer¹⁵
- Are CALD/new citizens getting the advice they need? If not, what would assist them?
- How many electors understand the preferential voting system? What method would best assist them?
- What communication methods work best for various target groups?
- Are the state electoral commissions ‘competing’ with the AEC? Should this process be streamlined to ensure a consistent message?

43. These questions must be answered - and many others should be considered - before further suggestions are made. Implementing a community engagement strategy would facilitate this process.

¹³ Electoral Commissioner, Mr Ed Killestyn, Senate Estimates Committee 28 May 2009 (Hansard

¹⁴ “Democracy Rules” is a teacher resource that is issued to school libraries.

¹⁵ Feedback from the Melbourne EEC indicated teachers were too busy during the day to download information from websites and were unable to do so at home (because of family responsibilities and/ or cost of accessing internet at their own expense). Consequently, teachers were always grateful for prepared information the Melbourne EEC provided.

Reaching the community

44. However, the author does recommend the AEC consider establishing accessible 'community electoral education centres' throughout Australia that would be available to all eligible electors – not just school students.

45. Such centres could provide a much needed resource for the various target groups the AEC is trying to reach and they could be jointly financed with state and/or local governments.

46. Establishing 'community electoral education centres' would also meld with the federal government's Social Inclusion Policy, assisting Australians to: "Learn by participating in education and training; engage by connecting with people and using their local community's resources and have a voice so that they can influence decisions that affect them."¹⁶

Conclusion

47. While the author acknowledges there is a need to improve electoral participation of various subset target groups – youth, indigenous, CALD, people with no fixed address – there is a tendency for the AEC to ignore the needs of the average Australian voter who wishes to better understand the Australian electoral process.¹⁷

48. The AEC should conduct more thorough research of its target audiences instead of making assumptions about their perceived requirements.

49. Before embarking on the implementation – or removal - of further programs, the AEC must enhance its understanding of the requirements of the Australian voting community.

50. More importantly, the AEC must decide whether electoral education is a role it genuinely wishes to embrace.

¹⁶ www.socialinclusion.gov.au

¹⁷ As manager of the Melbourne EEC, the author regularly conducted discussions with accompanying adults – usually parents – to gain an understanding of their requirements.