

Parliament of Victoria  
Joint Parliamentary Electoral Matters Committee  
**Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation in Victorian State  
Parliamentary Elections**

Submission from Dr Deborah Towns  
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Terms of Reference

Received from the Legislative Assembly on 21 February 2017:

That, under section 33 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, an inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections be referred to the Electoral Matters Committee for consideration and report no later than 31 August 2018 and the Committee should specifically examine:

1. electoral and civics education, the Victorian Electoral Commission's (VEC's) community engagement programs and other best practice approaches used by the VEC, other Australian electoral commissions, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, to ensure that Victorian citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively in elections;
2. strategies to reduce informal voting at Victorian state elections which are not related to the voting system;
3. how the VEC employs and trains casual staff for Victorian state elections, this should involve discussion about methods to attract people to join the VEC's casual staffing roster for Victorian elections, the Committee should also examine the roles and responsibilities of the VEC's casual election staff in light of changing technological and societal demands; and
4. strategies to increase electoral participation amongst community groups that traditionally experience barriers to electoral participation, such as Victorians aged 18 to 24, Victorians from multicultural backgrounds, as well as Victorians who have recently become Australian citizens and are not familiar with Australia's electoral system.

## **Introduction**

The League of Women Voters of Victoria (referred to in this submission as the League) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Electoral Matters Committee addressing issues identified in the terms of reference for the current inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation.

The League has had a long interest in electoral and civics education, strategies for reducing non-voting and informal voting and the impact on democratic process of technological and societal change as outlined briefly in Appendix A to this submission. The League has sought to be well informed about the work of the Victorian Electoral Commission's community engagement programs, the similar work of the Australian Electoral Commission, and of the Parliaments in supporting schools not just in voter education but in what can be more broadly described as Civics and Citizenship Education.

Through our membership of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), and through member participation in other bodies including the United Nations Association of Australia and the local chapter of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group we have had opportunity to consider the value of a human rights approach to voting.

Our understanding of voting best practice in an international context comes for example through our knowledge of the participation of Australia in the work of the International Parliamentary Union, and monitoring of progress in electoral administration and voter education through review processes enshrined in the UN human rights treaty system and relevant Covenants including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Covenant for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

With the emergence of similar monitoring through the European Union for example through the Europa approach, it has been possible to learn more about the way, a human rights focus in relation to electoral education and Electoral Observation means placing voters and the right to participate at the heart of the process rather than a narrow focus on the legalities of voter registration.

### **1. Electoral and civics education:**

We do think that it is important to review the work of Victorian Electoral Commission, but not merely in relation to the work of other Electoral Commissions in Australia and beyond.

It is also relevant to look at the way the VEC works with other bodies committed to Civics Education, not excluding schools, for example the annual Victorian Constitutional Commission, the Victorian Youth Parliament program sponsored by YMCA, the program for migrants previously provided by the Adult Migrant Education Service. From our perspective, while the ratio of women to men in elected office remains unbalanced, attention must be paid to the way the VEC's work of voter education the VEC is supported by Victorian programs with a local government focus such as 'Go Women 4 Local Government' developed by the Municipal Association of Victoria and Victorian Local Governance Association and the 50/50 work of the Australian Local Government Women's Association (\*Victoria) and LGPro especially in voters of Culturally and Linguistically

Diverse backgrounds through partnerships with Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition and its members.

Our knowledge of the approach used by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) community engagement programs is based on our experience with partnership approaches to running an annual student event My Vote My Voice at the Parliament of Victoria.

Each year we have been supplied with a range of material by VEC for participating students and schools – see Appendix B for reference to continuing assistance for this program in report from Ms Pam Hammond, My Vote My Voice 2017 Convenor, for National Council of Women of Victoria Inc.

With the support of the Presiding Officers, NCW Victoria Inc. through its *Civics and Citizenship* program has worked during the months leading up to the My Vote My Voice event, to promote awareness of the work of the Victorian Electoral Commission in participating schools, and with NCW Victoria member organisations including the Australian Women's Local Government Association (Victorian Division) and the League of Women Voters of Victoria. This is shown also in the following report from a League member about the 2014 event.

*On Thursday 20th March 2014, National Council of Women of Victoria hosted an excellent International Women's Day event in the Legislative Chamber of the Parliament of Victoria. After refreshments and photos of participants and attendees in Queen's Hall, we went into the ornate Legislative Chamber and were welcomed by the President of National Council of Victoria, Mrs Sheila Byard, who introduced the panel and the speakers.*

*Guest speakers were: Ms Safa Al Mahoun, Youth Commissioner Victorian Multicultural Commission, Ms Billy Crombie, Education Team Victorian Electoral Commission and Ms Ramla Gierre, Caseworker Migrant Support Programs of the Red Cross. The secondary students who spoke were introduced by Historian and past President of the League of Women Voters, Dr Deborah Towns: the students were Miranda Hoffman, Eliza Chantrell and Dawn Lee (Melbourne Girls Grammar School) and Elena Mitchell, Claudia O'Callaghan and Erin White (Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar). These engaging 3 minute presentations were well received. Mr Johnny Yang (International Student's Association) spoke about the situation of overseas students.*

*The panel responding to the students comprised the Hon Judy Maddigan (Speaker in the Legislative Assembly 2003-2010), Councillor Helen Harris (City of Whitehorse) and Councillor Jennifer Yang, (Deputy Mayor, City of Manningham). Among the guests was Mrs Beryle Foster (the former Councillor Beryle Campbell) who was the first woman elected to Council after the establishment of the City of Swan Hill in 1959.*

*This year is the 100th anniversary of women being able to stand for local government office and the 90th Anniversary of when women were first able to stand as candidates for the Parliament of Victoria. Female Members form only 33% of the Legislative Assembly even today. It was not until 1979 that Victoria's first female Legislative Councillors were elected, one of whom Gracia Baylor AM, former Member for Boronia Province was able to be with us on the day. (Ms Eva Court)*

## **2.Strategies to reduce informal voting at Victorian state elections**

Historically high levels of informal voting in Victoria have been attributed to limited voter grasp of the need to need to number every box, particularly because people in the post-war migration cohorts having been unfamiliar with preferential voting.

If the same inexperience with preferential voting has emerged with the new cohorts of migrants, the supposition might be that more effort should be applied to 'train the trainer' approaches with communities thought to be predisposed to vote informal.

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Communities in Victoria, the VEC website explains that a strategy has been adopted as part of the Victorian Electoral Commission Reconciliation Action Plan 2017-18, and this will be the subject of further comment in the next section.

We note however that levels of informal voting can be quite low in voting in some comparable overseas settings. One example is in relation to the Scottish Independence Referendum. In the United Kingdom in 2014. Admittedly the referendum question, merely needed voters to answer "Yes" or "No", to the question, "Should Scotland be an independent country?" rather than to complete a ballot paper of the type used in Victorian State elections. It was notable that in this voting, 84.6% of eligible voters took part the highest recorded rate of voter turnout in the UK, with a mere 0.09% of Invalid or blank votes.

This suggests that perceived significance of an opportunity to vote may overcome voter disinterest, and voter fatigue. Given a similarly diverse constituencies in the UK, some closely resembling that Victorian profile, it would seem mobilisation of vote was facilitated by other factors that came into play quite apart from the work of the Electoral Commission.

## **3.Employment and training of casual staff for Victorian state elections**

We find it hard to comment on the employment and training of casual staff for Victorian State elections, without access to information as to current staff ratios. There is reference on the current website to the workforce numbering 80 permanent and contract staff, with one employee who is an Aboriginal person. This might suggest that so few staff might have difficulty supervising the much larger number of extra casuals required for Victorian state elections.

Since March 2014 when Ms Billy Crombie, of VEC Education Team spoke at that year's [My Vote My Voice](#) it seems that may have been some reduction of staff for core VEC business.

Having basic information on the VEC website about casual staff roles, and the facility there for applicants to complete applications on line, seems be thought sufficient to secure staff of the type required. One question that occurs, is if it is thought desirable that casual staff should include persons of CALD background, to what extent is the VEC confident that casuals and their managers are adequately trained, and reliable?

Anecdotally it has been suggested for example that in recent State elections, staff working in Victorian polling booths may be insufficiently familiar with the requirement of the Electoral Act in relation to control of the grounds of buildings that are rented as polling places.

#### **4.Strategies to increase electoral participation amongst community groups that traditionally experience barriers to electoral participation**

Victorians from multicultural backgrounds, as well as Victorians who have recently become Australian citizens and are not familiar with Australia's electoral system.

**Chinese speaking voters** - We have had some experience in discussing Civics and Citizenship matters with CALD groups including Chinese speaking voters, and understand that within community organisations, there is a high level of voting and careful efforts to ensure that votes are validly made.

There appears to be a marked contrast between the limited level of information provided to NESB groups on the VEC website, by contrast with that of the Australian Electoral Commission, and some degree of confusion between diaspora groups as to why there are two Commissions.

For the Chinese speaking communities it appears that for whatever there is little use of print media to convey information about enrolment, postal voting and polling places. Our understanding is that information relating to these matters is provided through community language programs on SBS Radio.

##### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voters:

We congratulate the VEC on its recent work with community leaders the Korin Gamadji Institute's Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leadership (REAL) Program. The program aims to engage young people at Year 9 level, and works with participants across a number of years to develop their leadership skills. Phase 1 participants travel from across Victoria to attend a four-day intensive in Melbourne. This intensive includes a workshop delivered by VEC staff that focuses on getting a better understanding of elections, how decisions made by government affect our lives and the importance of enrolling and voting. It also includes a tour of the Victorian Parliament. Phase 2 participants return for a second intensive a year later. The VEC's Phase 2 workshop focuses on active citizenship, what issues are important to young people and how elections work.

##### Young people 18-25

The 2013 Lowy Institute poll on the attitudes of the young to Australian democracy focused Australia's attention on the alleged disengagement of young people from the democratic process. It reported that only 48% of 18 to 29 year olds preferred democracy to any other kind of government. It was reported in the same year that a large proportion (30%) of the 1.4 million eligible Australians missing from the national electoral roll were young people, with only around 35% of potential voters between the ages of 18 to 24 registered to vote.

Over the last six years 2013 to 2017, the League's participation in the program leading to the My Vote My Voice event, has included working with the YoungNCWVic group, including recent graduates, to ensure that relevant posts are made to the YoungNCWVic blog about new initiatives in voter education in Victoria, Australia and beyond. The aim is to build interest among our future leaders group in issues such as alleged youth disengagement. By drawing on the LWVV's Bessie Rischbeith Memorial Trust to provide free places for participants since 2013, we have been assisting

the National Council of Women of Victoria with its annual student event at the Parliament of Victoria My Vote My Voice for which the Australian Local Government Women's Association (Victoria) and the VEC have been co-sponsors.

The Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood civics and citizenship education has reported that schools which give students the chance to practically participate in meaningful ways – in their classroom, their school, their community or in an even wider sphere – perform better within the citizenship curriculum. It also shows that individual students who have the opportunity to participate perform better than those who don't.

Lyndy Stagg, Director of the Coerwull Centre for Leadership and Service (2016) at one of the participating My Vote My Voice schools comments

*Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School have been involved with "My Vote, My Voice" for a number of years and every year it has produced the same inspiring outcomes. The students are engaged, fascinated and delighted to be part of this programme and their visit to the State Parliament. We have a very strong tradition of debating at Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School and the girls certainly enjoy the challenge of the process. This event run by NCWV is a perfect fit for our girls as it involves research, teamwork, public speaking, in unfamiliar surroundings, and a very knowledgeable audience. The girls seek advice when needed and they spend time discussing the topic with their peers. After the event they share the experience with the senior school students at our weekly Assembly, which is encouraging and informative for all those present.*

*The participants are privileged to hear some interesting accounts about a variety of women's democracy issues. They certainly appreciated the morning refreshments and the chance to speak to their peers from other school. Networking is a strength of young woman and it is important to facilitate these types of occasions. The morning is a very worthwhile occasion for all concerned. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the proceedings.*

## **5. Conclusion**

We thank the Electoral Matters Committee for opportunity to comment on Civics Education and the work of the Victorian Electoral Commission. One concern we have is that some of the programs mentioned in Section 1 above are not freely available to the full range of Victorian Schools. Valuable though the YMCA Youth Parliament experience may be as form of civics and citizenship education, access to places in this annual program is extremely expensive, unless students are fortunate enough to live in a municipality where free places are on offer, or to obtain other sponsorship.

Even for a single morning event, not all schools can budget for student supervision. In 2011 the League of Women Voters arranged a morning program for Year 8 and 9 students at the Parliament to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women voting for the first time in a Victorian State election, with the participation from six government secondary schools – Brauer College (Warrnambool), Buckley Park, Caroline Springs (Creekside), Elwood College, Preston Girls Secondary College, and Melton Secondary College.

Since then the tendency has been for some schools to prefer to send senior students who can travel to and from the Parliament unsupervised. It appears that not so many Victorian schools are providing such opportunities.

We hope that one of the outcomes of the current Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry will be to assist the VEC to report more fully on its work in encouraging schools to enable a fuller range of young people to participate in electoral information programs, so as to draw on their capacity to educate others.

## **Appendix B**

### **National Council of Women of Victoria's report on its Civics and Citizenship program: the annual "My Vote, My Voice" Student Event, held at the Parliament of Victoria during the four years 2014 - 2017**

#### **'Civics and Citizenship' Program Background**

'My Vote, My Voice' is an annual event organised by National Council of Women of Victoria with the support of a number of its affiliate organisations.

Students are invited to list themselves to make brief three-minute presentations on the theme of the day 'My Vote My Voice', to our invited audience of students of diverse backgrounds, community members and our panel of eminent women. We hope that the students who attend – as speakers, and as audience - will go on to better grasp the intricacies of our democratic system, and that the others in attendance will have an opportunity to reflect on the assertion that 'Gen Y' and 'Gen Next' are disinterested in the democratic process.

The event is facilitated by a group of young women, mostly recent graduates who became interested in the alleged alienation, with male and female students from a variety of schools invited to participate. A number of Civics and Citizenship awards are made to individuals and school teams judged by the Panel to have made outstanding contributions to the event.

At the 2014 event held in March the focus was on the **Centenary of women being able to stand for Local Government**. The secondary students who spoke were from Melbourne Girls' Grammar School and Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar, with Mr Johnny Yang, Deakin University, speaking about the situation of overseas students.

#### **Guest speakers, Panellists & Dignitaries**

- The Hon. Bruce Atkinson MP, President, Legislative Council.
- Ms Safa Al Mahoun, Youth Commissioner Victorian Multicultural Commission,
- Ms Billy Crombie, Education Team, Victorian Electoral Commission
- Ms Ramla Giirre, Caseworker, Migrant Support Programs of the Red Cross
- Panel members nominated by the Australian Local Government Women's Association (Victoria) were Hon. Judy Madigan, Legislative Assembly (2003-2010), Councillor Helen Harris, City of Whitehorse and Councillor Helen Yang, Deputy Mayor, City of Manningham the
- Dr Deborah Towns, University of Melbourne, League of Women Voters of Victoria

**Attendees:** Students: 30 Adults: 50

At the 2015 event on August 10, the focus was on the **Twenty year anniversary of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women 'Action for Equality, Development and Peace'**. The UN conference was held in Beijing from 4-15 September 1995 and produced the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**, including the call for progress towards equal representation of Women in Power and Decision-making. Seven hundred Australian women attended the parallel NGO Forum held in Huairou near Beijing, one hundred from Victoria alone.

**Attendees:** Students: 70 Adults: 50

**Participating Schools**

1. The Academy of Mary Immaculate
2. Melbourne Girls College
3. University High School
4. Ruyton Girls School
5. Mac. Robertson Girls' High School
6. Melbourne Girls Grammar
7. St Monica's College, Epping
8. Methodist Ladies College
9. Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School
10. Korowa Anglican Girls School.

**Guest speakers, Panellists & Dignitaries**

- The Hon. Bruce Atkinson MP, President, Legislative Council.
- VMC Youth Commissioner, Safa Almarhoun
- Panel nominated by the ALGWA Victoria - The Hon. Judy Madigan, Legislative Assembly (2003-2010), Cr Jenny Mullholland, City of Banyule and the Hon. Samantha Dunn MLC, Eastern Metropolitan Province.
- Ms Yueying Wang (4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women, Beijing 1995 attendee)
- Ms Amanda Xu (4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women, Beijing 1995 attendee)
- Dr Helen Hill (4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women, Beijing 1995 attendee)
- Ms Anne S Walker (4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women, Beijing 1995 attendee) & Co Founder of International Women's Tribune.

**The 2016 event on August 12** had the theme: ***My Vote My Voice – The Right to Vote, the Right to Stand.*** The 2016 event was designed to encourage students to investigate the level of participation of women in the community, particularly in local government, past, present and future. The Australian Local Government Women's Association provided copies of 'The Right to vote; the right to stand – the involvement of women in local government in Victoria', for each participating school, to help students in their research.

**Attendees:** Students: 40 Adults: 60

**Participating schools:**

1. Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
2. The Academy of Mary Immaculate
3. Melbourne Girls College
4. University High School
5. Ruyton Girls School
6. Mac. Robertson Girls' High School
7. St Monica's College, Epping
8. Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School
9. Korowa Anglican Girls School.

**Guest speakers, panellists and dignitaries**

- Margaret Fitzherbert MLC on behalf of the President of the Legislative Council
- Tina Hosseini, Youth Commissioner for the Victorian Multicultural Council,
- Panel nominated by ALGWA Victoria - Hon Judy Maddigan, Legislative Assembly (2003-2010), Cr Felicity Frederico, Bayside Council and Hon Samantha Dunn MLC, Eastern Metropolitan Region

- Dr Deborah Towns, University of Melbourne, representing the League of Women Voters of Victoria
- **The 2017 event on September 1 has as its theme is 'My Vote My Voice - Women in Local Democracy – Towards Gender Equality'**. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Local Government Women's Charter which contains the three principles: *gender equity, diversity and active citizenship*. Students from across Victoria will come together to make three-minute speeches on these principles as they relate to decision making in the community and the workplace.

**Attendees anticipated:** Students: 40                      Adults: 60

**Participating schools (so far):**

- 1 Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
- 2 University High School
- 3 Ruyton Girls School
- 4 Mac Robertson Girls High School
- 5 Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School
- 6 Korowa Anglican Girls School
- 7 Geelong College.

**Guest speakers, panellists and dignitaries (at this stage)**

- The Hon. Bruce Atkinson MP, President of the Legislative Council TBC
- Michelle Richards, Moorabool Shire Fire Protection Coordinator, winner of the Australian Local Government Women's Association (Victoria) 2017 Bursary
- Panel nominated by Australian Local Government Women's Association (Victoria) -Barbara Abley AM (Geelong's first woman mayor), Cr Denise Massoud, Mayor City of Whitehorse, and the Hon Samantha Dunn MLC, Eastern Metropolitan Region
- Dr Deborah Towns, University of Melbourne, representing the League of Women Voters of Victoria.

**Sponsors & Supporters**

Supporter	Type of Support
Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls & The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade	Letter of support for event, Provided copies of information booklets
Victorian Electoral Commission (Education Team)	"I Vote" badges, T.shirts, 'Passport to Democracy', and other promotional materials
Parliament of Victoria Services	Community Engagement & Education Unit, Hansard for Audio recording and Parliamentary catering for refreshments
Australian Local Government Women's Association (Victoria)	Provision of panel members, and copies of 'The Right to Vote; the right to stand':
League of Women Voters	Funding student catering (The Bessie Rischbieth Memorial Trust); Assistance of members
Victorian Multicultural Commission Moorabool City Council	Provided guest speakers.
JERA International	Background material for Beijing 20+ review

**Outcomes & Feedback**

"It is great to see young women reviewing progress made towards gender equality over the past twenty years and charting the path ahead. I can't think of a more promising, untapped resource than the world's

young women. And there is no one better equipped to shape the future than the young leaders of today. I commend you, and your schools, on participating in this important event; and I congratulate the National Council of Women of Victoria and the event sponsors for arranging this program.”

Natasha Stott Despoja AM. Australia’s Ambassador for Girls and Women.

“It was our pleasure to support an event that encourages young people and especially women to participate in the democratic processes. Well done on all of your work in getting over 70 students. This is a fantastic opportunity for young people to share their ideas and practice their influencing and presentation skills. Thank you of thinking of us, and we would be happy to continue supporting it in kind in the future.”

Danijela Spoljaric, Education Team Leader, Victorian Electoral Commission.

“Thank you so much for such a wonderful morning. My students were so inspired listening to the presentations and we were very fortunate to be a part of this event.”

Mrs Prue Short, Year 6 Teacher and Junior School Student Teacher Co-ordinator, Methodist Ladies' College.

“We had a great day on Monday, thank you so much for the invitation to attend.”

Fadi Elbarbar, Social Justice Coordinator, St Monica’s College Epping.

“It was a successful day indeed, the students did a brilliant job and the judges and women from the conference were really insightful and informed”

Safa Almarhoun, Victorian Multicultural Commission, Youth Commissioner.

“Thank you for including me in such a wonderful event. It was such fun meeting up with everyone...and meeting some of the students following the event. I was invited by some University High School students to come and speak to their Feminist Collective! Made my day!” (Anne S. Walker, Co-Founder, International Women’s Tribune).

**Pam Hammond M.Ed, Education Adviser, Convenor ‘My Vote My Voice’ Program**

National Council of Women of Victoria Inc. <info@ncwvic.or.au>