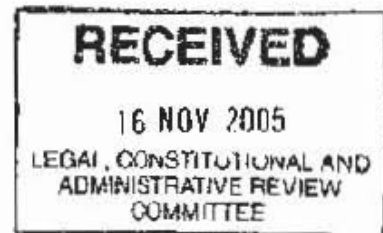


The Research Director
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Q 4000



Dear Madam

Voices and Votes – An inquiry into young people's engagement in democracy in
Queensland

I enclose my submission to this inquiry. It may be made public if the Committee so
wishes.

Colin A. Hughes
encl

SUBMISSION
TO
THE LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO
YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY IN QUEENSLAND

COLIN A. HUGHES

13 NOVEMBER 2005

The subject matter of this inquiry has had a long history in Queensland and, I have to say with deep regret, on this occasion I am unable to contribute very much that would be new. As to what might be done to improve things, I continue to support the proposals contained in the Queensland Constitutional Review Commission's Report in 2000 (pp.88-89) which were to invite the Minister for Education to report regularly to the Legislative Assembly on the state of the problem and progress towards remedying it, and to establish and maintain a State Electoral Education Center, if possible in co-operation with the Australian Electoral Commission. To that I would now add that it is desirable that the Committee explicitly endorse continuation of compulsory voting at State and Local Government elections for it appears quite likely that its abandonment for Commonwealth elections will be an issue at the next federal election, due in 2007.

The Committee's admirable Discussion Paper reported a number of useful sources, including I was pleased to see, having been previously associated with the organization, International IDEA's Youth Participation Report. It also assembled the limited stock of Australian data to which I would add only (re Figure 6, p.11) that other data from a large national sample collected by the AEC when I was there suggested that the increase in enrolment apparent between 18 and 25 was very much a function of age, and that two possible factors that might affect a sense of civic responsibility – getting married and having a child – did not appear to be significant. As to the three broad options the Discussion Paper identified (p.19), I very much doubt that increased coercion would help or that there is much more that can be done by way of mechanisms encouraging enrolment. I would say, as I have on several public occasions, that sudden closing of the roll prior to a federal election with the effect of preventing many thousands of potential young voters from enrolling, is certain to discourage participation substantially. I also doubt that a system of incentives and rewards has much to offer, and if attractive enough might prove in the event to be an encouragement to fraudulent enrolments in the same way as enrolment-based proof of age documents have been sought in order to gain entry to licensed premises.

That leaves persuasion as the only realistic option, and to that end I would like to mention briefly some publications not in the Discussion Paper but perhaps already known to members of the Committee. These are several recent articles in *Parliamentary Affairs*, the journal of the Hansard Society of which I am a member. They have mainly focused on evidence of declining turnout in the context of United Kingdom politics, and the existence of compulsory voting here masks some of the tendencies which they identify as possible causes. However the characteristics of those tendencies and the remedies recommended may be of assistance to the Committee, and I will briefly mention three pieces. British evidence seems more immediately relevant to Australian problems than American, a view that was reinforced by the observation of a well-regarded American journalist, Adam Nagourney, covering the 2005 British election:

...[A]n election that officially lasts only a month can make it harder to do the on-the-ground organizing that has become so critical to American democracy. 'In an election where they call it 30 days ahead of time, the system works against building citizen involvement,' says Joe Tripodi, an American political consultant

who has advised the Labor campaign and who worked for Howard Dean. (NYT, 1/5/05)

DeLoqueville's recognition of American enthusiasm for voluntary groups still holds good; which groups have organisational clout for citizen involvement may vary over time. Presently evangelical churches are in the ascendant.

The first article, and I think the most interesting, was by Stephen Coleman, Professor of E-Democracy at Oxford. It talked of "[t]wo houses, next door to one another, yet almost on different planets" (PA, 56(4), October 2003) in terms to chill the blood of any dedicated advocate of civic education.

If there is a fundamental structure and/or cultural gulf between the political class and everyone else, teaching the language of the political class to those outside it will simply reinforce the sense of distance between them. (p.758)

Nevertheless that language must be taught and primary and secondary school courses are the necessary vehicle. I am regularly saddened to see an Australian journalist write and an Australian sub-editor nod through a reference to "Senator Joe McCarthy, chairman of the House Unamerican Activities Committee." If journalists don't see the mistake, how can their readers? I would call the Committee's attention to the findings of a national sample (n 1,872) survey after the 1984 federal election that in response to the question "Federal Parliament is made up of two Houses. To the best of your knowledge, what are their names?" only 71.8% came up with House of Representatives or Lower House and 22.4% could not suggest a name. To the subsequent question, "In which of them (the Senate and the House of Representatives) do Mr Hawke and Mr Keating sit?" only 60.5% identified the House, 17.2% nominated the Senate and 21.0% did not know. (*AEC Research Report 1/85: Informal Voting 1984 House of Representatives Report* (1985), chap.5.) If there are no pegs there to start with, it is difficult to hang more difficult information onto something. There is no reason to believe basic knowledge has improved over the past 20 years.

For Coleman, and he is very convincing on the point, the rhetoric of "reconnection" fails in politics because it is "an impossibility, except perhaps for the most elementary level of participation in important elections." Retention of that elementary starting point is why I continue to argue for compulsory voting as strongly as possible. Recently the victims of the New Orleans floods were invariably called "poor and black" and it was added that was why the political process ignored them. But they were also non-voters, and that was the most immediate reason why they could be shamefully ignored by several levels of government. It may be an elementary level of participation, but it is has value for justice and equity considerations. Coleman was also skeptical of technological solutions which were being over-sold, though at the end he did suggest "a conception of two-way accountability" that required new technologies of interactivity and the nurturing of genuine respect" between the two houses he had found. (Curiously discussions of technology do not mention the dystopian film and Peter Cook vehicle of 1970, "The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer," which drew attention to several relevant issues like voter fatigue. On the other hand, George Clooney's recent "Good Night, And Good Luck" about Edward R. Murrow is exactly the sort of mass media product that can inspire some young people to take an interest in politics and get involved.)

Peter Kellner, a leading pollster whose organisation had conducted the survey work for Coleman's piece, discussed the "culture of detachment" (PA, 57(4), October 2004). He wishes to promote "authenticity" to defeat detachment by changing campaign styles, seeking to involve electors genuinely, recognizing that "all politics is local" and reviving local campaigning. This has to be done in the face of considerable changes in the political environment: claims to greater competence instead of inspirational vision, policies that make only a small difference at the margin, trench warfare about details instead of sweeping battles about principles, and declining local party organizations that "too often resemble nostalgic fan clubs for pop stars in decline" (p.843)

Ed Vaizey, a Conservative MP, cited evidence that young people really were interested in politics – a Nottingham Trent University survey in 2003 found 56% interested in politics, almost as many interested in a general and more than half who discussed politics with family or friends, and 88% could define issues they thought important but "turned off" by the image of politics and politicians (PA, 58(3), July 2005) for reasons which closely resemble Kellner's. On the discussing politics point, it should be remembered that Australian data have shown more wives think they discuss politics with their husbands than husbands think they discuss politics with their wives. Like many writers, he was inclined to see changes since his own youth, in his case the industrial struggles of Thatcherism, and thus believed that technological change (for sources of political information) and consensus politics had led youth not to rely on old structures. Nevertheless he thought it possible to adapt political processes to new mind-sets.

For example, the success of *Big Brother* in encouraging voter is obvious. One's vote makes an instant and significant difference. By picking up the phone or sending a text you can affect immediate change. (p.633)

Remedies might therefore be found in direct democracy - the referendum and the initiative, perhaps internet voting. Not surprisingly, he did not mention the other leg of direct democracy, and the one presumably closest to *Big Brother* appeal – the recall. My own impression of the high drama of the recall of Governor Grey of California and his subsequent replacement at a special election by a major movie star is that it was well reported in the Australian media but its systemic implications were effectively ignored as a bizarre American phenomenon.

It will be apparent that remedies being proposed to bring electors generally, and young people in particular, into more meaningful participation in the political realm may be beyond the scope of a parliamentary committee to recommend or a government to implement. For example, political parties figure prominently in prescriptions as the best transmission belts between populations and governments, yet intervention in the internal affairs of political parties is usually avoided as much as possible. Queensland alone has taken ground-breaking steps. For example, when media coverage of the political process is at stake the gate-keepers' preference will usually be to focus on scandal, sleaze, abuse of authority, denigration, and ignore systemic questions. There have been virtuous exceptions such as News Ltd's posting of Madonna King to Brisbane to report post-Fitzgerald developments in depth. Yet telling media outlets how to report the news is a risky business, whilst the appearance of new media has merely meant that more scandals

are more widely known faster than before and substantive reporting has been pushed even further into a corner.

It may well be that the Committee will receive practical suggestions that are well worth endorsing and urging on the appropriate authorities. I certainly hope so for the problem is a very real one. But even if that happens, I still think a bring-up at regular intervals mechanism would be worth while to retain the possibility that someone new or some new idea will enter the policy-making process.