

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into voter participation and informal voting

Inquiry into political donations and disclosure

Melbourne — 24 July 2008

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Witnesses

Mr S. Robson, acting executive officer, and

Mr J. Lo, policy/project officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into political donations and disclosure, and the inquiry into voter participation and informal voting. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments you make outside the hearings may not be protected by such privilege. I take it you have read the ‘Giving evidence at a public hearing’ pamphlet? Please state your full name and business address.

Mr ROBSON — Shaun Robson, acting executive officer for the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. The address is the Statewide Resource Centre, 150 Palmerston St, Carlton.

The CHAIR — Are you attending in a private capacity or representing the organisation?

Mr ROBSON — Representing the organisation.

Mr LO — My name is Jieh-Yung Lo. I am the policy and project officer from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. The address is 150 Palmerston St, Carlton, Victoria.

The CHAIR — Are you attending in a private capacity or representing the organisation?

Mr LO — I am representing the organisation.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Please commence your verbal evidence.

Mr ROBSON — Thank you very much. First of all I would like to thank you all for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. It is important that the representatives of the non-English-speaking-background communities have an opportunity to feed into these inquiries. In terms of the evidence we are giving today, there are a number of different areas that we have identified that we believe should be given some attention.

In terms of the multicultural and migrant communities, we have the established members, and in terms of that sector it is probably the ageing part of the community that we are going to be referring to. The other side is the new and emerging communities, particularly humanitarian entrants and refugees who have arrived in the quite recent past, and some of the issues they have had in terms of contributing and participating in the electoral process. There are generational issues that we will raise as well. We have also detected issues both on the electoral process side and also on the political campaign side in terms of participation, so we will touch on that as well.

To begin with I will speak about the ageing community within the established members of CALD communities. These are members such as the Greeks and Italians, those who arrived in the first migrant waves in the 50s. They, as you would be aware, represent a large proportion of the ageing community across the board. Many of them these days are becoming increasingly impaired physically. A lot of them also, as is the trend, revert to their language. So even if they had learnt to speak English in a fully functional manner during their stay, it is not unusual when they reach their later years to revert back to their first language.

In terms of participating in the electoral process, there are physical constraints that can come into play — I know this does apply to all aged communities, not just non-English-speaking communities, but we do believe some consideration should be given there — and there are also language issues. Obviously the Victorian Electoral Commission is very good in terms of providing translated material for voting. It seems to us that a lot of it is primarily online based, and for those who are in their senior years the Web is not necessarily the first port of call to gain information on anything. Perhaps there are supplementary opportunities to make sure that their participation in the electoral process continues.

Moving on to the new and emerging communities, this is an area in particular where ECC has been quite active in the last 6, 12 or 18 months, primarily with the African communities, many of whom have arrived from Sudan, Somalia et cetera. The recent history is that we have been involved in organising projects that educate them in the democratic process. Many have come to Australia from nations that are in quite intense political upheaval, many are quite unaware of the process of the democratic system and many are quite disillusioned if they have been in situations where supposed elections have been run and lost. We would all be aware of examples that exist in Africa as we speak.

We have had a project called the Australia Africa Democracy Project, which involved the creation of booklets to educate newly arrived communities about the Australian system of governance at local, state and federal levels and how their involvement in the process affects the decision making at each of those levels — whether it be who collects the garbage on what days, how it affects access to immigration or what their rights and responsibilities are. The booklets were created and were translated into a number of languages — about five, from memory. There were also a number of public forums held. So it was not just a written resource; there was also an opportunity for people to come and meet face to face with people in the system. We had representatives from the electoral commission involved in the process so that they could answer questions about the system and the process at the time.

We have actually backed up that initial project with one that we are engaged with currently. It is coinciding with the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote in Victoria. Our particular project is to educate women in the African communities about that large step and to use that historical precedent as a starting point to leverage their greater participation in the electoral process. It is a similar scenario, where we are creating a booklet which describes the history of that step in the democratic process, again it will be translated into a number of languages and we will also be using it as a starting point for public forums to educate them about the democratic system and also encourage their participation in the process.

In terms of other newly arrived communities, a big issue we have also detected is with some of the youth. A large proportion of newly arrived communities, such as those from African communities, are in their late teens, so they are actually of voting age and theoretically are able to participate, but their participation rate is less than exemplary. There is a large measure of disenfranchisement and not understanding about the system and to some degree a lack of inclination to learn more. That is an area we are addressing, but we do require and suggest that greater resources be made available. Currently with non-English-speaking-background communities there is the opportunity to access translators and interpreters at polling booths on election day. This is a major asset; however, there is a limited number of languages available. Obviously those tend to be towards the more established languages — and that is understandable — but there has been, of course, a big influx of newly arrived communities from certain parts of the world whose particular linguistic dialects have not been picked up as quickly as possible, hence our project at the moment. So we probably suggest that some attention be given to supplementing existing interpreters and translators at the polling booths with those who speak languages from those new and emerging communities.

One other suggestion we had was to do with democratic ambassadors or champions, and this again goes back to the tendency for a large number of these new and emerging communities to not be literate in their own language, let alone be literate in English, and their fluency and proficiency in English is not strong. It would be quite useful to have democratic champions or ambassadors, if you will, who are familiar with the system, to work with the communities on a face-to-face basis to help nurture them and to some extent handhold them through the system so that they are not so overwhelmed or daunted, because it can be quite an intimidating process for those who have never actually been involved in an electoral process before to walk up to a polling booth and be jumped on by all the various pamphleteers. We believe there could be some sort of assistance given in that regard.

The final one that I want to touch on involves an issue away from the electorate process side and it refers to the political campaign side. Currently I believe the state government requires at least 5 per cent of the electorate budget to be devoted to advertising in media for non-English-speaking backgrounds, so that can be used in the electoral process. I would also be interested to pursue the idea that the political parties themselves, which obviously receive government funding to exist, are given a proviso within that funding application that a certain percentage of their campaigning budget be devoted to communities from non-English-speaking backgrounds, because it is one thing to understand the process of voting, but it is another to understand the message given out by the different parties. Often, as I said before, even if they know how to vote, the sense of intimidation or confusion that comes from trying to differentiate between the different political parties can be more intense for those who are quite new to the country and those whose language is not English to begin with; and quite frankly a lot of people with English as a first language still find the differentiation quite confusing. I am happy to end now and to take questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Questions?

Ms CAMPBELL — You have touched on a number of areas that are consistent with your submission. A number of people who have provided submissions have put what might be their 5 or their 10 top recommendations that, if they were writing the report, they would have as recommendations. What would be the five things that you would think would be non-negotiable, that should be included as recommendations in our report?

Mr ROBSON — I would definitely make targeting our new and emerging communities a top-five priority.

Ms CAMPBELL — How? We are aiming to be as specific as possible. We can make generalised comments but — —

Mr ROBSON — As I said before, the trend in the past has been to rely on established media vehicles, often creating pamphlets, putting stuff on websites et cetera. This is functional to an extent, but unfortunately the nature of this new community is that a large number of them are not literate, so the messages are not getting across as well as we would advise. We would suggest that investigation be undertaken into using other models to ensure that these communities are, firstly, aware of what is involved in their rights and responsibilities in the electoral process, and secondly, feel suitably confident, encouraged and empowered to participate.

Mr LO — Also, through consultation we have done with our community members we have discovered that the main barriers to both voting participation and informal voting is the lack of engagement and also the interest itself in the whole system. We believe that an effective way to target these communities would be to adjust the messages that have been delivered both from political parties and the Victorian Electoral Commission. This could be done through the establishment of outreach programs, which is included in our submission, and these include introducing case studies of how government is formed, what role MPs play within the community and how they could communicate directly with their representatives as well. A lot of this comes back to the lack of engagement and knowledge around systems. So I would recommend that to be the second priority.

Mr ROBSON — A further priority — and this gets back to the earlier point of the high proportion of newly arrived communities, particularly from Africa, being quite young — could be along the lines of a project that we are using right now that targets African women. It is quite useful because African women are quite prominent decision-makers and community leaders within that sector. I also suggest that with that in mind we should be quite active in targeting some of these youth members through the schools, and obviously there is a measure of education about the democratic and voting systems in our current schooling system. If a certain proportion of that were able to be devoted specifically to those in emerging communities it would be more likely to get them more engaged, which is an issue we have noticed before.

Mr LO — There is also something that we have found that the Victorian government does very well, and that is the implementation of multicultural liaison officers. We found that specific projects being delivered to these communities have been very effective in creating more dialogue and information sharing. Within our submission we have identified key local government areas and electorate areas that have a high proportion of informal voting as well as voter participation, and we discovered that these areas also have a high level of multicultural and CALD communities. I think specific targeted education programs in those areas would be an efficient way to close the gap between informal voting and participation.

Mr ROBSON — I would like to add just one final one, and that is that in terms of informal voting a lot of the information that explains how to vote and the differential between ticking one box or writing 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 is published in booklet form. With these particular communities who are not particularly proficient in English it might be quite useful to have some educational material that possibly is more graphic in nature rather than relying so heavily on text. As I have said, it can be confusing even to those who have English as their first language. For those who have a very mediocre understanding of the language the process can be confusing.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thanks for your attendance today. The committee's recent report which was tabled in the Parliament makes nine specific recommendations in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, which is the terminology we use; plus there are a number of other recommendations that would impact on CALD communities, such as a recommendation that the VEC simplify forms and those sorts of matters. One of the things that the committee pondered, and I do not think I am speaking out of school by mentioning this, is looking at the idea of how to promote better engagement in CALD communities and also indigenous communities. The idea of ambassadors is something that we looked at, and a concern came up. The VEC currently conducts electoral education and civics education because the VEC is impartial. I suppose there is a risk that if you engage a particular individual, who might be a community leader, to educate that particular community about political matters and that person happens to be a member of the Liberal Party, the Labor Party or the Greens, it could give rise to a concern that they are not going to be impartial and they are going to be educating a particular

community in a particular way. How do you think your proposal for democracy ambassadors could overcome that concern that any sort of electoral education that is provided by the state has to be completely politically impartial?

Mr ROBSON — It is a good question, and it is one that we actually discussed ourselves the other day, and that was partly for the reasoning behind a proposal where a set proportion of the funding that goes to political parties has to get filtered down to non-English-speaking or migrant backgrounds. In that way there is an obligation on the political parties to ensure that by whatever means they use — and champions is one suggestion, if they choose to use that — at least people have the opportunity to hear all parties amongst them in the language that they speak giving the messages from those particular parties. It is possibly the only way I can think of that immediately comes to mind. Invariably if you have a limited number of people within a community, there is always a possibility of some political bias. How would we monitor that? You would probably have to have test cases, I guess. Obviously you would also need to advise those in the communities that if they feel in any way that the information they are getting is politically biased, there are avenues of redress and that they can get back to the VEC and say, ‘The information I am getting does not appear to be as nonpartisan as I was expecting’.

Ms BROAD — Can I take you to point 10 of your submission where you say in part that:

Communities would also like to see more officials at polling booths speaking community languages.

And you go on to say that:

The placement of VEC staff doesn’t appear to be systematic and as responsive to the local community profiles as it could be.

This is something that the committee considered in an earlier inquiry and reported on, and I wonder if you could elaborate on whether you have got any ideas in a more practical sense as to how this might be addressed, because we found it quite difficult.

Mr ROBSON — No, it is. Unfortunately, as is the nature of, I guess, population monitoring, it is obviously done primarily by the census which occurs every four years, and that gives us the demographic breakdown of various communities across various LGAs. As it turns out, though, in the last few years we have had a massive influx from certain countries, which means that there is a massive jump in certain communities within that four-year period. While the information from four years ago that we are basing our decisions on for putting certain pollsters in certain polling stations in certain languages might have been relevant at the time, four years later the data might be out of whack. In terms of getting a better response, possibly some community engagement in the lead-up to the election rather than basing it purely on ABS data might be one possibility. Anecdotal evidence changes and from year to year can actually be quite useful in terms of augmenting the existing stats.

Ms BROAD — Not to cut across you, but I was not focusing so much on the question of profiling and updating that but on the matter of how you go about establishing an electoral commission which is independent and recruits staff on a skills basis but also tries to provide an overlay. I wonder if you have any views about how the electoral commission might ensure that it does have, one way of putting it, a more representative set of polling officials and how it deploys them. It would be useful if you have given that any consideration.

Mr LO — We are having discussions with the VEC, one with the ABS data, and working around which communities are higher in those specific LGAs. Through consultation with our community members we have found that it is more about the knowledge of those electoral trainers around how to vote et cetera. When communities do attend polling booths they feel that the amount of knowledge they are receiving in that short period of time is not adequate for them to vote properly and effectively. I think a recommendation for us would be to have stronger guidelines in terms of training those volunteers in providing that information on the day.

The CHAIR — I take you to your recommendation of political parties being required to devote 5 per cent of their funding during campaigns to deliver messages to people from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Two questions around this issue: why 5 per cent?

Mr ROBSON — The 5 per cent was simply chosen because that is the current percentage that is devoted to advertising in non-English-speaking media through the Victorian Multicultural Act. Any general information about elections is required to have 5 per cent in non-mainstream media. That obviously has more to do with the general process of voting necessarily rather than actual campaigns. I do not believe political parties are under any obligation necessarily to devote funding to non-English-speaking backgrounds. Obviously we would prefer them to do as much as they possibly could, and 5 per cent we would consider to be the lowest.

The CHAIR — I think the point is political parties, if it is in their interest to do it, probably would do it anyway, and do more than 5 per cent, depending on the seat. What do you say to that? Do you really think it needs to be mandated?

Mr ROBSON — My response is I do not think it is in the interests of democracy that political parties dictate who has the most information in order to participate in the democratic system.

The CHAIR — You will be getting propaganda.

Mr LO — Obviously it is all up to the candidate in that area to develop that kind of information. What we are trying to recommend is not so much guidelines but more of a recommendation for political parties to do it overall rather than just having individual candidates spend more on CALD communities and less on some of the other communities. I think it is more of an overall recommendation for political parties to consider that.

Mr SCOTT — In terms of the overall approach to informal voting, your approach very much seems to be an educative approach. Have you given any consideration to more systems-based approaches about how people actually vote? There has been a discussion at these hearings around simplifying the voting process so, for instance, more votes would be made formal — the grounds around what was an informal vote would be less — and persons who were not familiar with the system and who made mistakes because of a lack of familiarity or a lack of information would be more likely to have cast a formal vote. Have you given any consideration to that sort of approach?

Mr ROBSON — The short answer is yes. In terms of the earlier point where we thought some of the information about it could be simplified even further in terms of graphic education, if there was an alternative voting process that would mirror that simplified education process, even if it were just for the first few times that people involved themselves in the system and then they could upgrade to the more intensive voting process, it would probably be quite beneficial. The first time people are involved in this democratic system it can be quite overwhelming, as I mentioned earlier. If there could be an option, not necessarily a necessity but an option, that you do it and it was well-educated, well-described, I would second that one.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time this afternoon.

Mr ROBSON — It is a pleasure.

Mr LO — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.