

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration

Melbourne — 12 March 2013

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Witnesses

Dr I. Bouzo, senior policy officer,

Mr P. Sharma Luital JP, policy committee convenor, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you both for joining us today. All the 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 that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege, so make the most of it.

Have you read the *Guide to Giving Evidence at a Public Hearing* pamphlet that the committee provided?

Dr BOUZO — Yes, I have. Thank you.

The CHAIR — I ask you both to state your full name and business address and if you are attending in a private capacity or as a representative of an organisation and, if so, which one.

Dr BOUZO — My name is Irene Bouzo. I represent the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, located at 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton.

Mr LUITAL — My name is Parsuram Luital. I represent ECCV, and I also come from Carlton.

The CHAIR — Thank you. The evidence that you are about to give will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I ask you to make a verbal submission, and the committee will then throw a few questions at you if you are happy with that; even if you are not happy with it, we will probably do it anyway after that, and that will be good. You will receive a transcript of your evidence in about a fortnight, so typing errors may be corrected but not any matters of substance. I invite you to begin with a dissertation and we will take it from there.

Mr LUITAL — My name is Parsuram Sharma Luital, JP. I represent the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, ECCV. I am speaking in my role as a member of the board of directors at ECCV. I am also the convenor of the new and emerging policy subcommittee of our board, and I represent the Bhutanese community. I am here with my colleague Dr Irene Bouzo, senior policy officer at ECCV, and she is willing to provide more detailed explanations.

We appreciate this opportunity to present to the Electoral Matters Committee on behalf of Victorians from culturally diverse communities. ECCV is a statewide member-based peak advocacy organisation that represents ethnic and multicultural organisations and people from culturally diverse backgrounds. We are concerned about the high level of informal voting amongst people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, in particular, recent refugees, young people in new and emerging communities, people with low levels of English and low literacy and senior citizens from established culturally diverse communities. People from culturally diverse backgrounds and former asylum seekers are not participating fully in civic life and are at risk of being disenfranchised from the society they live in. As you are aware, ECCV has already made a submission to the Electoral Matters Committee as part of the inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration, which included some strategies and recommendations to reduce informal voting.

I want to make a few key points about the reasons why so many people from culturally diverse backgrounds seem to be voting informally: they lack information about our voting processes; they do not have a good understanding of their rights; many do not have much understanding about local government; they have low levels of English; and they lack trust in authorities. People who have lived under repressive governments have a distrust of election processes, while others are a bit disillusioned with the political processes that have not sufficiently supported issues that are important to people from culturally diverse backgrounds. This could lead to informal voting.

We are aware that when people arrive in Australia from non-English-speaking countries they are given information about their rights and responsibilities. People are often so burdened with settlement demands, such as finding a house and a job, getting the children to school and making social connections that they do not really take in that first lot of education they received about rights and voting. We believe that civic education is a good way to increase community understanding about voting if it is targeted through grassroots ethnic community networks and in languages other than English.

In particular people from new and emerging community backgrounds need culturally responsive support at elections to reduce informal voting. ECCV has made several recommendations to reduce informal voting. These are: provide information about electoral processes in languages other than English; utilise community radio and ethnic media to get the information across; channel civic education sessions through ethnic community organisations; provide bilingual support at voting centres; and implement school-based programs designed for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. ECCV is currently consulting with the Victorian Electoral Commission to implement a culturally responsive democracy ambassadorial program. One best practice civic education model was ECCV's ambassadorial Australia Africa Democracy Project that hosted face-to-face programs with same-language ethnic groups and produced booklets for newly arrived communities in Victoria.

ECCV notes that multilingual DVDs and YouTube videos are very suitable for getting the message across to people with low levels of literacy. We believe targeted voter education projects would reduce informal voting and provide more motivation for people from new and emerging communities to exercise their voting rights. The key ingredient for ethno-specific civic education programs and multilingual DVDs is the allocation of sufficient resources for that purpose.

On behalf of the ECCV I thank you for the opportunity to present here today. My colleague and I welcome your questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much indeed. Dr Bouzo, would you like to make some comments, or will you answer any questions we have?

Dr BOUZO — I am happy to answer your questions. I can probably speak more about seniors from culturally diverse backgrounds, and my colleague Parsu has a lot of experience with new and emerging communities.

Mr TARLAMIS — You spoke about the democracy ambassador program. In your submission you also spoke about the Passport to Democracy program. Have you had any discussions with the VEC about modifying the Passport to Democracy program to roll it out through English language schools as well and whether that would be effective?

Dr BOUZO — We have been collaborating with the VEC on a culturally diverse democracy ambassadors program, not so much about the schools. We are aware that they are doing the schools program as well, but we are currently working with them on targeting culturally diverse communities for the democracy ambassador program.

Mrs VICTORIA — Can I add to that and ask if you have some idea as to how this democracy ambassador program will work? At first blush it seems to me that we are putting people out there who are trained by the VEC, and ambassadors are usually in an honorary role, so is the plan to have this as a paid or honorary role? Also, do you think there is opportunity for bias to creep in? If the VEC officers themselves are doing information sessions, we know they must remain totally politically neutral. If you have somebody who has been influenced by somebody locally, regardless of which political persuasion, they then have the opportunity to persuade an awful lot of people in their own language.

Dr BOUZO — We have discussed that with the VEC. We advocated for recruitment of volunteers from ethnic communities to avoid bias. We advocated that people work in pairs, so that you have two people together to avoid any bias one way or the other. We also are aware of limited resources and difficulties getting volunteers, so we advocated for paid expenses for volunteers.

The CHAIR — One issue that you commented on was the lack of trust among people who have come from countries where democracy is non-existent and where tyrants rule the waves, as it were. How would we go about making them trust the system? How do we get the message through to those people who have come from that environment that over here the authorities can be trusted, or at least most of them, and our electoral process is one that is worthy of support?

Mr LUITAL — From my own experience as a former refugee and working with a number of refugee communities for the last seven or eight years — almost every community that has arrived I have worked with in my current role and previous roles — people need information presented in a convenient way, in a two-way interaction and in the language that they prefer. Perhaps it is at community events and forums that we shall pass on the message, because the ignorance is because they are afraid. They are afraid because they do not have the information. They do not know that it is your right to vote here and that you vote properly. That information is lacking, because when they first arrive they get hundreds of pieces of information about other things, like how to cross the road, what is Medicare and where to take your children. For them priority no. 1 when they immediately arrive is finding a house — ‘I will not again be homeless’.

The other point is that they have lived in fear in their countries. Fear there means how to save their daughters from being raped and how to give their family food. Those were their no. 1 priorities. When they come here and food and shelter is guaranteed, other things are optional, because there is not anything stopping them. What I am trying to say is that unless we give them this information, it is secondary to them.

Only through community engagement — through the ambassadorial program or DVDs and videos where we talk and explain that it is your right to vote in Australia — will people come forward. This is the case with every program that we do, and it really helps people to understand. At the moment new and emerging communities do not know why they should vote. They do not know the leaders; they do not know the system, to be honest.

The CHAIR — Do think in that situation they should be forced to vote, impelled to vote? As you say, they do not know the system, and they do not know the personalities, the parties or the policies. Should they be forced to vote in the way that we all are?

Mr LUITAL — No, I think we should not force them to vote, but we should put out real information. They lack real information about what it means to vote. What it means to vote in their country is to vote for somebody who has influence; they have been told to vote for this person. The information that is lacking here is that voting is your right, and you are independently filling out a secret ballot. But the giving of that information to them, face to face, is lacking, and they will not read materials. They are not educated to read the materials and pamphlets you print out. Something visual, something engaging, will really convince them.

Mrs VICTORIA — I will follow on from that and ask if you have some information for me. This is an area I am not an expert in. What is the general time from somebody arriving here in Australia to when they become a citizen? Obviously they could be here for 10, 20 or 50 years, as I have seen in some citizenship ceremonies, before they have the right to vote. It is not like they are getting straight off a plane or boat; they are learning the Australian way, our culture and that we are not a corrupt society before they are given the opportunity and right to vote. Does that have some play in it?

Mr LUITAL — Yes, when I speak about refugees and new and emerging communities, I mean those that arrive through the Australian government’s humanitarian program. There are two types of humanitarian programs. In one the Australian government goes to the camp in Africa, Burma or Nepal and brings the people here, and they get a visa prior to arrival here. These people have nowhere to move, because they will come to live in Australia once and for all. People coming by other means, by aeroplane and other means, are also asylum seekers. Once they get their permanent visa to stay in the country, there is a minimum four years, and after that they have to sit for a citizenship test. But if you have been here 60 years, then you do not have to sit for the test; you automatically will be getting citizenship.

After four years these people, the asylum seekers, will be ready to vote. In the settlement towns people will be settled there for four or five years. The federal government has a program that means it takes people in the towns five and a half years to settle, and new and emerging communities and entire refugee communities fall under that. By then we find the young ones have found things out, but most of them are not educated and still struggling to get settled. Then elections may be the second priority.

Mrs VICTORIA — As a supplementary to that, is it ongoing education? If we go through the ethnic community base and say we are going to come to a senior citizens centre, an ethno-specific school, a nursing home or whatever, if they come along, is more than just one information session needed? Is it ongoing over those four years before they are allowed to come in and vote? Is it something that we need to be doing on a routine basis? Also, is it not only face to face? Obviously I understand literacy is needed, but should there also be a lot of pamphlets in those other languages? I believe there are some, but should there be more?

Mr LUITAL — Yes, because working with the migrant communities and the refugee communities, repetition and reminders work. Even if you are organising a simple camp and even if people say to you last Sunday that they are going to come, you have to call 10 times before this Sunday and even then you find people not coming. I am trying to say that it is not ignorance; it is the culture. So we have to repeatedly remind people. I would agree with you that perhaps we have to do it on an ongoing basis.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much indeed. As I said before, you will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight, and if you would just fix any typos but not change any of the content, that would be a marvellous thing. Thank you very much for coming in to see us today. We do appreciate it.

Dr BOUZO — Thank you for the opportunity.

Mr LUITAL — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.