

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto

Melbourne — 28 August 2007

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Ms A. Bleby, president,

Ms P. Niklas, divisional vice-president, and

Ms G. Diego, divisional policy officer, United Nations Youth Association of Australia.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto. 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 hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Have you been given and read a pamphlet guide to giving evidence at public hearings?

Ms BLEBY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Could you please state your full names and addresses?

Ms DIEGO — Giselle Noemi Diego, 20 Rhonda Street, Avondale Heights.

Mr THOMPSON — Excuse me, Chair, for the purpose of the committee the address may also be their organisational address.

The CHAIR — It does not state it here, but I guess so. Please state if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if representing an organisation, what your position in the organisation is.

Ms DIEGO — I am attending in the capacity of representing an organisation, the United Nations Youth Association of Australia. I am the divisional policy officer.

Ms NIKLAS — My name is Patricia Niklas. We are at level 2, 192 Flinders Street, Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Please state if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if representing an organisation, what your position in the organisation is.

Ms NIKLAS — I am representing an organisation, UNYA Victoria, and I am the divisional vice-president.

Ms BLEBY — My name is Alice Dorothy Rickard Bleby and our organisational address is 192 Flinders Street, Melbourne. I am representing the United Nations Youth Association, Victorian division. I am the divisional president.

The CHAIR — Thank you. The evidence that you will provide here today will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. I now invite you to make a verbal submission; the committee will ask questions after you have finished.

Ms BLEBY — First I would like to give you a brief introduction as to what UNYA is and what we do. As we mentioned, we are the United Nations Youth Association. We are a non-government organisation run entirely by young people for young people. All our members are between 15 and 24. We aim to educate and empower young people in line with the aims and ideals of the United Nations. We do that through education programs and also through our policies. We are honoured to be asked to make a submission to this committee. We have prepared a document, which I think you have, and basically we will present that to you.

As one of Australia's premier youth-run organisations, the United Nations Youth Association of Australia, otherwise known as UNYA, is committed to public policy that includes and assists participation by young people in the Australian political process. Further, UNYA is committed to strengthening Australia's democratic systems by promoting broad community awareness of political issues in an apolitical fashion and supporting peaceful and progressive mechanisms for change. UNYA believes that democracy is an evolving concept that must constantly adapt to the

rigors of a dynamic society. Australia has a responsibility to advance democracy, leading by example and assisting developing nations in our region.

Ms NIKLAS — We have split our submission into three parts; what we feel are the three most important aspects of youth involvement. They are: education, engagement, and enrolment, and I will start off with education.

UNYA feels that the current legislative requirement for Australian citizens to vote in state and federal elections accurately reflects the responsibilities of individuals in a participatory democracy. To this end, UNYA fully supports compulsory enrolment and voting. However, participatory democracy also requires citizens to be confident and enthusiastic in translating knowledge of political institutions and issues into active involvement in community decision-making. A system of compulsory voting must not supplant continued promotion of voting, nor can we falsely identify the passive casting of a ballot with active and motivated participation in the democratic process.

All Australians have a civic duty to vote, and voting for the first time or first few times can be a confusing and alienating experience for many. Not only do young people have to try and make decisions on partisan issues, they also have to steer themselves through the actual electoral process. There needs to be a stronger civics education focus in the high school curriculum, and we believe this should be a compulsory component in the pre-VCE years. Young people need to be made aware of how the voting system in Australia works, how the ballots are arranged and the ramifications of their actions in the polling booth. Often these issues are only covered in elective VCE units and are not compulsory for students. The Australian Electoral Commission can play a leading role in this area and work with schools in running voting workshops as well as supplying and distributing resources.

For many young people their first educative experience with the voting process is on election day at the polling booths where parties hand out their how-to-vote cards. While these cards can be helpful to people there needs to be a similar pamphlet accessible to young people instructing them how to vote regardless of which party they choose. This could potentially affect those who vote informally accidentally because they are not familiar with the system.

Ms DIEGO — People learn differently and respond to new information in different ways. This is particularly true of young people. Not all students absorb classroom lessons as well as others. There needs to be a more dynamic and creative way to educate and engage young people in relation to voting and the political system. Today young people are increasingly connected and communicate quickly and efficiently through a wide variety of mediums. There are avenues for education using the internet, community radio, youth commercial radio, and having a presence in environments which are associated with young people, for example, universities and schools, train stations, or sporting areas.

In democracies with voluntary voting, campaigns such as the United States of America's apolitical Rock the Vote have succeeded in encouraging young people to actively participate in elections'. Results from the AEC's youth electoral survey suggest that similar programs in Australia would act as a significant incentive for young people to vote.

UNYA also strongly believes that the inclusion of non-government organisations enhances the learning process for students, and also acts to mitigate concerns about partisanship in the delivery of civics curricula. UNYA believes that a greater emphasis on youth-for-youth education, including the use of youth NGOs and the equipping of young people with the capacity to educate and motivate their peers, is essential.

Voting is a civic habit which is heavily influenced by early experiences. If a young person voting for the first time, or even for a third or fourth time, is not comfortable voting or is disengaged with the process those attitudes may carry on into later years' voting patterns. Young people will

become the adult voters in marginal seats, the swinging voters, the informal voters, the partisan voters and the informed voters. More informed young voters will create a more empowered citizen which will boost the health of our democracy overall.

Ms BLEBY — The next section we will look at is engagement. We feel that significantly more effort must be made to engage young voters by members of Parliament, by the electoral commission and by other relevant organisations. Young people need to be directly engaged with the policies that are most relevant to them as well as provided with opportunities to access and explore all elements of party policies. Youth NGOs could be enlisted to develop engagement strategies, and a multiplicity of avenues should be pursued, including interactive internet forums and education programs.

The Australian Electoral Commission must play a significant role in disseminating information to young voters and providing alternative, non-partisan resources. We feel that there is a significant need to target and interact with young people before the age of 18. More often than not it is the under-18 demographic that feels the most disenfranchised with the electoral system. A pre-existing interest in, and commitment to, the electoral process will undoubtedly create a generation of active citizens.

Ms DIEGO — In the final section we will be speaking about today is enrolment. A lack of engagement by a broad range of citizens, especially young people, suggests the need for alternative methods of enrolment. UNYA strongly believes that the automatic subscription of citizens to the electoral roll combats the trend of young people not enrolling.

Currently it is presumed, through compulsory enrolment and voting, that Australian citizens have the automatic right and responsibility to vote, yet this is not reflected in the automatic engagement of citizens by our democratic institutions. Automatic enrolment must be complemented by an explanation to citizens of what enrolment entails. UNYA believes that automatic enrolment, coupled with comprehensive schemes notifying citizens of their new rights and responsibilities, would augment youth engagement in voting systems.

We believe there would be considerable value in allowing optional voting from the age of 16. This would empower a significant number of young people who are capable of participating in the democratic process, contribute to the education of young voters, and make our democracy more representative. Many young people between the ages of 16 years and 18 years feel they have the right to participate in decision making that affects their lives. Concerns have been raised that 16-year-olds are not responsible enough to make such decisions, yet we feel that introducing a non-compulsory vote would alleviate these concerns. UNYA's experience with this age group has firmly convinced us that these young people deserve and are fully capable of exercising their right to vote. Thank you very much.

Mr SCOTT — Just in terms of enrolment, in your submission you discuss an automated system of enrolment. Currently, what happens is that there are automated processes that identify people to enrol — or where they have moved — through things like drivers licences, VTAC and others. I presume what you are referring to is that it would be an automated process where people would automatically be added to the role where government had information on their address, age and citizenship. If they changed their details via something like their drivers licence, it would automatically update the process without having to complete a form. Is that correct?

Ms BLEBY — Yes.

Ms NIKLAS — Yes.

Ms DIEGO — Yes.

Ms BLEBY — Basically there are processes in place by which young people are reached at the age of 17 and closer to 18 years to encourage them to enrol, but there is also a significant

population, of young people in particular, who slip through the cracks, and that is our chief concern, especially that the process could be so much more easily facilitated by people going automatically onto the role.

Mr SCOTT — Can I just follow up on that? Do you have a view about the recent federal changes in relation to closing the electoral roll, because the figures I have seen show that — I think it is — up to nearly 80 per cent of the people enrolled during that period are under about 25 years. Do you have any views on those recent changes?

Ms DIEGO — We have very strong views, and the reason why we did not include it in our submission is because we know for a fact that the Victorian Electoral Act has been fixed so it is not so much of a problem. We actually feel very strongly that this legislation will alienate a lot of young voters, especially first-time voters. A lot of people are not aware that they have to enrol — they are not actually enrolled — and the calling of the election is a bit of a reminder that they need to do that. Closing the polls so early on will exclude a large demographic who are not already represented enough in Parliament, considering we do not even have a youth ministry. This is another way of taking away the voice of young people in the democratic process, especially at the federal level.

The CHAIR — Throughout your presentation you mentioned the terms ‘engagement’, ‘participation’ and ‘enrolment’. What barriers are there in the way of enrolment, participation and engagement?

Ms NIKLAS — I suppose we can all discuss this. I think there is a view among a lot of older people, and I am not trying to make a generalisation here, that young people do not really care about the electoral system; they do not care about how they run their lives, and therefore they are almost spoken down to in terms of things like enrolment. For example, when I turned 17 I received a birthday card from the Australian Electoral Commission which reminded me to vote, but that was it. I suppose, to us, a lot of barriers for young people when they are enrolling in, being engaged by or educated about the electoral system are that there are simply not enough resources and there are not enough targets towards young people to help them make an informed decision. It is almost as if the assumption is that when you are young we will tell you how to enrol or how to vote and give you the practical know-how to write numbers down on a piece of paper, but as soon as you turn, say, 30, you automatically become an engaged citizen and suddenly know what the ramifications of that means. There is no in-between step. I think that is the barrier.

Ms BLEBY — I think also we can say that barriers exist on at least two separate levels in many respects. One is within the process itself, which is the distribution of information about enrolment, it is about going through the bureaucracy to get on the roll and that sort of thing and then walking into the booth and knowing, for example, the difference between above the line, and below the line, and all those elements that are not automatic knowledge. I think that is something that is lacking in terms of a civics education program, as we mentioned, in communities and also in schools.

Those almost bureaucratic challenges present barriers to young people, because in some ways it is too hard to get involved for the first time. Then I guess there is the other level of engagement with young people in terms of policy-making and also in terms of directing information about policies. That is, as Patsy mentioned, the feeling that is often talked about in terms of young people being talked down to, policies not being either specifically directed towards young people or not explained in terms that make them relevant to young people. Obviously an enormous part of elections is directed towards older adults who are existing within the established policy framework.

The CHAIR — The median voter, I think.

Ms NIKLAS — It is very important, we feel, that young people are made to feel that their vote is relevant to those policies as well, because they do have an equal representation as votes, and also that they do realise and they are engaged in the processes that make youth policy as well as general community policy, because both elements equally affect them.

Ms DIEGO — We see it as a process. This is not going to happen overnight. The way to get young people engaged and participating — which are the keywords that we use — is a slow process. It starts from an early age. It starts with their education, which is why we have such a focus on educating young people about civics education, which is just so important. Recent changes to the state curriculum have reflected a component of civics education. We feel it needs to be strengthened. It is an ongoing process. If students are educated at a younger age, by the time they reach the voting age, they can easily understand those policies and decipher politicians, policies and politician-speak at the same level as any other adult could. We feel it is starting at the root of the problem, as opposed to just addressing top layer, surface issues.

The CHAIR — What you are basically saying is civics education should be introduced much earlier?

Ms DIEGO — Yes; definitely.

The CHAIR — So by the time you get to voting age — —

Ms NIKLAS — And being more consistent as well.

The CHAIR — Right.

Ms NIKLAS — What I was trying to articulate earlier is that it is not so much that young people do not have the will to be informed and involved, it is more that they do not know where to begin.

Mr THOMPSON — Where did you learn to become engaged in the political process, Patricia?

Ms NIKLAS — It was through the United Nations Youth Association. They approached my school and invited students along to their state conference, which discussed the role of Australia.

The CHAIR — What type of school is this? Is it a secondary school, a university?

Ms NIKLAS — It is a secondary school, yes. It was when I was in year 11. They invited students to their state conference, where they ran model United Nations as well as workshops and discussions on things work indigenous rights, Australia's role and the United Nations, foreign policy and diplomacy. I sort of caught the bug and kept going from there.

Mr THOMPSON — So in your own case you would regard yourself as being sufficiently politically aware to make judgements you deem to be appropriate in the electoral system?

Ms NIKLAS — Not sufficiently aware; I think I still have a long way to go. There are certainly a lot of things that I am yet to learn before I will feel that I can make an informed decision when I mark down my vote, but I think that youth NGOs and especially UNYA, for me personally, are what have fostered my original enthusiasm in the electoral system and the democratic process.

Mr THOMPSON — Earlier today we had evidence from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Cooperative Ltd by Greta Clark, who is a research officer, expressing concern about the disengagement of Victoria's indigenous community in the electoral process. Does UNYA have any indigenous Victorian involvement in its assemblies?

Ms DIEGO — At the moment we do not. We have the problem in UNYA that a lot of our activities are metro focused. We have recently received a national grant from FACSIA for a regional engagement program. We are about to undertake an education forum over a few days in Warrnambool, where there is a large indigenous, young population. We are looking at trying to engage not only indigenous young people but also rural young people, because we think it is definitely a lot more difficult to access these sorts of non-government organisations and extra resources that a lot of metropolitan students can. It is actually something we are looking at increasing in the future.

The CHAIR — We talk about young people as if they were a monolithic block. When you talk about young people, are you talking about the university students, the shop assistants, the apprentices in trades?

Ms BLEBY — It is obviously very difficult to categorise young people because you are simply taking an age-group, and we know that there is bound to be a hugely diverse range of people. Basically we quite literally take young people to be those between 15 and 24, but we are aware that there is an extremely broad range of perspectives. A lot of the work we do starts at an upper high school level — so from about year 10 to year 12. We are all tertiary students.

In terms of engagement with the electoral process, we see that in many respects there are two key mentalities towards the electoral process. One is politically motivated, aware, desperate to get involved and having trouble finding out the information due to, as Patsy said, not knowing where to start, a lack of information, a lack of resources and a lack of accessibility. The other, which we have not addressed as much, is the total disenfranchisement with the system and not wanting to get involved. That is where I think we did mention in our submission initiatives like Rock the Vote that encourage people to engage with the electoral process as something that is relevant to them. That is another incredibly important element, because you often hear people saying, ‘Young people do not care. They are not engaged and they do not want to be’. That is not something that I think we should accept.

I also think it is something that, particularly with the system of compulsory voting, cannot be allowed to continue, because people need to take responsibility for their decisions. When we are talking about young people, we are talking about looking at engaging and empowering those who already have the interest, but also seeking out those who feel they have been pushed away by the system, or who do not understand how important it is to their lives and to their role as an Australian citizen.

The CHAIR — Do you think that the disengagement is also due to the perceived standard of behaviour by politicians, or perhaps the superficial coverage that politics receives in the mainstream media?

Ms DIEGO — I think there is a combination of factors. I think the media has a very big role to play in young people’s perceptions of the political system as a whole, as well as specific politicians. The media systems that we have — we have two newspapers in Victoria; three leading newspapers. A lot of young people are not actually just taught how to read a newspaper in terms of independent thinking and analysing what they are reading. I think it is definitely a skill that needs to be fostered in looking at, when you read an article or you listen to a news report, how to actually analyse between the lines and decipher what is actually being said, and how to access a broad range of different media outlets to gain an overall picture of some issues at hand.

They feel that yet our media has a large role to play in these perceptions considering that politics only receives a 10-minute slot in the nightly news. Most specifically political programs such as *Dateline* and *Lateline* are on later at night on non-commercial channels. These are the sorts of different media outlets that young people need to be made aware of and how to actually read and listen to the news as a skill, as opposed to just absorbing the information that is given to them.

Mr THOMPSON — Just to pursue that a bit further, if I could, the Chair has raised an interesting point in terms of the media and the way it might be covered. I know that on some occasions when an important bill has been debated in Parliament and which has had a fair range of community interest, the contributions of the different members might have been summarised. Do you think there would be some merit in there being a legislative report in the daily press that gave a more objective overview of the bill at hand and the different contributions from the government, opposition, The Nationals, and Independent?

Ms BLEBY — I would definitely say that is a good idea. I think people are in some respects put off by partisanship, or they find that very difficult to filter. It is not just young people, but I think it is something that does affect young people, and perhaps that is part of their disengagement when compounded by the media. But I definitely think we need those sorts of initiatives in terms of having explanatory memos, articles and that sort of thing with a sort of as-neutral-as-possible summary of the processes the bill went through, what it is meant to do, and deciphering legal language and all of those sorts of things. Giving people the opportunity to understand that kind of information is a hugely empowering process. I think that would also encourage people to seek more information for themselves, because it is sometimes about finding the starting point. That would also be a huge step in terms of showing Parliament's will to engage people in what they are discussing and that sort of thing.

The CHAIR — Do you think Australian youth are less engaged than youth in comparable advanced capitalist states throughout the world — let's say the UK, the US, New Zealand, Japan and Germany?

Ms DIEGO — I can only speak from my experience in the different countries that I have visited in the last few years. I find that, for example, the young people in France are very different to Australian young people in terms of their political engagement. They seem to be a lot more aware of who their politicians are and the policies that are going through. If you only look at the riots that occurred in November 2005 in Paris, with a lot of the young people — —

The CHAIR — The North Africans.

Ms DIEGO — Yes, with the North African immigrant young people rebelling against different political action statements made by politicians and different legislation going through. It was a different attitude towards politics. It has a lot to do with the different media outlets, as I said before, that are available in France, the lively debate and the cultural importance that is placed on politics there. Similarly, from my experiences in other countries, such as in South America, there is definitely a lot more perhaps passion and awareness of political issues. The amount of young people that, for example, go to a protest — —

The CHAIR — But South America is different, isn't it?

Ms DIEGO — It is very different.

The CHAIR — Because of the socioeconomic issues. And there is a correlation, I guess, between socioeconomic issues and the engagement of young people in politics?

Ms DIEGO — Yes, definitely.

The CHAIR — What about the Anglo-Saxon countries, the UK, the US, New Zealand?

Ms DIEGO — I would say Australian young people are probably as informed, if not more.

Ms BLEBY — I think it is very difficult to say. Obviously we can only talk from our experience, and really understanding how engaged young people are is — —

The CHAIR — Sorry, but there are no boundaries, though, between you and those people, is there really — on the net and so on?

Ms BLEBY — But in terms of us understanding how engaged they are with their political process, we are not necessarily, I do not think, in a position to understand exactly what their involvement and engagement is. I imagine it is quite similar and it seems to be so from what we know. But there are also other issues that affect Australia in different ways that I think Australian young people are more or less engaged in than in other parts of the world, for example, issues relating to indigenous Australians, climate change and those sorts of things. While they are globally recognised issues, their particular focus is in Australia, and especially for certain young people, but it does depend on the information being able to be disseminated amongst young people. I do think it is quite hard for us to make a judgement in terms of young people in America or in the United Kingdom.

Ms DIEGO — Maybe we could add to that. Perhaps we could look at something included in our report and make a comparison with the United States of America, where they do have optional voting. The fact that we have compulsory voting, regardless of the certain restraints like enrolment, as we mentioned, it still forces us to be even moderately aware of the fact that we do need to vote. So there is a little bit more political engagement by Australian young people because voting is compulsory. Whether it is because they are genuinely interested or they just do not want to pay a fine, there is that sort of general increased awareness of the political institution and the role they need to play in that, probably more so than in a country that has optional voting.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that. You will receive a copy of your transcript in about a fortnight. Typing errors may be corrected, but not matters of substance.

Ms DIEGO — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.