

SCHOOLS STATE

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The Australian version of democracy is flawed

Legislative Assembly Chamber

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Scotch College Melbourne
Sirius College
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Sirius College
Sirius College
St Catherine's School
St Catherine's School
The Peninsula School
Thomastown Secondary College
Thomastown Secondary College
Thomastown Secondary College
Thornbury High School
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Viewbank College
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OPENING STATEMENTS

Comparing Australia's version of democracy to other countries

Mr MIFTARI — Convention delegates, good morning to you all. I would like to begin by saying that this morning we sit in the Legislative Assembly, otherwise fittingly known as the Victorian people's house because of the conventions entailed in our own special version of democracy. I would like to point out to you that if we were sitting in the 2000-seat Chinese National People's Congress on the western side of Tiananmen Square debating the same topic, albeit in the context of China, we would probably be limited to and forced to uphold the opinions and viewpoints of the ruling politburo.

Australia is a representative democracy. This political system affords people the right to vote for candidates who will carry out the business of government on their behalf. We witnessed our representative democracy in action, to use a common cliché, in action a little over a month ago when 54 in every 100 people put a number 1 or 2 next to the name of a coalition candidate on the ballot paper.

Major bilateral partners such as the United States and Great Britain are also representative democracies. Whilst many would assume that representative democracy is a globally unanimous political system, sadly it is not. In the past oppressive dictators such as Fidel Castro in Cuba and Joseph Stalin in Russia, and more recently Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, to name a few, have operated political systems that did not provide universal suffrage to the people. Nor did their respective political systems contain the features of our own democracy, as flawed or perfect as it may be.

As a history student, it is natural for me to create comparisons between our democracy now and democracies of the past. I remind delegates this morning that the theory of democracy is an ancient Athenian one, basically meaning power to the people. Whilst these features may be common in the democracies of other nations — —

The CHAIR (Mrs Fyffe) — Your time has expired.

Delegates applauding.

*Engaging young people in politics and active citizenship —
for example, lowering the voting age to 16*

Mr MORTON — Winston Churchill once said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all others that have been tried. It is especially bad when you do not get a say in it just because you are too young to vote. This can lead to many people becoming disillusioned with the idea of politics and just switching off. Lacking this critical sense of agency that runs through the core of our political system, disillusioned teens grow into disillusioned adults, of which our country does not need more. Indeed, it is the right to choose our leadership that differentiates democracy from the other less fair systems of government. It is a right which people have fought and died for in the past and continue to do today, so it is only just that we should extend this right those of 16 years and above.

One argument against this stance is that they are too young to be entrusted with this sacred right. Really? If I may ask the Chair if I may use a prop?

The CHAIR — You may, but your time is running down.

Mr MORTON — I am conscious of that. I hold in my hand a Victorian learners permit. As a 17-year-old I can change my name from the one on this permit, rent a house in that name — and I can be entrusted to control a hunk of metal that is powered by ancient fossilised kill beasts and is intended to go far faster than evolution intended, with the very real ability to endanger my life and the lives of others if something goes wrong. I can also be fingerprinted by the police if something does go wrong. I am allowed to work and pay taxes.

If I am mature enough to do these things, then why am I not allowed to have a say in how these taxes are spent? Who better to speak on the intricacies of the education system than someone who is actively in it? I understand why the 50-year-olds in Parliament think it was good enough for them, but experience is the keystone — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired. I will call for any questions or comments.

Mr HU — My question is: do you believe that the voting age should be decreased to 16 and over, or do you think that we should have representatives for youths within Australia?

Mr MORTON — You can vote from 16, but it is voluntary, with compulsory voting from age 18.

Delegates applauding.

The CHAIR — We of course are not allowed to clap when Parliament is sitting, and neither are we allowed to use props, so we are showing a little bit of leniency here.

*Engaging young people in politics and active citizenship —
for example, lowering the voting age to 16*

Mr ANDERSON — Promoting widespread youth engagement in politics is essential for the health and perpetuity of any successful democracy, including Australia's, because the young people of the current generation must ultimately provide the engaged and informed politicians and citizens to lead our country in the future. Whilst we frequently extol the virtues of our democratic system, it is unfortunately not a truly representative one. Since the major parties are always striving to garner what they perceive to be the majority vote, so-called minority issues are invariably passed over.

Therefore, in order to promote great political engagement by youth, I believe that there need to be special provisions to ensure a more adequate and permanent presence for representatives in the Parliament specifically chosen by young people. Sadly, as with Aboriginals, no-one in politics is under the illusion that youth constitute a major force, and of course many do not vote anyway. Thus often little attention is paid to members of these groups. This is unfortunate, as I believe that youth, if encouraged to be politically active, can contribute a great deal to national policy debates. For instance, youth have a unique capacity to contribute to education policy, because they have the current practical experience of learning in this country's schools and tertiary institutions.

If we seek to further engage youth in politics, we need to find ways of providing greater representation in the Parliament for under 20-year-olds. I do not believe that this requires lowering the voting age to 16. However, I do not see why it could not involve having in both the Senate and the lower house a certain number of reserved seats for which only youth may vote. I believe that this would be the most effective way to increase youth involvement in politics and that it would thereby make politics more engaging for young people, such that hopefully many more of them will begin and continue to care about politics for the rest of their lives.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Is there a question or point of clarification?

Mr MA — In your speech you talked a lot about youth and the role of youth in democracy. Why do you believe that youth are so important to democracy, what role do you believe that they could play, why is that so important and more important, if you will, than the current form of government, and what sort of impact do you think that youth and future generations of Australians could have on Australian democracy and the nation as a whole?

Mr ANDERSON — Thanks very much for the question. Firstly, I would say that I do not believe that youth involvement is more important than the involvement of any other sector of society. The point about including youth and involving youth further in the political system is a point which goes to in fact including more people, not excluding people and not giving preference to certain segments of society but to making it clear that youth have an equal role to play.

As to the role that I think youth can play — if they are afforded the right, for instance, to vote for specific youth seats in Parliament, as I mentioned in my speech — I think education, for instance, would be a very significant area. I think it is all very well to have politicians who went through the education system numerous decades ago, but what of more value could we have in the education debate that we do not currently have than people who are actually in the system as it stands at the moment voicing their opinions? I think that certain seats reserved for the youth vote would be a fantastic idea that could only strengthen our — as youths — involvement in democracy.

To answer the final part of your question, I would say that I think youth are crucial to a functioning democracy, because invariably, whilst the current politicians might be in their 40s, 50s and 60s, in 40 or 50 years time the youth of today will be leading the country, and if they do not get to start with a foundation — —

The CHAIR — Thank you. I have to wind you up there, because we are on a tight schedule.

*Engaging young people in politics and active citizenship —
for example, lowering the voting age to 16*

Ms THIRUNAVUKARASU — Youth participation is the heart of Australian democracy, especially in a world where good morals can be overshadowed by secret agendas and where economic stability is of more value than life itself. Youth bring it back home — they focus on the social issues of the day, such as marriage equality, asylum seekers, Indigenous recognition, universal education and foreign aid. Youth give another perception to politics. In fact they are the tabula rasa of democracy, meaning that they are the clean slate of the way Australia governs its country. For this reason it is important to ensure that youth continue to stay enthusiastic and committed to participating in Australian democracy.

Youth are not disengaged in politics, but rather they feel that their voices are not being heard. When our world has so many authority figures, we can sometimes feel that our place in democracy is to be the constituents and leave the decision making to the adults. However, historically we are the most educated generation ever, and as young people, we have adapted at an unprecedented speed to the rapid changes in technology, and this should not go unnoticed. Therefore structures should be established in democratic institutions to involve youth in decision making in this country, such as the Australian Youth Climate Coalition.

There should be more avenues to allow youth to express their opinions to the politicians who will value their voice and act on issues that concern the youth of Australia. We do not seek to have unrealistic responsibilities, and we do not demand impractical action. All we want, as youth, is to be heard and valued and have more accessible avenues to law-makers, because our voices are worth a lot more than you can imagine.

The CHAIR — Do we have any questions or points of clarification? All right. Thank you very much.

*Addressing human rights — for example, for Indigenous Australians, young people,
people with a disability, refugees*

Mr PARKINSON — I would like to start by thanking the Wurundjeri people. Could I just see a show of hands of any Wurundjeri people in the room at all? Unfortunately there are not any. I do not believe there have been any Wurundjeri people in the Victorian Parliament ever. We only need to look at New Zealand to see that they have seven seats reserved in their Parliament for Maori representation. It allows them to effectively address concerns and affairs in their community, and this has been going on for 100 years, even before Aboriginal citizens were given rights and were able to vote.

How can we expect to have Indigenous representatives in our Parliament in today's society when it could still be argued that we do not share equality with them? We pride ourselves on being a multicultural nation, and many different people from different nations come here and make up this great country. It is stated in our national anthem that we have 'boundless plains to share'. Why is it that we still do not share equality with Aboriginal citizens in our boundless plains, a place of freedom?

There are, however, some exceptions: Neville Bonner, Doug Nicholls, Ken Wyatt and a few more. Ken Wyatt is the first Indigenous Australian to be elected into the House of Representatives only a mere three years ago, and Indigenous Australians were given the right in 1967 to be a part of our Parliament. It is just a reality of Australian democracy that wealth and privilege are what get you elected. You only have to look at Clive Palmer to see that this is true.

I think it is a good idea to take a leaf out of New Zealand's book and have a mandatory seat for an Aboriginal citizen to take in the Senate from each state and territory. It would ensure that their issues and affairs can be addressed correctly. We do not want the occasional hero who just gets lucky. We need an Aboriginal voice that is guaranteed in the community.

The CHAIR — Your time has finished. Are there any questions or points of clarification?

Mr PRORETTO — Do you believe that your suggestion would go along with the democratic principles of proportional representation, considering the quota you suggested would promote a proportion of Aboriginal people far above the proportion of Aboriginal people actually present in the Australian population?

Mr PARKINSON — It does go a little bit against what is actually in our system, but it is a population that has been oppressed for such a long time, and like I said, in New Zealand they have had the ability to be a part of Parliament for 100 years, even before Aboriginal people here were given rights and considered humans. I think it is the right thing to do. We all know that Kevin Rudd said sorry to the Aboriginal population. I think that while doing this does alter our version of democracy, it is a right step and it is a good step in the right direction to start making up for we have done.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Reviewing federalism and the three tiers of government

Ms WILLIAMS — For quite some time the predominant trend in Australia has not been federalism, but more towards the centralisation of power. However, in contrast, federal systems are being noticed internationally and are quickly expanding in popularity. These types of systems are recognised for cultivating unity through accommodating diversity, and they solely focus on the decentralisation of power. They work towards building the relationships between government and the people providing a flexible, responsive government.

The reason federalism is supported so much is because it strengthens the democratic process and helps to build a stronger political system. This system benefits Australia because it offers protection for the individual by checking the concentration of power. It adds choice and diversity and offers a customisation of policies to accommodate the needs of everyone, including youth. It also offers incentives to compete with other jurisdictions as well as to experiment and innovate. There is also greater scrutiny of policies due to the need for attaining cooperation.

Since the outcome of federation in Australia was achieved in 1901, our government has been split into three tiers — state, local and federal. Each tier of government plays a different role and has individual priorities but on a certain level each works together with the others. Each level of government holds elections, makes laws for citizens, is responsible for providing goods and services, and punishes those who break the law. I believe that federalism and the three tiers of government that stand in Australia today do benefit the people of this country. However, it can sometimes prove confusing in terms of knowing who to turn to when faced with issues.

The CHAIR — Any questions or points of order?

Ms MAO — My question is: do you believe that a modern variant of oligarchy exists within our society whereby wealthy or powerful individuals can exert influence over political decisions?

Ms WILLIAMS — Do you mean the youth?

Ms MAO — As in power, wealthy individuals and corporations.

Ms WILLIAMS — I do not understand the question; sorry.

The CHAIR — That is fine. You do not have to answer any questions.

Addressing human rights — for example, for Indigenous Australians, young people, people with a disability, refugees

Ms CHAMI — Let us start off with what a democracy is. A democracy is a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally, either directly or through elected representatives, in the proposal, development and creation of laws. Some of the issues of human rights to this day in Australia are the issues of Indigenous Australians, young people in our society, people with disabilities and refugees. The issue of human rights is more than just a movement and more than a chapter in history. These issues still need to be solved, because for many these are still issues that play a role in their everyday lives. In order to consider our country's democracy we need to ensure that everyone is treated equally to start off with.

Generally people with disabilities encounter multiple and aggravated forms of human rights violations at some point in their lives, and many experience human rights violations on a daily basis. Aboriginal people continue to feel misunderstood by white Australian politics. They claim that many legislative acts reflect a white point of view instead of both. A 2011 survey of academic staff in higher education revealed that more than 70 per cent of Australian academics and professional staff had experienced discrimination and racist attitudes in their workplaces. This may be the reason for there being only two Indigenous representatives in the federal Parliament.

Refugees fleeing to Australia have lost their rights with the new policy of sending refugees to Papua New Guinea or putting them in detention centres. The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 is a Victorian law that sets out the basic rights, freedoms and responsibilities for the citizens of Victoria. Twenty fundamental human rights are protected in this charter. If we have signed this charter, why are people still not satisfied with their rights? The real question is whether the Australian version of democracy is flawed. In my own eyes I believe it is. If we are a democracy, why are we sending the refugees away instead of taking — —

The CHAIR — The member's time has expired.

Mr KELLY — You talked a lot about human rights. America and France have bills of rights that accompany their constitutions. Do you believe we should have one also?

Ms CHAMI — Yes.

The CHAIR — That is a difficult one to answer very briefly.

Reviewing electoral processes and representation

Ms WALTERS — Being a democracy allows us to influence who runs our country and how. Although this is a great privilege, it is now always the case. Yes, we are given the ability to choose and we must all vote, but the information that we receive is not all equal. I am sure you have all noticed how right before elections our TVs are bombarded with political propaganda. This way of campaigning is useful, but is it fair on those who do not have the funds to compete? When it does come time to vote, is the younger generation of Australian voters being unfairly influenced? Does this mean that someone's net worth can determine their ability for leadership?

All Australian citizens over the age of 18 years are required to vote on election day. When entering a polling location voters must be prepared. Upon arrival you will be met by party workers who try to convince you to vote for their party and then thrust a sheet in your face explaining how to do so. After you have dodged the Sex Party advocates, you are then observed by polling officials who make sure everything runs according to plan. They make sure you have not already voted at this election, because you know how many people love to vote multiple times. You are then given one very long piece of paper and one small one and told to enter a polling booth. You skim the sheets and see that you are voting for the House of Representatives and the Senate. You have never heard these words before, but they seem important. The reality is most young voters have not received all the information needed to make an informed decision on the day, or they may have only heard views from one party. This makes our electoral process widely open to criticism and often taken less seriously than it should be. I hope after today everyone here has a better understanding of Australian politics or maybe even some ideas for change in the future. Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I think we can give two questions to you now that you have given us 25 seconds extra.

Mr NEHME — Are you willing to deprecate this inherent right of freedom of speech in the media and therefore to downgrade a fundamental of democracy to prevent this so-called propaganda? Are you suggesting that we are that impregnable as a society? If so, should we really have that sort of power in the vote?

Ms WALTERS — There definitely needs to be freedom of speech in the media, but it needs to be equal. Everyone has to be able to say what they want to say on TV or whatever. You cannot have just Clive Palmer having 100 ads all the time and being able to influence you all the time and no-one else having a say. It is not fair if you are not receiving all the information you need to make a proper vote and to make an informed decision on the day.

Ms WALKER — How do you suggest we avoid this bombardment of unfair amounts of ads from different parties? If it were to be avoided, how would we educate our citizens fairly and evenly on each different set of policies from each different party?

Ms WALTERS — To avoid it we should probably provide some sort of way for students and anyone to go online and find out about each party, but we should just advertise that — that is, that they can go online and find out. We should not advertise the actual policies of the parties, because you do not want people getting one-sided views. If they can go and find out things for themselves or be educated in school with certain presentations and get information from each of the major parties so that you know who you are voting for and you know who shares your opinions on what views you have.

Addressing human rights — for example, for Indigenous Australians, young people, people with a disability, refugees

Mr RASHDAN — The theme which I shall be addressing today could be simply summarised as: how do we address human rights for the minority group, which would consist of Indigenous Australians, young people — youth — people with disability and refugees? In my opinion, a small part of the minority group will not be heard by the government due to voting restrictions. For example, refugees do not get a vote and the youth do not get a vote — that is, 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and so on. Therefore the government would be less likely or less inclined to make policies which would refer to these sorts of people because this is not where their votes are or where the bulk of their votes would come from. Therefore why would they be concerned with a minority issue and not spend the time doing majority issues? That is one small factor.

In my opinion, reducing the voting age to 16 would help in this case somewhat, because then the government would be more likely to deal with issues which concern the youth, and also indirectly address human rights issues, which concern young people in Australia. At the moment, for the most part the minority groups often join together and create organisations and groups so their voices can be louder. An example of this is an organisation called Disability Services Australia, which enhances the lives of many people who have a disability. Although it has a small number of members, DSA has a very large say in government, because it has good ties with the federal and state governments.

In my opinion the Australian government is doing a fairly good job in addressing human rights for the minority group, although in some situations it could be better. It could be bettered by having more diversity in government, as the young gentleman over there mentioned.

The CHAIR — Once again we have time for two questions.

Mr HOLLAND — You mentioned that you support 16-year-olds getting the vote. Considering the fact that most 16-year-olds are very much influenced by their parents, do you think that giving them the vote would give parents who have children undue influence over more than one vote?

Mr RASHDAN — In my opinion — and I am talking for the people around me — the argument that people are influenced by their parents is not really true. I am saying that as my personal opinion, because I am not given opinions by my parents, and also the people around me are not. But I cannot talk for the whole majority of youth in Australia, so my point of view is that that argument is valid. Having the voting age changed to 16 years of age would still be a positive idea and a positive influence on Australia as a whole.

Mr HU — Do you believe civic education for youth should also be upgraded as the voting age is lowered?

Mr RASHDAN — As mentioned many times in this venue, I believe education is quite important, but at the same time I have heard quite a few arguments saying that the majority of political parties at that point will somewhat influence education, so I am not sure how the argument goes. There are still pros and cons, but I believe for the most part it is quite a good idea.

Addressing the role of the media in democracy

Mr VOLLEBERGH — Good morning, everyone. Today I am going to talk to you about my perspective on the role of the media in a democracy. I believe that a healthy media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy and thriving democracy. They can bring news of current events to everyone, bring light to a story not often talked

about and broaden people's perspectives. They can expose corruption, as seen by the recent investigation into the Reserve Bank of Australia by *Four Corners* and Fairfax Media. They can investigate malpractice and reveal bureaucratic stuff-ups. They can correct misinformation and present information without bias so that people can make up their own minds. This is hugely beneficial to us as citizens of a democratic process as we can use the information we learn to make more informed choices about our votes, making the system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly.

That is what the media can do. They have the resources and access to inside events and are in a position in society to do these things, but it seems too often these days they do not. The media seems to be engaging in poor journalism, producing endless polls and coverage of meaningless gaffes by politicians. They get into petty and personal politics, such as the dress sense of female politicians. Sensationalism, something the media engages in too often, is the enemy of rational and thoughtful discourse. More and more media outlets seem unwilling to challenge those in power and hold them accountable. Media in Australia is increasingly owned by a select few, with the result that those individuals have a lot of power to push their own personal agendas. However, despite its shortcomings, we are lucky to live in a country that values freedom of the press and which has a wide array of TV, radio, newspapers and websites available, including the ABC. Together we can make a better media and a better democracy — —

The CHAIR — The speaker's time has expired. It is now time for questions and comments.

Mr VALLURY — Do you believe that the trivial stuff in the media, like Julia Gillard's dress sense, could be the result of the interest of the general population and is what they want to see?

Mr VOLLEBERGH — Yes, definitely. We shape the media coverage. The media only supplies what the public wants. They want to sell newspapers, they want more viewers and so on. They want to sell ads, if they are a commercial station. It is up to us, the public, to demand better quality content, better quality journalism and more insightful and in-depth coverage.

Mr MOONEY — Do you believe that the media is representative of what the people actually want and is only reporting on what we, the public, consume? Also, do you believe that neutral sources such as the ABC — that statement might be a bit objective, depending on what you believe politically — should play more of a role during election time?

Mr VOLLEBERGH — Certainly. I am a big fan of the ABC. It is practically all I consume in terms of TV, so I am one of the biggest supporters of public broadcasting and of providing objective information to voters and to everyone who wants to consume it. Again the point you make and the other person made about it providing what people demand is to an extent true, so it is a combination of the responsibility of the media to provide better content and of us demanding better content, because they are never going to provide the content if people do not want it. We should insist on the provision of it.

Addressing the role of the media in democracy

Ms AYCUOGULLURI — Freedom of speech as well as the freedom of the press represent fundamental values in our understanding of democracy. The media's role in ensuring a free flow of information, ideas and opinions remains a critical element in maintaining a healthy, fully functioning government. The media is the mirror of society in a democratic country, as it acts as a vital link between the governing and the governed. It has the responsibility to present what is true, advocate for what is necessary and enable the people to sift the truth from the material. The media serves decisively to construct a civil society and censor the authoritarian trends of politicians and political parties. It has also corrected and continues to correct the excesses, negligence and management errors of our government. The media questions the actions of government officials, confirms the truth of what officials tell the public and gathers the facts needed for citizens to make informed decisions.

The role of the media is perhaps best understood, as the past indicates, when undemocratic and authoritarian activities are exercised in societies with the most intense forms of media control. At the other end, though, in a number of cases the media distorts reality and induces pessimism, scepticism, distrust and the incarnation of isolation and violence. It represents the public interest, though private interests are sometimes given priority above all else. This situation can lead to the manipulation of public opinion in the direction desired by those who are looking for political ends, market advantages or economic gains. It is our duty as citizens to seek the truth and make sure that our decisions are least affected by such bias and partial schemes.

To end, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to all the professionals in the field — journalists, photographers, spokespeople and the like — for I am somewhat convinced that the government of my country has been elected by an informed citizenry and is one that represents the best interests of the people.

Ms TASEVSKI — What is your opinion on the lack of media diversity in this country, mainly the monopolisation of the media by the Murdoch family?

Ms AYCUOGULLURI — I do not really hold an opinion on that.

The CHAIR — That is perfectly fine. You are allowed to say you do not hold an opinion on that.

Ms EVANGELISTA — My question is similar. How do you think we can prevent the often one-sided presentation by media stations owned by one person who is merely channelling their own views?

Ms AYCUOGULLURI — There are a lot of media stations, so we are not restricted to one. There are a lot that are not so one-sided in their presentations, and we can make use of those stations.

Comparing Australia's version of democracy to other countries

Ms MAO — One of the many things that is internationally recognised and respected about our great nation is the strength and fairness of our democracy. While we do not pretend our democracy is without flaws, we as Australians know we have every opportunity to contribute to the national debate on the issues that impact on us and those that are most important to us. In fact our presence here today is in effect the clearest evidence of our democracy. It illustrates the fact that anyone who has the passion and the desire to make a difference in their local communities has the right and freedom to do so. However, we do not have to look far around the world to see people who are prepared to put their lives on the line to live under some sort of democracy.

Today a free press is a symbol of a free people. The people of Australia have the freedom and right to access information and divergent opinions. Meanwhile in countries like Iran, while freedom of expression is emphasised in chapter 3, article 24, of its constitution, the press in Iran is far from free. The government routinely blocks or restricts access to websites and satellite signals for its citizens at home and abroad.

In addition, Australians also need to guard against becoming a replica of the American form of democracy, whereby the deterioration of democracy to a modern variant of oligarchy and plutocracy under which powerful and wealthy multinational corporations and individuals can exert influence over democratically elected officials can undermine the likelihood of effective legislation and consequently the true practice of democracy.

As young Australians we should be passionate about the opportunity we are about to embark on today, voicing our opinions without fear or favour safe in the knowledge that our country allows and encourages individuals to speak freely and that this is enshrined within our constitution.

The CHAIR — The speaker's time has finished.

Ms RIORDAN — You said that we have freedom and access to information, but we no longer receive current information on asylum seekers, because it is such a hot political topic. Do you think that this lessens our democratic nation because we do not get the information we want to hear?

Ms MAO — Yes, I believe a free press is a symbol of a free people, as I said before, but I believe the people in Australia are not completely oblivious to what is happening in Papua New Guinea right now with the refugees. There are also people who are actively involved in petitions and trying to fight for the freedom of those refugees.

Mr BURKE — You say we need to avoid becoming like the American political system, yet the Australian media — at least the print media — is basically controlled by two companies: Fairfax and News Limited. Gina Rinehart has obviously been trying to take control of Fairfax, and News Limited is controlled by Rupert Murdoch — two powerful right-wing moguls — yet the American political scene has such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post* and more, who provide — —

The CHAIR — This is turning into more a statement than a question.

Mr BURKE — How do you back up your claim that we need to avoid becoming like the American media?

Ms MAO — As I said, our democracy is without flaws; it is very powerful and fair. However, there are areas for improvement, and we do need to prevent multinational corporations from exerting too much influence. We need to stick to the true practice of democracy itself, whereby the citizens can exert their own influence and opinions to contribute to the making of policies.

Reviewing federalism and the three tiers of government

Ms GUNN — Federalism is the way that power in Australia is split into the different duties of the federal government, state governments and local governments. It all started with Federation, which you all know heaps about, and it has been that way since 1901. The thing is that even though we call ourselves a democracy, Australia being a federalist society is not something that can actually be changed.

There have been various efforts from different regions of Australia to disconnect politically from the rest of Australia — namely, Western Australia. In 2010, after the proposition of the resource super profits tax, there were a lot of efforts to separate Western Australia, as it would be a very wealthy country separate to Australia. This did not go that far, but in 1933 a similar thing happened in Western Australia where Sir James Mitchell, the then Premier, passed a referendum to change Western Australia to one country called Westralia. That was then not allowed by the commonwealth, because one state by itself is not allowed to declare independence.

This really conflicts with the idea of an Australian democracy and in fact creates a fourth tier of government separate from federal, which is that of the commonwealth. Additionally, the separation of the states in the Senate is done as 12 senators for each state, which is kind of unrelated but also related to federalism. Tasmania gets the same amount of representatives in the Senate even though it has a different number of people. There is obviously a — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired. Are there any questions or points of clarification?

Mr HU — Do you think that despite this being a federal system with three tiers of government the Governor-General and the Queen can exert too much power under our constitutional monarchy?

Ms GUNN — Personally I do not really see that they do that often, and I think that if the Governor-General did start declaring laws and stopping the people we vote in from governing, there would be a lot more calls for Australia to be completely independent. But I think there have definitely been certain times where they have, and I guess it is just whether or not that is fair. It is not really democratic, but at the same time the rest of Australia was not given a vote as to whether Westralia should exist; it was only Western Australia's opinion. So it is kind of difficult to know whether it should be the commonwealth deciding or whether it should be the rest of Australia deciding.

Mr MOONEY — First of all, on the secession idea in Western Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, was that not more an executive branch of government decision, because we were more attached to the British monarchy back then? This one is more of a question; that was more of a statement.

My second question is: do you not believe that the right of, say, Tasmania, compared to Victoria, having 12 senators is a vital part of the separation of powers? Victoria would have a lot more lower house seats than Tasmania, but if a piece of legislation were passed through Parliament which discriminated against Tasmania, do you not believe that the 12 Tasmanian representatives in the Senate would have the right to protest against that?

Ms GUNN — I think it is interesting. These laws were obviously created when the states were separate, so there was obviously more of a separation between what different people thought, but at the same time I do not think someone in Queensland will have an opinion much different to someone in New South Wales generally, so representing them separately I feel should be more related to population. If you are going for a democracy with 'equal vote', then the fact that someone in Tasmania's vote in the Senate counts more than someone's in New South Wales does not seem exactly fair.

Addressing the role of the media in democracy

Ms TREVITHICK — The media plays a vital role in the functioning and governance of a liberal democracy such as that which we enjoy in Australia. The media essentially have two primary functions: firstly, they are responsible for the spread of information and therefore enabling informed decisions to be made; and secondly, they perform a checking function by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths and affirmations of office and carry out the wishes of their constituents. This is why it is vital that the media in a liberal democracy are independent. Some other functions of the media include: acting as a watchdog on government, informing the public, restricting government power, preserving individual liberty and keeping the government transparent.

The press has been described as a ‘fourth power’ because of its considerable influence over public opinion, which can impact on elections, as well as its indirect influence on the government — for example, in supporting or criticising various pieces of legislation. The media restricts government power in general by helping to maintain transparency about what is happening in the government. The media also keeps a society informed about any urgent matters or current issues about that particular society that they feel should have attention drawn to them and be discussed in a critical, fair and balanced manner. It may not be possible to uphold the ideals of fairness and balance if information is solely presented solely by the government itself or if the people do not have access to a wide range of sources and services. However, this process will never be perfect and can prove detrimental at times to various sectors of society.

High concentration of media ownership can have very significant effects on the Australian public. Media ownership by a limited number of organisations in Australia can have a large influence on what and how issues are presented and must be properly scrutinised as it is an unelected power with considerable influence over Australia’s democracy. The exercising of political power over elected governments, such as that utilised by media organisations like News Limited, can be a major issue confronting Australia’s democracy. The media has a very important role to play in modern democracies, and a free media — —

The CHAIR — Your time has finished.

Mr MOURELATOS — I was wondering: do you think the media has more power than the government at times? And if you do, do you know of any ways that we could put the power back into the government?

Ms TREVITHICK — That is a good question. I have noticed that often the media are biased and try to reflect their own point of view. I believe something should definitely be done about that. But, good question.

Ms THIRUNAVUKARASU — As more avenues to receive news increase, through social media online and things like that, do you think the lack of media diversity in mainstream media is as serious an issue as it is perceived to be?

Ms TREVITHICK — Yes, I do think so. Especially through social media we see a lot of the bias that I mentioned before, with anti-so-and-so pages and all that sort of stuff getting out there. Yes, I do believe it is a big issue in the social media.

Reviewing electoral processes and representation

Mr HOLLAND — Good morning all. Just out of curiosity, has anyone here heard of an Ashley Fenn of the Family First party? Are there any fans of Daniel Nalliah of the Rise Up Australia Party? Perhaps some poor soul here is a massive fan of Bruce Poon of the Animal Justice Party. What about Ricky Muir of the well-recognised Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party? I see some light bulbs. The point of this line of questioning is not to illustrate Ricky’s relatively obscure origins, but rather to question why Ashley Fenn, Daniel Nalliah and Bruce Poon, who each received thousands more direct votes in the last federal Senate election, were not selected, like Mr Muir, to represent Victoria in the upper house of Parliament. What is more, Barry Michael of the Palmer United Party was not elected despite receiving 106 000 more direct votes. That is the population of Bendigo.

Now I am not trying to paint a senator like Ricky Muir in a defamatory light, but my question is: being the representative democracy that we are, how can we justify not electing the candidates that most Australians prefer? If nothing else, should not we, the constituents, be educated about the ballot paper and the implications

of voting above the line according to party preferences without knowing exactly what deals have been made in private? After all, even if an election is an absolute landslide, what is more fundamental to the nature of democracy than to ensure that every person's vote is counted collectively in the election of the candidate who most reflects the wishes of the voter? Thank you.

Mr VOLLEBERGH — My question is: what would you do or propose if you got the chance to reform the system? We are specifically talking about the federal Senate. For instance, would you have abolished party preferencing? Would you have above-the-line numbering, instead of just putting a '1' in one of the boxes? On things like that I would love to hear your ideas.

Mr HOLLAND — Personally I believe that the first action in any of these kinds of conflicts is education. It is one thing to legislate against a problem, but that does not fix the actual issue underneath. I think that what we need to do is educate people on the implications and the pitfalls of, say, voting for someone and putting a '1' but not actually knowing what that is doing. After that I think some options could include, say, forcing different parties to display their preferences, and then there would be a greater level of transparency.

Mr CONNOLLY — While I agree that preferences need to be clearer, is not the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party's Senate win in fact a good thing for democracy? Instead of a party such as The Greens, with affiliations with the Labor Party, or even the Liberals, winning a seat, we have a senator who is neutral. With preferencing he is neutral for both the Labor voters and the Liberal voters and many other voters, not closely tied with one part of politics and would be a poor outcome for the other half of Australians who voted for a party in the Senate.

Mr HOLLAND — The first thing is that part of the responsibility of neutrality in the government lies with the Governor-General, or the Governor. Therefore I do not think we should really be concerned about trying to get parliamentarians who are completely neutral. That does not really reflect the constituents at all. My second point is that Mr Ricky Muir is not neutral. He obviously loves cars, and he obviously loves public — he would hate public transport — roads and things like that. The thing is that he is also aligned to the Palmer United Party. No one candidate is going to be neutral, so I do not think that is the most relevant of points.

Ms PAGE-SEXTON — Ultimately do you think the preferential system should be abolished?

Mr HOLLAND — No, because that would take a lot of money and a lot of time. That would not create the biggest of benefit. It would actually cause a lot more mayhem and everyone would have to be re-educated, and I do not think that would be the best idea. I think a little bit of reform is a good thing. In this case education needs to be our first port of call, because that will not take nearly as much money and will probably have the best benefits. But I think a little bit of reform, if that does not work, would be a beneficial thing, as I have outlined before.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We have an expression: 'Stand in your place to receive the call'. Would anyone who has a prepared statement and has not been able to make it please stand in your place so we know how many want to do so? We have until 10.45 a.m., when Adam Bandt will come to speak. There are 14 people, so we will go with 1 minute each, with no questions or answers.

Ms CANTARELLA — I have just got a quick point. I believe a major flaw in Australia's electoral political process is the preferencing deals that are allowed with the Senate ballot, as this gentleman stated. Ricky Muir, a representative of the Motoring Enthusiast Party, was elected in Victoria by a series of preference deals which saw him leapfrog nine other minor parties with larger first preference votes, despite him registering merely 0.51 per cent of the vote. Therefore this does not reflect the public's wishes. I believe the system of proportional voting in the Senate should be reviewed, and I think voters who wish to vote above the line should be able to write down their first 10 or so preferences to combat preference deals electing parties that the public have not actually voted for.

Ms FOLLY — In terms of Australia's version of democracy — being flawed, I think it is really not so big a problem because from my perspective, where I come from, my democracy is flawed much more than Australia's democracy. When we talk about democracy we are looking at the government and the presidents and what they come up with for ruling the countries. My perspective is that Australia has served most of the human rights but some of them might be mistreated and it might be causing flaws of democracy. My country's human rights are below human standards. Five years ago I was a refugee, and coming to Australia was a great

opportunity for me. Looking at the opportunities that I have now, they are much more than the opportunities I had before, and to fix this democracy being flawed is just a little thing that Australia has to do. It might cost a lot of money, but if Australia can fix that, that might also make Australia one of the greatest countries in the world.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your time has expired.

Ms VISWANATHAN — A free press is a symbol of free people, yet freedom of the press is slowly becoming compromised. Australia is ranked 26th on the Reporters without Borders 2013 press freedom index, behind New Zealand, who placed 8th. In 2013 alone seven media members have been called on to reveal their confidential sources. This shows the lack of uniformity in laws designed to protect journalists and their confidential sources. The majority of journalists are bound by the Journalists' Code of Ethics and cannot reveal their confidential sources nor hand over the information they receive from their confidential sources. So if these seven journalists decided to maintain their ethical obligations, they could face a criminal conviction plus a jail term or a fine. If freedom of the press continues to be compromised, it is our democracy which will be the loser.

Ms RIORDAN — We enjoy freedom of speech, association and political views, and this makes us incredibly lucky. But we do have flaws which are inherent in the system. The first is a lack of education. The majority of Australian citizens either do not study democracy or they do it when they are so young that they cannot remember it when the time comes around for them to vote. This means that they cannot articulate the change they want to see in the political system because they simply do not understand it. Furthermore, many Australians do not actually focus on the party that they follow; they simply focus on the leader. Others will cast a donkey vote or choose a very small minority party because they cannot be bothered to vote properly. Finally, Independents have the power to blackmail and position political parties who require their support into endorsing niche policies and highly controversial views which the majority of the Australian population do not follow.

Mr MA — Before we debate the flaws of Australian democracy we must recognise that we have a very well-established democracy with freedom of speech and an opportunity for every member of the Australian nation to participate in the country's government. But we also must acknowledge that there is much room for improvement and that we must always continually strive to improve what we have. As Dr Martin pointed out in his keynote address, only 8 per cent of older people are not politically affiliated nor identify themselves with a party while 42 per cent do, and instead they seek to express their views and the issues that they support and champion change through non-electoral politics rather than electoral politics.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your time has expired.

Mr NEHME — Members, today we have heard a lot about media and media bias and how it influences our society. From this I would just like to pose two questions. My first one for you to think about is: if society is as impregnable as we suppose it is, is it fit for democracy? Are we fit to have the vote in this case if we are so impregnable by media and external influences? My second question is: is society going to conform to democracy in our current system or should our democracy conform to our social mindset and society as a whole? With these two questions I think a lot of flaws are raised in democracy but also a lot of flaws in society, and I think it is something we should keep in mind throughout the day. Thank you.

Mr KELLY — Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating once referred to the Australian Senate as 'an unrepresentative swill', but when looking at other political systems it is easy to see why he could also have been referring to them. Much of this has to do with the candidates who put their names forward. Firstly, nobody really knows who the vast majority of these candidates are, what their political views are or even what their party stands for. The second thing is that the vast majority of reputable candidates, who are mostly from the major parties, are white, middle-aged males with a background in law and a connections list that happens to be longer than my arm. The third point is that most people have no idea how the decisions made by these people — whom we do not even know — actually affect our lives. This is especially relevant when we are referring to changes or the maintenance of our constitution, which many people can see only has relevance to High Court judges and people in Canberra. So democracy does have many flaws.

Ms QIAO — My comprehension is that democracy is a relative term. There is no absolute democracy just as there is no definite restriction. For example, democracy is freedom, and the freedom of the majority is based on the restriction of the minority. For instance, the freedom of speech is sometimes restricted so that it will not infringe on other civil rights. So the constitution and other laws are not bound by but enhance democracy.

Democracy makes sure the pursuit of freedom is extended to its maximum while every citizen's rights are still preserved. Moreover, democracy is about a balance. The other question is about how to reach the balance and how to respect every citizen's civil rights and about reaching a dynamic stability within a nation.

Ms BYRNE — We are discussing democracy today, and we must remember that democracy means we all have a say and we all have an influence but there has been this diffusion of responsibility. We are blaming the government and the media, but we need to keep perspective. There are more than just a few people here that we can blame. We have been talking about how we have the freedom of speech. We do not have freedom of speech. We keep saying 'this is our right' but we do not have it. The closest we have is the High Court found us to have the implied right of freedom of political communication, which means that we can say what we want about political matters. This means that this democracy that we are discussing here today is one of the few areas where we can get up and have the freedom to express our thoughts and opinions. So maybe we should take some of the responsibility onto ourselves here. We need to keep in perspective what is going on and everyone who is involved. Rather than looking around trying to point the finger at a few big people, why don't we keep in perspective the issues?

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr MATERIA — This issue has been raised a couple of times, but I believe one of the major flaws in Australian democracy is the Australian Senate system, and this is due to unequal representation and a defective voting system. Right now the Senate is divided between states whilst the House of Representatives is divided between electorates across Australia. There is an equal number of voters in each of these electorates. What this stands for is a one-vote, one-value idea which is very prominent in democracy, but in the Senate there is an unequal balance of voters in each Senate electorate which means that if I live in Tasmania and you live in Victoria, my vote is actually 10 times more valuable than your vote. The second point is that it is a defective voting system, because many people choose to vote above the line and go with party preferences, and it denies them the opportunity to — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr MOURELATOS — We have heard a lot of people talking today about how media is affecting politics. I would like to talk about how consumers are affecting democracy. Today we really complain about how we do not have enough and we want more. Everyone wants the flashiest new iPhones. For example, I have been trying to download *The Walking Dead*, season 4, for the whole week. I really want to know what happens to Glenn; I think he is going to die, but I do not know. It has failed. Am I annoyed? Yes, I am. But do I blame democracy for not being able to download it? No. It is not a flaw in democracy; it is just a minor point that needs to be fixed. Consumerism in our democracy is not flawed; it is a problem we can fix.

I am not going to leave you with an Albert Einstein quote or anything like that. I am going to tell you about something that Joss Whedon once said, which was: 'Don't give people what they want. Instead, give them what they need'. We can make everything we want from our needs. Democracy supplies our needs, so we can make it the fundamental basis of our wants.

Mr HU — I just want to keep it short and sweet today, because most of what I wanted to say has already been said. Basically we live in a great democracy; we live in a great society. It has served us well for the last 100 or so years, but there are, of course, a few minor flaws that we can fix or look to improve on. First is apathy among voters. A lot of votes are donkey votes. People just fill out the paper with '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10'. That can be fixed with education as well as by the media.

The statistic that was mentioned before was 42 per cent of youth voters wanting to vote. That is interesting and shows that civic education is crucial. The preferential structure in the Senate has already been discussed. Finally, democracy is weakened when there is a closer to 50-50 split, as the views of the minority — even though it is still a minority — are ignored. That being said, democracy has served us well, and with a little bit of tinkering and some small changes we can make it even better.

Mr HELLER — The meaning of the word 'democracy' is well known — people power, or government by the people, for the people and of the people, as Abraham Lincoln famously said. On the other hand, democracy as a concept is not as easily defined. As Oscar Wilde proclaimed:

Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.

American journalist H. L. Mencken stated:

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.

More seriously, the Museum of Australian Democracy outlines four elements of a liberal democracy which we believe can be used as mateship criteria to assess our system of politics: legitimacy of authority, justice, freedom and the definition and limitation of power. Another important criterion should be added to this list, and that is the commitment to recognising and respecting human rights. After considering these criteria we believe Australian democracy is definitely flawed, especially considering the unrealistic but — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Mr MICALLEF — I am here today to address a major flaw in the Australian democratic system. The people who run the country are not in fact the coalition government members that people voted for. Rather it is a select group of multinational CEOs who influence politicians. During the campaign process the Liberal Party pledged to look after the Great Barrier Reef and implement a plan called Reef 2050 to help sustain the world heritage-listed site. Once elected, the Liberals swayed towards what was better for the economy, and as a result 3 million cubic metres of coral will be destroyed to make way for the world's largest coal export terminal.

Many of you may wonder why an issue like this has not been publicised. It is predominantly because one company controls 70 per cent of what Australians read every day. If you look back on federal elections in the last 25 years, you see that every government that has been elected has been heavily favoured by Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd. Clive Palmer, a mining magnate who has a net worth of \$895 million, founded the Palmer United Party — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired. Thank you, each and every one of you who has participated in our first session. It was amazing. I was sitting here wanting to debate with you and wanting to raise points. It was terrific, and I am looking forward to this afternoon when we will really get into the debating. Now it gives me great pleasure to welcome our guest speaker, Adam Bandt.

Adam Bandt is the Australian Greens deputy leader and the federal member for Melbourne. Adam has portfolio responsibilities for employment and workplace relations, industrial innovation, science and research, high-speed rail, parliamentary reform, emergency services and assisting the Greens Leader, Christine Milne, on climate change and energy. Before becoming an MP, Adam worked as a public interest lawyer representing some of Melbourne's lowest paid workers including outworkers in the clothing industry. I am surprised you have time to sleep, Adam. Delegates, I give you Adam Bandt.

Mr BANDT (Federal member for Melbourne) — Thanks very much. It is great to be here with you in my electorate of Melbourne, the only Greens-represented electorate in the country. We have 20 minutes, and I am hoping to speak for about 10, and then we can have some time for discussions. Like your Chair here today, it was great to sit here and listen to what people have been saying. There are some pretty interesting ideas, and I look forward to debating some of them with you for a little while at least.

I want to suggest to you that what is flawed about democracy in Australia is that we do not have enough of it — not enough in the decisions that affect our future and particularly affect you in the way you are living your lives now and the kind of society you are going to inherit when we move on and leave it for you. Not enough of those decisions are being made in a democratic manner. As someone who sits in the federal Parliament, I want to suggest to you that powerful interests in this country outside of Parliament, but now as we have heard some of them stepping inside the Parliament, have far too much say over the direction of this country.

I have seen it happen a number of times — the pokies debate, for example. We know that pokies cause an enormous amount of harm right across the country. As you go out today you may see some rock posters up around Melbourne pointing out that pokies in Victoria cost average Victorians over \$1 billion a year. People can lose up to \$1200 an hour on pokie machines, and every survey done suggests that people right across the country want to see action taken on the harm that is caused by problem gambling. And yet when it comes to Parliament and the opportunity to have some significant reform in that area, Parliament has been found wanting.

Part of the reason that decisions to protect people from the harms of problem gambling have not been able to be made in Parliament, and we have not been able to pass laws despite the fact that the previous government promised Andrew Wilkie, the Independent from Tasmania, in writing that it would take action, is because of the power of the gaming industry and the pokies lobby. The pokies lobby is able to come to town and patrol the corridors of Parliament and say to members of Parliament, 'If you vote a certain way, we will go out and run campaigns against you in your electorate. If you vote a certain way, we will make sure your party does not get donations from us in the lead-up to the next election'. As a result, despite the fact that the Australian population wants Parliament to take action on poker machines, for example, that did not happen in the last Parliament.

We see it with the mining tax. The minerals that are in the ground in this country are owned by the Australian people. We only get to dig them up and sell them off once. Once they are gone, they are gone. The former Treasury secretary, a guy called Ken Henry, said to the government and to the Australian people, 'We need a proper mining tax in this country so that we can get a proper return from the things that we are only able to dig up and sell off once. That will allow us to set up the Australian economy for when the rest of the world tells us to stop digging. It will mean there is money to fund schools, hospitals and the infrastructure we need for the future, like high-speed rail on our east coast'. What happened? When the government brought the proposal to the Parliament and to the people, the mining industry came to town and for \$26 million in advertising campaigns it not only changed the Prime Minister and got rid of Kevin Rudd the first time around, but it managed to write itself out of having to pay an enormous amount of tax.

One estimate has said that as a result of that campaign that was run by the mining industry the Australian public purse is somewhere in the order of \$100 billion worse off over a decade; that is \$10 billion a year. When governments cannot get that money from the mining industry, for example, then they have two choices: they can either start cutting services, as we are finding out with universities losing money and university students being asked to go into more debt, or they can raise taxes that the rest of us have to pay, which is why we are seeing a discussion at the moment about how maybe the GST should apply to food — that maybe we should extend it and raise the rate of it. As a result of a very powerful section of Australian society that represents a small number of people coming to town and running an advertising campaign, they changed the decision and influenced the decision that Parliament was able to make.

You can see it with housing. There is a report in the paper today that suggests that the commonwealth government gives more assistance in housing to people who already own homes and to people who are investing than they do to people who are trying to get into the housing market for the first time or that they do to renters. In other words, people like you in the next couple of years may be looking to either rent or buy your first homes and will get less support from the government than people who are already in the housing market and already own a home. Again, you have to wonder whether that is fair and whether it accurately represents what the people want.

So I think that the Australian system of democracy is only flawed in that we do not have enough of it and not enough decisions are being made by the elected representatives of the people. One way we could fix that is to perhaps extend it. One thing that I think should be debated is whether we should lower the voting age so that for people aged 16 to 18 it is optional as to whether they vote. So it is not compulsory, but for those people who are 16 to 18 years old and are interested, you could go and vote if you felt like it, but you would not get a fine if you did not. If we did that, I think one of the things that it would force parliamentarians, politicians and political parties to do is to pay greater attention to what young people actually want, because then they would be forced to compete for your votes as well, not just for those of the people who are already inside the system. We would certainly be closer to things like marriage equality in this country if younger people had greater rights to vote.

The last thing I suggest in terms of the way that we could extend it is that I think it is important that we make sure that democracy is something that does not just happen at elections but happens in between elections as well. A lot of people that I have spoken to during my election campaigns in Melbourne have said they do not even understand what the point is of voting because they see no connection between politics and their everyday lives. I guess if all you knew about politics was what you read in the newspapers, especially during the last period of government where the front page of the paper every day was about leadership struggles or people talking about themselves and being internally focused, you might start to think there is nothing in it for you and it is far better to just focus on improving one's own life outside of the systems of government and systems of democracy. I think that is quite dangerous, because if we go for another generation or two of people saying there is nothing in it for them in politics, then politicians are going to become even more disconnected from the

people, and they are going to start making decisions that are going to more harshly impact on people. One thing we need to do is reinvigorate the democratic spirit and make sure that in between elections people understand that they can have a say in what happens to them.

My office and our approach that we take as the Greens is that we have four key pillars: peace and non-violence, environmental sustainability, social justice and grass roots democracy. For us that is about practising what we preach, and that means our door is always open for people and especially for young people to get involved in the campaigns that we run on a day-to-day basis. We are doing some at the moment, for example, around the east-west tunnel. If more people felt closer to their members of Parliament and more able to actively influence decisions that were affecting them, we might see a bit of a turnaround in this disconnect that people are feeling from politics. This is not an exercise in trying to get people to trust politicians more — that is a losing game; I think we rate lower than used car salesman when it comes to trust — but it is about people understanding that politics is about them and about their everyday lives. I think we need to make sure that we turn around that disconnect.

To conclude, and I think we have about 10 minutes, as we go into the future, as inequality rises and the gap between the rich and the poor grows and as we have to tackle dangerous runaway climate change that can see a lot of people subjected to a lot of hardship, we need more democracy and not less. It is probably going to be up to all of you to make sure that it happens, and we will do what we can to help along the way.

The CHAIR — We are going to open up for 10 minutes. You can ask for clarification, you can ask a question or you can debate if you like.

Ms EVANGELISTA — I know a lot of people who wanted to vote for the Greens, whose values and ideals align with Greens values, but they did not; they voted Labor instead, not because they have the same values but as a preventative measure of not voting for the Liberals. How do you propose we change this so that it is not just between the Liberals and Labor, and we are not just voting to keep one party out but we are voting for the party we want instead?

Mr BANDT — I would say a couple of things. By putting the Greens into the Parliament, by the people of Melbourne voting for me back in 2010, we achieved an enormous amount. As an example of that, immediately after the election we found ourselves with the balance of power. It is not every day you wake up and find voicemail messages from Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott on your phone, with both of them wanting to be your friend and talk to you very urgently. We were able to sit down with the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and say, ‘Yes, we will support you, but we want a number of things. We want action on climate change’. One of the other things I am quite proud of is that from the start of next year parents will be able to take their kids under the age of 18 to the dentist, or kids will be able to use their Medicare card to get Medicare-funded dental care. That is something that happened because we had the Greens in the Parliament. We could keep Tony Abbott out and get some good things done.

Our job as the Greens is to explain to people that when you vote for the Greens, you do not just get someone voicing the values that you want; we get things done as well. Far more often than I had expected when I went in, I saw the Greens and some Independents over on one side and Labor and Liberal voting together on the other side on things like cutting the single parent payment, for example, or cutting funding to university.

To me, it is bad to have Tony Abbott there, but it is also bad to have Tony Abbott’s policies implemented by Labor. It does not matter who implements them; they are bad policies. I would say that the only way you are going to keep Tony Abbott out and stop his policies getting implemented is by voting Green. If there is one lesson from the last election, it is that perhaps we need to do a better job at explaining that to people. But people in Melbourne voted for us.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Ms RIORDAN — I voted this year, and I agree with many of the Greens policies, because they focus on human rights and social issues, which I think is really important. But unfortunately older generations tend to view me as being quite idealistic, and they say, ‘Oh, yes, social and human rights — whoo hoo! It sounds really fun’. They are more focused on the bottom line. My question is: how are the Greens going to use the media to highlight Australia’s human rights and international law violations, inject some more social empathy into our

society and encourage the older voters — unfortunately most of us here cannot vote — to vote for the Greens because of these social issues?

Mr BANDT — You should not underestimate the impact you can have on how your parents and older people around you vote. They listen to you, believe it or not. One of the political parties in Germany, I think it was the Pirate Party when it ran a couple of years ago, had billboards up that just said, ‘Ask your kids why they are voting for the Pirates’. That was their slogan. I think that the conversations that you have with people around the dinner table and at home can change the way people vote. My fiancée’s mum voted Liberal all her life, until my fiancée, when she was at high school, started getting involved in the refugee campaign, and now her mum has just completely changed 180 degrees. So do not underestimate how powerful you are.

Mr MOONEY — I voted in this election and I voted Labor. What I found in the election was that there were two different sorts of issues that people would tend to vote on. They would vote on the economy or they would vote on social issues. With people voting for two different sorts of issues, social policies such as voluntary euthanasia or same-sex marriage often are not supported in Parliament.

The CHAIR — What is your question?

Mr MOONEY — My question is: do you support the Swiss system in which a people’s petition can be taken to a referendum so that people can vote on a social issue or do you support more grassroots representation in which people join their local political party and try to influence members of their political party on how they vote on a certain issue?

Mr BANDT — I think that as MPs we should be able to walk and chew gum at the same time and in Parliament we should be able to debate the social and the economic issues. For example, debating something like equal marriage and passing laws around that does not preclude debating how we have a strong and cleaner economy.

On some of the more general issues, in Germany, where they have a different electoral system from ours, they have had the wisdom to have Greens forming their federal government in some form or another on and off for periods going back 20 years. They are a shining light in the current financial crisis and their GDP is going up but their energy use is going down. They have 382 000 jobs in their renewable energy sector, which is 102 000 in Australian terms or, to put that in context, more than twice as many as in coalmining, oil and gas combined. I think one of the things that the Greens need to do is make people understand is that dealing with climate change means having a clean economy and a caring society. We have to put forward a vision that enables us to get to both, so that people are not feeling that they have to choose between one or the other.

Mr BURKE — As you can probably tell by the accent, I am American. Where I come from, we have the primary vote where people who want to be candidates for an electorate will try to get party members to support them by voicing specific things that they stand for within their party. Obviously in Australia people in any party who run for election are decided by preselection. Recently we saw that Kevin Rudd had changed the voting system so that for the first time Labor members could have 50 per cent of the say in electing the Labor leader. You said that the Greens are very committed to grassroots democracy. Do you think it would be a good thing if the Greens party or all parties had a primary election which gave the people more of a say?

Mr BANDT — There are a lot of things about the US that I like but some that I do not. With all due respect to you and your country, there are a number of ways in which I do not want Australia to become like the United States. One is in respect of the health system, in which the amount of treatment you get depends on the size of your wallet. Another is in respect of guns and a third is in respect of politics. I think part of the problem with the US system — it is not necessarily connected with the primaries, but I think there is a connection — is that, again, you need an enormous amount of money to be able to run those primary races right across the country. You do not get past go to become the President of the United States unless you can count on having a couple of a hundred million dollars being put aside into your campaign.

I think one of the good things about Australia is that we have a system that for smaller parties and Independents you are probably in with a chance — not the same as in Germany, say, but at least you are in with a chance. In the Greens, we have a very strong membership-driven system. Our membership gets to determine our policies and already gets to preselect all the candidates. There is no central body coming in over the top of them. I think

that has worked pretty well. We have not had the problems that the others have had. I have an open mind but when people say our politics should be more like those in the US, I kind of freak out a bit.

The CHAIR — There are far more hands going up. I am sorry, but we have to stop now. Adam, thank you very much.

Delegates applauding.

REPORTING SESSION

The CHAIR (Mrs Fyffe) — Now we are going to move to the reporting session. Each group will have 2 minutes to do their report. We only have till 2 o'clock. You can, if you need a point of clarification, at the end of each report put your hand up, and I will call you — but please, only points of clarification if you do not understand. Otherwise we are going to eat into the soapbox segment, which is probably what you want to do more than any of the others. I call on group 1 to make their report.

Group 1

Ms van PLETZEN — Good afternoon, Delegates. Our group discussed the government responsibility of recognising the youth present in our Australian democracy. As part of the stimulation of the Australian political environment we propose to lower the voting age to 16. However, voting will not be compulsory. This action will be supported by the introduction to the school curriculum of a mandatory civic responsibility class. This course will inform students of the political climate as well as educate them about the important structures of the government and how the political process is implemented in our democracy. It is our hope that this mandatory education program will help Australian youth to cultivate a deeper understanding of how politics works and support them in forming their individual views.

We see political understanding as an important skill and knowledge set, equivalent to mathematics, English and other classes in school, as politics affects everyone, and all citizens should feel that they have an intimate relationship with their political views. This education program will be initiated so that when young students are introduced to their voting responsibilities, hopefully at age 16, they are able to make well-informed and well-educated decisions in reference to the democratic election process. As voting ages are lowered, we believe that this in turn will encourage the presence of youth views and values in our Parliament.

Group 2

Mr ANDERSON — In our group discussion we focused primarily on the sub-topic of addressing human rights, and under that we spoke mostly about the question of what sort of recognition Indigenous people should be given in the constitution and more specifically in the Parliament — whether they should be given, for instance, a certain quota of seats for which only Indigenous people can run. The conclusion we came to ultimately was that, yes, they should.

We came to this conclusion on the basis of two major justifications. The first is to do with the party structure which currently exists in Australian politics. The issue we saw was that with having the major parties as we do, they are constantly in the chase — in the running — for the majority vote. As a result, the minority issues, as they might be termed — for instance, Indigenous welfare, which applies directly only to the 2 per cent of the population who are Indigenous — we fear often get overlooked. We felt that, for a start, by having permanent seats for Indigenous members in the lower house and in the Senate, we would really be bringing to the fore in everyone's mind in Australia — and, importantly, in parliamentarians' minds — the issue of Indigenous welfare, as that is frequently overlooked. We feel that this would help to place more emphasis on it.

The second justification we came up with for having permanent Indigenous seats in the Parliament is a historical reason. The fact that over the last 113 years since Federation no government has been able to come up with a conclusive solution to the deficit in Indigenous welfare standards is to us a justification for more drastic means to be implemented, and we think those drastic means should be permanent representation in Parliament.

Mr VOLLEBERGH — My point of clarification is on this idea of a select number of seats that only Aboriginal people could run for. Who would be able to vote on it? Would it be everyone or just Aboriginal people?

The CHAIR — A very good point.

Mr ANDERSON — That is a really good point. Thanks, Alex. We had quite a bit of debate about that. In New Zealand I think it is only the Maoris who can vote for Maori seats. We did not really come to a conclusive decision, but we thought what would be best would probably be to have each state or territory have a quota of Indigenous seats and to have everybody in that state or territory vote for those seats so long as it is an Indigenous candidate.

Group 3

Mr HOLLAND — In response to the point ‘Is Australia’s version of democracy flawed?’, group 3 believes that while Australia’s democracy is quite good and an exemplary form of government, we feel that it has a couple of flaws. We feel that all these flaws can be addressed through one simple program: FEAR — federal election allostatic revolution — which is an independent watchdog that will implement an aggressive form of education reform primarily in the national curriculum. It will be primarily made for years 7 to 10, by the end of which there will be a greater level of education between those year levels that will make them more equipped to deal with the compulsory elections from then on.

We feel that with that level of education there will be no need for, say, mandatory seats. We will be able to communicate the importance of equal representation in the Parliament, and through education we can circumvent the need for legislation to be made and thus make a much better impact on our young people. We feel that through the use of FEAR we can then comfortably lower the voting age to 16 instead of 18. That is because people will be more educated, and the problem of impressionability will not be an issue anymore.

Mr HU — I was just wondering if voting for 16 to 18-year-olds would be compulsory or non-compulsory.

Mr HOLLAND — Group 3 has theorised that it would still be non-compulsory, and there would still be an option whether the students felt so inclined.

Group 4

Mr LUONG — I am here to talk about democracy and why it is flawed. Let us be frank: democracy is flawed, and Australia’s version even more so. A way to remedy this issue is through education. Our group proposes a civics class from years prep to 12. This class will act as a compulsory class, similar to that of English. What we attempt to achieve in this is to educate young people so that they grow up to be intelligent, politically minded and literate adults who vote in terms of their own opinions and are not influenced by that of the media. This class will discuss the political system in Australia, how to vote, how to get involved in political debates, the media and its influence in Australia and teach young people how to think for themselves — self-determination, if you will.

Schools will need to increase their involvement in student life. For this to happen, more events such as this — debating and the model UN — will need to be implemented to allow students to voice their opinions on a stage other than their school. This allows them to have their opinions challenged by other people, creating an ability to discern right from wrong. This class also allows for teachers to create a sense of neutrality in terms of discussion, where all opinions are welcome, allowing for the students to grow up and vote and be able to discuss and debate Australia-wide why they vote for a certain party.

Ms SIDWELL — To clarify, do you want to engage prep students in a specific class about politics when they can barely write their own names?

Mr LUONG — We specifically discussed this in our group. What we plan to do with this class is increase the complexity as students age. This would allow them to be eased into such ideas as ethics and political systems. This way they are not overwhelmed from an early age, and when they get to year 12 — near the end of their schooling — they are able to become intelligent adults in Australia.

Group 5

Mr LIM — One aspect that we looked at of why the Australian version of democracy is flawed is the representation. We decided that each state and territory should have equal representation in the Senate. This would mean that the Northern Territory and the ACT would go from having 2 representatives in the Senate to having 12, just like a state. Because the Northern Territory has a strong Indigenous population, this would ensure that their human rights are being looked after and that their values are also being represented in the Senate.

We also looked at awareness and education. Once we have equal representation, we can work on building equal awareness. We also made the point that increasing representation also hinders the principle of responsible government — that is, you are serving the majority and not the minority.

On education, we looked at the 2015 new national curriculum, which includes civic education being implemented in primary schools. This implementation would be a three-month program in the lead-up to or prior to an election which would educate all voters, in both federal and state elections. It would address how to vote, who you are voting for and the implications of your vote.

Mr MOURELATOS — You stated you want to implement education to different areas in Australia, and you said you want to implement it in the Northern Territory because there are lots of communities there. A lot of communities have children who do not attend school there. How are you going to tackle getting the political education out to them?

Mr LIM — We did look at evaluating it from a policy perspective — that is, the policy-maker — but that is a problem. The best way to effect change is through a setting, so a school-based setting would be the best because change for the future generation happens through children.

Group 6

Mr FERGUSON — Our group spoke about human rights, particularly in the context of refugees and asylum seekers. Pretty much everyone here would probably know the issues surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, so they would probably know the conclusion that we came to — that is, that Australia is not meeting its international obligations with regard to asylum seekers. We have signed and ratified the UN declaration of human rights, which states in article 14 that:

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

We are actually in direct violation of that when we send people away to Papua New Guinea or we hold them in indefinite detention while we process their claims. For that reason, Australia's democracy is flawed, because we are not representing people who are seeking asylum and need our help.

We came up with a quite detailed plan as to how we would overcome this problem. First, we propose that Australia holds a referendum on the issue. The referendum would be about Australia enshrining human rights within its constitution. This would address the asylum seeker issue and also several other domestic issues which we do not have time to touch on now. With regard to asylum seekers, once we have ratified including human rights within our constitution, we would be obliged to process people on the mainland. As they would be under our jurisdiction in our territory, all the other parts of whichever other human rights declaration we chose to adopt, and we would suggest the United Nations ratify, would apply to them. That would include having the right to work, having the right to education et cetera. That would imply, then, that they cannot be simply held in detention for years and years while we process their claims, as has been done with such disastrous consequences.

While the referendum was being held, we would simultaneously run an education campaign, similar to the campaign for, say, train safety.

The CHAIR — I am sorry; your time has finished.

Ms HARRIS-SCHOBBER — The UN declaration of human rights is not exactly an international law; it is a treaty. Are you putting forward that Australia should implement a domestic law? If that was going to be put forward, would an international law be put in place or would you base it on the treaty?

Mr FERGUSON — The issue that we came up against was that we have signed the UN declaration of human rights, but it is more an obligation than an actual law that we have to follow. In order to force our governments to respect the rights that they have agreed to respect, we would have to enshrine within our constitution a declaration of human rights so that they would be legally obliged to respect the rights of these people who are coming by boat or who are already here.

Group 7

Mr PREST — First, we propose pretty much optional voting for 16 to 18-year-olds to engage young people. If we did that, it would catch on pretty much, by word of mouth and everything like that. No. 2 is that we have a national census to determine issues in our society which will educate the public and drive them to pressure their

politicians to take action on those issues. So it is pretty much a circle: if you tell them what is wrong, they can get them to do what they want, because they realise they want that.

No. 3 is allocating responsibility to one level of government. We want pretty much a nationwide blanket for the rules. So one government can address same-sex marriage and another can address education policies and all that stuff. No. 4 is to have a quota for the amount of media that one person or one company can control. If one party owns a newspaper, you cannot have them controlling a lot of newspapers because then the public will hear only their side of the story. You want a fair lot. That is pretty much it.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Are there any points of clarification?

Mr MORTON — I have two points for clarification. One is regarding the third item on your list, One Government Australia. Would that completely eliminate federalism? Also, on the fourth item, we must respect the right of the press to print whatever the hell they want. These are privately owned companies. Once that freedom of voice is taken away from the person running a company and given to the government, then it will be only a matter of time until every paper is a propaganda machine.

The CHAIR — Would you like to respond to that? It became a bit of a statement.

Mr PREST — I think it was a bit of statement, yes.

The CHAIR — But there was a point of clarification before the statement.

Mr MORTON — Do you accept my slippery slope argument?

Mr PREST — To that I say that, if one party runs a whole heap of newspapers, then all you will get is that party's view. If you do not stop them but restrict them from printing their propaganda in every newspaper, you can get the view of all the parties out there, not just the one.

Mr MORTON — And my question about your third item, about the entirety of Australia under one government, seemingly eliminating federalism?

Mr PREST — No. We would still have the three levels of government.

Mr MORTON — But there is only one ruling body.

Mr PREST — One ruling body — I am not too good on the politics.

The CHAIR — I think we are getting into debate, so I ask you both to resume your seats.

Delegates applauding.

Group 8

Mr O'BRIEN — We discussed the majority of the major points for topics and came up with a basic action plan. Firstly, with the media, we decided that instead of restricting or limiting what the media can actually say or do we should put a restriction on how much of their party money parties can spend on advertising. We had the basic idea that you could distribute the amount of advertising time among all the parties to ensure that they get an equal say and there is less corruption in that regard.

We then moved on to voting. We decided it would be best to have only above-the-line voting for the Senate, replacing above-the-line and below-the-line voting. We also decided that all parties above the line must be numbered to see how your preference is going. We also want to standardise what is a legitimate party. We decided that currently it is too easy to become a party and that the restrictions and basic standards for being a party are too low. We decided that there should be an increase in the standards, such as how long it had to be established, how many candidates it had et cetera, to make it a fair and more equal system.

We then went to education. We want to keep the current voting age. We decided that the voting age should not be lowered for a number of reasons — firstly, because we believe that by lowering the voting age we would have a large number of people who are not mature enough and not adapted to vote. Moreover, we believe that

having non-compulsory voting was not a good decision for the simple reason that it is too easy to manipulate and corrupt it, as can be seen in the US system.

Finally, we decided that international law should be recognised in the constitution basically by eliminating some of the issues we have had in our society with the government ignoring and violating human rights issues. We decided that they should be made a part of the constitution through a referendum or by other means.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Does anyone require clarification?

Mr CONNOLLY — I have two points. One, you said that there should be only above-the-line voting. Would that mean that I would have to vote 1 to 47 above the line on a metre-long ballot? That is just the same as voting below the line. It is bringing it up and making it compulsory. Two, cutting parties and people from running in the Senate is quite a bad idea. What would happen to our Independents? I am sure you have heard the name Nick Xenophon; he is a very important Senator. In what you are proposing, he would not be able to — —

The CHAIR — Order! You are debating.

Mr CONNOLLY — That is my question — what about the Independents?

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you for your question. The basic principle we had was that we are not trying to stop Independents or minor parties getting seats; we are just trying to make it so that we have legitimate minor parties and Independents getting seats. We do not want to have a repeat of what has been occurring in recent elections where we have had Independents, or members of Parliament, being elected not because they were quality Independents or parliamentarians but rather because someone put a donkey vote through. With our plan regarding voting, we decided to have this greater standard for parties to be beholden to so that we, firstly, have fewer people voting or a higher standard and, secondly, that we would not have Independents who are not worthy of a seat because they have not had the experience or do not have the qualifications to gain a seat, or to make it so that we only have a higher standard of politics generally across the board.

Group 9

Mr NEHME — Members, the role of the media is to hold the government accountable; to report the facts and to be impartial; and to facilitate and educate a decision, rather than to indoctrinate. We recognise that it is infeasible to regulate the media, because the media is merely exercising its prerogative, and to restrict media coverage for each party would impinge upon this right. The passing of such legislation would be infeasible due to the political influence and capacities of lobbyists such as Rupert Murdoch. Therefore we say that the public perception of media is pivotal and more important, and the way we construe media, and therefore education at the youth level, is paramount.

Therefore our proposition is to introduce mandatory current Australian politics courses to the curriculum through year 8 onwards until voting age, and that would basically inform students of the role of the government. It would educate students on the influence of the media and on the separate political factions, and it would be before the vote was taken by students so as to make them aware and allow them to make an educated decision. It would also be an impartial curriculum, so it would not favour either party or any faction. This would result in equal sagacity within the community and people throughout our community less able to be influenced, as they would be more educated about politics in general and have a view themselves. It would make people throughout our society more able to make autonomous decisions. That is why we endorse our proposition.

Mr MIFTARI — That sounds fantastic, like most things, but is it not rather contrary to democracy to force people to take these classes when they do not want to? Not every 13-year-old in our state takes an interest in politics. Name one 13-year-old other than the 13-year-olds in this room who would be happy to open a *Herald Sun* — —

The CHAIR — So your question is?

Mr MIFTARI — I apologise. Is it not contrary to democracy to make people take these mandatory classes?

Mr NEHME — You say it is contrary to democracy to make these people take these classes, but without these classes we are basically making democracy obsolete, because we have people uneducated about the system, and we have votes that are basically obsolete — they are not actually addressing the political issue at

hand, and you get things like donkey votes, as we are seeing in our elections today. Either way you are denigrating democracy in some form. The question is: which way is better? At least education gives a perspective to these children. It gives a perspective to the people, and that is why it beneficial.

Group 10

Ms SIDWELL — Our group discussed engaging young people in politics and active citizenship. We believe that the voting age should not be lowered, but we should provide education to future voters from age 16 and onwards about the policies they will be voting for. Temporarily, young people can become more engaged if opportunities for learning about politics can be implemented in schools and universities. We agree, however, that there is a way to inform young people about politics, but it may not necessarily engage them in politics and active citizenship. As a diverse group of 10, we have developed actions to inform and engage young voters, and this includes, beginning at year 10, introducing no specific class but incorporating politics into subjects such as English and the humanities. Therefore instead of writing essays about Shakespeare, students would write essays about politics. Also we should use social networks as a means of informing people about politics and have someone at a political show or festival, where each politician or an Independent has their own booth where you can go up and ask questions of them.

Ms ALI — I agree with what your group has said about educating young people, but can I just ask why your group does not believe that we should be able to vote?

Ms SIDWELL — Why?

Ms ALI — Yes, at the start you said that.

Ms SIDWELL — One of the boys in our group suggested that you develop over time to become an adult, so when you are 14 and 9 months, you can get your first job; when you are 16, you can learn how to drive; and when you are 18, you can vote. It is just that development of maturity over time, so you have enough knowledge to be able to vote. There are people who turned 18 after the election this year, so they do not get to vote until they are 22. There is still that length of time between them, so we believe we should keep the voting age 18.

SOAPBOX

Ms EVANGELISTA — I just wanted to make two brief points. One is definitely about education. I think we should have some sort of political education from at least 16 upwards — maybe not from prep; that might be a bit early. But we should try to educate young people so that they make informed decisions. I do not think it is encroaching on any sort of democracy rights, because you are forced to vote anyway, and you might as well make an informed decision. You are forced to do all of these classes; it is no different if you are being forced to do a politics class.

My second point is that of the Indigenous seats. I think that is a great idea. Also there are very few women in Tony Abbott's cabinet. Perhaps there should be more representation — a small quota, perhaps, of women having some of these seats.

Mr CONNOLLY — The Australian version of democracy is flawed. Why is it flawed? One word — malapportionment! To put it simply, a Tasmanian Senate vote is worth 14 New South Wales votes. To combat this, there must be double the amount of seats in the House of Representatives than the Senate. But this still does not fix the problem, because our fathers of Federation did not anticipate the strong party system that exists in the Senate. The Northern Territory and the ACT, despite being granted self-government, have only two seats — are their governments inferior? — whilst the other eight territories have no Senate representation at all. How do we fix this? Alter the representation? No, abolish the states. States and territories multiply government waste and bureaucracy by eight. We have 10 departments of education. This is just one reason why democracy is flawed, but there are many that have been outlined today. So I want you to vote 'yes'.

The CHAIR (Mrs Fyffe) — Your time has expired.

Ms O'CONNOR — I just want to say that democracy should start in the schools at a stronger level. If all schools have a democratic, functioning SRC, democratic teachings and practices can start to educate youths at a younger age. They can develop skills that they can then practise and implement throughout later stages. I think we should put more of an effort into developing functioning SRCs and youth groups.

Mr MOONEY — The Australian electoral system and democracy in Australia itself is not flawed. However, there are many ways to improve it. One such minor reform would be to fix federal election dates. This would not only provide certainty for business and the electoral commission but would fix vicious electoral cycle editorial reports by the media. Along with this, I would like to see a four-year federal Parliament term to put it into line with the states. Along with this, it is important to differentiate between commercial journalism and editorial journalism. For a party in the election cycle, their spending should be cut by the amount of candidates they put in seats. If they put 150 candidates in 150 seats, they should get more funding than a party that puts a candidate in a single seat and — —

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms RIORDAN — I believe we need a referendum to make international human rights legal in Australia, especially as many Australians desire better treatment for asylum seekers. It would prevent the media from dehumanising this group and the government from criminalising them as 'illegal' and 'boat people'. It would allow for education and integration into our society so that asylum seekers are processed in Australia whilst being able to live, work and function in the community. This also follows human rights. This would increase the integrity of Australia as a nation because it would demonstrate us to be a fair society, and it would strengthen our democracy as we would recognise legally the international laws that our representatives have signed and ratified representing the Australian people.

Mr O'BRIEN — Ladies and gentlemen, it has been brought up in this session today that we should reserve seats in Parliament for Aboriginals, and I think it was also brought up about women. Ladies and gentlemen, I strongly disagree with this notion, for the following reasons. Firstly, I doubt the actual effects of this representation. A good example of this is: are the majority of people in our society invigorated by politicians at the current time? I strongly believe that, specifically for the Aboriginal people, it would be much more effective to have a different form of representation other than in Parliament, for the simple reason that currently we do not look out and go, 'Oh, Tony Abbott. I'm inspired by Tony Abbott to do something different!'. We might go, 'Oh, Buddy Franklin. I'm inspired by him instead!'. Moreover, I strongly believe it goes against our meritocratic functions in society. We believe people should be voted into Parliament because they are the best

candidates for the seats. We do not vote for people in our society because they are of a certain race or a certain gender. I strongly believe — and I believe it should be voted on — that we should vote for people based on their merits, not based on their race, colour or anything else.

Mr XIA — Fellow delegates, I have three points to raise quickly. Firstly, I do not believe Indigenous people should get reserved seats within Parliament, as many other minorities may also feel like they have been suppressed and deserve seats. Rather, I believe that we should educate the population to not frown upon these races, so to speak, and that these Aboriginals should not give themselves a bad picture. Polls have shown that Aboriginal towns and cities have higher crime rates than those in white cities. On the second point, I think we should leave the seats in the Senate, as they are, but allocate extra seats based on population, so if Tasmania was to have a higher population than Victoria, then it could get extra seats. Lastly, I think we should introduce optional voting for people aged 16 to 18, as they could get hands-on experience and then learn from that.

Mr NEHME — In terms of this proposition for affirmative action for Aboriginal people, extending on Connor's point, it instigates a social regression, as it reinvigorates the derelict stigma of Aboriginal people not having the capacity to earn their own way, effectively rendering their seats and influence on our society obsolete. This comes under the meritocracy sort of argument, where we do not have them earning their way and people denigrate them because they did not earn their way into our Parliament. This is counterproductive to their whole cause, and it is counterproductive to what we are trying to help Aboriginals to get. Therefore, it should be based on meritocracy.

Ms BONGIOVANNI — In regard to the issue of representation of Aboriginals, I think we should change the number of people in the Senate so that the Northern Territory, where there is a high population of Indigenous Australians, should have 12 people in the Senate — so, equal to all the states — rather than two. This would mean there would not be compulsory seats for Indigenous Australians, so it would not work against what the gentleman over there was talking about, but Indigenous Australians would be able to elect representatives and they would have more of a say and their votes would count for more.

Ms CANTARELLA — I believe the voting age must stay at 18 because, let us be honest, most 16-year-olds — apart from us — are not exactly politically minded and do not really care about democracy or politics. I understand that most of us would like to vote, but we have to be realistic. Furthermore, we should keep the voting age at 18 because, as minors, our parents pretty much influence most of our decisions and opinions and we would pretty much just be giving an extra vote to our parents, unfortunately. However, I do believe we need some form of civic education so that when we do turn 18 we can vote without influence and we are educated about our decisions and how Australian politics works.

Mr VOLLEBERGH — I would like to discuss the idea of abolishing compulsory voting and introducing a non-compulsory voting system. Why do I support this? I support this because, as we have discussed today, there are a significant number of people in the community who are not politically engaged. I support measures to rectify this, but there will always be those who are not politically engaged. Why are we forcing those who are unwilling to vote? Instead, I believe we should leave it to those who are willing and who are interested to vote. Let them make the decision. It will result in lower turnouts, yes — probably nearer 50 to 60 per cent, looking at the sets of surveys that have been done, as opposed to the current 95-plus — but the turnouts we will get will be the most interested and informed people who really care, and not just everyone who is being forced out there, using up their Saturday.

Mr KELLY — I just wanted to raise a point regarding the topic of a national survey, which was outlined by my friend over there. Basically what I am going to be talking about is how the system, as we have it at the moment, is one where all the money from the political parties that is promised at national elections is given to those who are in marginal electorates. For instance a seat like Corangamite, which is actually quite affluent, gets all the funding from the government promised to them at the election, whereas lower socioeconomic electorates are left all but behind. So I would propose that we have a survey of the nation so that we can see where the socioeconomically disadvantaged areas in our country are, so that we can better pressure our politicians into addressing them rather than just abandoning those who actually need the help of the government the most. I think that in doing this we would be able to ensure that everyone feels they are represented by our government.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Ms GUNN — I have three things to talk about. Firstly, in the Senate I think it is ridiculous that we have 12 representatives from each state. This is because the populations of each state are completely different. Maybe if each state had completely different interests this would make sense. In the United Nations it makes sense that even though India's population is way bigger than New Caledonia's, there is one representative for each because each country is completely different. The states are basically the same — we are all Australian.

Secondly, I think that voting should be opened up to 16-year-olds as an optional thing because, firstly, there are people who are 17, about to turn 18, and it is ridiculous that they do not get a vote simply because of when their birthday is and when the election is. Obviously there are people who are interested when they are 16 and it is a good introductory period. Thirdly, on education, I think it is ridiculous that it be compulsory to have an educational class about politics when you are in year 12 as you need a choice.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your time has expired.

Ms BYRNE — I wanted to say that we should not let 16-year-olds vote because they are still being educated and still learning about politics. This is really important because even some of our current voters are really uneducated. In a recent survey before the election eligible voters were asked, 'Should Billy Hughes be allowed to run against Kevin Rudd in the election?' Eighty per cent said, 'Yes', and, 'He is a good bloke'. He was Prime Minister from 1915 to 1923 and died 61 years ago!

Then they were asked, 'Should Australia become a federation?'. Seventy per cent said yes. Then another 20 per cent said no. These are our current voters who are allowed to vote, and even though they have completed their education they still are not fully aware, so why should we let people who still have not had the opportunity to learn this stuff go through and be allowed to vote and further put misinformation out there and have uninformed people deciding our country's future?

Mr DUNN — I just have a couple of things to touch on quickly; I will not talk for too long. With regards to the media and their influence, I think this sort of education, while not mandatory at year 12, would be vital because teaching people how they are being persuaded allows people to recognise that they are being persuaded and then in future they will not be persuaded, and I do not think that mandatory voting should be scrapped because, as the fellow over there brought up in his rebuttal, it will reduce the amount of people who show up to vote, and even though it is not that drastic, it is pretty drastic. I also wanted to pose the question of online voting to the house right now because no-one brought that up earlier.

Mr MIFTARI — Big government or rather intrusive government is impeding on our right to live freely. Too much red and green tape from the plethora of bureaucracies and levels of government we have in Australia is sadly infecting our consciences and confusing our sense of direction as to who does what and why they do it. Governments should not need to tell us what to do, and because of our democracy and because I can stand here today and say what I am about to say I strongly suggest that either the local or state government be abolished in due course.

Ms RESULOGLU — Some people say that we should not be allowed to vote when we are 16. I am against that because most of us here are around 16, 17 or 18 and someone said we should not be allowed to vote because we are still learning, but to be honest we are human. We are always learning. We never really stop learning, so we should be allowed to vote because all of us seem sensible. If we are here, we all have that need to learn, so people from 16 to 18 should be allowed to vote but it should not be compulsory.

Mr ANDERSON — We have spoken quite a lot about the states today, but I am completely in accordance with the boy who spoke just before. I do not feel that local government should be abolished, but I do believe the state should be. To me the states represent unnecessary bureaucracy. They are virtually impotent. The states have to deal with hospitals, they have to deal with the police, they have to deal with a great whack of education, yet they simply do not have the tax foundation, the funding bases to do it. As such, the states only serve to create red tape and confusion and to hold up processes of change which could be enacted much more efficiently if there was a direct relationship between the federal government and local governments. A perfect example of that would be the recently discussed and enacted national curriculum. Instead of having all that kerfuffle in which the states went to and fro and said they were against it then would support it, it could have been enacted much earlier if the states had been abolished.

The CHAIR — Your time has expired.

Ms SMITH — I just wanted to address the mandatory voting that was brought up earlier. It is something that makes our system of democracy great. If you compare it to America, they do not have mandatory voting. More people voted in *American Idol* than did for the President. That is something that makes our system of democracy great. Another point on the leadership issue raised over here is that leadership is not based on gender or race. You do not get chosen as a leader because you are white or Indigenous, you get chosen by merit. Thank you.

Mr MICALLEF — I want to talk about the preferential voting system. In the most recent federal election this preferred system has allowed candidates from the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party and the Australian Sports Party to be elected in the Senate. These political parties that are based around hobbies will hold the balance of power in the Senate. Australian politics has been in this kind of position before, with the Independents and the Greens having so much influence on the Gillard government, with the Independent member Bob Katter seeing his electorate receive special treatment in the form of better funding. If we allow parties like the Motoring Enthusiast Party — which lists one of the objectives in its constitution as fostering amicable discourse between the motor enthusiasts community and the automotive after-market industry — if we allow these kinds of parties to hold the balance of power in the Senate, then how is this democracy working the way it should be?

Ms GUNGOR — I think that Australian democracy is flawed because our government is a constitutional monarchy. We have been a federation for 100 or so years and we have learnt to have our own jurisdiction and follow our own processes. As you all know, in order for our bills to be passed through we have to have the assent of the Governor-General. However, this is not necessary for a democratic form of government. A monarchy does not serve a democratic agenda, and therefore the constitutional monarchy should be abolished.

THE VOTE

The CHAIR — We are now going to move to the votes. I am sorry; we have to move on. The time is never enough. I am going to ask each of the group leaders, going 1 to 10, to read the action — that is, the actual action you have — not to debate it but to read the action in its terms. Then, after each one has been done, we will have a vote. I will ask those who are in favour to say ‘aye’ and those who are against to say ‘no’, and I will try to decide on the voices. If there is any dissent with my ruling, then of course we will go to a division. I call on the leader of group 1.

Group 1

Ms van PLETZEN — Our action plan is:

To make civic responsibility classes mandatory and voting from 16 non-compulsory.

Delegates divided on question.

Question agreed to.

Group 2

Mr ANDERSON — The question is:

That each state and territory have a specified number of seats, both in the lower house and in the Senate, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates alone.

Question defeated.

Group 3

Ms BUTTIGIEG — The question is:

To implement an independent organisation, FEAR, which is the federal election allostatic revolution, to monitor a change in the national curriculum to include a unit in civics and electoral education from years 7 to 10.

Question agreed to.

Group 4

Mr PRORETTO — Our proposal is:

To introduce a mandatory civic education class, from prep up to year 12, at varying levels of complexity, covering all necessary topics in terms of political engagement in Australia.

Question defeated.

Group 5

Mr LIM — Our action plan is:

To have equal Senate seats — 12 for both states and territories.

Delegates divided on question.

Question defeated.

Group 6

Ms RIORDAN — Our proposal is:

To hold a referendum to make the international human rights charter legally binding in Australia.

Question agreed to.

Group 7

Mr KELLY — We had three. The first is a national census to determine the issues in our society, which can then help them to be addressed later.

The CHAIR — We have to put just one vote.

Mr KELLY — Just one? The national census thing. I talked about it earlier. Our proposal is:

To hold a national census to determine what the issues are around our country so they can be better addressed.

Question agreed to.

Group 8

Ms EVANGELISTA — We had a few too, but I will just say one of them: to have equal media advertising so we are not bombarded with just one party but have allocated slots for different parties of media advertising, if that makes sense.

The CHAIR — Was that the statement of group 8?

Ms EVANGELISTA — We had a few, but one of them was:

To have media advertising evenly distributed so there is equal media time for each party.

The CHAIR — Is the motion agreed to — that is, equal distribution of time for different parties, not just what you can pay for. Is that what you meant?

Ms EVANGELISTA — Yes.

Delegates divided on question.

Question agreed to.

Group 9

Mr NEHME — Our proposition is:

That we introduce a civics course, an Australian politics course, during year 8 and until voting age, which is mandatory in the school curriculum.

Question defeated.

Group 10

Ms TEESDALE — Our key action is:

That beginning at year 10 and following on to university politics be incorporated into subjects such as English and humanities, dealing with the issues we are talking about.

Question defeated.

The CHAIR — We have one final vote. It is on the main proposition:

That the Australian version of democracy is flawed.

Question agreed to.

The CHAIR — That was a terrific session. I thank all of you.