

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

Members

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Dr David Zyngier, senior lecturer, curriculum pedagogy, Monash University.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Thank you so much for your extremely comprehensive submission to the committee and for your willingness to come along and talk about some of the evidence contained within it. You will be aware of the issue of privilege of course, which applies in this room but not outside. Could I ask you to state your name, your business address and, more importantly, whether you are speaking as a private individual or whether you are representing your institution. I will then invite you to make a few preliminary comments.

Dr ZYNGIER — Thank you. Dr David Zyngier, Monash University. I speak here as a researcher and educator but not on behalf of Monash University.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Would you like to make your preliminary comments?

Dr ZYNGIER — You have received and hopefully ploughed through my extensive report.

The CHAIR — We have.

Dr ZYNGIER — It is not unlike a report that I wrote for Senator Brandis a couple of years ago, although it is more comprehensive because I have now completed my research for the Australian Research Council. I do not know where that report went to from Senator Brandis, because it was funded by the —

The CHAIR — It is on his bookshelf.

Dr ZYNGIER — Yes, a very nice bookshelf.

The CHAIR — I know George very, very well. He would not mind that.

Dr ZYNGIER — I was approached by the Constitution Education Fund, which is an Australian body. Its patron-in-chief is the Governor-General. It is a very esteemed body. It was very concerned about, as this committee is very concerned about, the lack of participation of young people in particular in understanding and knowledge about the constitution, about Parliament, about our three tiers of government et cetera.

Because you have my report I am not going to go over it, but firstly I would like to talk about my own work in civics and citizenship because it is a longstanding project of mine, as a schoolteacher from 1981 to 1998 and then as a university academic working in the teaching of civics education to preservice teachers. I am currently working with the Thai government on enhancing their civic education program in Thailand in a hopeful move towards a deeper and more extensive democracy in that country. I have also been the chair of the Citizenship and Democratic Education Special Interest Group in the largest research academic body in the world, called the Comparative and International Education Society, which regularly holds conferences of over 10 000 people.

So I come with a bit of expertise in this area, I guess. Most recently I was part of a research team that was asked to evaluate the Victorian Electoral Commission-funded project at the KGI — the Korin Gamadji Institute — which is attached to the Richmond footy club. They run a program for Indigenous youth called the Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leadership program. The Victorian Electoral Commission actually fund that program, and they were particularly interested in increasing Indigenous youth registering to enrol to vote and also actually voting. I was asked to evaluate that program, and I think that there are some lessons there for the rest of us here.

My current research has been looking at teachers in particular, not just civics educators but teachers in general across the spectrum, what they understand about democracy and how that impacts on their teaching. We are currently involved in looking at first-year university students in the politics faculty — what they understand about our electoral system, about government. One would have thought that those who are enrolled in the politics faculty — as I did many, many years ago at Monash University, in the early 70s — would have a greater understanding of politics and political issues than those who might have enrolled in engineering, for example, or those who are not at university per se. Unfortunately our initial findings are that they are pretty dumb, and that is not a reflection on anything except they have not been

given any information up until that point — and these are people who are already enrolled, hopefully, to vote.

So a lot more research needs to be done in that area, and I am hoping that the Victorian Electoral Commission or maybe this committee could somehow or other find a way of doing some more in-depth research in that area, because if the elite, if you like, of our society — those who are entering university; at least academically elite — have a very poor understanding of these issues, than woe betide the rest of the youth in our society.

What do we actually know about civics and how it is taught in our schools? Unfortunately, not much. We have a great national curriculum, which has been developed collectively, cooperatively and collaboratively over a period of time — it is called civics and citizenship education. We have got great resources on the national curriculum website in these areas. But we do not know whether it is taught, because it is not a compulsory subject; it is integrated — whatever that means — and Martin, as a former Minister for Education, would know about these things. Whether it is taught or not, we do not know, because it is part of history, it is part of economics, it is part of language teaching and there is no-one responsible in any particular school who is the civics education teacher. We are anomalous in most of the OECD countries in that we do not have a civics subject that is taught to our students. Somehow there is a hope and an aspiration that it gets done, but we really do not know, and that is an area again that I would flag for further research. We just do not know what is being taught and how well it is being taught, across Victoria or across Australia, for that matter.

I wrote in my submission that we teach about democracy but we do not actually teach for democracy, and that is one of the key issues that we find — young people really do not want to be told things; they want to do things. They want to get out into the real world and not be told about the real world. I often use the term ‘Ron’ to my student teachers when I am giving them a lecture. I reflect on the common complaint from students in schools, ‘Why are you always telling us about Ron?’. The teacher says, ‘What do you mean, “Ron”?’’. They say, ‘Well, you will use this later on’. The issue is if we cannot get young people involved in the community from the earliest possible age, then why would they bother when they get older? We have just heard from Launch, for example, where we were told that even people who are homeless still want to be involved in civic society. Well, we need to encourage that; indeed we need to encourage that even more. There are a couple of terrific programs that are available for schools to use in this area — Student Action Teams and the ruMAD? program, both of which have been developed collaboratively with teachers a number of years ago — that fundamentally get students, young people, involved in creating programs and doing things in the community that they are interested in doing.

We need to see changes in the way civics is taught — if it is taught — in our schools. I would want to recommend, if this committee had any input at all into education, that it be made compulsory again, at least from years 3 to 10. In years 11 and 12, when unfortunately most of our students are looking at their ATAR, and that is all they want to achieve — a good ATAR, or high VCE scores — we need to somehow bring the VEC in to emulate the Richmond Emerging Aboriginal Leadership program for our year 11 and 12 students so that they are actually enrolling to vote before they leave school, so that they have some programs in their school that are going to encourage them to become civic citizens.

In my submission to you I outlined that there are at least five kinds of citizens. We all want to have good citizens, but what do we mean by the term ‘citizenship’? I have developed this framework that ranges from the passive citizen to the responsible citizen to the active citizen and then the justice-oriented and justice-activist citizen. I guess I would like to see more of our young people in particular but all people in general being active and action justice citizens, where they are trying to improve society not just for themselves, not just for their family or their neighbours, but for society in general. I guess that is one of the major aims of the 2006 Melbourne declaration when it talks about actively involved citizens in our society. I guess that is my overview of what I would like to see coming out of a committee like this. I will take your questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. If I may lead off with a question which does not go to the heart of your submission but nevertheless causes me to have some concerns, your figures show, to my mind, an

alarming lack of respect for democracy amongst not only young people but the population overall, with a significant number of people not even being sure that it is the best system, which alarms me enormously. You also then touched on the fact that contact with members of Parliament is down — in this instance, on page 6, from 27 per cent to 23 per cent. I have to say that as a 25-year member of Parliament my impression is contact with me has been diminishing rapidly over the course of that 25 years. When I spoke on the assisted dying bill the other day, I made reference to, even on an issue like that, how few people bothered to contact my office, which then had a call from someone saying she could arrange for people to contact it, which is not the point.

Dr ZYNGIER — Yes, I am sure they could!

The CHAIR — It is about the fact that people naturally, even on an issue like this, did not even feel the need to contact a local member of Parliament. Why is that — that people are just not bothering to contact members of Parliament anymore?

Dr ZYNGIER — I do not want to be throwing brickbats at you guys.

The CHAIR — No, I am very tough. We can all cop it.

Dr ZYNGIER — I am sure you are; after 25 years you have to be. I think there is a disengagement, a total disengagement with what is seen as the political process. Things do not seem to be getting done. This is just my view, but it is also reflected in —

The CHAIR — It is an informed view.

Dr ZYNGIER — It is reflected in the research, and as you said in your comments prefacing the question, it is alarming that extensive research shows that about 23 per cent of people between the ages of 18 and 35 would rather have a ‘strong’ government, in air quotes, and not a democratic one. That is frightening. It is frightening for me, because every generation, it is often said, has to reinvent democracy, and if we do not fight for it, we lose it.

Why people do not contact you I guess is an issue that you need to take up as parliamentarians, putting yourself forward there and getting out in the streets. I remember going down to the local shopping centre and seeing a parliamentarian there every weekend with a card table and handing out leaflets and so on. I guess you guys still do it, but maybe more visibility in schools if you had the time.

Ms BATH — Could I explore something? I have come from a teaching background in maths-science, but I know at my previous school — I was there for nine years — they taught civics in year 8, so sort of early on, and I am not sure that then it filtered up through, because the curriculum gets very compact as the ATAR is sought after. I would like if you could explore a couple of things for me. Sometimes year 8 might be a bit bland — it is the nuts and bolts of civics — and then sometimes teachers can get up into that upper level and almost be evangelical in their modus operandi. Someone can either get on board — and I am not going to talk the politics or policy — and ride that train, or else they can be turned off it. I guess my question is to you back at the educational end of training teachers, what is being done at university to try to make teachers be, I guess, role models for the democratic system but not evangelical? Do you get what I am saying?

Dr ZYNGIER — Yes.

Ms BATH — You need to be impartial in your presentation but still stimulating.

Dr ZYNGIER — We do not want teachers proselytising for anything, whether it is religion or a political view et cetera. One of the things I recall when I first started teaching is that my students wanted to know what football team I barracked for. For them that was the most important thing, and I think it was after about two years that I let on that I was a Cats supporter. That was the most important thing for these students at that time.

When I was teaching in school and we taught year 8 or year 9, we taught the nuts and bolts and bored the pants off the students, because it is not what they want to know. They want to know how they can get involved in society and social issues, political issues. One of the subjects that used to be popular but is not as popular now as it used to be was Australian history, because in Australian history you actually had an opportunity to look at political issues: Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War; Australia's involvement in Anzac Day and what that meant in Gallipoli, the campaigns; and looking at the 1950s and the anti-communist bill, et cetera. Those sorts of things would be looked at in Australian history, but Australian history is no longer taught compulsorily, and in the final years most of those students who are interested in history are looking at the history of revolutions, which is a very popular subject, but not at Australian history anymore.

Look, to go to the nub of your question, good teaching should not proselytise; it should enlighten, it should set up a spark for more learning and for young people to go more deeply into things that they are interested in. Unfortunately, as you quite rightly said, when the students are aiming for their ATAR they are going to focus on particular issues to enhance that score if that is what they are into. As a teacher of mathematics and science, how you teach your subjects is important in a democratic process. Every teacher needs to be a teacher of literacy — we are told that — and also a teacher of IT. I put the proposition forward in my submission that every teacher needs to be a teacher for democracy, how we actually run our classrooms. But that is another issue. We try in our preservice teacher education — it is not 'training'; it is education. I have a couple of dogs; I train them. I educate preservice teachers, open their minds. We try and instil in our new teachers a way of teaching that is not talking down or at our students but learning with and from them, so it is a much more democratic process. Even in the teaching of mathematics and science, it needs to be less didactic and much more cooperative.

Ms PATTEN — I just wanted to ask you, David, whether you knew anything about the Passport to Democracy, which is the VEC model. They certainly say that it has been well received in schools and that it has increased over the years. Do you have any comments on that, and on top of that we have also been hearing about countries like Canada which run a parallel election in their high schools where candidates get involved and those results are made public after the election closes. I am just wondering if you have got any comments on the effectiveness of either of those ideas?

Dr ZYNGIER — I do not know about the effectiveness of those mock elections because I have not done the research in that area, but I do know from my research that students do not like play-acting. They have student representative councils, and it is terrific news I think that we just read last week or the week before that students are actually going to be compulsorily elected, I think — or maybe nominated — for all school councils, where they will actually then be involved in real decision-making and not play-acting. Too often the student representative councils — and we have got a great student representative council organisation here in Victoria, which do really good things — are usually, as I said, play-acting democracy and there are certain things that are off the table and certain things that are on the table, and they are usually quite limited in what they can do within the school.

To go back to your Canada question, a number of countries around the world, a number of education systems, run parallel elections. Many places in the United States do it as well — many of the states in many of the school systems. It would certainly be an interesting thing to do in our schools. So to reflect back to the Passport to Democracy, it is a well-developed program. The Victorian Electoral Commission does not have enough education officers. I think it has only got a couple, and we have got something like 1000 schools in Victoria. So if you just do the maths, they cannot get there even if they worked 10 times harder than they do. That is a serious issue.

We have got a great program that was developed many years ago called Discovering Democracy. Many schools probably still have the kits in their Glad Wrap in their school library somewhere. It has now been digitised, and it is all online. I talk about the Discovering Democracy project and program in my submission. All those programs are really good, but they do not go far enough. They do not get the students, the young people, actually doing things. They are learning things. That is a serious issue. Young people do not want to be told about the future. We know that they are our future, but they are our future

now, and so they actually have to get out into the real world and do things that they are interested in doing and thereby learn about civics and citizenship and what it means to be an active, responsible citizen.

The CHAIR — Again, thank you so much for your willingness to come here today and to expand on your very, very comprehensive submission. You will receive the Hansard transcript in about two weeks, and you are free to make minor corrections but obviously not to alter the substance of your presentation.

Dr ZYNGIER — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.