

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections**

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

#### Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

#### Witnesses

Dr Deborah Towns, Vice-President, and

Ms Sheila Byard, OAM, The League of Women Voters Victoria.

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

**The CHAIR** — To the League of Women Voters Victoria, thank you for coming along to speak to the Electoral Matters Committee on civics and informal voting and a whole range of other issues that your submission has touched on. In the first instance would you perhaps like to make a couple of opening comments, and then I will throw it open to the committee to ask questions.

**Dr TOWNS** — I thank the Honourable Louise Asher and the Parliament of Victoria's joint parliamentary Electoral Matters Committee for enabling us to make this presentation. The League of Women Voters is historically a very old organisation that began exactly for the reason of electoral matters. It began when voting was not compulsory, and one of the reasons for the beginning of the organisation was to encourage people to exercise their right to vote and to encourage women and men to vote responsibly. Over the years it has developed into an educational organisation, and we particularly more recently concentrate on educating young people about voting, not just the mechanics of voting but also learning about being more involved in the community.

Again, as I said, historically we began at a time when voting was not compulsory. At the moment I would say our membership is small and fluid, but we do partner with many organisations so that we can conduct a wide range of activities which are referred to in appendix A and appendix B, which I will refer to a bit more later, and so will Sheila Byard. One of them is the National Council of Women, and Sheila is a past president of the National Council of Women.

We also get a lot of support from the Parliament of Victoria, particularly most recently from the Honourable Bruce Atkinson. We have access to the meeting rooms and to the Council chamber. In past years we have had many parliamentarians even sponsor students to attend some of our activities in Parliament, and I know that Louise Asher has also been involved in earlier years. We also have partnered with the Victorian Electoral Commission on many occasions. They give us lots of information.

I have been involved, I guess, in these types of activities with young people for almost 20 years, and every year we have particular important events, which I have got here, that we always recognise: 31 March every year we recognise because that is the anniversary of when Victorian women first got the vote in state elections, and 12 May we recognise every year too. So maybe, Sheila, you would like to add a little bit more at the moment. We are sort of tag teaming.

**Ms BYARD** — I am Sheila Byard, and I am here to support Deborah. Our contact information is on the face sheet of our submission: Post Office Box 1372, Kensington, Victoria. I am someone who has previously had an appointment teaching public policy and other things at Victoria University, and a number of my concerns relating to this inquiry — I suppose I speak from experience — I had then with students of a wide variety of backgrounds, rural and urban, who would enrol at Victoria University.

I am a trustee of the Bessie Rischbieth Trust, which gets a mention in here. The Bessie Rischbieth trust is a leftover from the famous old Australian Federation of Women Voters. Bessie Rischbieth was a woman who was born and educated in South Australia and went to Western Australia, but was a very leading figure in the 1920s to have women included in Australian delegations to the League of Nations. It is fortunate we had that little seeding grant of money because it enables us to sponsor events from time to time. Deborah and I worked together closely a number of years ago when we were able to bring students from government schools in outer suburban and rural areas to Melbourne because we could fund the accompanying adults. We used to focus mainly on Years 8 and 9 students, and we could have the accompanying adults and we would pay fares for them to come. In more recent years we have had to move to a slightly older demographic because the schools cannot afford to release staff to accompany students.

We think there is a deficiency in schools funding. There are many competing demands within the curriculum, but some schools — we refer to some of the Catholic regional colleges and the Mercy schools for girls — have a strong program inside the school which relates to social justice broadly, and so they are encouraging these young people to stand up and speak about their particular topics at a school level and in assembly, week by week. So young men and young women have come from those schools to support a team of three who might enter into our annual event in Parliament.

**Dr TOWNS** — Some of the activities, if you have a look at appendix A, that we have been involved in are that we provide research or resources for the community. If you have a look at page 10, appendix A, going back into the 1980s, back in the 1980s was when there were a relatively great number of women members of Parliament, and a group of us organised a video. We made the video in 1988, and that was sent to many schools for free just to show young people how women got into Parliament because that is part of our program too — to encourage young people to consider going into local government or state or federal parliaments. We did have an activity, Sheila, didn't we, about 10 years ago where we had women and men members of Parliament who were prepared to spend half a day talking to students from all over Victoria about how they got into Parliament and what their history was.

We have other histories here, such as *Women's Sphere: a Summary of the Movement for Women's Electoral Reform and Representation in Victoria*, because, as you know, women still make up approximately 30 per cent of parliamentarians and 30 per cent of councillors in local government.

So it is a very educational role that we have. Just from our own knowledge, for example, the younger group was talking about younger people and their activities earlier, I was working over the road in the Education Department when we had the centenary of Federation. That was a very exciting time and many students got very interested in government and Parliament and studying Australian history, studying civics and citizenship, and there were millions and millions of dollars of activity. So I am supporting what the earlier group, whose acronym I have forgotten at the moment — Youth —

**Ms BYARD** — Affairs Council.

**Dr TOWNS** — The Youth Affairs Council, thank you. When there is publicity given to this issue, students and young people get very interested because they see relevance for themselves. So, as I said, if you have time to look at appendix A and appendix B, they talk about particularly 2014–17 when we have had activities in Parliament House for young people. Each year we have had a particular cohort of students, teachers and members of the community. Approximately 100 people are involved each year — different groups of people — and you can see the schools there. Also, as I said, we get particular support from the Honourable Bruce Atkinson. The sorts of responses that we get from people in the community, which I have carefully put here but I cannot find at the moment, are what people said about how useful it was for the students at the school. I just cannot find it at the moment.

**Ms BYARD** — Don't worry; I am sure the committee have read it anyway.

**The CHAIR** — Pages 13 and 14.

**Dr TOWNS** — Anyway, you could read about how well it was received because it tied in with the leadership programs at the school, the volunteering programs at the school and community responsibility programs at the school. Sheila, do you want to mention anything else?

**Ms BYARD** — I am sure that members of the committee have read our submission, but I just would speak to my own experience in relation to the strategies for increasing electoral participation. One of the things that I have been involved in over the last couple of years, particularly in my role with the National Council of Women Victoria, is working with newly emerging groups in the community. We have also had students who have been on internships or placements with us who we do use, where we can attract these young people to come in, as leaders in setting up the event at the Parliament each year. I might just allude to section 4 on page 6 about Victorians from multicultural backgrounds. I have done a number of exercises with Chinese-speaking groups — we have a number of affiliates of the National Council of Women with that background — working with them and discussing with them what it means to be a participating citizen in a democracy.

My experience confirms what is said in the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria submission — and I think they have submitted previously to this committee on such matters — is there are some issues around the availability of print media material for Chinese-speaking communities. There is a reliance, probably, on SBS radio notifications in relation to elections. There is quite a degree of interest in knowing better how it works, but at the moment, programs are not being delivered. This is a question about which strategies the

commission can adopt given some budgetary constraints, so choices are being made about what where we will go and what we will do, especially for the Parliament itself taking part in this work. ‘We’ll go to the country, we’ll run this briefing, that briefing’. But I think because of the increasing proportion of Chinese-speaking people, particularly in some parts of the city, say, within the bounds of the City of Melbourne, it is really important that we lift our game in relation to those people.

With young people, I point out that the blogging we have been doing with these young women, who are mostly people who have completed a masters or are completing a masters at Melbourne University or RMIT. We had an intern who was here from Sheffield University originally, who was doing a masters at Melbourne, and she spoke about her experience of the Scottish referendum by watching the media and what was happening there.

I heard you say with the young people, ‘Should we go to 16-year-old voting?’. I think the idea was supported by that referendum. I see you have a UK Electoral Commission submission amongst the submissions that are on the website. I think that is an interesting idea. It goes to the fact perhaps that young people may be galvanised into an engagement when they understand the specific issue around which the vote will be conducted. So that is rather supporting plebiscite ideas rather than specifically general electoral participation. I have read the submission from the senior lecturer at Monash to this committee, which is a very long submission.

I think we would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

**The CHAIR** — That would be terrific.

**Dr TOWNS** — I just wanted to make one more comment. We talked earlier about how, even though we are very supportive of the Youth Parliament program, it is very expensive.

**Ms BYARD** — I think I can say I have been to sessions of the Youth Parliament. We know it is expensive. We know in the past sometimes the Parliamentary Education office was able to persuade each state electorate to send two students to an activity in the Parliament, and funding was found, whether through Rotary or through the MP or however. But I was amazed at the Youth Parliament to find a lack of understanding, I think, of Standing Orders.

**The CHAIR** — You will find that in the Parliament!

**Ms BYARD** — I am also an observer of the Parliament, but I did find it a bit challenging that the Speaker was busy with a handheld device throughout the proceedings. My observation is that there and also with things like the UN Association, which I have been an office-bearer for in the past too, when they are doing model UNs, with the Monash international students association, there is a heavy emphasis on adversarial debate so that you could show you can act out a role-play that is adversarial and you can stand the heat and battle of the day, but I am not too sure whether that is the best way to go.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for the effort that you have gone to; it is much appreciated. In my desire to skip the preliminaries, can I just verify if you are speaking on behalf of the League of Women Voters or —

**Ms BYARD** — Yes.

**Mr DIXON** — I think as a general rule getting people involved in politics and political processes, rather than the process, it is more about, ‘Let’s start with the issue that actually gets people excited. What’s your view on this? How do you turn that into reality’, and that is when you go into, ‘This is how the process works’. But focusing on what matters to people, it seems to me — my background is education — that is how you engage people in the first place, and then you can go to the process. Would you say that as a general rule that is —

**Dr TOWNS** — Yes. Every year we do have a theme, and one theme we had to get the young people to be interested was before they came we asked them to go into the community and talk to some local

councillors about an environmental issue or any issue that the young people were interested in, and then they reported back and they talked about it. Even though we were, say, celebrating the 90th anniversary of women getting the vote or something like that, we themed it like that, and we found that we got a lot of interest from the students because it was something they were really interested in.

**Ms BYARD** — They do like the experience of actually interacting with elected people in —

**Dr TOWNS** — They love the networking —

**Ms BYARD** — local government or the local MP.

One thing I would make a comment on though is in my experience one of the things that I did with the National Council of Women some time ago — we got a grant from the Sidney Myer Fund — was a thing called Women Together, where we were bringing women from Rumbalara, from Goulburn Valley, from newly emerging Islamic women's groups and so on, and we ran a day program. We discovered from that that adult migrant education had quite a good civics program that it offered, but the only people who could do that civics program, which was based rather on the 'Discovering Democracy' materials, were people who had completed the compulsory hours of the English language program. Women generally fail to complete that course because women have carer responsibilities — the children get the flu or whatever it is — so they drop out of the English language course, and therefore they never get into the civics course.

But by and large — and I have also worked for adult migrant education in the past — my experience is that people who come to that program are madly keen to understand voting and Parliament more generically and are not so much single-issue driven, because that is part why you are in Australia — because you want to be in a democracy. So I think you need to have that in your minds.

**Ms SPENCE** — I have one question on that. In that research did you identify any other cultural barriers that women face from the various multicultural communities to participation?

**Ms BYARD** — I do not know how you define it, but my family background is what could be called Caledonia Australis, so somewhere in my mother's family history the Beatons arrived through the Highlands and Islands Emigration Society in Portland. You can retrieve an article in the *Argus* through Trove that says 'Shipload of non-English speaking migrants cause trouble in Portland'. So the Flora MacDonald had arrived, and John Beaton and his second wife and seven children committed to paying £12.14.6 to cover the cost of the fares to come to Brisbane and were less than thrilled to be offloaded in Portland. It turned out to be a happy event because John Riddoch turned up and took them over to Penola, and they were there in time for the kids to go to the McKillop school.

But there are barriers. My mother died just this last week — 104 — but I remember as a kid out at East Oakleigh my father was the poll clerk, or the manager I think you call them now. The children would play around, the women would be having a cake stall as always in a semirural area, and it dawned on me that when the local adults came in to vote that very often it was a bit like a reverse of the Queen and Prince Philip — the chap would come through wearing a hat, and he would take one how-to-vote card. His wife would be following three paces behind and take no how-to-vote cards. My mother always made it a point of principle to take every card. She would smile politely to everybody and pass through. If you said to her, 'How did you vote?', she would say, 'Secret ballot. Australia invented it'.

In my experience of meeting a very great diversity of women from different communities, and we have worked with immigrant and refugee women's coalitions in Thomastown, Turkish women, I do not see barriers that are based on ethnicity essentially.

**Ms BATH** — I notice on page 7 of your submission that you speak about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and it probably leads on from what you were saying. I am interested to know how we can encourage leaders in the community from Indigenous backgrounds. Often the women have multiple roles in their communities. They can be the carer or the go-between working with medicine in their fields. How can we encourage them, because they are leaders in their fields, to have some time almost to go into a broader role?

**Ms BYARD** — The League of Women Voters has seen the value of educating even the adults who accompany the children to the programs at the Parliament. That is part of it. I think at this point here we should congratulate the electoral commission on its work. One of the things I think that most people in the community — you have had a previous inquiry when you had a question raised, I think in 2014, ‘Should we call the Legislative Council in Victoria the Victorian Senate?’ —

**The CHAIR** — That was the previous Electoral Matters Committee.

**Ms BYARD** — There is confusion in people’s minds about the role of the Victorian Electoral Commission and the Australian Electoral Commission. I think it was the Australian Electoral Commission that had a very successful program with Aaron Pedersen, an Indigenous hero, an actor, running a program up in the Mildura area with young people to encourage them to engage in voting. I do not say that it has got to be the particularly burdened adults who have to be the leaders in electoral education with Aboriginal kids and Torres Strait Islander kids. I would say that what is being rolled out looks good, but I think that we should be picking up all of these children, from every different background, through the schools.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very, very much for coming along and for the detail in your submission and for the work you do generally. You will receive a transcript in about two weeks. You are able to correct errors of fact but obviously not any change of substance. Thank you very much.

**Dr TOWNS** — Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**