

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

Ms Wil Stracke, industrial and campaigns officer, and

Ms Danae Bosler, political and research lead organiser, Victorian Trades Hall Council.

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

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for presenting to the committee and for coming along today to extrapolate on your evidence. You would be aware that these proceedings are covered by privilege, but not outside. Could I please ask you to state your full name and your business address and to advise the committee whether you are representing your organisation or whether you are appearing in a private capacity, and then you can perhaps make a couple of preliminary comments.

Ms STRACKE — My name is Wil Stracke. I am the elected industrial and campaigns officer from the Victorian Trades Hall Council, and I am here representing the Victorian Trades Hall Council.

Ms BOSLER — My name is Danae Bosler. I am the politics and research lead organiser at the Victorian Trades Hall. I am here as a support person and running support for Wil. The address for the Victorian Trades Hall is 54 Victoria Street, Carlton.

Ms STRACKE — I will just do a quick introductory statement about the Victorian Trades Hall Council. We have done the submission, so I will just take you through the key points under each of the terms of reference categories that we have got there.

The Victorian Trades Hall Council was founded in 1856, and we are the peak body for unions in Victoria. The VTHC represents 41 unions and over 430 000 workers in Victoria. These workers are members of unions that reach into every industry in the state, both the public and private sectors. The VTHC is not affiliated with any political party. The VTHC seeks to defend and promote the rights of workers, and that includes at the ballot box. Since gaining the 8-hour day the VTHC, its affiliates and individual members have campaigned in many elections, both at state and federal level. We have also participated in plebiscites, referenda and now voluntary postal surveys on social and political questions.

The VTHC fully supports any measures that can improve accessibility to our democracy for all Victorians. Improving accessibility includes education leading to greater understanding of the electoral process, providing translated materials and ease of access to voting places.

I will just go through the key points that we have got in our submission, and then we can deal with any questions you might have. The first category in the terms of reference was ensuring Victorian citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively in elections. For us, we focused on young Victorians still in school and on new citizens. We support the submission of the VEC to the 2016 Senate inquiry, which argued that making election education mandatory and conducting it in the final year of school would increase understanding of the electoral process. We also support the AEU submission — the Australian Education Union — which talks about the fact that teachers need to receive adequate professional development at work to ensure that they have a high-level understanding and learning experience and therefore can give a high-level learning experience to students in the preparation for teaching of civics and electoral education.

For new citizens we know that the AEC attends citizenship ceremonies across Australia every year. We think that is a fantastic initiative, but what we would say is that we think that it would be useful if there were follow-ups done after their enrolment in the first election that they participate in to provide them with information about the electoral process, preferably in multiple languages.

We know that our system of voting is different for local councils, for the Victorian elections and then for federal elections, and it is different to what it is in other countries as well, so we think it would be useful to clarify what is required in order to do a valid vote and to encourage them to participate in that process. I would just say personally, as someone who became an Australian citizen so that I could participate in the political process, I think that is a really useful thing to do.

In terms of strategies to reduce informal voting at Victorian state elections which are not related to our voting systems, we know that the VEC has a number of programs for communities that face barriers to their electoral participation, and we note that their report of the 2014 election noted that they did 249 sessions. We think that that is a really useful program, and we would advocate for more resourcing to go into that particular program in order to address informal voting.

In terms of how the VEC employs and trains casual staff for Victorian state elections, we would say, as an active participant in Victorian elections, that the VEC staff do an outstanding job in what can be sometimes quite difficult circumstances. It is a testament to the tireless professionalism and the efforts of the staff who do that. In terms of hiring, we would say that as a statutory authority the VEC should set an example as a best-practice employer, and we would say that there are particular areas and characteristics of employment disadvantage that the VEC could concentrate on in its hiring practices. We would hope that the VEC could target particular groups like single mothers, Indigenous Australians, carers, young people, people with disabilities and those suffering mental illness as a potential cohort of people who could be brought in to work on elections in that process.

In terms of managing disputes on booths, we would say that we think that the VEC staff do an outstanding job on election day. It can be at times a trying situation. These elections are a highly contested space. We would say that we think that the lesser trained and casual staff should not be put in a situation where they are the ones who have to resolve disputes, and we would say that it should always be the responsibility of senior VEC officials because they have the experience, the training and the knowledge to defuse any disputes that may arise at polling stations.

In terms of strategies to increase electoral participation among community groups that experience barriers to electoral participation, we would say electoral staff play an important role in engaging with voters as they attend voting places, and we would like to see a diverse and multilingual workforce matching the communities they are in. A greater emphasis on this in the hiring practices of staff for elections would be, I think, a useful thing to do, and it might make electoral participation less intimidating for many in multicultural communities.

And for young people, who we know are disengaged on the whole — are more likely to be disengaged from the voting process — we would say that a program that included VEC staff visiting secondary schools in the week before election day would be a very useful thing to have, particularly for students who have just turned 18, and we would like to see a system allowing 18-year-olds to vote in their schools for their first election. We think that that would reduce absenteeism. That, for us, provides two things: it provides those young people with an opportunity to participate in a space where they feel safe, and there is also an element of FOMO — a bit of fear of missing out — which means that if young people who have not yet turned 18 see their cohort voting in the school, then that may encourage them to see that as part of the political process and to see themselves as being empowered in that process.

Those would be the key points from the submission that we have made. We are happy to take any questions.

Ms SPENCE — Obviously you do a lot of campaigning work at Trades Hall. I am just wondering, given that those that tend to be disengaged from the electoral processes can often be the same groups that are either disadvantaged or sometimes exploited in workplaces, are there any campaigns that you run that empower those workers that would also empower the disengaged?

Ms STRACKE — I am going to make an assumption that you are talking particularly about young people.

Ms SPENCE — Yes.

Ms STRACKE — Trades Hall has the Young Workers Centre, and we run as part of that a program where we go out to high schools and do outreach around educating young people about what to expect in their first job and also what their workplace rights are — rights and responsibilities, really. We have visited, I think at last count, 100 schools this year in delivering that program, which has a number of modules. That is a useful way to reach a cohort of people who otherwise do not necessarily get that information. That is, I suppose, why we would advocate a similar program for young people around electoral and civic education.

Ms SPENCE — Do you think one of the keys is actually going to their space?

Ms STRACKE — Yes, you have to go to their space. We do that in two ways. We actually go out to schools and have that conversation in schools, and we also do it by way of social media, which is the great space where young people communicate and get information. But actually face-to-face conversations are the most useful ways to do that. It is a space where they can ask questions; it is a space where they can feel safe in asking those questions. So appropriately developed modules aimed at specific age groups to address that disadvantage are, I think, the best way to make sure that they feel like they are prepared.

Mr DIXON — Voting at school intrigues me. Are you aware of it being done anywhere else in the world, and could you give a little bit more detail about how you think it might work?

Ms STRACKE — No, we are not aware of it being done anywhere else. I would say we already go out, for instance, to aged-care facilities and do booths at aged-care facilities. We do the same in hospitals with people who —

Mr DIXON — Mobile booths?

Ms STRACKE — Yes, I think mobile booths might be the way to do it. We do have an emphasis on people voting on the actual election day, and kids are not in school on election day because it is a weekend, so we would say we would limit this to kids in their first voting experience. But I do think we already do that for certain cohorts of people that we say cannot get to booths.

The CHAIR — Can I just follow up on that? Would you then envisage the whole shebang of an election, like how-to-vote cards and party workers and all that, being in the schools?

Ms STRACKE — Look, we have put the concept to you.

Ms PATTEN — It is fantastic. Can we not just put them on a bus for early voting?

Ms STRACKE — I suppose if you want to educate people about the process, my view would be that that is part of the process. Whether that is practicable or not is really up to — if it is an idea that is worth exploring, then I would say we would all go away and have a think about how that might work in terms of the practicalities. I am assuming you would have to, surely, in the same way that you do in hospitals. What you do in hospitals, for example, is you do not actually have the full shebang. What you have are the how-to-vote cards. So what you do is you have the booth and you have the political parties' how-to-vote cards. You have them available so that people understand how they actually complete their ballot paper to ensure that it is a formal vote. So whether you take everybody out there — probably not. I would envisage it running a little bit like the hospital booths, where you have the materials and you have a VEC person who is there to oversee and make sure that it is done appropriately, but no, not the whole travelling busload of everybody there.

Ms BLANDTHORN — My question is an extension of Ros's question, and I guess it is not just young people in their workplaces but also people particularly, I would think, in low-paid jobs who may not have completed school or may be migrants who have come with whatever level of education they have had elsewhere. Is there a way that we can pair some of the campaigns that you already run with that kind of voter education in particularly those lower paid industries that are representative of the more disadvantaged types of workers?

Ms STRACKE — I could see us doing some work around that space. Our view is always that peer-to-peer education is the best way to do this. So in an ideal world, if I was going to talk blue sky, then I would say if we could get a cohort of workers and others who are happy to go out and do that kind of education, some training is offered around how that works and then they go out and replicate that in terms of particularly people from various language groups. We know that nearly 50 per cent of informal votes that are cast are not complete — the numbers are not right. We do have a particular system of requiring preferential voting and it is not valid unless you complete A, B, C — that you do all of those things.

So it is education around the formalities of voting in language with cohorts of people in workplaces, and we always think workplace education is a fantastic way to reach people. It is how we have reached people

to talk about issues like family violence. It is about going out and training workers. It is the same with gender violence campaigns that we run where we train a cohort of activists who then go back to their workplaces and have that further conversation, so it is a kind of peer-to-peer education process. We think that is a useful way to reach people, and we find it is the most persuasive way to have those conversations because people feel like they can ask questions.

It is not necessarily someone in an official suit who comes to the workplace and says 'This is how it is'. It is more engaging, and it is tailored to meet that particular cohort where they are in terms of their understanding of the processes and also their level of disengagement, about how empowered they feel to actually participate in the process. We would say that that would be a fantastic way to reach particularly workers or people in our community who are in workplaces but who do not necessarily have the education to understand the kind of nuance of the different kinds of voting that we have in the state.

Ms BLANDTHORN — That should not have to fall to organisations — like yours. Are there things that you think the VEC could do better to assist with that type of education?

Ms STRACKE — How much resourcing do you want to put into the VEC to do this? With these kinds of programs, that is an intensive kind of way to do it, because what you want to do is go to as many workplaces as you can and you want to go to as many spaces as you can, so community groups, where you can speak in their language. Ideally you would also do the same for community and ethnic groups, where you would ideally have a package that you could say to them 'This is information about voting. Can you deliver this in partnership with us?', and making sure it is delivered in an appropriate way but that it meets the requirements so that it is not lost in translation anywhere. So I think there are lots of ways that we can do that, working in partnership. There are lots of organisations that can do that working in partnership with the VEC. We think trade unions is one. We reach into every industry. We reach into many workplaces, but there are also different community groups that could do the same.

Ms PATTEN — I am going back to the bussing in of students at 400 high schools around the state. It is one thing to be going around to nursing homes and hospitals because the numbers are not to quite that level, but bringing students on an excursion to early polling, you might have to put some sausages on. I like the idea of that fear of missing out and I like the idea of seeing your peers do something, and I think there is something really good about that, but I think trying to get the VEC around to over 400 schools might be a bit of a challenge in the three-week early polling period that they have.

Ms STRACKE — Yes, again I would say how it rolls out in practice is something that we can talk about and look at in greater detail, but I think with young people we need to take it to them in some way, because they of all of the age cohorts are the least likely to participate in any process, even on issues that they are passionate about. We know that for instance they support marriage equality, but we also know in this postal process that they are the least likely at this moment to have participated. At least that is what the polling is telling us, so what that tells us is that there is a level of engagement that goes beyond just the concept of going somewhere and doing something, because that is just about ticking a box, putting it in an envelope and getting it in the mail over an extended period of time.

So there is a level of engagement that I think means that we have to go into new territory in terms of how we think about how we are going to get them in and engaged, because as they get older we also know that the next least likely age cohort to be participating is that next age cohort. So that is a group of young people who have moved into that next group who have not necessarily become engaged in that process. We have to do something because otherwise, as this next cohort moves on, are they more likely to enrol as time goes on? I do not know. So we need to do something now to address the fact that this is a cohort of people who feel very disengaged from the process and we have got to make it relevant to them, which means that is the educational component about civic education which says that their vote has meaning. It has purpose, it has meaning and it has a direct impact on their lives and the future. Then there is: how do we actually overcome the concepts or the formalities around voting, which is bringing it to them in some way. Now whether that is a voting box at every school, I do not know, but we have got to do something that makes it relevant, interesting and important to them.

Ms PATTEN — What about online voting?

Ms STRACKE — I am of a generation where I get anxious about emails and giving my banking details over the internet, so I am possibly the wrong person to ask about online voting because it makes me nervous. But, maybe, I think there are other ways we can do this to make it direct, immediate and relevant to them.

The CHAIR — Thank you very, very much for coming along today and for expanding on your submission. Victorian Trades Hall Council has been very good with its engagement with the Electoral Matters Committee, so I thank you for that and for participating in this parliamentary process. You will receive a copy of the Hansard transcript within the next two weeks or so, and you are free to make minor adjustments but obviously not to change issues of substance. Thank you very much.

Ms STRACKE — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.