

The Parliament of the People: A Survey of the Role of Parliamentary Education in Australian Parliaments Part I

Graham Spindler*

This paper sets out to review the range of activities of parliamentary education units in Australian Parliaments, indicating the contribution they make to the interaction of parliament and the people. It is based on a survey (appended) of Australian parliamentary education units conducted April-May 2008. Education units from six of the 10 parliamentary jurisdictions responded (Australian, NSW, Queensland, South Australian, Tasmanian and Western Australian parliaments).

Over the last two decades or so, all Australasian parliaments have incorporated a school and community educational role into their corporate goals and organisation. Impetus for this, and for electoral education, came partly through Senate Reports on Active Citizenship of 1988 and 1991^{1, 2}; growing international interest in and concern about civic education in both older and emerging democracies; and the *Whereas the People* report³ of 1994 commissioned by the Keating government. The latter report was largely funded and implemented as the *Discovering Democracy* program under the Howard government 1997–2004, and was followed by further Civics and Citizenship initiatives in 2004–2007. Over the same period, civics and citizenship education was adopted as one of the main national goals for schooling by all state, territory and federal curriculum authorities⁴ and incorporated into school curriculums in various ways. In NSW, Civics and Citizenship was included in School Certificate testing from 2002, and in 2004, national assessment in Civics and Citizenship was introduced.

These developments encouraged Australian parliaments — often in conjunction with state education departments — to establish specific education units, staffed either from the parliament or in a shared arrangement with another institution such

* Manager, Parliamentary Education Section, Parliament of NSW.

as the education system, courts, electoral or other government agency. In some cases, initial establishment predated many of the developments shown above, but those developments — particularly the curriculum changes — gave a specific, curriculum-centred rationale, role and status to Parliamentary educators in supporting school education.

Over time, most units have experienced various forms of restructuring and repositioning within the Parliament. With the exception of the Commonwealth Parliament, the units are small (3 staff or less). Most have either extended their role beyond school education or been established as part of a more broadly based unit within the parliament (e.g., community engagement, liaison, library, parliamentary procedure or other support services). Consequently, most units also have roles in varying degrees beyond tours and school or tertiary student education — roles in areas such as community education, teacher professional development, community engagement and protocol.

Parliamentary Education units — though varied in staffing, resources, placement within the organisation, role and range of activities — are underpinned by their common commitment to the importance of civics and citizenship education. The long-term impact of their activities may be difficult to measure meaningfully but all units have large throughputs of clients (mostly school students) and produce and distribute significant numbers of information resources. Since most operate on modest (or undefined) budgets, there can be little doubt that they return good value for their investments.

The contributors to this paper believe that the effectiveness of the major role played by education units in the engagement with and understanding of people and their parliaments is maximised when this role is recognised and made an integral part of the organisational aims and other strategies, and the broad communications policies of parliament. This appears to be the case in an increasing number of Australian parliaments. Education is not a sideline activity for students unrelated to parliament's role — even where an education unit primarily works with school students, it is obvious that students are the future (and in some cases current) voters and, in any case, are as much 'clients' of the parliament as anyone in the community. However, most education units do engage to varying degrees with the broader community, and this is an area which particularly offers many more opportunities for parliaments than have been taken up. Effective community engagement need not depend on expensive advertising or even on glossy publications, but will benefit by creating a culture and atmosphere of openness and through encouraging and facilitating active and informed citizenship. In particular, education activities offer a more neutral arena for parliaments to deliver messages to the community which focus on the significance, processes and relevance to the community of parliament and its members, without these messages being submerged in the political arena or under media-driven presentation of conflict and sensationalism.

Overview of the Survey

Six parliamentary education units responded — Commonwealth, NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. Following is a brief overview of responses.

Part 1: Programs for School Students

Understandably, this is the area of activity where education units have most in common. All conduct or support tours for school students as a major activity, generally involving thousands of students. Most incorporate some form of role play activity into the tours. All conduct or support student or youth parliaments, student conferences and seminars. Most conduct or support some form of youth leadership programs.

All publish a range of information and curriculum resources in print. All have produced videos for sale or free distribution, most recent productions being in DVD formats. Most manage education or for schools sections of their parliament's website. Only the Commonwealth PEO has a separate website.

Most conduct some form of indigenous or reconciliation programs — most extensively in Queensland and Western Australia.

Most conduct outreach programs outside of Parliament House — most extensively in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. A major component of this may relate to Regional Parliaments and some programs are conducted jointly with other bodies (e.g., courts, electoral educators).

Most coordinate or assist with small scale work experience programs.

Most seek to engage with or work in cooperation with outside organisations, most notably education departments and systems, but also other civic and resource and community organisations.

Part 2: Programs for School Teachers

All units provide some resources for teachers to use in classrooms, often in the form of information, teacher guides or classroom resource materials such as role plays, posters, DVDs. Most units participate in programs for teacher professional development, and pre-service teacher education. A few units initiate and conduct teacher professional development activities.

Part 3: Programs for Tertiary Studies

All offer some form of support for tertiary students, ranging from tours to occasional lectures in formal courses'

Most offer specific adult migrant education programs for English language students. Most operate some form of internship program at parliaments for university students. Typically these involve around 10–30 students each year. While not a high priority, most attend occasional conferences and may present papers. The most commonly attended conferences are the Parliamentary Educators Conference with ASPG next.

Part 4: Community Programs

The most diverse area of education unit offerings is in programs for the community. This is probably a reflection of the varied objectives, structures and staffing of the units. The location of education within the ‘Community Engagement’ structure and objectives of the Queensland Parliament, for instance, results in a much greater focus and reach in this area than other parliamentary education units. However, all units offer community programs.

All parliaments offer a range of regular community tours, many but not necessarily all of them conducted by education units. The focus tours may be on viewing sittings, procedure, architecture, history, artworks, meeting members, particular times of the day, etc. Many are conducted at the request and to meet the needs of community organisations.

All units offer a range of information for the community about Parliament in various formats including print, internet and DVD/Video (subtitled in some cases). In the case of Queensland parliament, this includes some ‘e-democracy’ elements.

Most parliaments provide some level of physical and communications access for people with disabilities. This is usually on a parliament-wide basis but may involve education units.

All state parliaments support YMCA Youth Parliaments and a few offer additional youth (other than school) programs. Some units offer elements or courses in electoral education, notably where no AEC Electoral Education Centre exists. At least one unit offers regular public community courses on parliament and participatory democracy, generally through community/evening colleges.

Most units are involved in or coordinate community events involving their parliaments. These may be open days or special celebrations at parliament house, or community-focussed activities which may involve parliament (shows, charity events, open museums, history or seniors weeks, etc).

Most units include specific multicultural and indigenous activities or programs. The Commonwealth PEO conducts outreach workshops at indigenous communities; Queensland is extensively involved in indigenous community events; several parliaments have nominated specific Indigenous areas; NSW offers its basic brochure in 17 community languages; WA offers culturally-focussed tours; several

units offer parliamentary and/or electoral workshops for adult ESL groups. Several units conduct extensive outreach education programs with a community element. A major community commitment for several units occurs where their parliaments hold regional sittings. These usually involve the development and conduct of extensive community information programs, displays, publications as well as education activities.

Units contribute to (or in the case of the Commonwealth, operate) websites which include substantial community content. Some units, particularly Queensland, are involved in preparing and/or mounting displays for special occasions.

Some units actively, notably Queensland, emphasise development of partnerships with community organisations. All units produce at least some low level marketing materials/souvenirs such as bookmarks. Queensland more actively produces and sells a wider range of souvenirs. On a few occasions marketing is through paid advertising (e.g., WA public tours).

Part 5: Programs for Business and Government

Most units offer special programs of some form on Parliament for government departments on request. Queensland and NSW conduct regular fee-paying programs, the latter being primarily marketed to the business community. The Commonwealth *Fellows Program* is open to government and business community applicants.

Part 6: Other Parliamentary Engagement Programs

Most units assist with official visitors and delegations at least occasionally, however the role of Queensland's Community Engagement Unit is far more extensive in this. Most units assist with Member and/or staff inductions and provision of resources to assist Members in community engagement, however the role of Queensland's Community Engagement Unit is far more extensive in this. Some units have some involvement in areas such as internal communications, committees and parliamentary history, however the role of Queensland's Community Engagement Unit is far more extensive in this. ▲

Contributors

Parliamentary Education Office, Parliament of Australia; Parliamentary Education Section, Parliament of NSW; Community Engagement section, Queensland Parliamentary Service; Parliamentary Education Officer, Parliament of South Australia; Second Clerk Assistant, Tasmanian Parliament; Parliamentary Education Office, Parliament of Western Australia.

Paper coordinated and commentary notes written by Graham Spindler and Daniela Giorgi, Parliamentary Education Section, Parliament of NSW.

References

- ^{1.} *Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations*, Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, AGPS Canberra 1988
- ^{2.} *Active Citizenship Revisited*, Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, AGPS Canberra 1991
- ^{3.} *Whereas the people ... Civics and Citizenship Education*, Report of the Civics Expert Group, AGPS, 1994
- ^{4.} The National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (*Adelaide Declaration*), agreed to by all State and Territory education ministers in 1999, state that students, when they leave school, should:
 - be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life (Goal 1.4);
 - have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives, and to accept responsibility for their own actions (Goal 1.3).