Civics and Citizenship Education in Australian Schools

A study of parent attitudes
Part I: Qualitative Phase

Prepared for

The Australian Parents Council

by

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in collaboration with
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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is the fruit of Stage One of a two-stage research project undertaken by Denis Muller & Associates, in collaboration with Irving Saulwick & Associates, for the Australian Parents Council (APC).

It is based on qualitative research conducted in all States and Territories of Australia between 3 and 12 November 1997.

The qualitative research consisted of 10 focus groups of parents with children at school. Participants were drawn from all three school sectors -- Independent, Catholic and Government. Recruitment was carried out by the State and Territory affiliate organisations of the APC in collaboration with the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and its State and Territory affiliates, to specifications designed by the consultants and approved by the APC.

The groups were conducted in Canberra, Sydney, Toowoomba, Darwin, Perth, Adelaide, Launceston and Melbourne.

In Melbourne and Sydney there were two groups, one drawn from parents of children at non-Government schools, and one from parents of children at Government schools.

In each other centre, the groups were combined from the non-Government and Government sectors.

Each group consisted of eight, or occasionally nine, participants, with broadly equal representation from the non-Government and Government sectors.

They were usually mixed gender, although one group consisted only of women. They consisted of people from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, and all groups had at least some participants who had been educated abroad and/or were immigrants to this country. The Darwin group had two Aboriginal participants.

However, we should say that almost inevitably, those who took part were particularly interested in the children's education, tended to come from middle-class households (although not all did) and tended to be involved in the activities of their children's schools to a greater extent than parents generally.

The focus groups were all conducted according to a Discussion Schedule drawn up by the consultants in collaboration with the Client. The groups were facilitated jointly by Denis Muller and Irving Saulwick, who have also jointly written this report.

The Discussion Schedule is given in Appendix A to this report.

Overheads highlighting important aspects of the Discovering Democracy programme were prepared by the consultants and approved by the Client. These were not circulated in advance but were used by the consultants during the focus group discussions to obtain reaction to specific aspects of the proposed programme.

The overheads are given in Appendix B.

Stimulus materials were prepared by the consultants, approved by the Client and circulated in advance to focus group participants. These materials consisted of a summary of the rationale for the Discovering Democracy, and a broad indication of its probable content.

The materials are given in Appendix C.

The findings from this qualitative stage of the study will be used to inform the development of a questionnaire for the quantitative stage, which is to be conducted in early 1998.

The consultants would like to pay tribute to the enthusiastic and efficient organisation on the ground in each of the centres. The people assigned to liaise with the consultants and the participants were unfailingly well-organised and hospitable. The facilities were all that could have been wished for.

We would like to thank the participants for giving up their time to come and talk with us. Their contributions were thoughtful, constructive, sometimes provocative and given frankly.

We would also like to thank the staff of the central office of the Australian Parents Council for the quality of their input into the preparation of the study and for their role in the organisational side of the work.

It is with pleasure that we now present our findings.

DENIS MULLER & ASSOCIATES
November 1997

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

As a prelude to this section of the report, we wish to state that there were very substantial consistencies across all groups in the views expressed, and in the general level of support for the principle of civics and citizenship education. Equally, there was very substantial consistency in views about the purpose and content of a civics and citizenship education.

These statements hold true whether the groups were sectorally mixed (as most were) or segregated (as in Sydney and Melbourne). They also hold true for the single group of "expert" parents, Group 2 -- Sydney, Government.

However, each group approached the questions from subtly different perspectives, and consequently shed subtly different light on them. We have taken pains to report these subtleties in all their shades.

1. Most parents either did not learn very much at all about their country's history and institutions when at school in Australia, or simply learnt about 'explorers and dates'. Some believe that they were given a distorted view of history, one which essentially looked at history through the eyes of a triumphalist British Empire. Few can recall learning much about events after Federation. Even fewer can recall being taught about contemporary or near contemporary events. While there are some notable exceptions, most parents say that they left school knowing very little about how Australia is governed, and how the institutions of government work. Most say that they did acquire this knowledge later, although some say that there are still major gaps. In retrospect, they would like to have been better educated on these matters at school.

2. When they did leave school with this knowledge, it was more likely to have come from the home than from school. Some report growing up in homes where discussion about politics and current affairs was vigorous. Some of these people accepted the political and social values of their parents, others rebelled against them. But most look back with gratitude that their parents introduced them to this area of knowledge. Others report that politics (with sex and sometimes religion) were taboo subjects. One woman said: 'I would not have dared ask my parents how they voted'. This would not have been an isolated experience. Children who did not hear discussions about current affairs and politics at home say that it took them a long time to understand how government and our institutions work. Some are still hazy about it.

3. In most cases they believe that their children are being better educated about the political process than they were (although, as we have seen, their own education is remembered as being very modest). They are glad about this. They see it as an essential, indeed as a core, part of their children's education. Some, who have the simple view that there really is not too much to learn (although what there is, is important) wonder whether it is not already being covered adequately, and whether a special subject is necessary -- particularly one which extends over so many years.

4. When asked about the best features of Australian democracy, most start by talking about freedom. They see Australia as a free country and Australians as enjoying freedom. They speak of freedom to say and do what one wants; to live and to travel where one wants; to vote. Other things mentioned include the belief that this is a relatively peaceful and safe country, free from the racial and civil strife which afflicts many others, and that people have the protection of the law.

5. Our respondents were less able or less prepared to discuss possible weaknesses in the Australian democracy. Some criticised our politicians, some criticised particular policies they did not like, but not too many fundamental criticisms were offered. Many did, however, criticise the way our indigenous people had been treated: this theme arose unprompted and with conviction time and again throughout our study.

6. Many of our respondents were involved with their school in one way or another, usually as interested participants in their P & C. To this extent they were perhaps atypical of the total parent population, many of whom may not be involved at all. Some were also involved in other community organisations, although many were not.

7. They stressed again and again that their children should be taught about their society and their rights and obligations in it. Many lamented that people tended these days to be self-absorbed and self-interested. They looked back with some nostalgia and a palpable sense of loss at times when people, in their view, had a wider sense of community and of communal responsibility. They are of the generation which was galvanised by a major issue such as Australian participation in the Vietnam War.

8. They seem uncomfortable with the knowledge that individualism has been a dominant influence in public policy formulation since the early 1980s. (This idea was famously captured my Margaret Thatcher when she said: 'There is no such thing as society -- we are merely a collection of individuals.') This proposition is not accepted by ordinary Australians. Indeed they have a lively sense of belonging to a society and a feeling that this belonging both confers rights and imposes obligations -- particularly the obligation to participate in one way or another in the socio-political process. Many were ambivalent about this obligation: some did not know

how to participate; some thought that participation was fruitless because one could not influence events; some were too busy or too self-absorbed or too uninterested to become involved; some had been seared by the process of involvement. Some looked askance at 'activists', seeing many of them as extremists whose motives could not necessarily be trusted. In summary, they agreed with the principle of participatory democracy, but many were wary of it in practice.

9. Australian parents are proud of their country. They are particularly proud of its freedoms. They want their children to be similarly proud of it. They know that Australians don't shout about this pride, but believe that nonetheless it lies deep in the Australian psyche. Some would like it to be more overtly expressed. Moreover, they crave a more tangible expression of belonging to a nation which coheres around some identifiable unifying force, idea, identity or purpose.

10. At the same time, while they feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to Australia, and wish to see this shared and exhibited by their fellow Australians, many (perhaps most) explicitly reject nationalistic and jingoistic rhetoric and symbolism. Their generally positive response to the concept of civics and citizenship education, taken together with these overarching needs suggest to us that such a programme has the potential to contribute, in the minds of parents, to the development of a healthier and more tangible sense of community, stronger national identity, more cohesive national unity and to a process of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

11. They want it both to impart knowledge about 'how the system works' so that their children can make informed political judgments and know how to participate if they wish to, and to foster a sense of national unity and national identity which is built around an understanding and acceptance of common values, and the institutions that underpin them. These values include the concept that all people are equal, should be treated as equal, and should have equal rights under the law.

12. However, there is a caveat. Because people are essentially pragmatic and utilitarian, and are certainly not used to thinking in abstract terms, they require the content of civics and citizenship education to be practical, relevant and close to home.

13. Many believe that unless it is grounded in ways which are seen by the students to be relevant to their lives it will not come alive for them and therefore not succeed. This is why many would like the civics and citizenship programme to draw on local experience or local institutions -- so that students may more easily see the relevance of what they are learning to their own lives.

14. Some see a programme based on a national curriculum as violating this principle. Others see a national approach as desirable -- so that all children are offered all that should be offered, and offered it essentially in the same way. Still others see a synthesis -- a national approach expressed through an overall framework, but with local content used to deliver common outcomes.

15. There is an issue which causes them misgivings about this programme. This is about bias among teachers. It arises from their own experience. Many parents believe that this programme is a sensitive one. They see it as teaching values as well as facts. Some are worried that teachers may impart their own values (read biases) to the students, or place their own personal interpretation on the facts. Others argue that young people are sufficiently robust to form their own judgments, no matter what teachers may say, particularly if the programme encourages them to 'ask questions' and to approach learning with in inquisitive and open mind. These people see this as a particularly valuable, as well as a self-correcting, component of the programme. Still others see teacher training as a critical part of the programme, partly to educate them and train them in the programme, and partly in the hope that it will reduce what they see as the possible danger of bias.

16. One other matter was of major concern to parents. They see the current school curriculum as crowded. They do not want to put their children under more pressure. While they see the proposed programme as a very important core area of learning, rating just below the three R's (perhaps rating seven or eight on a 10-point scale of importance) they don't quite know what should be dropped to accommodate it. Some suggest that it is just a matter of reorganising the current curriculum. Others say the proposed programme seems to overlap with a lot of subjects. They are confused about how to give it the position it deserves without unduly overloading an already stretched curriculum. They need to be shown how the programme will fit in.

17. Allied to this -- but the obverse of it -- parents have wide-ranging expectations about what a civics and citizenship education programme could deliver. The current parameters of the programme may profitably be looked at in the light of these expectations. Parents want two broad outcomes from such a programme. First, at the level of the individual child, they want their child equipped to understand and participate in the political life of the nation. At what might be thought of as the "skills" level, however, they think of civics and citizenship education virtually only in terms of the political and legal processes, rather than in a wider social sense. However, there is a second level, where parents think about the potential outcomes of the programme for Australian society as a whole. Here, as we have stated above, they think well beyond the political and legal processes. They want a civics and citizenship education programme to inculcate the core values they see as lying at the heart of

what it means to be Australian. They want it to strengthen national identity, contribute to reconciliation between white and indigenous Australians, and be a force for national unity. Looked at from this perspective, they really do want more for their children than just the "skills". They want them to absorb the values, attitudes and beliefs that will enable them to create an Australia which, for today's parents, is more an aspiration than a reality.

3. ISSUES AND HYPOTHESES

A number of clear issues emerged from this qualitative phase of the study, enabling us to develop some hypotheses which we believe are persuasively supported by the findings. We also believe they will enable us, in collaboration with the Client, to develop an insightful questionnaire for the quantitative phase.

1. There is broad support among parents for the concept of a civics and citizenship education programme. They believe that schools do a better job of civics education now than when they were at school -- but that this is not saying much.

2. There is little argument about some of the central features of the proposed programme -- its title, its Years 4 to 10 span, its parameters and objectives.

3. It is unanimously accepted that it should be delivered within a national framework, but local content is favoured by many as a means of making it accessible, relevant and practical for students.

4. Many purposes are envisaged for the programme, some of which may lie outside the current boundaries of the programme:

   To prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens;

   To equip and encourage them to participate in community affairs;

   To give them a sense of belonging to Australia, and inculcate a sense of quiet pride in their country;

   To contribute to a stronger sense of national identity and unity;

   To contribute to the advancement of the reconciliation process;

   To contribute to the integration of disparate groups.

5. There is concern about possible bias in the way the subject is taught.

6. There is confusion about how the programme will fit into what it widely perceived to an already over-crowded curriculum, either as a stand-alone subject or as integrated into existing subjects.

7. There are major reservations about a citizenship ceremony, although a minority were quite attracted to it. There is wider -- though far from unanimous -- support for some kind of graduation from the civics and citizenship programme.

4. REFLECTIONS ON THE GROUPS

GROUP 1: CANBERRA 3/11/97

This group of six women and three men were extremely interested in our subject and prepared to talk about it at length.

They were diverse in background and outlook, although most were tertiary trained. While they were not, as far as we could ascertain, political activists, they were interested in social trends and social issues. Although we did not ask them specifically about their political views or allegiances, their views seemed to cover the political spectrum, from very conservative to quite (but not doctrinally) radical.

Most wanted their children to know more about their own society. Most thought that this programme would assist to build this knowledge. But most also did not want the instruction to produce 'one-eyed nationalists'.

They exhibited an interesting blend of cynicism about politics and the political players, including (in some cases) political or social activists, some of whom they saw as dishonest, and hope or idealism about the world they would like to see for their children. They were proud of their country but at the same time proclaimed their internationalism. Most certainly saw no contradiction in this position.

GROUP 2: SYDNEY 4/11/97

These were the true radicals -- confronting, argumentative, earnest, articulate, without doubts, committed, and generally well informed about the affairs of their own school -- whose views were based on well developed views of society, education and the responsibilities of teachers, students and citizens within it.

They were mainly members of the executive of the NSW Council of State School Organisations. They had been told that the consultants wanted to speak with a group of 'ordinary' parents with children in government schools. It was no accident that they did not deliver such people, but came themselves. They wanted to be heard.

They commenced by questioning the facilitators about the legitimacy of the process and about the background biographical data sought by them. It was as though they wanted in some way to control the process -- and not to play according to rules they had no part in formulating or at least endorsing. After their questions had been answered, they participated robustly in the discussion.

They saw education as a critical step in the acculturation process. Education, they seemed to say, was not so much about assimilating facts as it was about learning how to control one's life. It was also, to them, about learning to exercise power in one's own interests. They viewed the civics programme through this framework, and found it somewhat wanting.

Learning, to them, is most effective when the student sees the relevance of the subject to themselves, and learns by doing. The approach, in their view, should be designed with this in mind. They could not see evidence that it had been.

They asserted that their view represented the views, or at least the interests, of their members.

GROUP 3: SYDNEY 4/11/97

This group of parents with children in private Catholic and non-Catholic church schools were, despite their ages, 'old fashioned' conservatives -- not old fashioned in the pejorative sense, but in the sense that they supported some ideas and practices which were no longer often talked about. They lamented this.

They would like to see children taught to honour their country, to sing the national anthem and to salute and honour the flag. They would like to see migrants 'become more Australian' and accept the 'Australian' way of doing things. They would like to see less emphasis on multiculturalism and more on the unity of all Australians.

They favour simple civics education on these matters. They want this education to help make children proud to be Australian.

They were somewhat concerned about the ability of teachers to teach this subject without introducing their own (perhaps radical) biases.

They suggested changes to the proposed syllabus to exemplify their thoughts: they suggested that we should teach tolerance 'so long as it is not at our expense'; rights should be taught, but 'we are having our hands tapped and the newcomers are not'; Christian moral values should be taught. They also thought that the programme was 'too historical' -- it should concentrate more on 'the now'.

We sense that these people are worried about the changes to Australian society which they see around them. They are nostalgic for the old verities. If education could help to reintroduce them, or halt the slide away from them, they would be delighted. But we also sensed that they are not confident that it can.

GROUP 4: TOOWOOMBA 5/11/97

This group of six women and one man was uneven: one or two had thought about our subject in a penetrating if non-intellectual way, two or three had not thought about it very much but brought insights based on their intelligence and perceptions none-the-less, and two or three were able to make only limited comments on our subject.

Their socio-political attitudes defied the normal stereotyping: they supported the principle of community action but thought that many demonstrators were exhibitionists or dishonest; they thought that many people on welfare were rorting the system and yet were critical of the way we have treated our Aboriginal citizens.

Although some were involved with parent organisations, and were active in seeking to advance the interests the education sector, in the main they were politically unsophisticated: they claimed never to have been taught much and not to know much about how the political and institutional system works, and did not see this as a major problem. Perhaps this was because they had little faith in their political leaders.

They were perhaps representative of mainstream Australia: reasonably open-minded people who have their social and political blind spots; essentially uninvolved and yet somehow uncomfortable with the way Australia is governed; more concerned with their own lives than with getting involved in the big issues of state; likely to shift their political allegiances from time to time without too much hope that the change will make much difference, and with little ambition for their children to be any different.

Like most Australians, these people were pragmatists and realists. They shun theory and ideology. They think that learning should be practical. And they think that people will only learn when they are interested and can see the relevance of what they are being taught. Some were not so sure that this programme could be made relevant enough to interest students.

GROUP 5: DARWIN 6/11/97

Place has been a major factor in shaping the views of these six women and two men. This was true, not only of the two indigenous members of the group, but also of the others, two of whom had come from New Zealand.

While these people saw themselves as proudly Australian, their self image was more particularly as Territorians. Their comments were informed by this perspective.

They too were pragmatic. They wanted information which could be useful to them, or which reinforced and deepened their sense of place.

They had a sense that citizens these days were self-absorbed to the point of myopia: that most were concerned only with themselves and not with the interests of the wider community. They looked back with some nostalgia to the days when citizens had come together to support or oppose some great cause. Perhaps today there were few great causes, or perhaps people were too busy just surviving. Some said they had lost heart because the fight was too hard to win, particularly for small people who did not know where the levers of power were, let alone how to pull them.

If this programme is to go ahead, they would want it grounded in practical information, based particularly on their own community. For them, it should be an informative song line. Its philosophic base should be respect for all people.

GROUP 6: PERTH 9/11/97

These five men and two women who live in Perth were well educated, articulate, involved parents. Most were active on their school parents committee. They were intensely interested in education but were not educational experts. They were quintessential middle Australia.

They saw the proposed initiative as very important, mainly because they saw modest participation in some aspect of society as both a privilege and an obligation. Although some were cynical (to use their word) of politicians, they were not cynical about the democratic process as a whole. They thought that the individual, acting alone or in concert with others, could make a difference. They felt it was entirely possible and very necessary to educate Australian children in this tradition.

One or two who had been born and educated or lived overseas emphasised what they saw as the strength of Australian society -- freedom to say and do what one wanted, and to participate in the political process.

GROUP 7: ADELAIDE 10/11/97

This group was difficult to categorise meaningfully. They were ordinary Australians, a number of whom had been raised in the country. They were office assistant, policeman, cashier, housekeeper, nurse, car plant scheduler, and a woman working with her husband in a cabinet-making business. They were Catholic, Lutheran and people who did not claim affiliation. Their children were in the three school sectors.

Some had become social activists, some had not. Some looked back in a search for their values, some looked to the present. All recognised that society was changing. They all wanted to see a unified and proud Australia which recognised but did not emphasise differences. One said: (I was taught) you are Catholic, rather than you are Australian'.

They had learnt about their own society piecemeal, in the process of living: they would like their children to know more and looked to the school as well as to the home to impart this information.

They exhibited an interesting blend of individualism and communalism, of contemporary sensitivities and of conservative values derived from their past. They wanted people to rely on themselves economically, and not 'bludge' on the state, but they also wanted people to accept that each one had an obligation to contribute to the community in one way or another, and to be tolerant of difference, particularly towards their fellow Aboriginal citizens.

GROUP 8: LAUNCESTON 11/11/97

This group was particularly interesting for the insight it offered about the process and the dynamics of communication.

In the main it was made up of typical citizens: interested in their children's education, with some but not intimate knowledge of the workings of government and the political process, believing that it was appropriate for people to be involved in community activities, but critical of, and uncomfortable with, 'extremist activists'. They had the view that education about civics and citizenship was important, was not too complicated, should not take too much time and was essentially being covered in their schools at the moment. They were, however, searching for a way to express their 'Australianism'. They were, as have been most of our respondents, pragmatic and non-conceptual in their thinking.

One of their number was different: he was a Protestant minister who had been taught to think conceptually. He challenged them, not directly, but in what he said and in the concepts which emerged. He particularly wanted to include value concepts into the programme. He was not arguing for his own Christian values, but he did argue that much of Australian life had been informed by Christian beliefs, and that one could not understand Australian history or politics without looking at these influences.

This in turn stimulated contributions by other group members about the effects of multiculturalism on the Australian culture, and about the need to understand the beliefs and values of the indigenous people if a true picture of Australian society was to be developed.

GROUP 9: MELBOURNE 12/11/97

This group of mothers (it included no men) with children in Government schools were earnest people who worked mainly in the helping professions: occupational therapy, social work, social welfare, nurse, volunteer work. A couple of others worked in other professional jobs.

One or two had passionate views about the socio-political environment (although their views were quite dissimilar), others were quietly interested. Some had learnt about Australia and civic matters from a particularly engaging teacher, some because they grew up in a time of political and social turmoil and controversy.

While some were cynical about the ability of ordinary people to obtain access to power and exert influence over decisions, they all supported the proposed programme. They did, however, have their reservations: they saw the curriculum as very crowded, and wondered how this additional programme could be fitted in.

GROUP 10: MELBOURNE 12/11/97

This group of Melbourne middle class professionals (except for one woman whose husband was a truck driver) whose children were in independent Catholic and non-Catholic church schools were, with one or two exceptions, conservative, complacent, comfortable, and not involved (outside of work) in their society.

While they thought that civics education was important they certainly were not passionate about it, nor did they think that it involved a major task. They wondered why it could not be compressed, or merged with other subjects. They were looking for the minimalist option.

Except for one minister of religion among them, and one woman of Middle Eastern background, they seemed disinclined to talk about ideas or issues or problems in society. It was as though they lived lives which were self-sufficient and untouched by social forces.

5. CONTENT ANALYSIS

This content analysis is presented in two parts.

Part I reports and analyses a general discussion about:

- The sort of schooling the participants themselves had received in the field of civics and citizenship;
- What the major gaps were in their knowledge about these matters when they left school;
- What they thought about their children's current education in this field;
- Their view about participation in society and their views about political activism;
- Their views about the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian democracy;
- Their views about the relative importance of civics and citizenship education, and
- What a good civics and citizenship education might consist of.

Part II reports the discussion about the central tenets and some of the specifics of the Discovering Democracy programme.

5.1 PART I: GENERAL DISCUSSION

We opened each group discussion by asking participants to recall:

- **What they personally had been taught at school about history, geography, politics, and the legal system;**
- **How satisfied they were with what they had been taught, and**
- **What should have been taught.**

Summary

The vast majority of our participants were jaundiced and disillusioned about the quality of their own education in these fields.

Not only had they had left school totally unprepared for citizenship but in many cases they had been bored to the point of alienation by anything to do with politics or the political process.

They had been taught by rote about the explorers, about British settlement, about the history of England -- mainly the names and dates of kings and queens. They had been given basic facts such as the number of seats in the House of Representatives, and the names of rivers.

There had been the occasional excursion to Parliament or the local council, but for many it all seemed irrelevant. They could not see the remotest connection between the political process and their own lives.

Those who had taken history at secondary school had been exposed in some detail to the history of many other nations -- France, Russia, China, Japan, the United States -- but not Australia's.

Worse still -- and some respondents became quite angry at the recollection -- many felt they had been taught a biased, distorted, incomplete and Anglo-centric version of Australian history.

This had denied them a proper understanding of Aboriginal issues, something that is clearly on the minds of many respondents at this time when issues of land rights and reconciliation are prominent on the national agenda.

They also feel they missed out on learning how the political process worked, and on being exposed to alternatives to the prevailing Menzian Liberal values then dominant in Australia.

Many had forsaken any further interest in politics. Others had been politically awakened either by their families -- especially where their fathers had been politically opinionated -- or by large issues such as the Vietnam War or the Dismissal which had engulfed Australia during their adolescence or young adulthood.

Others again had been awakened by travel, reading, tertiary study, or by experience.

A few said they felt they had been well served by individual teachers whose passion, knowledge and imaginative presentation had aroused and held their interest.

For most, however, their learning on these topics had ended in primary school. There had been no place for it in the secondary curriculum except for those who took an elective subject which covered it.

What the participants said

We were taught names, dates, events, and we learned them by rote. It was boring.

We weren't taught how government works.

It was simplistic.

We had one exciting excursion to Parliament House.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

We were taught about rivers in geography.

In history, it was explorers and Aborigines, nothing about democracy, no critical analysis, nothing about the judiciary or the media. It was mostly holes.

We learnt facts by heart -- then forgot them.

You were told, this is how you vote and how you think.

In Year 6 we learnt there were two parties -- one good (Menzies), the other bad. Alternative information was banned, for example, alternatives to the Domino Theory (as a rationale for Australia's involvement in Vietnam).

Most of my political education was at home with my father. He was particularly one-eyed. I became "the other side".

I was taught about White Australia, British imperialism and colonialism. In primary school we learnt quite a lot about the political system.

-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS)

In 6th class we were taught about how federation came about, the House of Representatives, the federal system, why there are territories and states.

In later primary school we learnt about the two Houses, who was Prime Minister and Premier.

I got educated through the university of life.

Being called up (for national service) made me aware of government and what it could do.

I tried to avoid the draft (into the South African security forces). I hated my (South African) government and questioned what's going on here.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS)

It was not very interesting and didn't seem relevant.

I hated history and civics. The teachers were boring.

There was not a skerrick of legal studies. And in history we were taught a lot of rubbish about Captain Cook and the Aborigines. It was a bit like cowboys and Indians -- the Aborigines were the baddies.

We're a very political family and had great family discussions. But history let me down.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

We learnt a lot about the English kings and queens. It wasn't relevant.

We did a lot of projects on other countries but not much about Australia.

Boring.

We did ancient English history and the explorers of Australia.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

We learnt very little.

It was irrelevant. Why learn about this bloke who sails up a river?

We studied Chinese and French history.

Gold rushes were very boring.

I found history interesting but there were gross distortions of fact. It makes bigots of us.

I was taught Truganini was the last Tasmanian Aborigine. Most of it was crap. It led us to places we should not have been led.

My teacher said there was no White Australia Policy.

In South Africa, history was a means of indoctrination, but it's not so much of a danger here.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

I remember learning a lot of Anglo history -- dates of kings and so on -- as though it were our own.

There was not a lot of emphasis on history at all, and nothing whatsoever about government. I came out of school not even knowing the words of the national anthem.

I came out of school with no knowledge of these things.

There was an emphasis on patriotic-type attitudes -- assembly, salute the flag. I don't see it as something that should have been missed out on.

I did study Australian history in high school. I surprise myself with what I remember. My grandfather and father fought in the world wars and I developed pride in the Anzacs, real pride, and knowledge came through that.

That's exactly where my knowledge came from -- the Anzacs and my family. It was really sad because they passed on all their prejudices. Probably I realised (they were prejudices) when I travelled overseas and had something to weigh it up.

We used to put down the "wogs" as we called them, yet when I went to London all the Australians were living ten to a room like the Greeks here. I had to find out for myself about what had really been done to the Aborigines. I wasn't taught that through the school system.

Most of my history was Captain Cook, nothing about the Aborigines. You had your Queen, your European history and did your assembly. I knew the Ten Commandments but not who the Prime Minister was or the day Australia was founded.

I was supposed to vote at 18 but didn't know anything about it. I just followed who Mum and Dad voted for.

A lot of the things I know about the house of Representatives etcetera I learned in business college.

I finished up in a political campaign not knowing who the Leader of the Opposition was. I'm nearly halfway through my life. That's terrible.

We had bits of Anglicised Aboriginal history in primary school, and the major dates -- the gold rush. It was a very masculine side of Australian history, very English-dominated. But I feel I cam out knowing about voting and basic party structures. I had a sense you did think for yourself.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

I learnt some Australian history -- explorers, the gold rush, Eureka, a bit about federation, in secondary school. History was one of my favourite subjects.

Australian history was mainly about British settlement, about how the Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct. We had almost as much on American history and geography.

In high school, learning about government was fairly dry. We didn't read newspapers, or sit around debating or having mock elections. We were not really encouraged to use it (the political process) or experiment with it or imagine ourselves as part of the process.

Basically it was the gold rush, Captain Cook.

Mine was similar -- explorers, first settlement, white triumphalist history, no sense of what happened to the Aborigines. There was lots of 19th Century history but no First or Second World War or Vietnam.

We had quite diverse discussions on different levels of government. I was at high school during Vietnam. It was such an upheaval that kids got an idea of what government upheaval was like. Vince Gair came to the school and argued for Vietnam.

In third year at high school we learnt about the structure of government. We had a tremendous teacher. You had to read the paper every morning to be ready for the bombardment!

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

I learnt no history in high school, but in social studies in primary school we learnt about the House of Representatives but it didn't mean much -- it seemed so far away.

I learnt nothing about civics in my entire school education.

We did a bit of British history -- Magna Carta and King John -- but we didn't cover Australia.

We did bits of British and Australian history, but what was presented about Aborigines was very much the missionary perspective. We did do things about the House of Representatives but it meant nothing. It didn't feel it belonged to us. We didn't learn political thinking. It was factual, not contextual, and I didn't remember it.

It was different for me. I had a very enthusiastic teacher and was at school in Queensland during the Joh years. We knew what was going on mainly because of the teacher's enthusiasm. She'd be one of the very few teachers that I'd want to learn more from.

It was hard to understand how any of the things we were learning could have any possible effect on you.

I had a pretty good grip on the levels of government. We did an excursion to the town hall, learnt about the Constitution. I liked it so I soaked it up. But as far as being a responsible citizen, that came from my family.

When I enrolled (to vote) I felt dreadfully uninformed.

We did Aborigines, the first fleet, and touched on government, but it wasn't until I did my nursing degree that I learnt about the Constitution and different forms of government -- and that there were types of government different from ours. I thought, 'Goodness me'.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS)

We were given material to memorise about hierarchy, numbers of members in the legislative and executive councils of the Hong Kong government (respondent educated in Hong Kong). It was useful as basic information. I don't see my daughter getting it (in Australia).

We had a thorough course on the general political framework -- the Houses' roles and numbers. I understood what they meant and how they worked.

Not for me. The fathers of federation were a big deal, the battle for power among the states. I have a very strong recollection of my Year 8 history teacher. I thought it was useful.

In Grade 5 I had a teacher who talked about history, the colonial situation, the effect of unions.

The thing that really grabbed me was the lives of the explorers who roughed it, some surviving, some not. I can go to those stories now and warm to them.

I just learnt the tail-end of the story -- the good bits happened before 1900 and the end was federation.

It wasn't contemporary.

I wasn't taught much at all -- mainly British, days of Empire and all that.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

We then asked participants:

- **What did they feel were the major gaps, if any, in their knowledge about their country's history, geography, political and legal systems;**
- **What, if anything, they had done about filling in any such gaps, and**
- **Whether they felt there were still gaps in their knowledge about these matters.**

Summary

Looking back from the vantage point of experience and adulthood, nearly all our respondents saw yawning gaps in their own education in this area.

It had left them with:

No understanding about the way the main parties differed in their policy approach;

No sense of the meaning of "representative democracy", that politicians actually represent the citizen and are accessible to the citizen;

No connection between their own lives and the processes of government or the law;

Scant knowledge of Australian history since Federation, particularly of Australia's involvement in the World Wars, much less anything more contemporary than that;

No appreciation or understanding of how other systems of government worked, such as totalitarian, socialist or communist forms of government;

Little, if any, understanding of issues relating to Aborigines;

> No sense of how the events of history had affected the lives of ordinary people, especially those who lived through the wars or the Depression.

All in all, they laid a comprehensive indictment against the education system of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in these fields.

The effects of this differed from person to person.

Some had sworn a mighty oath that their own children would not emerge into adulthood as ill-prepared as they had been, and were themselves educating their children in these matters where they saw the school system failing.

Others had just simmered. This research allowed them to give vent to their feelings -- which they did without hesitation.

Others, feeling they had been gulled by parents and school system alike, had been radicalised and politicised.

It was a common experience that history, geography and social studies were confined to primary school or, at best, lower secondary, and that the system of "streaming" eliminated this field of study for many students in the sciences.

A few -- a very small minority -- were content with what they had been taught, and were inclined to think that schools were still coping adequately in these areas.

For some, the gaps had been partly filled by picking up knowledge and ideas from parents, but this had been a two-edged sword. Some were glad of the chance to engage with political discussion with their parents, but others felt that the school system had left them vulnerable to being manipulated politically -- especially by strongly opinionated fathers.

Many were conscious of having made a deliberate effort to fill in the gaps in their formal education.

The main methods were:

To take an interest in politics, even if they were not personally active;

To watch television and read newspapers;

To read widely;

To become active in movements such as the Vietnam Moratorium;

To take a politics course at university;

By observation and experience.

Most felt that, as a result, they were reasonably well-informed now, although a few felt they had remained irremediably ignorant and naive. They were not comfortable about this.

Some thought that schools were doing a better job nowadays and that their own children's knowledge about these things was better than their own.

On the other hand, there was a perception that today's young people were growing up at a time when there were no great issues to awaken them politically.

There was also a distinct level of disapproval of the way politicians behaved, hardening into cynicism in some cases.

Some respondents looked to the example of the United States where citizenship is seen to have a place at the forefront of schooling. Respondents had mixed feelings about the US model. Some thought it inspired national pride and stimulated interest in citizenship, but others thought it was unpalatably jingoistic, and preferred the more laid-back Australian expressions of national pride.

What the participants said

If I had better grounding, I could make better judgments.

I rebelled against what my parents raised me to be.

My father sent me to vote absentee -- for the candidate of his choice!

You pick it up informally with a reasonable amount of effort.

I learnt from home.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

I had no understanding about the policies of different parties.

What were the gaps? Everything.

We learnt only a White Anglo-Saxon middle-class perspective.

Perhaps I learnt something at uni -- looking at different ways of looking at society.

I learnt what I could from TV, and I developed a love of biographies.

I became engaged in the (Vietnam) Moratorium and (Aboriginal) land rights.

-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT)

There was no sense of the politicians representing me.

It (the political process) seemed to have nothing to do with everyday life.

It wasn't something that involves us.

It was (as remote as) the Pope in Rome

We should have been taught more Australian history.

It have been good to learn how other countries were governed.

Whitlam? Supply? I didn't know what it was all about.

I didn't see or know anything about the Aborigines.

I didn't see one until I went to work in Redfern.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

The separation of powers -- I learnt that through Joh!

I'm not familiar with it even now.

I like to read the paper, hear about what's happening.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

It's very difficult to understand the concept of government. I never saw Parliament on TV, I didn't know any politicians, didn't know about the Upper House and Lower House. I wished I could understand it more.

I would have liked to know how to use your local Member.

It's really important to know the process of participation and the resources that the Government has available. For example, we wanted to build something for the schools but had no idea where the funding would come from, or where you could go, or how to word things. It's important. It's such a minefield.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

We were given facts without interpretation.

I didn't get an overall appreciation of government-and-citizen relations.

I had no insight or understanding. We learnt by rote. The political system was never explained, and you don't understand it until you're involved in politics. There was no place for women. They were kept barefoot and pregnant. There was no push to make us into human beings.

I had to learn this (politics etc) after I finished tertiary education.

You educate yourself as you go along.

The Whitlam sacking was a benchmark. I all of a sudden sat up and looked.

It was similar to Vietnam.

Because of post-War immigration, the school was full of immigrants. I became tolerant because so many were different, not through education.

I came to it (history and politics) through English and literature.

US citizenship starts at kinder. It's good and powerful.

You under-estimate the love that Australians have for Australia. We may not know the words to the national anthem, but . . .

In the US they have all that surface stuff, but we have it (the substance).

In not showing it openly, it tends to be hidden and not become part of the community.

It (the US model) would worry me. The strength of feeling about an "us" is based upon there being a "them".

We have it (patriotism) harmlessly.

There's been no war here. It's been a fairly placid settlement.

But a lot of our history is denied.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

A void, a complete void in that area.

I had a reasonably sound feeling of a democratic white society. It was lacking a perception about what a dictatorship is, concepts like socialism and communism. You could have a comparative approach.

I'd say I've been politically naive all my life. I don't recall any political education at all. I also came from a family that only voted one way. There were the goodies and the baddies.

I would have enjoyed being informed about our Constitution and politics, where we came from, how we got there, how I fit in. I had Jewish friends and they were concerned about the Holocaust, but I would have liked these things from an Australian perspective. I wish it was jammed down my throat a bit like biology and geography. That's Australia, and it means something to us.

Do you remember the Vietnam protests? You had to be aware of the input you could have. That made us have an interest, because it was something that affected your families.

The trouble is, we were adult by the time we got there.

There's a lack of representation (by ordinary people) in lots of areas because of the lack of knowledge among the main mass of people. Only the people with a skill in that area feel confident to feed in. I discovered that in the campaign I ran. People

didn't want to become involved because they didn't feel they could make a difference: "There's nothing I can do"

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

I would have liked to have gone more into World War One and Two. My children ask why we celebrate Anzac Day. That's a big gap.

It would have been very helpful to have been taught the implications of history. If I'd been taught what it was like to actually live through the Depression and the attitudes that followed - a great disciplined attitude to money. Why does Bruce Ruxton hold the views he does? Some of our history impacted us to the core of our being. I wanted to understand these things.

We weren't encouraged to experiment and have mock elections or anything. You have to vote and decide on a whole range of issues, and the issues weren't there either. It was history but not recent. Australia had changed and it wasn't (any longer) the country we had learned about. There was not enough topical stuff.

I enjoy reading about politics: that carried through from high school. It's been an ongoing thing all my life and I don't feel I missed out anywhere. My father was in the Army and in Vietnam so I grew up with him away and knew about the wars.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Visiting the local council or parliament house would have made it come alive.

I enrolled in politics at uni not really knowing what politics was. I thought, I should have learnt this in primary school -- what it means to be a citizen, what the state is. I thought of politics as being "out there", not as a personal thing. I became really frustrated at what I had not learnt. My family only talked about politics at election time, but nothing about how politics affected me, or about philosophy.

Religion and politics were not talked about at home. I didn't know who my parents voted for.

I learnt a lot from novels and TV programmes what life was like for people.

Experiential.

My parents handed out how-to-vote cards for DLP. That's how I learnt.

People don't know what they can do. They feel powerless and don't know what steps to take. They're not good at getting information.

I find it the opposite to being a good citizen if you don't see yourself as part of society. Cynicism is coming out in primary school. It's really sad.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

We were certainly taught how the political system worked, but I wish I'd been taught how the Houses worked. That's quite distinct from history. I had to learn as an adult. I would have been more aware and active. I have tried to teach my children: I have taken them to the local library to learn about the federal system, tiers of government and so on. They resisted a bit, but they've got a vague idea, in addition to their schoolwork.

We focused a lot on Egypt, but not Asia, America, places I need to know about as an adult.

There was no study or analysis of the contemporary system. The Menzies era didn't seem to register because the middle years didn't cover them and I specialised in sciences later and didn't get any of it. Yet the school did ground some politicians (Peter Costello). I felt a little cheated that I didn't have a rounded education.

I agree.

You were streamed from early days. Too early.

My experience was exactly the same. Others did history and I did maths-science.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

We then asked participants their view of the quality of their own children's education in this area.

Summary

Respondents generally thought that their children were being far better educated and better informed in this field than they had been themselves.

They regarded this as a very positive aspect of modern schooling.

There was some concern about what they saw as a degree of apathy by today's young people towards political issues.

Some were inclined to put this down to what they saw as deplorable behaviour by politicians -- especially on televised Question Time -- and to unreliability on the part of the media. These two factors were seen as inducing a regrettable level of cynicism in young people.

Finally respondents were concerned to see that young people grew up knowing just as much about their responsibilities as their rights.

What the respondents said

My daughter asks us -- how do you vote! I'm frightened she doesn't ask questions.

Kids have other passions.

-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT)

My two kids did legal studies. They are extremely useful life skills.

My kids have a reasonable knowledge of what their rights are.

But without history, they won't know their responsibilities. You've got to have an historical background. Sometimes rights get more attention than responsibilities.

Yes, I don't think kids can understand that balance unless they understand how Australia got where it is.

My kids know who's who.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Kids from our school have just finished a project on the history of Darwin. The things we learnt through our daughter! The kids just soaked it up -- it was relevant to them.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

My son is in Year 11 and I was surprised at the knowledge and understanding he had.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

My children seem to have covered a lot of Australian studies.

My Year 5 has done a little bit on the local council. As soon as they hear the word "politician", it's: "What are they?" It's very hard to describe to a 10-year-old. Australia Day to him -- what is it? Even to me.

My Year 7 has done work in Australian history -- the Depression, gold rush, farming, constitution. There has been a reasonable input. Aboriginal studies and culture has been part of their curriculum. Politics -- I don't know, but certainly they're aware of politicians to the point where they are quite familiar with politicians' names. He recognised one at school recently. Also there seems to be more recent Australian history - people who fought in the wars, they interview them. There's a lot going on. It's much broader than I had.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

Kids are far more informed via the media, and there is more fertilisation in the whole social environment, as well as at school.

All Year 9 is Australian studies -- all different aspects. One thing they didn't learn a lot about was government. They didn't take kindly to it because all they hear about it is fighting and bickering.

They are doing Federation. My child had to sit down and play a part opposing Federation. Previously he had played the role of a free lad in the colony.

My 19-year-old's knowledge of government is zilch. The postal vote arrived in the mail today. I don't know what for. She had no idea what to do with it. (It turned out to be the ballot for the constitutional convention).

I had a similar experience. Her impression of Parliament is all they do is abuse each other. She asks, why should I be interested?

I'm not sure what they're learning. They are not interested in current affairs. Unless it comes up on a computer screen, they're not interested.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

My son is just learning about the three tiers of government in Year 7. He's interested.

Grade 5/6 are going to be junior councillors at the local council.

They read the newspaper and watch TV. I don't think the media are as informative as they used to be. There's no balance there. The media can be really detrimental in that respect.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

They seem to be learning lots about Asian countries - which is fantastic -- but nothing on Australian history . You need a balance.

When our children were in a government primary school they went to Canberra and spent a lot of time on the political system. Now, my son in a Catholic school has not even touched on the subject and has no idea. He thought a minister of church was Prime Minister!

My son's school hasn't touched it (also at a Catholic school).

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

We then asked participants about their personal participation in community activities, and their view of those who were politically active.

Summary

Most of our respondents gave at least lip service to the notion that people in a democracy had obligations to society to become involved, to participate. Some felt this deeply. In fact, we sensed that this was a widespread, and perhaps a growing view. Our respondents seemed to be looking for ways to affirm their membership of the community. But, at the same time, many saw no great causes with which to become involved.

Many were also ambivalent about this obligation:

- some did not know how to participate;
- some thought that participation was fruitless because one could not influence events;
- some were too busy or too self absorbed or too uninterested to become involved;
- some had been seared in the past by the process of involvement, and were wary of going through the process again.

Some stressed that we were fortunate that we lived in a country where participation and controversy were possible. Others just said that events had prompted them to act. Still others said that one had to learn how to act -- to take a step and then to take another. Or that one's ability to, and interest in, taking part came with maturity.

What the participants said

Fortunate you can protest and participate.

You can speak out, put the pressure on. (Look at) Greenpeace.

I joined a political party in 1972 -- because of Whitlam.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Participation should be encouraged.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

I spent a lot of time as a resource officer with Aboriginal students. I was thrown in the deep end. I was new at it. As I got to know the students and how the school operated, I wanted to know more and more. Same on the wharf -- all this strike at Cairns -- all new to me. Read the bulletins about how powerful, how far they come. It opens your eyes.
(Could you have been taught?)
No. But would have been great to have had Aboriginal workers coming in to help teach. Lot of Aboriginal kids very shy.

It's important to know that one person can make a difference, but it's (also) important to know how the person can make a difference. You've got to know the system.
(Can they be taught?)
You can teach so much in the classroom but unless you see it in practice it's got no relevance.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

Whether we like to shield kids or not, you can't avoid protest, or hearing about it. It's there as an opportunity all the time. You've got a right to a voice. Very powerful lesson in what you can achieve if you want to get up and be counted.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

As you get older, you say maybe they're right; you're able to weight up more. When I got called up, I had no hesitation, but now (lucky Gough came in) . . . You're not able to think them out (when you're young).

It takes courage to get involved. We're a pretty conservative society. I tried to get a parent group going but you'd think I was advocating setting up a Nazi party.

It should be about participating, but we're not encouraged enough to participate.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Listen to this political innocent's story of the excitement and trauma of involvement:

I was so average, that when I wrote letters and all were taken up, I must have been logged into media as a political animal. The issue was one of inequality over stay-at-home mothers. Commentators would say, where do you come from? And I said, from behind my kitchen sink in the suburbs (where I have returned). When I opened my mouth, the toes I stood on, I was silenced, received threats,

hand-delivered letters to my house. I was frightened to the point of taking advice from a political minister. I wanted people to know I hadn't died . . . . The media would have loved to put that on the front page but I didn't want it to happen. I did not understand what I was getting into. I was bumbling on with a whole lot of people piling on behind.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

Some looked askance at 'activists', seeing many of them as extremists whose motives could not necessarily be trusted. In summary, they agreed with the principle of participatory democracy, but were wary of it in practice. Others thought that the media sometimes distorted the picture by concentrating on the rowdy minority.

The Parliament House break-in got out of hand.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

People can have their opinion but there are ways of saying it.

Who's going to take much notice of someone sitting in a tree.

They are attention-seeking.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Must be allowed to act. You will always have the extremists.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

Most people are asleep. The silent majority is a very accurate description. The downside is that those who get involved are often particular interest groups with barrows to push. Most don't get involved. My ideal is to be involved without there being an issue. So I introduce myself to my local member when I move towns.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

When I hear activist I think of Albie Langer. It's how the media portray them as the radical fringe. I'm very influenced by what the media portray -- more negative than positive because it tends to be very aggressive and at the extreme.

Black and whites when you come to activists and no grey. You first think of extremists when you think of activists.

I don't think it's healthy: the media concentrated on 30 or so disrupters at the back of reconciliation conference, but played down the dignified Aboriginal lady who was also involved. It concerns me the way the media portray things that are not accurate -- gives a false picture. They need to communicate that there is a lot of good rational debate and that good Australians are trying to reason things out.'

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Consistent with their views about individual freedoms, some insisted that people had a right not to be involved, even if they personally disagreed with them.

> *Individual choice to be involved (or not). I feel sorry for those who don't.*
>
> **-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT)**

The alienation and cynicism felt by some was palpable. In some cases one could see the conflict between alienation and the perceived need to become involved fighting one another in the respondent's mind.

> *We have no respect for politicians. As Wendy Harmer says -- it doesn't matter who you vote for, it's always a politician who finishes up on top of you.*
>
> *You put effort in and see no effect, so (you) disengage.*
>
> **-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT)**

> *There is no respect in Parliament. They behave like pigs. They set a bad example.*
>
> *I thought it would've changed when question time was televised, but it didn't.*
>
> *They behave like children.*
>
> *I went to Parliament House and saw how they carried on. I wondered how they could run a country. Kids saw that and think they can carry on like that too.*
>
> **-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)**

> *People are sick of hitting their head against a brick wall and not getting heard and they give up. In our community I don't care what our local government spends it money on any more, because I battled and got nowhere. I look after my kids and make sure they get a decent education. But sometimes I just have to stand up and do something. Kids really need to know about it. It's their world. My son, 8, is stressed out because he's worried we're going to run out of oxygen. They need to know a lot more about the process of government, otherwise it'll be apathy. If you don't know enough you can't speak on it.*
>
> **-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)**

Frustration about the process of involvement and the problems of involving others and of finding time in a busy life were also evident.

> *People don't want to know about change or ethics. Rock the boat and . . . hit a brick wall. Not listened to, no compromise, the put-downs (parent committee).*
>
> *Not a lot of team playing.*
>
> *There is a lot more pressure on us nowadays.*
>
> *We're busy, the kids are busy, the curriculum is unbelievable.*
>
> **-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)**

So too was the sense that the big issues had disappeared, or that one's interests changed.

> *I was very political in the 70's at University. I marched in the moratorium, I was secretary of the local Labor Party branch. I found it very sad that when I moved from Newport (very working class) to Glen Iris (comfortable middle class) -- there was nothing happening, all was very twee, there was nothing to do. Maybe my life was changing, but I felt I had become apolitical. Maybe times had changed. In the 70's we had lots to be political about, today they have less . . . .*
>
> **-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)**

We then asked participants their views about the strengths and weaknesses of Australian democracy.

Summary

Our respondents delighted in the belief that they lived in a free society. Freedom to them was all around: freedom to speak as they chose without fear, freedom to move about the country without restraint, freedom to vote, freedom to live as one wanted.

There was also an appreciation that Australians lived under the rule of law which was stable and which offered protection.

As we have indicated above, our respondents were not starry-eyed or without criticism of Australian society. But for all its faults, it was still the best place in the world to live and to raise children.

What the participants said

Our politicians, as a group, are among the best in the world.

The right to vote.

You can become anything you like.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Don't have armed forces running around shooting people.

It's peaceful.

Freedom of speech.

When we vote, it's fairly counted.

You can have differing ideas and still be valued.

Not dictatorship.

Each individual free to spend his money, come and go.

Don't know how lucky we are till you see other places.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Compared to someone from Russia we're well off. They depend on the black market. Line up for bread.

Relatively prosperous.

You know there exists a process that you can change something.

Freedom of speech.

Freedom of action.

The right to stand up for what you believe in.

Lack of corrupt pollies. Relatively uncorrupted.

In the Territory it's who you know. So small. Local member more accessible. Can get by with networking (good and bad).

Everybody has to right to stand for elected office, be part of the government, at all levels. You have to know the processes, but you have the right.

That's good and bad, because you need talents to be a good politician.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

One person can make a difference. You can do something. If you are not happy about something, you can change it.

To be a MP you don't have to be rich.

The greatest strength is multiculturalism.

Minority groups can make changes (pressure groups).

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

People will protest without fear of persecution. You see it every day of the week. There were protests against Howard on forests, but no violence. He signed a few autographs.

I lived in America for a while. Compulsory voting is good in Australia. In US more people voted for Mickey Mouse than proper candidates. As a permanent immigrant I couldn't vote. Paying taxes but didn't have to vote even if I became a citizen.

Public input into getting governments to back down -- for example,. nursing home levies. It had nothing to with me but I felt good about it. Felt that it was unjust.

We have safe and fair elections - not only vote but it's not rigged.

It's sad that the only things the kids see on TV is the politicians abusing each other, whereas they're probably quite civil to each other.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Compulsory voting -- at least people have to be citizens for that one time.

We are a lot better off than Americans -- ordinary people can get into politics without needing millions.

In federal parliament you have the Senate as a good stop to the House.

Freedom of press (some sniggering).

The courts system.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

Freedom of everything -- in every sense. We've had exchange students; first thing they say is how much they enjoy the freedom. Go to supermarket; speak to strangers; stay up late; discuss issues with guardians. Wide range of personal freedoms.

I love the idea of representative democracy. I know it doesn't always work, but knowing I'm represented in the bear pit - my piece of land, my family, my life, at every level.

I took some overseas visitors to parliament. I was ashamed at what they saw in question time. Vitriolic abuse. But it showed me we had the freedom to be downright rude. I was a bit embarrassed at the tone, but probably wouldn't have been without these visitors (accountants from Indonesia). Made me appreciate the freedom we had.

Rule of law gives us a great degree of psychological security. You can't just disappear. Freedom from fear of abuse of power, especially police power. You certainly do have a voice.'

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

The things which our respondents criticised about the Australian democracy included disenchantment with the standard of our politicians and a feeling that they are out of touch with ordinary Australians. Some thought that we were over-governed. Some also spoke of social inequality and of the position of minority groups, particularly of the Aborigines.

Politicians are out of touch, don't care.

Politicians haven't a clue, are out to feather their own nests.

The calibre of politicians.

They start of good and get tainted.

Can't trust any politicians.

They're not paid enough to attract the best.

Two parties similar -- just the blue and the red team.

Too many levels of government.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Do we vote with a knowledge of whom we're voting for?

Do we care?

When and election is coming up, I write and ask parties for their policies on a couple of things I'm interested in. I've never not had a response.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

The taxation.

Democracy is costly.

If people without ability get in to parliament, they'll muck it up.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

We're badly over-governed. Too little is done by too many people.

And the gulf between rich and poor is accelerating and widening.

The treatment of Aborigines. The humanity being shown to them is being unwound in indecent haste. (Also) the experiment in the reduction in the franchise with the voluntary voting for the constitutional convention.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

We need a total review of the way Australia is governed. There is a lack of federal co-operation. More power in federal government, and the federal constitution is far more democratic than in state constitutions.

We lack of uniformity in state laws.

Governments are becoming more like each other -- but local government not so local and getting further away from people.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

The obvious downside is that the supposed representatives are necessarily caught up in the machinery and administrative matters and are not actually carrying my concerns into parliament. Most of their time is spent oiling the machinery and keeping it running.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

We then asked participants:

- **Whether school students should be taught about civics and citizenship;**
- **If so, how should it be taught, and**
- **What should it cover?**

We also asked how important civics and citizenship education was, relative to other subjects, from core subjects such as literacy and numeracy to popular electives such as languages other than English (LOTE) and skills-oriented subjects such as information technology.

Summary

There was unanimous agreement that school students should be taught civics and citizenship.

Moreover, civics and citizenship education was accorded a very high priority by our participants, rating just behind the "3Rs".

On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 meant very important and 0 meant not important at all, civics and citizenship unfailingly received a rating of at least 7 to 8 by individual participants. A few rated it 9 or even 10.

There was less unanimity on how it should be taught.

A clear majority thought there should be an integrated programme, because it would give the subject the status, bulk and visibility it deserved, as well as lessening the chance of important parts being missed out.

A minority were concerned that an integrated programme would overlap with other areas of the curriculum such as history, geography and economics.

A handful thought there would not be enough content to warrant a stand-alone programme.

All were unclear on how the programme could be worked into what was widely perceived to be an already crowded curriculum, without squeezing essential subjects such as literacy and numeracy.

It became apparent that even these parents -- who were probably better informed than most about schooling -- were somewhat confused by these aspects of the proposal.

Some reasoned that an integrated civics and citizenship programme would absorb certain aspects of existing subjects such as history and geography. This would mean no further crowding of the curriculum; rather, it would have a substitution effect.

Others were not convinced by this. They saw potential for demarcation disputes and overlap between teachers of the new programme and those teaching established subjects.

The need for careful explanation and reassurance on these issues is clearly indicated.

Another issue of concern was that teachers might not be sufficiently well trained to present a civics and citizenship programme without allowing their own biases to skew the presentation.

On the other hand, some respondents made the point that a well-taught civics and citizenship programme would equip students to know a bias when they saw one, and would help them see through it.

Finally, the issue of programme content aroused several groups to a lively discussion about the perceived need to inculcate a sense of "Australianness" in students, and some saw this as a way to do it.

Others saw civics and citizenship as an opportunity to teach students about consumer issues.

It became apparent that parents have very diverse ideas and expectations about what a civics programme could or should deliver.

What the participants said

It's pretty important -- like reading and writing.

A life skill.

Some teachers' knowledge is atrocious.

Is this social engineering?

It would be important to teach the social context early on.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

It's an important area, but balance is needed, and broad content.

It's missing the practical. Where's the participation? You learn nothing about politics until you're engaged.

You also need media education.

It looks like another academic syllabus. You need to teach them to interpret.

You need to empower them to ask questions.

Empower teachers.

It's not good to start with the idea that adults have all the knowledge.

It's anti-democratic to feed students information without giving them some control. It's empowering the children.

The curriculum is already crowded.

-- GROUP 2 (SYDNEY, GOVERNMENT)

It (civics and citizenship) must be taught.

If it can be unbiased. There is some difficulty with that.

I agree. We don't want indoctrination.

Or emotion. Or the teachers pushing their own political agenda.

I'd like to see the flag flown.

There's no patriotism in Australia. We used to sing the national anthem and teach the kids allegiance. They stopped the Easter bonnet parade at our school

because the immigrant kids felt left out. We were losing our own identity because of the new kids. We should have said, "This is our culture, join in."

We're trying to be politically correct. We should get back to "we are Australians". We've lost that.

When our school had Costume Day, all these other kids had national costumes, but our kids didn't. They don't know what's "Australian".

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

If they learned it in primary, where school's still fun -- go to Government House. They need to get in early, before high school and before the kids are having to cope with other changes.

The empowerment aspect is not being covered (at the moment). General information is given out, but the fact that you can make a difference, that you are part of Australia, that your opinion is important . . . (is lacking).

Civics should not just be politics but life skills. Financial and personal, how not to get ripped off, how to apply for a job, taxation.

It seems it's up to John Laws to get people motivated to say I'm Australian. I am woman, says my daughter, but I've never heard her say I'm an Australian, or this is what it means to be Australian.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

The only problem is, there seem to be more subjects coming into the curriculum -- drugs, sex, librarianship.

Absolutely. It's too crowded.

I wouldn't like to see something else in the curriculum when we need them to learn more tables, more writing and spelling.

We need to concentrate on the 3Rs.

I'd like to see something on statehood and how states evolve. That's a big deal for the Territory.

This (civics and citizenship) might create conflict between Aboriginal perspectives. How would it be presented? Is it culturally sensitive?

My son tried to say some politically incorrect things and the teacher shut him up.

I'd hate to think the teacher wasn't trained to cope.

Teachers are so scared now about people speaking against Aboriginal rights. It means the crazy ideas don't get out and get discussed.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

Very much yes.

It should be a core subject.

It must be.

With reservations -- that it is not skewed.

It should be taught so long as it is unbiased.

But that is the same with everything.

Even if it is biased, time will even it out.

People have to come to their own conclusions.

People have to be educated so that they can be better able to make judgments.

It ought to be unbiased.

They must be taught about the structure of dissent. The methods of dissent are worth studying.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

It is important. It should start in primary school and be part of the basic curriculum.

Teachers feel time is so thin for the basics, but it needs to be in there, certainly.

Civics and citizenship is a core subject. It should make them more responsible citizens and less vulnerable to propaganda, and will give them a healthy sense of belonging to the country.

I think it ought to be compulsory but I have great concerns about fitting it in.

Much of it is already taught. It's a matter of formalising it. Would it be a greater load really?

Components already are there. It's whether the bits and pieces are pulled together. It's formalising something that exists informally.

I feel it's being taught now, but it has to be not just within the classroom, but part of daily life. You can't teach it in the abstract. You have to make it practical.

I think that sometimes the children are already being helped to do this -- they go to a nursing home and sing as a choir, although not labelled Civics . . .

But it could be part of the programme.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

It's a really good idea to have a compulsory civics course.

I rank it right next to the 3Rs. If you don't learn about your country and how it works and how you fit in and how you can effect change. . . .There is this danger that young people aren't nationalistic and know nothing about their own country.

I read that democracy is on the wane. Maybe we should start teaching our kids, or we might lose it.

I question whether it has a "central role"(in education). When I went to school the central role of education was to prepare people for a job. It's a major change to see civics as part of the central role of education.

I don't think you can teach people to be moral, ethical or committed but help them to be by modelling. That's a job for home rather than school.

It should be in school as well as home because not all good role models are at home. Also, school reinforces home, or counteracts bad modelling at home.

They already get taught Australian history, and a lot of things already in there. Would you be doubling up? How much do you need to know?

My kids' teachers are always talking about time constraints. How are other subjects going to compete?

I mentioned it to some teachers. They wondered how it was going to fit in and for such a long time (Years 4 to 10). How were they going to keep the kids interested? They're already doing a little civics during elections.

What gives way?

It's not a new subject. It's there in great parts already.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

On principle I'd give it 9 or 9-and-a-half, but how do you teach it? As history?

I rate it very highly.

I wouldn't rate it a 10 in the compulsory format with units, but I would rate it a 9 or 10 with experiential stuff in it -- teamship, citizenship.

I see it as very important that it be an integrated thing. You learning reading in association with learning about how to deal with animals, for example.

Think it's excellent. I'd much rather they had political philosophy than religious education. If you have to make room in the curriculum, get rid of R.E.

I'm very impressed with the guidelines (for the civics programme).

My main issue is funding -- so much more is expected of teachers and often it's not funded properly.

Often there's not the financial resources to follow through. You have to train teachers, create books and materials.

I thought, this is great, but then I thought, what is going to be taught?

If they add something in, what's being taken out?

Something would have to go.

They're going to have to make sure that what they teach is true. They talk about equal worth - what is Wik about? I agree with the principle, but if you get up and say it and kids can see the reality isn't that, they'll get cynical.

You've got to sift the good from the bad.

Kids need to learn about bias.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

Yes, yes, yes.

I agree.

Yes, but I wonder whether the teachers will be trained. Will it be their opinions coming through?

You get that everywhere.

I'll live with bias risk and trust teachers to be professional.

But some teachers put over their opinions.

You need a good training programme.

My concern is that it looks a little sterile -- just facts and figures. Particularly at the older levels, you need to get them involved in issues.

Also, it's about preparing kids for when they turn 18, so they can make decisions they wouldn't have been able to otherwise. It should give them an understanding to develop their own opinions.

I would like to see them teaching about the political system and how it works, how ordinary citizens have access to it, how people become involved and why, and why the majority don't.

Asked about whether civics should be a stand-alone subject or integrated with other subjects, respondents said:

I agree the curriculum is overloaded, but I still see this as very very important, and it should start in primary school. Surely it wouldn't take much teacher training.

They could use civics and citizenship content in English classes, for example, so you wouldn't need to make a lot of extra time.

If topics were spread among history, English or whatever, they're learning it as they go.

I'd like to reinforce the point that producing it (civics and citizenship) as a whole unit is not the way to go. Drip-feed it through other subjects. I've just recalled that my kids in Year 4 or 5 wrote to local paper about potholes outside school and got them filled in.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

5.2 PART II: DISCOVERING DEMOCRACY -- SPECIFICS

After the discussions described above, we showed the participants some overheads to draw their attention to some important specifics about the Discovering Democracy programme.

In this section of our report, we record what they said about the programme. The overhead is given first, and the discussion about it follows.

All the overheads are collected in Appendix B.

OVERHEAD 1

DISCOVERING DEMOCRACY IS FOR TEACHING YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT:

- **What it means to be a citizen of Australia**
- **How our system of government works**
- **How Australian democracy evolved**
- **How to take part in the public affairs of Australia**

Summary

Participants were asked two questions about the content of this overhead:

> What did they think of Discovering Democracy as a title for the programme, and
>
> What did they think about the broad parameters as set out?

The name was generally well received, although one or two people thought the word "citizenship" should appear in it somewhere.

The many who liked it approved of the concept of "discovery", saying that that would be in tune with what children liked to do.

Also the parameters of the programme received general approval.

Respondents were especially keen to see a strong element of participation in the programme, as suggested by dot point 4 in the overhead.

They wanted young people to learn not just about the architecture of government but where the doors were, how to open them and what to do once you were inside.

Many suggestions were made for how the programme could be broadened or for what should be included under these general headings.

The most oft-recurring theme was the need to create in young people a sense of belonging, of national identity, of knowing what it meant to be Australian and to be proud of it, without becoming jingoistic.

What the participants said

Discovering Democracy -- dry and uninteresting.

It assumes democracy is the best way to go. It doesn't allow for alternatives.

A good list.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

To discover is exciting.

It must teach how to access politicians.

How to take part is important.

Expand on how to be proud to be Australian.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Discovering Democracy suggests too much politics.

We should teach children how we (our system of government) evolved, and give them information about the rest of the world -- some kind of comparative studies.

It should cover what makes an Australian. if you don't know who you are, how can you act?

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Discovering Democracy says, "Stand up for yourself."

Kids need to learn to be proud of who they are as a citizen.

It's important to learn how to take part. Participation is important.

Learn how it works.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

I'm not sure about Discovering Democracy. It's slightly gee whiz. But I can't think of an alternative.

The use of democracy itself is emotive and loaded, and patronising.

I disagree.

I think Discovering Democracy is excellent.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

(Title) is fairly suitable.

Is discovering democracy what we are on about? Civics and citizenship might be a more useful title.

Citizenship is the core.

History should be there.

What it means to be Australian; where that has come from.

Anzac Day may disappear.

We should understand what it means to fight, but we don't the brutality of war.

We can talk about Federation and Captain Cook but we can't underestimate Anzac. They were tough fighting people who wanted to do something for their country.

They fought for a way of life. We should not have too much focus on war but on what they were fighting for.

We need to know what it means to be an Australian in the world.

Australians were here before Cook. Children should have a fairer attitude to different races. Part of their pride in Australia should be that it is a very old country and did not just start when Captain Cook arrived.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

Discovering Democracy sounds good. Kids like to discover.

It all needs to be bipartisan.

The word values comes to me.

I don't think you can talk about being a citizen without considering the values which are embedded in your culture.

Rights and responsibilities need to be covered.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

I like the word "discover." Kids like to do that. It suggests something new and adventurous.

No criticism.

They (the dot points) embody the main parameters.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

OVERHEAD 2

The activities which form part of the Discovering Democracy programme will help students:

- **recognise how their own lives are connected to the political and legal institutions through which we govern ourselves, and**
- **develop the ability to participate as informed citizens in their community**

Summary

There was no gainsaying these objectives, but respondents had plenty of ideas about what should be added to them, or what should come within their ambit.

This reflected the wide-ranging expectations, revealed earlier in the discussions, about what a civics and citizenship programme could deliver.

It is clear that the boundaries and limitations of the programme need to be explained to parents.

It is equally clear, however, that parents have some widely held and consistent views about what the programme should offer. Chiefly these are that it should:

Be practical;

Emphasise the virtues of participation;

Equip young people to participate;

Emphasise responsibilities as well as rights;

Connect young people to their history, and

Be a force for national cohesiveness.

What the participants said

It's a question of understanding how to participate, not just participation.

That implies that all should participate -- which is a value judgment. Sounds a bit heavy to me.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

That's what we missed out on.

It's a pity -- not all families are political.

They should be teaching honesty and commitment.

(The lesson should be) You've got to be there, don't quit.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Needs to be practical

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

Yep.

It's on-going. It can't be a ten-year programme and then scrubbed by the next Government.

Yes, absolutely. The first (objective) identifies the system and second would show how to participate.

It would make the process of referendums better by making citizens better informed.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

They should teach the responsibility of the citizen in a collective cohesive sense.

As informed and responsible citizens in a cohesive community.

"Connected" needs to be "part of".

The focus should not be too prescriptive.

It must teach children to think for themselves, come to responsibility.

I disagree. We have not given them responsibility, therefore they don't belong and therefore they don't care.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

(The programme) needs to be connected with the cultural and the historic, to put things in perspective.

Understanding comes from historical perspective.

It should not be confined to the political and legal. What has happened to the historic, economic and social dynamics?

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Include other nations and other systems.

Contextualise history.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

I can see this programme being hijacked by the history teachers. It must be forward-looking.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

OVERHEAD 3

AUSTRALIA'S DEMOCRATIC VALUES

- **All people are of equal worth**
- **People have a right to take part in the way they are governed**
- **People have a right to choose who will govern them**
- **People have an obligation to tolerate other people in their society, even if they are different**
- **People have rights to freedom of speech, of religion and of association, and of access to information**
- **People have a responsibility to take an active interest in the way we govern ourselves**

Summary

These values evoked wide support. There was very little basic argument with them. There were some who thought that the word "tolerate" had negative or paternalistic connotations and they sought for a more positive expression of the same idea. There were some who wanted the concepts to express a universal outlook, rather than to see them as limited to Australia. But these are purely points of detail and of emphasis.

People did, however, stress that in their view there was a difference between freedom and licence. Freedom did not mean licence to do anything one wanted to do. Some also felt that to leave out questions of "morals" was a mistake.

There was also an undercurrent of feeling among some respondents that rights were being offered to new settlers or to minority groups to the detriment of the more established or majority communities.

Many respondents indicated that they thought rights were being given more attention than were obligations. A significant minority expressed a deeply held view that the acceptance of obligations towards society was the hallmark of a civilised society.

What the participants said

We should encourage Australians to be good citizens of the world -- by our standards.

Freedom involves some restraints.

"Tolerate is quite a negative word these days. I'd rather "respect" or something like that. "Tolerate" has the implication of "put up with".

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

Toleration and freedom are OK, so long as it is not at our own expense. We don't want to give up our rights.

The right to information -- the media would misuse it -- it's a right, but not (one) to abuse. It must be used responsibly. It must not slander.

We may have a free press in name only, partly because of concentration of ownership.

All people have a right, but we are having our hands tapped (by which the respondent meant constrained) *and the newcomers are not.*

A lot of stuff that's put out is so "politically correct" that we get confused as to what the real meaning is. I'd like the Australians to get back to calling a spade a spade.

There's not enough of the word "Australia" in those overheads.

One of the dilemmas of the modern era, with multiculturalism, is that the whole concept of moral fibre is lost, on the basis that it is not politically correct to impose our moral code on this fella or . . . . So morals are sort of tossed out. We need to introduce a backbone of Australian moral fibre, which is not so much the black-and-white Christian stance, but that these things are accepted. Some absolute standards.

I think we've got to.

The cultures this country was founded on 200 years ago are being eroded because we are in fear of offending other people.

Is it being eroded or is it evolving?

Well . . .

It's just different.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Kids believe some are better than others -- for example, people who go to uni.

And employers create that impression.

Some people are more valued than others.

There's prejudice against Aboriginal kids because they are given money to go to school.

Freedom of information -- you've got to be careful -- does it mean freedom to pry?

People can check their own credit rating and they don't realise it.

They need core information -- federal structure, constitution, the way the nation evolved.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

You have to recognise the rights of others to freedom of speech.

That ties in with respect -- teaching the kids that it's OK to be different, to have your own religion.' (In addition to tolerance, they wanted respect for difference.)

Up here (in the Territory) *we're pretty tolerant, we do respect difference. When we go south, especially to WA, we find the way people speak about other races is horrifying.*

My son is very proudly Australian but gets teased because he is different -- his accent, because of his parents! He hates it because he gets bullied. (New Zealand mother.) If he was black, they probably wouldn't do it.

There is racism everywhere but in the Territory we are more tolerant of differences.'

There needs to be an emphasis that with each right there is a responsibility.

There should be more information about what is a citizen.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

The obligation to tolerate is obviously limited. To what extent do we tolerate Nazis? Religious groups that practise infibulation? Limits ought not be defined but we should argue about them.

It's a good summation of values.

It's very much watered down in reality.

I have trouble is with these lofty ideals -- get out in the real world.

Lower the lofty ideals -- find a way of expressing them closer to the actuality.

This starts from the assumption that democracy is the way to go. Is democracy the way to go?

Incorporate this question and answer in the values.

Measure it against monarchy.

Maybe "Why Democracy"?

Isn't it part of being Australian? Not just about a democracy but all the values we believe in.

Maybe the programme is about being Australian.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

They must also be done (taught) at home.

People have so many rights they have relinquished their responsibility and schools have to pick them up.

I share my children's education with the school.

My feeling is that this is great and necessary but can it be taught without political bias?

Society has gone so far, children would smash the walls and it would be called creative.

There must be positive reinforcement through the family.

It must have its own curriculum and teachers must follow it to reduce bias.

If you teach them to be free thinking, they can see when a teacher is biased.

I agree with the principles (based on "real values").

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

Pretty well sums it up.

It would be nice if it happened.

On the whole I think we are pretty tolerant.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Tolerate is a negative word. It accentuates differences.

What does "different" mean? For example, the intellectually disabled can still be valued as a person.

I would like it to be outward-looking as citizens of the world.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

Motherhood. You could not disagree with them.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

OVERHEADS 4 & 5

STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT:

- **The three levels of government - federal, state and local**
- **How the Constitution was developed**
- **The contribution of major figures in our history**
- **How the nation evolved from a collection of colonies**
- **Major economic forces such as the gold rushes**
- **Major social forces such as our immigration programme**
- **That the new democracy came at the price of dispossessing the indigenous people of their land**

Summary

We gained the impression that many, but certainly not all, of our respondents were themselves not very knowledgeable about many of these matters. Their quietness of response in some instances suggested lack of familiarity.

Certainly, in the main, they accepted that these matters should be taught, and that students would benefit from such teaching. Some, particularly people in Darwin, stressed that they thought the material should have a local emphasis -- partly because they felt that the children would be more engaged if it did.

They emphasised the need to discuss what was going on in Australia now -- as well as the need to provide some historical perspective.

Although many did not like the way the slide expressed it, the concept that a better and certainly less Eurocentric treatment of Aboriginal history was long overdue was very strongly supported. So too was the resentment of some that the Aboriginal community, in their view, were receiving special treatment. Prejudice towards this community, and resentment of the role of the High Court, also surfaced.

Overall, however, the commonest view -- often expressed with conviction -- was that a balanced and frank Australian history, doing justice to white and black Australians alike, was essential. It had been missing from their own education, they did not want it missing from their children's, and they believed that such a programme would assist in a reconciliation process which they wished to see advanced.

What the participants said

I'd like to see something about democracy and where it sits along the continuum of political persuasions (the respondent was alluding to a spectrum between totalitarianism and democracy).

I've got a feeling the last one is in there because it is politically correct. My kids are starting to get a guilt trip about (what happened) several generations before them. Certainly you can decry what happened, but I don't think they should feel personal guilt. They can now say, "What can we do about it". That's a different thing.

It's unresolved. That's why it's still an issue.

You could word that (par on the overhead) neutrally. You could say "the effect of democracy . . . "

The first two are causal. Suddenly we get into a consequence.

That's right. It doesn't fit.

Guilt is not a positive emotion. But it is an important part of our history. It could be a re-phrased: "Children need to know about the major impact that democracy has had on the nation's peoples".

That's much better.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

Make it simple -- kids will understand it (gold rush).

However, we need to talk about Vietnam and the Second World War. We need to talk about the horror of war.

Yes the horror and war and the effects of it.

Focus should be now.

The third point there -- that the new democracy came at the price of dispossessing . . . . I think it's more the new society came at the price of dispossessing the indigenous people of their land".

I agree.

I think they should just leave the Aboriginal bit out of it altogether, I'm afraid. The amount of money put into that by the Government over the years is horrific.

It's the only thing you've got on the 20th century, and it's only there because of Mabo. It's the High Court that has brought these things on because the Abos have worked out that you can't beat them with the sword, so you beat them with the pen. They're whipping us with their own laws. Good luck to them, but I don't know whether that last (point on the overhead) is accurate.

It's politically correct.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Those three (economics, social forces and Aboriginal matters) are all very important. I'm really glad they're there. As far as the indigenous were concerned, students have to learn that what happened wasn't particularly fair.

I agree.

They have to know history. Before you go forward, you have to know what's gone behind.

What about blacks understanding the whites?

You should also learn about the Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal culture's pretty much a mystery. If I want to find out about Lebanon, I can look that up in the library. I don't think I can do that with Aborigines. You keep hearing things like, I've heard them say teachers shouldn't look Aboriginal students in the eye. I'm sure lots of teachers don't know that.

What is an Australian citizen? Are we going to be Australians, work as a group, or are we going to be little groups and Aborigines and everything else? Where's that going to be taught?

The overriding emphasis should be on responsibility to the country, to the wider community.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

It should be put into basic readers and should be made fun.

Make it a local NT reader.

The nationwide may not be relevant.

Our kids don't want to read about trams or snow.

There needs to be a balance (between national uniformity and local content).

What about a book that covers each state?

Dragging them (teachers) out all the time (for training) worries me.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

How do you choose "major figures"?

I'd rather see the third point say what were the influences on our history? It's more than major figures -- diggers and settlers etcetera.

Why isolate the indigenous thing to Australia? Why not teach about the American experience?

I disagree (with the wording of the overhead). We sacrificed the Aborigines to greed, not democracy.

It's loaded.

"This society" came at the price of dispossessing. . . .

They must know about this. It's a matter of how it is expressed.

You should incorporate benefits of democracy to society -- as well as the cost.

Why not just "the impact" on the lives of indigenous people? (General agreement).

Dispossession was not the only price they had to pay.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

This covers a lot of what we've talked about.

History is masculine history; women and indigenous have been omitted.

We need to consider future directions, information about Asia, the republic, and our recent history -- the past 20 years.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

We quote the following group at some length because the comments reflect many of the positive views, as well as the fears and concerns, of parents on this subject.

My kids are being taught all this already. They are play-acting to make this real.

Do you pull these things out of subjects?

Can you make it part of social studies, with civics and citizenship as a unit?

They ought to leave it as it is between 4 and 10 and bring it together in Years 11 and 12.

It should be left in subjects as it is, but make it a compulsory unit to be included in these subjects in SOSE.

Teach our teachers to make it come alive.

They have Australian history already in Year 9. It would not be that messy to include civics and citizenship in the history.

Citizenship is lived out in a multitude of ways. I am not surprised it is in a multitude of subjects. To teach it as one subject is artificial and a bit dangerous because it portrays something which is the fabric of life as something different.

Economics, social and Aboriginal matters -- they are core elements to Australian history.

Aboriginal dispossession needs to come to the forefront.

Now I realise how we have not recognised the Aboriginal experience.

To now, it has been distorted.

The British settled this country and history is written from the victors' point of view.

Now we have spoken to the oppressed people
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Now we have to write our history so that the country is whole.

We are a fragmented country. Indigenous people do not feel part of Australia.

We have all got to be one.

Rewrite history with the Aborigines. It would help reconciliation.

There's no consideration of the spiritual or Christian values which have made this country. Education is secular, but if religious or spiritual or Christian values have impacted our country, they have to be reflected.

Who is going to write this?

People respect Australia as a Christian country. The Church has impacted Australia deeply.

The impact of multiculturalism and the impact of other religions are all contributing to this society.

We should be talking about democracy versus dictatorship. We must show them the other half. We must show them why democracy works for us.

That is a minefield. You have the huge dynamic of "political correctness" to deal with. We owe it to our kids to be honest.

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

Here, too, is evidence of some disquiet -- both about how the subject would "fit in" with subjects now being taught, and about some of the matters to be dealt with. The discussion begins with reaction to the proposed content.

Fine.

Could not disagree.

What will economics and other teachers think about stripping their topics?

A bit too much overlapping with other subjects.

Should it be filtered through other subjects?

How will it fit in with other subjects?

The fact that Aboriginal people were massacred -- it was glossed over. They were not being treated fairly in the history books.

We all have democracy now.

Why focus on Aborigines? There are a lot of political groups here who have a history.

The young have a tainted view of Aborigines.

The wording is loaded. It's not a fair statement, but it must be taught. We have not gone the New Zealand route. We are a multicultural society. This does not reflect that.

People who are new to the country appreciate democracy much more than people who have known nothing else.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

OVERHEAD 7

THE DISCOVERING DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME

Content

Programme for Years 4 to 10

New nationwide curriculum materials free to all schools

Special training for teachers

National activities to inform and involve the community

OVERHEAD 9

NATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Possible citizenship ceremonies for students in Years 11 and 12

Parents, teachers, local councils and community organisations encouraged to help run:

- **constitutional conventions**
- **parliamentary debates**
- **mock elections**

Open Learning course on television

Adult and Community Education programmes.

Summary

We have grouped the discussion of these two overheads together because there was little disagreement or new input on most of what they showed.

There was general agreement that this should be a national programme although, as we have reported elsewhere, there is a

widely held view that local content will be important if the programme is to be as practical and relevant as parents wish.

On two issues, however, there was lively debate:

Whether the Year 4 to 10 span was best, and

Whether citizenship ceremonies were a good idea.

Not all the groups engaged the question of Year 4 to 10. Some took it as given, and had no objection.

In the groups where there was a discussion, the tendency was to suggest that students should be started earlier, and that there should be some follow-through to Years 11 and 12 so as to make a clear connection with the coming-of-age that was just around the corner for senior high school students.

At the same time, it was recognised that it couldn't be compulsory in Years 11 and 12.

What the participants said

Build up from Year 4.

-- GROUP 1 (CANBERRA)

Four to ten a good idea.

It should be right through.

It should be an elective in 11 and 12.

-- GROUP 3 (SYDNEY, NON-GOVERNMENT)

Year 4 is too soon -- just a little, not too much.

You need to create interest when they're young.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Agree 4 to 10. Catch at time they are about to start blooming.

I'd be inclined to start when they start school, could go to Year 12.

In Yr 3 they're starting to be human beings, reason for themselves, figure out the smarts of it all. It should start at Year 3.

Appropriate levels could be started at Years 1 and 2 with very simple stuff. I can see why it ends at the end of compulsory schooling, but it's important to keep the momentum going through 11 and 12 as they approach voting.

I'm inclined to go Year 6 to 12 because of the impact at the latter end.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

The idea of citizenship ceremonies as a rite of passage for young people entering upon full citizenship received a mixed response.

There was opposition to anything which discriminated between Australian-born and overseas-born students, and there was concern to ensure that the birthright of citizenship for those born in Australia was not in any way contradicted or devalued.

There was also concern that any such ceremony should be open, and equally accessible, to all students, whether they had left school in Year 10 or stayed to Year 12.

Some thought that young people would find the whole idea ridiculous, while others thought that young people would welcome it, especially if it came with something of practical use such as an ID card.

Overall, the idea of a ceremony to mark graduation from the civics and citizenship programme was more attractive to most people than a citizenship ceremony.

What the participants said

Great idea. It would make it personal.

It should be done through local government, get youth involved.

-- GROUP 4 (TOOWOOMBA)

Kids would love it.

Give them a medal.

Depends on the family.

Some who are in Years 11 and 12 may feel excluded.

-- GROUP 5 (DARWIN)

Look how they turn up to graduation. It would add pride.

It would give them ownership.

It should be in Year 10 (general agreement) for students leaving in Year 10 -- it would give them ownership.

I have trouble with the idea of making it a citizenship ceremony. They've been living in Australia since Year Zero. This implies that they were non-citizens and we should not imply this. I think it would be really retrograde.

But graduation. Citizenship graduation. Yes.

It is implying being a good citizen is all tied up with government process, but some people might be great citizens without being in a formal process.

They won't turn up to citizenship ceremonies, but they will turn up if it is part of school, part of graduation.

-- GROUP 6 (PERTH)

Non-Australian children should be given an opportunity.

I like it but it should not be compulsory.

Like a lifesaving certificate, it would give them a real sense of achievement.

They could be given a book or stamp or passport, like a passport to citizenship.

They now belong and they have certain responsibilities.

Kids may think it's a bit sissy and stupid.

I don't like it but I don't know why.

I'd favour a certificate at the end of Year 10 to say you have completed this course.

It's a family thing, it's not a government or an education responsibility. It should come from the family.

If we don't follow through, it will not be seen as an important initiative.

The community must show ownership and commitment.

-- GROUP 7 (ADELAIDE)

It's like coming out. They have their balls; they're old enough to vote and drive a car.

It's nice.

Immigrants becoming Australians is something special.

There are not enough ceremonies in our society.

In other cultures they have ceremonies for coming of age.

But it must be available to all.

How do you get lower socio-economic kids who are lost, as part of this?

-- GROUP 8 (LAUNCESTON)

It would be exclusive - it does not cover younger students.

Cynical Year 12s would find it laughable.

Graduation I don't like.

I like the idea of transition, rite of passage.

-- GROUP 9 (MELBOURNE, GOVERNMENT)

It doesn't appeal.

It would not hold much meaning.

It implies they are not a citizen.

If kids got an ID card at the end of it, they could go the pub. They're too busy to get their licence.

-- GROUP 10 (MELBOURNE, NON-GOVERNMENT)

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