



Exploring democracy at your House

Do you know who sits on the Federal Executive Council? Or how tall the Prime Minister is? Or who was the first woman to represent Tasmania in the Federal Parliament?

These are some of the more obscure questions that come the way of the Parliamentary Education Office every day, as school students and members of the general public try to get their head around parliament and politics. But the PEO is far more than an information service for the myriad inquiries that come to it by phone, fax or email from students, teachers and parents around the country. The PEO provides a comprehensive educational service to Australian schools and communities, describing and explaining the workings of parliamentary democracy and promoting active citizenship.

At the heart of our operations in Parliament House is the Education Centre – a mock parliamentary chamber in Committee Room 1S1. Every year over 65,000 students enjoy what most visitors regard as the highlight of their school trip to Canberra – a parliamentary role play, complete with props, costumes and scripts, and guided by an experienced and highly skilled parliamentary educator. For students who live more than a thousand kilometres from Canberra, a travel subsidy is available under the Schools Citizenship Visits Program to help bring them to Parliament House.

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We also export our Education Centre programs to capital cities, regional towns and outback communities. Our outreach also includes special in-school programs, teacher professional development, radio broadcasts involving young citizens, training programs for community groups and presentations and workshops at conferences.

The PEO takes great care to make sure its programs and learning resources are geared to the curriculum requirements in Australian schools. Over the last year or two, all State and Territory education

authorities having been redesigning school curricula, and civics and citizenship education is being incorporated explicitly into curriculum frameworks and specified in educational outcomes. Moreover, the Council of State, Territory and Commonwealth Education Ministers has formally agreed on a set of National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century, which includes the goal that students shall be "active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life." As well, the Commonwealth Government's Discovering Democracy initiative has resulted in high quality learning resources being distributed to every school in Australia. The PEO is making a significant contribution to the realisation of these goals and to the support of civics and citizenship education in schools.

While we take great efforts to produce resources which directly assist the classroom teacher, the PEO is committed to a vision of citizenship education which promotes and facilitates deep participation by young people in their schools, their communities and the nation as a whole. In June 1999 the PEO hosted a forum of bureaucrats, teachers, academics and principals who have a serious commitment to student participation in decision-making and in school governance. We have produced videos, and printed booklets highlighting best practice, promoting the establishment of school parliaments. In this way the PEO is responding to the research which has shown that it is not so much what we teach in our schools but how we run them that will determine whether young people emerge as active citizens.

Good citizenship education involves two fundamental tasks – explaining the concepts of civil, democratic society, its institutions and lawmaking processes, and cultivating the attitudes which dispose Australian citizens to engage with, and participate in, those structures, institutions and processes. The first task is by far the easier one, and the PEO can fairly claim to be a leader in this aspect of citizenship education. The second, that of attitude formation, is a much more complex activity. The PEO has been redoubling its efforts of late to nurture greater levels of participation at the school and community level. This means infusing knowledge of parliamentary democratic structures with the spirit of democratic process, and providing both the skills and motivation for people to embrace that process in the conduct of their daily lives.

The PEO has been working at all levels to fulfil this aspect of its educational role. We recently concluded a successful school holiday program for young children who, accompanied by their parents or caregivers, spent time in our Parliament House Education Centre listening, creating, interacting, and learning. These children, and their adult companions, experienced Parliament House as a stimulating place, one to which they could feel connected, and for which they have now developed genuine affection. Our evening program for adults, A Little Night Sitting, brings community groups into the Parliament for a three hour session of role play, discussion and viewing their parliamentarians at work. It has been so popular that next year we plan to run A Little Lunch Sitting as well.

In a collaborative project with ABC Radio, the PEO sponsors TalkBack Classroom, in which middle to senior secondary students interview leading politicians for Triple J's Morning Show, and co-host panel discussions and talkback on ABC metropolitan and regional radio. Students are also working as a video crew, under professional guidance, to produce a high-energy documentary about the working lives of two parliamentarians, Tanya Plibersek MP and Finance Services Minister Joe Hockey MP.

Collaboration has been an increasing feature of the PEO's operations. We have recently developed, with the YWCA, a day long workshop to train community groups on how to interact with the political process. The workshop is built around a series of video interviews with parliamentarians, journalists, newspaper editor, ministerial adviser and parliamentary committee secretaries. Each

year we work alongside Rotary to deliver a weeklong Adventure in Active Citizenship, which brings 70 young people from all parts of Australia to Canberra. We have worked closely with Adult Learning Australia, delivering train-the-trainer workshops for adult educators, and running parliamentary education programs for students involved in TAFE's migrant education program. There is virtually no part of Australia's education system that has been untouched by the PEO's efforts.

Commentators may continue to assert, as did Paul Kelly in a recent article in *The Australian* that Australia has an impoverished civic culture, and that there is no effort to sustain education about our political life. But a different story is in the ascendant – a story of citizens who want to take more control of their lives and their communities, who want to have a more direct say in the decisions made on their behalf whether by governments or corporations or media proprietors. For young people, the desire to have their voices heard is strong, and the PEO is committed to the idea that citizenship is not a deferred outcome, but a role to which young people can bring their ideas and energy, and for which they deserve support and encouragement. In its teaching programs and learning materials the PEO will continue to strive for that balance of knowledge and attitude which will serve all our citizens well as participants in a robust democracy.

For further information contact Brenton Holmes, Director of the PEO on (02) 6277 3559 or see the PEO's Internet site at www.peo.gov.au.

Hearings commence on Tax File Numbers inquiry

The House Economics Committee has received many submissions from individuals and organisations since the advertisement on the Tax File Numbers inquiry was published in late September. The submissions have focused the Committee's attention on issues of tax and welfare fraud, Tax File Number privacy and weaknesses in the Australian Taxation Office's (ATO's) administration of the system. Part of the inquiry will involve reviewing the Auditor-General's report into the Management of Tax File Numbers, which found:

- at least 3.2 million more tax file numbers in Australia than people;
- nearly 200,000 duplicate Tax File Numbers;
- \$500m worth of tax is not being collected because of tax file number weaknesses; and
- the ATO cannot reconcile investment accounts of banks and other funds.
- Improving the better data matching capacity across some government agencies to uncover tax and welfare fraud;
- Extended quotation of Tax File Numbers for a range of financial transactions, for example, Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre, credit reference and real estate transactions; and
- International comparison of Tax File Number-equivalent application and use in other OECD nations.

However, the Committee's Chairman, Mr David Hawker MP, said, 'The Committee's work will build on the Australian National Audit Office audit, not duplicate it.' The Committee will also be investigating administrative, policy and client service issues related to Tax File Numbers.

The hearings for the inquiry will start in early December. Some of the issues that the Committee will be considering include:

- The problems with proof of identity requirements that allow fraudulent use of Tax File Numbers to unlawfully obtain tax advantages and/or claim government benefits;

More information on the inquiry, an electronic copy of the Australian National Audit Office report and media releases are available from the inquiry's web site at:

www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/efpa/TFNaudit/tfnindex.htm

Further information on the hearings or any other aspect of this inquiry can be obtained from the Committee Secretariat by Telephone: (02) 6277 4587 or Email: EFPA.Reps@aph.gov.au.