

*“Education is not the filling of*



Students and their Assistant Teacher at Loomah Community School (West Kimberley, Western Australia) use the Parliamentary Education Office's Big Book to learn about Parliament.

In its efforts to educate young Australians about their Parliament, the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) does not just fill students' heads with facts and figures about the House of Representatives and the Senate. When visiting the Education Centre at Parliament House, students learn about Parliament by role playing different parts of parliamentary processes. They debate a bill, they act out a committee investigation. They get to know how the place works by becoming enthusiastic participants in the workings of their Parliament.

Away from Parliament House, students also need to be enthused about the way in which our parliamentary system of government operates. That is why in recent times the PEO has been focusing on the teaching of teachers, so that our educators can bring to the classroom the same type of experience that students enjoy when visiting Parliament House.

Through its teacher professional development programs, the PEO helps teachers to learn how they can incorporate the decision-making processes of Parliament into teaching strategies for use across the curriculum. Teachers are shown how the decision-making processes of Parliament can be translated into the school environment so that students not only come to understand how Parliament works, but also come to appreciate the importance of

making decisions after investigating, debating and listening to the opinions of others. In this way, they are instilled with knowledge and skills for life.

“Participation by students in decision-making in their schools, whether it's about school governance or curriculum or some local community concern, is the most powerful way of orienting students towards being active citizens,” says Brenton Holmes, PEO Director. “In every program we ask ourselves: How will this activity enable and encourage students to be more fully engaged with their learning? Will it motivate them to participate effectively in their classroom and their community? Will it help equip them to make informed decisions and follow sound processes for decision-making?”

## *pail, but the lighting of a fire.”*

**William Butler Yeats**

The topics for debate and decision-making can arise from the school community, the local community, from areas listed in the curriculum or even from national issues in which the students may be interested. Recently students and teachers who have been visited by PEO staff have looked at:

- the problem of local youth accessing a motor cycle track in a country town;
- the effect of the crack-down on miners and gold licence inspections on the Ballarat gold fields in 1853;
- the problem of increased petrol pricing at the pump;
- a proposal to dump low grade nuclear waste at a nearby site;
- restricting tree felling on private land in Queensland;
- making algebra a compulsory subject in school;
- increasing the defence budget for East Timor peace-keeping;
- mandatory sentencing of juvenile offenders;
- the Immigration Bill of 1901;
- illegal immigrants; and
- water management in rural Australia.

All of these topics were selected by the students and their teachers for different reasons. The role-play inquiries and debates succeeded because the topics matched the interest level of the participants.

There are a number of ways in which the PEO plans and delivers these programs. Usually PEO staff follow-up a contact either directly from a teacher or through general networking. After consulting with the teachers concerned, a program is sketched out to suit the needs of the school. A visit to the school is arranged and usually begins with some demonstration role-plays with the students. PEO staff then spend time with school staff planning and devising the next few days' activities. This often involves the teachers and the students choosing a topic, posing a problem and devising a solution to it – often through devising a Bill for debate. Preparations for the debate and the committee of inquiry are then made. After these activities are completed and the solution to the problem has been carefully considered by the students – and changed if needed – the PEO, teachers and students look at ways of taking action to implement their solution.

The PEO outreach program includes Indigenous education, with PEO staff having visited many Aboriginal community schools in Arnhem Land, the Kimberly and the Pilbara. The emphasis is on giving the teachers tools for teaching about Parliament and how decisions are made. A colourful and attractive PEO resource – the *Big Book* – is a key to the success of these programs. The local teacher uses it with their students while observing how the students engage in the learning activities. Topics looked at in this way have included:

- legalising 'ganja';
- banning the sale of alcohol in communities;
- making five days schooling per week compulsory;
- banning junk food from community shops;
- making English the compulsory language for instruction in schools;

- making the teaching of Aboriginal languages compulsory in all Australian schools; and
- investigating the smuggling of wildlife in the bush.

From time to time, PEO staff work with university lecturers to assist trainee teachers develop skills and knowledge in parliamentary and civics education. In 2001, the PEO will be bringing together a large group of newly appointed school teachers in regional New South Wales to run an intensive professional development program for them.

“Teaching teachers is a most effective way of spreading the goals of civics and citizenship education through our schools,” says PEO Director Brenton Holmes. “The staff at the PEO keep closely in touch with classroom teachers, and we work hard to ensure that what we offer teachers is practicable and directed towards specified curriculum outcomes.”



*Parliamentary Teaching Fellowships are offered each year. Participating in the Fellowship program (left to right) are New South Wales teachers John Chapman from Dalgety, Stephen Chapman from Goulburn and Margaret Taylor from Bega.*

Another way in which the PEO commits to the training of teachers is through Parliamentary Teaching Fellowships. This scheme enables a group of teachers from around Australia to spend an intensive week at Parliament House developing a range of projects that they can implement in their schools and communities.

“At the Parliamentary Education Office we help to light students' passion for parliamentary democracy, but we also provide teachers with the resources and skills they need to fan the flames,” comments Brenton Holmes.

**For more information on the programs of the Parliamentary Education Office**

Visit: [www.peo.gov.au](http://www.peo.gov.au)

Call: (02) 6277 3147

Email: [info@peo.gov.au](mailto:info@peo.gov.au)