



Submission to the Electoral Matters Committee's:

Inquiry into the future of Victoria's electoral administration

February 2013

About the ECCV:

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the statewide peak advocacy body representing ethno-specific agencies and multicultural organisations. For more than 35 years the ECCV has remained the principal liaison point between culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, government and the wider community in Victoria. The ECCV has over 210 members, representing groups with an ethnic or multicultural focus, organisations with an interest in these areas, or individuals who support the ECCV. The majority of our members are not-for-profit community service organisations. The ECCV advocates and lobbies all levels of government in areas such as human rights, access and equity, racism, discrimination, employment, education, health and justice. We advocate on any issue that is of concern to our members. The ECCV has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society.

Background to this Submission:

The ECCV welcome the opportunity to contribute this Inquiry. We see this as an extension of our ongoing commitment to supporting CALD Victorians to navigate local, state and federal electoral processes in Australia.

The ECCV is concerned by the observation, made by the VEC, that "there is a relationship between rates of informal voting and the proportion of electors from non-English speaking backgrounds living in an electoral District."¹ The ECCV is committed to ensuring that the voices of all Victorians are heard and we feel that the correlations that have been made between English proficiency and informal voting speak to need for more accessible information and processes around the Victorian political process (as well as Federal processes).

¹ Victorian Electoral Commission, "Report to Parliament on Niddrie District by-election held on 24 March 2012", Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne, March 2012, p.18.

As the Committee is undoubtedly aware, citizens may cast informal votes for a variety of reasons, however it is very concerning to think that some CALD Victorians may be voting informally due to a lack of access to support and information. In a multicultural state such as Victoria, it is a disadvantage for community members to be, in effect, disenfranchised because they are from a non-English speaking background, or because they have not received adequate support or information.

With this in mind, the ECCV has seen fit to prioritise this issue over recent years. Our work in this area has included policy advocacy, community consultation and the development and implementation of capacity building projects. Examples of our work in this area include:

- The ECCV Submission to the *Inquiry into Voter Participation and Informal Voting* (June 2008) [Attached]
- *ECCV Scoping Paper to the Victorian Electoral Commission about the notion of 'Democracy Ambassadors'* (October 2009) [Attached]
- The ECCV Submission to the *Inquiry into the Functions and Administration of Voting Centres* (May 2010) [Attached]
- The ECCV Australia Africa Democracy Project (2006-2007). A program combining community education forums with resource development, with a focus on Horn of Africa Communities. See: <http://eccv.org.au/projects/the-australia-africa-democracy-project/>

Addressing the questions posed by the Discussion Paper

The following submission will provide information and recommendations relevant to the below questions, as presented in the Electoral Matters Committee Discussion Paper (November 2012)

- Do you think civic education is a good way to increase community understanding about compulsory voting?
- What are some ways to reduce informal voting?
- The Committee has learnt that education programs focused on voting help reduce levels of informal voting in CALD communities. Do you have any other ideas to address the increasing trend in informal voting in Victoria?
- Do you have any suggestions or strategies to encourage electoral participation by Victorians?

Issues that may affect CALD electoral participation.

Based on consultation and stakeholder feedback, the ECCV are aware of several factors that can inhibit the participation of CALD Victorians in electoral processes.

These barriers vary from person to person and from community to community, with different people being affected in different ways and to varying degrees by factors such as:

- **Language and literacy barriers**

This means that messages and information around voting, candidates and other political processes do not reach certain members of the Victorian community.

- **Uncertainty regarding civic rights and responsibilities.**

This can be the result of migration and adjusting to new political structures, laws and norms. However, stakeholder consultation has revealed that many Victorian secondary school graduates feel that they do not have the political or systemic knowledge to vote with confidence. This is all the more concerning when we consider community feedback which indicates that many CALD parents, particularly those with low English proficiency, turn to younger family members for information regarding voting processes and candidates.

- **Unfamiliarity with democratic process and the Australian/Victorian system of government**

For many migrants the Victorian and Australian system of government is unlike any system of government they have experienced in the past. Those coming from undemocratic or unstable states may be reluctant to participate in electoral processes and political acts (discussed below). Other Victorians may have experienced and be confident with electoral politics, but may not be familiar with the particularities of the Australian and Victorian system. For example stakeholder consultation reveals much confusion with regard to the preferential voting system and voting protocols for different levels of government. This may be correlated to the high rates of informal voting found in some CALD communities.

- **Issues related to the electoral role.**

Stakeholder consultation has revealed that many CALD community members, particularly those from more recently arrived cohorts, may not be aware of the need to update the electoral role in the case of changes to their address, or personal details.

- **Transport and mobility issues.**

Community consultation indicates that this can have a particular impact on certain CALD communities. Mobility becomes a barrier in instances where:

- access to private transport (a car) is not possible
- convenient public transport is not available
- groups, or individuals, require special assistance to travel from place to place (due to language barriers or other issues)

- **Settlement pressures**

Settlement demands (such as the priority of finding housing, employment, schooling for children and forging community connections) can overshadow other matters for members of new and emerging CALD communities. ECCV consultations have revealed that many of those arriving in Australia are given information related to rights and responsibilities. However, the context under which this information is provided, that being during the stressful and fast paced process of settlement, can lead to this information being overlooked. This speaks to the need for information provision and education that is ongoing and constantly reinforced through local-level community education and consciousness raising programs

- **Reluctance and distrust**

Some CALD Victorians may demonstrate a reluctance to involve themselves in voting, or any political endeavour, due to having experienced repressive governments, compromised rule of law, political, ethnic or religious violence and/or unresponsive political systems in their country of origin.

- **Disillusionment**

Stakeholder consultation has revealed that many CALD Victorians are disillusioned with politicians and with the political process in Australia. Some feel that they have little to gain by participating in this process. In consultation, a number of young people from CALD backgrounds claimed that it did not matter who they voted for, or if they vote at all, as they were not likely to be well-represented in any case. Many young stakeholders felt that politicians were neither interested in, nor relevant to them, leading some to reject the political process and eschew participation.

Strategies to overcome barriers to electoral participation in CALD communities.

The ECCV believes greater effort needs to be made to ensure that all Victorians, including those from CALD backgrounds, are better informed and prepared to participate fully, freely and fairly in the Australian electoral system. Community consultation on this matter suggests that the following strategies may assist with this process

- **Enhanced use of ethno-specific community media**

Information regarding electoral and political processes could reach large CALD audiences via the range of community language media forms that are available, including newspapers, radio broadcasts and television programs.

Based on the feedback we receive from our members and stakeholders, the ECCV have great confidence in ethno-specific community radio broadcasts and consider them to be one of the most effective and accessible ways of communicating with CALD communities. Community specific broadcasts and programs have a wide listenership and are capable of crossing geographical, age, gender and social boundaries, as well as literacy barriers.

- **Enhanced support on Election Day**

Feedback received by the ECCV indicates that many community members would like to see more officials at polling booths speaking community languages. This would assist community members to feel more supported and provide an accessible point of information for those who may need clarification or assistance.

In addition to this, enhanced transport accessibility to and from voting centres would be of great assistance. With resourcing, local ethno-specific and multicultural organisations could coordinate and promote increased transport to voting centres. Local ethno-specific and multicultural organisations are regularly identified as the first port of call for many CALD Victorians seeking information with regard to supports and services. These organisations have established rapport and trust with their constituents and are thus very well placed to play this role during elections.

- **Enhanced school-based learning**

It is very concerning that many Victorian secondary school graduates report that they feel underprepared for voting and unclear regarding political process (a situation that raises serious questions about representation and democracy). Although the ECCV commend the VEC's Passport to Democracy program, evidence on the ground suggests that not all Victorian students are attaining the level of understanding this program seeks to provide. The experience of being

compelled to participate in a system that one does not understand is undoubtedly very disempowering and can lead to negative attitudes towards the voting and political process more generally.

In order to safeguard the representative character of our democracy, Victorian schools and teachers need to be better resourced and supported to provide comprehensive education, to all Victorian students, regarding local, state and federal political structures and voting processes. This must include specific resourcing for the development, implementation and evaluation of school-based programs designed for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

- **Culturally and linguistically competent Democracy Ambassadors to provide ongoing support and information.**

In October 2009, the ECCV offered to work with the VEC to provide ongoing awareness raising in CALD communities via a community based Democracy Ambassador program. The ECCV proposed that trained Democracy Ambassadors, who would also be part of the local community, could assist in communicating clear messages about enrolment, voting and elections and to some extent provide support and empower members of Victoria's CALD communities to engage in the electoral system. The role of Democracy Ambassadors, we proposed, would be to:

- Provide information on when citizens are eligible to vote and assist in identifying voter's appropriate electoral roll.
- Provide information about elections.
- Explain the different types of voting systems and the variation in the methods used to indicate the voter's preferences on a ballot paper.
- Provide assistance at elections on how to fill out the ballot paper and where the ballot paper should go once it is completed.
- Explain how people can get to the voting centres and what alternative options they have if they cannot get to those centres on Election Day.
- Clarify the compulsory nature of voting.
- Gather information from the community by inviting feedback regarding their understanding of the voting system and the appropriateness of the services provided.
- Promote the range of information sources produced by the VEC and explain how and where they can be accessed
- Relay messages about enrolment, including how to register for enrolment and the time enrolment details need to be updated.

As outlined in our original proposal, Democracy Ambassadors would be trained to deliver community information sessions, modelled on those that have been run by ECCV in the past, such as the 'Australia Africa Democracy Project' (outline attached). Community information sessions would provide community members with an opportunity to discuss the electoral process and to raise any questions or concerns that they may have in a comfortable and culturally responsive environment. Democracy Ambassadors would also be able to provide information and resources to explain and demystify the Australian political and electoral system.

In addition to the above, Democracy Ambassadors could assist community members to make connections between political/electoral processes and the realities of their day-to-day life. Many Australians (including CALD Australians) do not see overarching political structures as relevant to their personal concerns, frustrations and beliefs. It can be empowering for individuals and communities to represent themselves and seek change and progress through the democratic system, however, many CALD community members will require enhanced support in order to achieve this. We hope that Democracy Ambassadors will provide this support and that their work will see our democratic system enlivened by the many voices that are currently lost at election time and in the political sphere more generally, due to participation and information barriers.

The ECCV remain firmly committed to the Democracy Ambassador program and we hope to continue to engage with the VEC around this concept. More information regarding this proposed project can be found in the attached document *ECCV Scoping Paper to the Victorian Electoral Commission about the notion of 'Democracy Ambassadors'* (October 2009)

Recommendations

The ECCV recommend:

1. That the VEC enhance their use of in-language, community specific media in order to provide CALD communities with information regarding elections and voting in Victoria
2. That resources be directed towards the recruitment and training of additional bi-lingual voting centre officials and support staff, in order to enhance voting centre accessibility.
3. That the VEC partner with ethno-specific and multicultural community organisations in order to coordinate accessible Election Day transport options for CALD community members who may require this support
4. That Victorian schools and teachers be better resourced and supported to provide comprehensive education, to all Victorian students, regarding local, state and federal political structures and voting processes. This should include specific resourcing for the development, implementation and evaluation of school-based programs designed for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.
5. That the VEC continue to work with the ECCV in order to develop and implement the Democracy Ambassador program throughout Victoria.

Contact Information

The ECCV thank the Electoral Matters Committee for considering this submission. For more information regarding this topic, or this submission, please contact:

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