



CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

29th August, 2024

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

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To the Committee Chairperson,

Re: Civics Education, Engagement and Participation Inquiry

The Central Land Council (CLC) thanks the Committee for its invitation to appear at the Darwin Public Hearing of the Civics Education, Engagement and Participation Inquiry, 24th July 2024. This inquiry provides an opportunity for all of us to understand the system changes required to ensure Aboriginal people have every opportunity possible to participate in civics education, and political life. At the heart of this inquiry, is the need to recognise people's right to self-determination and the right to full participation in political life. These are founding principles upon which our Universal Human Rights are built¹.

The ability to exercise the right to self-determination and participate in political life requires more than just opportunity. A supportive environment in which people can learn about civics education, and practically apply this to real life activities is essential. Previous initiatives demonstrate that when there is a considered approach to support remote communities to learn and engage with civics education, political processes and community engagement activities, then voting turnout is higher. Examples include:

- When ATSI undertook their 2002 elections, delivered in parallel with their education campaign titled *The Right to be Heard*, voter turnout in Central Australia increased by 11.1%².
- When the CLC ran a remote education and advocacy campaign in 2023 on the 2023 VOICE referendum, remote voter turnout increased 6.2 % to 73% compared to 66.8% at the 2022 Federal Election³.

By contrast, studies have shown a correlation between the Federal Government's abolishment of the Aboriginal Electoral Engagement Program in 1996, and a steady decline occurring in voter turnout in remote communities as a result⁴.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

² Inquiry into the Federal Election, 2022 – CLC submission

³ Will Sanders, Electoral administration and the Aboriginal voting power in the Northern Territory: Reality and potential viewed from the 2019 federal election, CAEPR Working Paper 2019

⁴ Morgan Harrington, Barriers to voting in remote First Nations communities, Australian National University, 19 April 2022.

The need for education campaigns alongside real life civics activities, is backed up by the 2019 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship⁵ (latest available report) that found *“students with more interest in civic issues, more confidence to actively engage, or greater belief in the value of civic action had greater intention to promote important issues in the future”*⁶.

With this in mind, we are pleased to note that NT Electoral Commission have re-opened their Alice Springs office in July this year. It is also reassuring to note their commitment to producing online resources in Aboriginal people’s first languages. These are important steps in a range of measures that need to be pursued to enhance engagement with electoral processes.

We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the Legislative Assembly of the NT, to engage with young people about civics education. Given their limited resourcing, it seems they have been very innovative in working in partnership with other organisations such as the Michael Long Learning and Leadership Centre to engage remote students.

The importance of civics education cannot be overstated. Whilst the CLC acknowledge current efforts as mentioned above, our constituents recognise that much more needs to be done, particularly for remote Aboriginal students in the NT, where intersecting factors contribute to significant barriers to participate and engage with these systems.

The CLC Context

To understand these barriers, it is important to understand the context that contributes to people’s lack of understanding and participation in these processes, including:

Young people’s engagement with civics education has been hampered by a significant policy shift away from the provision of secondary schooling in remote communities, towards attendance at boarding school since 2015. This lack of continuity of education within remote communities for Aboriginal students has created a gap in civics education at a crucial time in young people’s lives. For example, in the combined Barkley / Central Australian Region that CLC covers, approximately 1/3 of remote communities have local access to secondary education options, with an average attendance rate at approximately 53% for Aboriginal students, with very remote attendance around 43%;

Digital exclusion impacts equity of access to the internet, as a result people’s ability to access digital resources such as those developed by NTEC is diminished;

Inadequate resourcing of the NTEC and AEC to undertake a sustained commitment to engagement with Aboriginal community partners, the lack of adequate support regarding remote polling stations, and the inequity of having time access to booths contributes to lower voting turnout;

Approaches from the NTEC to voter access whereby a small voter turnout in a community, results in a smaller window to vote offered at the subsequent elections. Rather than investing more resources into ensuring residents are confident and motivated to vote, the period of time the polling booth is open in that community is subsequently cut back;

⁵ NAP Civics and Citizenship 2019 National Report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), <https://www.nap.edu.au/nap-sample-assessments/results-and-reports>

⁶ NAP Civics and Citizenship 2019 National Report by ACER, pg. 28, <https://www.nap.edu.au/nap-sample-assessments/results-and-reports>

Cost of living pressures hinder participation i.e. transport to other communities or regional centers to vote, particularly in the context of very short windows of opportunity to cast your vote;

Historical experiences of interacting with governments that have created an environment of mistrust has to be taken into consideration in the development of engagement strategies by governments.

The NT poses some unique challenges, particularly for remote communities. Aboriginal people in the CLC region experience an intersectionality of challenges that further impact participation in democratic processes including:

Linguistic diversity and a lack of information in first languages and significant gaps in educational outcomes from preschool through to higher education;

Distance from major regional centres and support services;

Poor access to culturally relevant education and attainment rates;

Over-representation of Aboriginal people who are incarcerated for more than three years who are unable to vote;

Consistently low voter turnout.

In order to engage in acts of self-determination and participation in political life, Aboriginal people must have information available to them that is accessible, reliable, and accurate. There exists a role for government to work alongside Land Councils and other Aboriginal community controlled organisations to support civics education, but also to work in a genuine partnership that fosters shared decision making, as per the government's commitment to Closing the Gap.

If we are genuine about having people's voices heard, then we must take a holistic approach to addressing the systemic problems, not just focus on individuals. A concerted effort is required to engage with remote communities in a different way, in order to support community members to understand and participate more fully in political processes.

Enclosed (Appendix A) is a table of recommendations for your consideration. We thank the Committee again for the opportunity to provide input and look forward to the outcome of this inquiry.

Yours Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Les Turner.

Les Turner

Chief Executive officer

Appendix A - Recommendations

1. Priority is given to funding the development of voter educational materials in Plain English and local Aboriginal languages
2. Northern Territory and the Commonwealth Government commit to increase resourcing for effective community engagement with the above mentioned resources.
3. NTEC and the AEC commit to use of interpreters, and employ local Aboriginal staff to support people at remote, regional and urban polling stations.
4. The strategies and initiatives through the Indigenous electoral participation project are co-designed with, and endorsed by indigenous communities and organisations prior to and during implementation.
5. A sustained commitment to the continuation of the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program, with adequate resourcing.
6. The NTEC and AEC to engage with Aboriginal community controlled organisations and representative groups to approach their education campaigns from a community development perspective, to ensure adequate time and resources are made available to support voter understanding and turnout.
7. As per CLC feedback provided to NTEC, 14th March 2024, whilst we support the increased polling hours for communities in our region with an enrolment increased, we urge NTEC to consider the need for focusing on a range of communities where enrolments and voter turnout are currently low.
8. Parliament repeal section 93(8AA) of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 which prevents prisoners from voting, disproportionately affecting Aboriginal people.
9. NTG prioritises the reinstatement of secondary schools to remote communities, in consultation with Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT, Aboriginal Education Steering Committee
10. NTG commits to fully resourcing and mandating bi-lingual education in primary schools as a minimum requirement.
11. NTG work in collaboration with the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group to fast track CTG Socio-economic target #17 that gives people access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.
12. The Committee request a full review, to be publicly shared re: current level of access and delivery of civics education for across remote Aboriginal communities, including participation of remote NT students in the public, private and independent schools.
13. The Committee to support the development of a digital literacy program aimed at remote Aboriginal students, with a significant engagement component supporting students to learn to critically analysis skills to assess information sources and their content (as per the University of Melbourne Submission).
14. NTG give adequate resourcing, to support educators to access professional development re: civics education, including relief from their usual duties. With the high turnover of schooling staff, we emphasise the importance of directing civics education at local educators. This will ensure:
 - a. Continuity of learning for students
 - b. The transference of knowledge and understanding between western and Aboriginal knowledge and governance systems – understanding that these systems can add value to each other