

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT
OF THE 2017 STATE GENERAL ELECTION**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 11 OCTOBER 2017**

Members

**Mr P.A. Katsambanis (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Folkard (Deputy Chairman)
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup
Mr A. Krsticevic
Mr D.T. Punch**

Hearing commenced at 9.18 am

Mr ROSS WORTHAM

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, examined:

Mr STEFAAN LUKE BRUCE-TRUGLIO

Policy and Advocacy Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, examined:

Miss TAMKIN ESSA

Project Support Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, examined:

Ms SARA SHENGEB

Project Support Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide evidence in relation to the inquiry into the administration and management of the 2017 state general election. My name is Peter Katsambanis; I am the Chairman of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I will introduce you to the other members. The deputy chair is Mr Mark Folkard, the member for Burns Beach; and the other members are Zak Kirkup, the member for Dawesville; Don Punch, member for Bunbury; and Tony Krsticevic, member for Carine. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however this privilege does not apply to anything that you might say outside today's proceedings.

Before we begin with questions, do you have any questions about your attendance today or any brief opening statement that you want to make?

Mr WORTHAM: I have an opening statement, if that is appropriate.

The CHAIRMAN: Go ahead.

Mr WORTHAM: Thank you, Peter. Let me start by saying thank you to the committee and to Franchesca for organising our attendance today and for reaching out to the council to ensure that young people are involved in the review in this inquiry. Before I begin, I want to take just a moment to acknowledge the traditional caretakers and custodians of country, the Whadjuk Noongar people, and pay our respects of the council to their elders past and present, but importantly, as you would expect, we want to pay our respects to our current young Aboriginal people in community—our future elders. They are our future for maintaining culture and connection to land.

I was going to start by saying let me introduce these fine people around me, but we have kind of briefly done that. I just want to say that the council is here representing good practice, as well as the voice of young people, so it is equally important that we hear from Tamkin, Sara and Stefaan in our feedback and testimony today. That being said, I want to just run through a few brief opening statements if that is all right, Peter?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes, please.

Mr WORTHAM: Thank you. Just for context, YACWA, the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, is the peak body for young people and all those that support young people in WA—that is, nearly

500 000 Western Australians and hundreds of organisations and workers. We are predominantly a human rights organisation that has been around since 1980 looking after the rights of young people. We predominantly look after the young people who do not often have a voice—those the most marginalised and those in need of additional supports, when our mainstream system is not supporting them. We believe deeply that this inquiry is extremely important to ensure that young people, in particular marginalised young people, have access to the democratic process, and we commend the committee on the process you have gone through so far.

In the lead-up to our retrospective submission to the committee, YACWA has conducted a couple of surveys, which you will see within our submission. That being said, it was only recently provided to the committee, so I thought it might be worthwhile just briefly going through that and some of the results.

The first survey that we conducted was actually in 2016 prior to the election. It was quite a successful survey that engaged more than 300 young people and their responses to their engagement within the political process and within the electoral process. Post the state election, we conducted an additional survey that again looked at young peoples' engagements, in particular, for this state election where we got another 40-plus responses. A large portion of our submission is based on those responses, as they are current in the experiences of young people, and in addition to that, some research that we have done on good practice for engaging young people within the voting and electoral system. Responses came from across the state, from every region, and from a very diverse range of young people—young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people from Aboriginal backgrounds, young people living with disability. We are quite confident that it is representative of a cross-section of young peoples' experiences.

I just want to run through four key findings briefly with you. There is more detail in our submission. Frankly, overall it was a fairly negative response of young people's experiences with the electoral process. The first key finding was that young people were not satisfied with the information that they were being provided. In our submission it goes into more detail, but the fact that they were not satisfied should not demean the level of engagement that young people have within the voting and electoral process and the political system. More than 67 per cent of respondents indicated that they actually took an active interest in politics and were wanting information. The information they were receiving however was not either of interest or given in the right way. The WA Electoral Commission's targeted advertising campaign, "The Dark Lord", received fairly negative feedback from respondents, and towards the committee being aware of that, in terms of future development of campaigns. In fact, almost three-quarters stated that they did not see the campaign, suggesting issues with the communications strategy. Of those who saw it, most indicated that it had no effect on them and in fact we had two respondents that said that it actually discouraged them from voting, which is a concern. We believe, though, that creative online engagement strategies such as that can be effective if developed with young people and with current and relevant information that young people want to hear, not just satirical approaches to engaging young people.

A third finding was that young people felt that the process did not examine issues important to them. Whilst we understand the Electoral Commission does not have responsibility over political parties and what they produce as part of their campaigning, young people felt strongly that the candidates and the policies that were presented were not relevant and do not necessarily address matters that they were interested in—therefore potentially impacting on their engagement within the voting.

A fourth finding was that young people face particular barriers, which we know—work barriers on the day. Young people often work on election day, and we have some stories in the group, in

particular around that being a barrier to accessing the polls. The transiency of young people is another challenge—going from one electorate to another—and the information that is needed to inform young people on how they update their enrolment, if and when they move.

We have six key recommendations that I will just highlight and then I will conclude. We suggest that the Electoral Commission develop a targeted strategy to improve youth participation and awareness outcomes in future electoral processes, and develop an engagement strategy for young people. We suggest that the commission ensure that any strategy to increase participation of young people is developed in partnership with young people and that the commission consider physical and practical barriers to voting processes. You will see within our submission, there is quite a number of recommendations for online voting. While we understand the challenges to that, it is something that was brought up quite frequently. In addition, we suggest that the use of social media platforms to engage young people is prioritised to disseminate information. The format and the platform used should be determined in conjunction with young people on relevant issues of the day.

Lastly, that we encourage the commission to consider ways to ensure information is provided on election candidates to other young people. There is more information around the statistics coming from the surveys and there are great stories sitting in the committee, so I will conclude there. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you—that is very comprehensive and helpful for us. There is a merging of issues in there, some of them that are beyond the scope of this inquiry—although interesting and important to us as individual members of Parliament. But the issues around particular political issues and engagement with political parties are beyond the scope of this inquiry. I hope you understand that.

Mr WORTHAM: We do.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned how your survey results found that young people wanted awareness campaigns that were more relevant to them and perhaps engage young people in the development. Was there any engagement from the WAEC with your organisation or any other youth organisations that you are aware of in the lead-up to the election and in the lead-up to developing their campaign strategies for that last election?

[9.30 am]

Mr WORTHAM: There was no formal engagement that you know about?

Ms SHENGEB: Prior to the elections we had young people take the initiative to participate in the discussions and lead interviews with politicians on social media, in which we had lots of engagement from young people responding to those videos and those live recordings and things like that, but —

Mr WORTHAM: That, however, was an initiative from the Youth Affairs Council and was not formally connected to the commission, so we had no formal connection. We would invite the connection between the Youth Affairs Council and the Electoral Commission in future elections, certainly. It is a clear objective of council members that we want more young people to be actively voting, so how are we to support that work?

The CHAIRMAN: Did you have any involvement at all in that Dark Lord campaign?

Mr WORTHAM: I will speak briefly on the council and then just get some feedback from my colleagues. The Youth Affairs Council reposted several of the Dark Lord campaign's Facebook posts, which went out to about 8 000 of our members, as well as discussions with members in and around the campaign as it developed, but I think feedback from these guys about their experiences of the campaign would be welcome.

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: I wanted to touch a bit more on the Dark Lord campaign, just from my personal experience in voting and engaging in the last election. When I saw it, I did not think it was an official Electoral Commission–linked campaign. It seemed like a bit of a joke. From that perspective, and from the people I have spoken to and also from the results of the survey, it is not something that young people would take particularly seriously, in terms of actually going out to engage them to actually vote. They will just see it and go “huh!” and just move on, because it is basically treating the campaign and engaging with the Electoral Commission kind of like a joke itself, so then why should young people treat it seriously? So generally my personal position, and also people I spoke to, is quite negative to that. I am not sure if that was actually done in conjunction with young people, but it is certainly something that needs to be done in the future. And also, I did not see any social media presence, personally, of this actual Dark Lord campaign apart from a couple of YouTube videos. It seemed to be mostly TV targeted, and that is not a space that young people generally would look to these days. I think, definitely, going forward, more heavy social media campaigns need to be utilised and also a balance between lighthearted, funny, engaging tactics with actual information—serious things about how to enrol and how to vote—those types of things, so it is about maintaining that balance between serious and engaging. Having those targeted initiatives like going out to schools and telling them how to enrol, how to vote and then having a broader social media marketing strategy, which could be a bit more lighthearted, about engaging young people to go out and vote.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Thanks for that, Stefaan. Just before I start, I would like to say congratulations to Sara. I heard your interview with Gareth Parker, I think it was, about being awarded the scholarship. For all those who do not know, Sara’s story is fantastic. She is an Eritrean refugee, I think it was, who came to Australia around five or six years ago, and since then has achieved some awesome stuff. I just want to say officially—well, not officially, but from my perspective—well done, and thanks for your contribution.

The CHAIRMAN: Well done from all of us.

Ms SHENGEB: Thank you.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: From the great state of Western Australia, we are far richer for having you with us.

Ms SHENGEB: Thank you so much.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Stefaan, I am really keen to understand a bit more, or certainly whilst from your perspective. The Minister for Electoral Affairs, during estimates, a couple of weeks ago now, suggested the Dark Lord campaign was a rip-roaring success. They had commissioned a number of post-election surveys, and suggested that the data analytics that were captured during the campaign and elector surveys over that period of time, sort of indicate that the Dark Lord campaign was, I guess, successful in turning out more voters, as well as the other one, which was the judgemental booth campaign, both of which I am fairly critical of, for not dissimilar reasons that the Youth Affairs Council has mentioned. I am keen to understand whether or not, as part of your post-election survey, anybody identified that they had even seen that campaign, similar to Stefaan’s experience, I suppose, or if there are any further comments on that. I am very concerned that the Electoral Commission did not engage with young people. The committee, I think, is reasonably concerned that they did not especially engage with culturally and linguistically diverse or remote Aboriginal communities but young people in particular. I find that they just, sort of, were missing. Did anybody realise that the post-election survey, whilst it was restricted in size, did not have a particularly positive perspective of the campaign by the Electoral Commission? Did anybody even know that it was happening? I mean, you guys are engaged, but did anybody reference that anything

was going on like that? To me it seems incongruent, that we are getting the minister saying it was great, and it turned out young people, and we have young people who are saying actually that is not the case, and no one identified it.

Mr WORTHAM: I am happy for you guys to respond, but, briefly, from the council's perspective, it was not effective. We had zero response in terms of positive engagement within the campaign. I do remember after some of their beginnings of the TV campaign were happening, there were conversations with members, but it was mostly around the fact that it seemed a bit ridiculous in terms of responses from the surveys. None of the responses said that it had a positive impact on their desire to vote and, as I said before briefly, those that actually did engage with the campaign, which was about one-quarter of the responses, had a negative effect, to actually discouraging them from voting—quite the opposite actually.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: In relation to, I guess, those types of campaigns that you have seen before, has the council got any sort of historic view in terms of maybe when you have done this for the federal elections, in terms of post-election surveys or other state elections, that you consider benchmarking your data against to show that actually, if you can qualify, maybe that the Electoral Commissions in other elections have done a particularly good job in some cases? Have you guys got any sort of historical reference point to go off here, or is it something new that you guys are engaging in, in this case?

Mr WORTHAM: As Sara has mentioned, one of the things that the council did in the lead-up to the state election was engage with each of the major parties to give them a platform to speak on Facebook live, via our Facebook page, to engage with young people around their policies in quite a soft but serious way. The engagement, as Sara mentioned, from that, was quite strong. We do not have post-surveys specifically indicating that that data did not impact on young people's desire to vote. Unfortunately, we do not have that direct detail, but it is certainly something we would be keen to look into, if it is viable for the committee.

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: Just in terms of the survey itself, the results we found in terms of the Dark Lord campaign mirrored the results from the Electoral Commission's post-campaign survey itself, which also stated that a large percentage of young people that they reached out to actually did not know about the campaign at all, or were not influenced. Even that survey is still reflective of our results, and I think a good assessment of the effectiveness of the Dark Lord campaign.

Ms SHENGEB: Just to continue on from that one, I think it is very important to include young people in the process of identifying what the priority areas are or how they best engage with voting systems, and things like that are very important because they know how they best can be engaged and they are more likely to influence other young people to do the same thing.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: This is getting slightly outside the remit of the committee, but I anticipate that there is a far higher engagement at this point in time in something like the same-sex marriage postal survey, and things like that. That is a non-traditional platform. You are quite right about television engagement. This is a similar outreach in terms of a campaign encouraging people to use the post, I suppose, to let their voice be heard, something again that is not particularly traditional for young people. Are there any lessons that you are seeing in terms of the Youth Affairs Council there that you could give to us that we could perhaps push to the government in terms of things that have been done right in that context, with the same-sex marriages survey, and how they are going about things, and the disparity, I suppose, between how the commission went about advertising them?

[9.40 am]

Mr WORTHAM: I hate to draw too many links between mainstream electoral processes and the marriage equality survey. Naturally, we as a council, and our members, were not supportive of that process. That being said, the rallying around the concepts of equality that have come from the Australian community and organisations across the country and the extreme encouragement that came from hundreds of organisations and individuals to actually complete the postal survey is quite unique. It is very much akin to larger issues of young people being active and involved in political processes in other countries on a particular subject. Brexit is an example where they might not have been engaged in the actual election itself. Because it was a specific issue, it brought that to the attention of young people. There are certainly more young people enrolled to vote now as a result of the survey, which is a wonderful thing. In terms of encouraging young people to vote, it is not just the commission's responsibility. One thing that the survey did, as it got all organisations interested in the space active to encourage people to be participatory in the vote. It is certainly a thing that we would want to see for mainstream elections as well.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Can I just get an understanding about how you conducted the post-election and pre-election survey? Why was there a disparity of, say, 300 respondents in the pre and only 41 in the post?

Mr WORTHAM: Time frame. In the pre we spent roughly two months promoting and pushing the survey, where the post —

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Sorry, Ross. Was that online?

Mr WORTHAM: Sorry, yes—through Facebook online. It was conducted over SurveyMonkey by Facebook and Twitter. The post-election survey was conducted via the same medium—through Facebook and Twitter—and promoted to our members and to those who completed the previous survey but we only had a short window because it was done for this.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: Ross and others, I was interested in your comment that this is between the Electoral Commission and yourselves. I am reflecting that we have had the Electoral Commission in here saying, "Yes, we did engage with youth using 'The Dark Lord' campaign," and that it was a great success. We have sat here and heard from yourselves—they did not actually speak to yourselves and you are, I would suggest, one of the key stakeholders in that particular space. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr WORTHAM: My thoughts personally as the CEO of the council is that, going forward, we would love more of a relationship with the commission. We certainly would not oppose it. The circumstance was that it may not have been engaged with us actively in the last election and/or that we were available for that engagement. Retrospectively, I am not quite sure which was the case. Going forward, I agree with you, Mark, that the council can provide an opportunity for the commission to engage directly with young people and also, indirectly, support the commission to create the strategies to do that better themselves.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: This leads to my next question. What are your thoughts—I would be interested to hear from your colleagues—about better supervision of the Electoral Commission ongoing? What are your thoughts on that, particularly from yourselves?

Ms SHENGEB: I am not quite sure I understand the question.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: At the moment, the Electoral Commission stands by itself; it is independent et cetera. It does not have a chain of command of, for a want of a better word, supervision after each election process. This committee is the only supervisory or reviewing capability for them. I am suggesting that I am interested in your thoughts about continued supervision of the Electoral Commission to ensure that you are engaged in the future. Without that supervision, because they

are an independent statutory authority, it is not there. It is quite clear from what you have said to me that they have missed the gate. As I say, ongoing, to improve the process to ensure that you have your input—I am asking: what are your thoughts on supervision of the Electoral Commission to ensure that you can become active participants?

Mr WORTHAM: It makes sense for the commission to have independence aside of any political engagement. That is logical. The details of what additional supervision may look like would need to be a bit more played out before we can even say if it is a good idea or not. The encouragement of the commission or the mandate of the commission to engage or create opportunities to engage with young people would be good. If we could highlight that young voters are a priority for the commission, that would be another positive outcome. However, if supervision is able to be done in a way that maintains the independence, that would be welcome.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Let me go back to the issue of engagement. There is a flurry of activity around election time or in the lead-up to it, but I get a sense from the earlier information you provided that there is a need for some sort of ongoing process of engagement and information sharing and participation design leading up to the election process well ahead so it is almost a continuous process. Have you got some thoughts on that?

Mr WORTHAM: One of the things that has been omnipresent in our discussions with members and young people in and around the election but also in other areas of engagement and consultation with young people is the use of school and how we utilise the school environment to ensure young people are prepared for independence and prepared for adulthood and that transition. Taking part in our electoral process is something that we directly have feedback that young people want to see more of in schools—how to vote, the process of voting, the importance of voting and even the discussion of how young people can start doing more voting systems within schools themselves to actually practice that—so, absolutely.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: So is that building it into the syllabus at a high school level? Just going back to “The Dark Lord”, there is a view in marketing that, particularly in social media, you need to have really good content, really good authenticity and some sense of emotional connection with the content. How would you think “The Dark Lord” campaign fared on those sort of criteria?

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: Fairly poorly.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Fairly boring?

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: Poorly. It did not establish that connection because it was not based on realism. It was based on something like—you see the person is not human. It is not something that young people can relate to. You might think that for 18 to 25-year-olds that it is very much for 10-year-olds. It is not something that young people can say, “This is something that is real that is going to affect me. I want to vote because of this.” It is like something out of a Harry Potter thing. You need something that is based on reality, is what I am trying to say—something that is engaging and is relevant to young people.

Mr WORTHAM: If we had, for example—this is not a formal recommendation but it is an example—more, let us just say, famous musicians, actors or people who young people respect, like sports representatives coming up through our campaign commissioned by the commission, that might provide more of an engaging platform. If we engage young people in areas of their interest and respect, that then transcends to a discussion on the importance of voting. As Stefaan was saying, we need to take young people seriously and their experiences and views of society seriously. It certainly did not do that.

[9.50 am]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: If I can just paraphrase that, in a sense, if we are asking people to make intelligent choices around the political process, we have to give young people the respect of being intelligent in how we communicate that.

Mr WORTHAM: Well said.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Just further to that, I do not quite understand. Why is it that there is not an imperative, I suppose, from a young person's perspective to engage in the electoral process in terms of their democratic right and responsibility? Why is it that that seems to be missing? I would say most Western Australians probably do not necessarily always enjoy getting out of bed on a Saturday and going to vote in long lines and all that sort of stuff. We understand that, but they still go through that duty as a citizen. Why is it that that message is missing in the case of young people if they do not seem to be engaged? We cannot always rely, I suspect, on the Western Australian Electoral Commission to advertise to turn out a vote. They should do that, but they are not necessarily great at that; we have raised that. Why is it that there is this disconnect?

Miss ESSA: From personal experience, I completely agree with what you say, and that is my mindset right now. But during school, you do not get taught about how to vote, when to vote, what the process is, about if you can vote beforehand or not, so my first year of being an adult, I had just turned 18 and I had to vote. I was working that day from nine to five and I could not go out and go and vote. I did not find out until after that you could vote beforehand. I think it is just that misinformation that does not get put through, and I think, like what Ross said before, that being put through schools and engaging with young people and telling them, "This is your right; you have an opinion, this is where to go and this is what you can do." I think that is what this engagement is, because we are so misinformed in schools and once we get out, it is just like a world that we do not know and we are expected to be adults. I know we should be adults, but again, we need to be given the right information to do what we are asked to do, so I think it is just that small act of, I guess, informing someone that will help you, and I got a \$60 fine, I think, after that, and I was kind of put off for a while. Then, once I started volunteering and getting involved with YACWA, I realised where I could go with my voice and my opinion, and where I could, I guess, voice these opinions.

The CHAIRMAN: It is interesting, because in your comments just now—it is Tamkin, is it not?

Miss ESSA: Yes, that is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: You raised two issues that concern me about an emerging disconnect. The first one is the engagement process, where we were told by the minister that it was successful and wonderful—sort of like a *Yes, Minister* response of ticking all the boxes for the public service, but providing no service to the actual community that is being serviced. The other one is about the education around voting because, again, we are told by commonwealth electoral commissions and state electoral commissions that they do a good job and that they get out there in the schools. We are probably not going to find a solution to it today, but it is quite clear that there is a disconnect between what the people delivering these programs think they are achieving, and what you are telling us as young people is actually being achieved, and that raises alarm bells for me.

Miss ESSA: Definitely, I agree. While we were coming here I was talking to Ross about how we need to, I guess, get that information in schools, even in the final year. As part of year 12, I know we had set times that are there and we had organisations coming to our school to speak about issues like mental health, but maybe an issue should be how the government works and how politicians work, and how the whole system works, which just is not in there.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: That becomes enmeshed in the syllabus.

Miss ESSA: Yes.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: Two points: as far as I am aware, there is some political education in high school. I have gone to high schools and spoken about it. I think there are two things here. One is how much are people paying attention at that point in time and how much are they retaining. Obviously, at that point in time when they are hearing it, it is like, “Yeah, whatever. Thank you very much. Is it an exam? No? Okay, I’m off to the next thing.” That is one thing, and I suppose that happens to all of us in life. The second point is that for the older generation, we had TV, we had commercials, we had the news, you read the paper and the radio had information on it, whereas today you have Netflix, Stan, all these other on-demand things, Foxtel et cetera, and you do not have people watching commercials. You do not necessarily have them watching the news; you do not have young people reading *The West Australian* or *The Sunday Times*. They are all the traditional mediums for how we operate, but Facebook, YouTube — again, the ads might be there, and I am not a big Facebook user, but I do use it, and when I use different social media, I do not actually see the ads. They might pop up, but I am focusing on my material, going onto the next thing, and a lot of the time I do not see it. I suppose it is a bit like when I read the local paper; not that many young people read the local paper. Why would they read the local paper? I know that the bottom half of the paper is where the ads are and my eyes never go past halfway; I just look at the top of the page, unless for some reason I am actually looking for an ad, I will look down lower, or politicians advertising on the bottom right-hand corner. You never look there at all. So, it is about how do you get them interested? How do you get them focused at the right point in time? Obviously, a lot of young people participate in sporting clubs, so how do we get maybe organisations at a broader level have to take that message on board at every stage in the process and at every stage of your life to make sure that they sell that message—that it is important to vote and that you need to do it at that point in time? Maybe local council networks; I do not know, there are a lot of different mediums. I am just wondering whether you have any ideas about that.

Mr WORTHAM: Thank you for that point, and Zak, for your point as well around the responsibility. I think it is worth stating that we actually have quite good voter turnout in Australia and Western Australia. I came from the United States in an earlier life and it is quite the opposite in the United States. We are starting from a good starting point, and that is worth acknowledging. The issues around responsibility and understanding responsibility and rights as citizens and the issues of interest and desire to be part of that process are really important to unpack. I think if we go back to the Electoral Commission’s role and the limitations of that, it is just simply engaging people around responsibility to take part in a process, around the detail around the areas that might gain interest, such as the marriage equality postal survey. There is an area of very particular interest to a younger generation that has seen a really strong voter uptake. That is a political issue, so again that sits outside of the commission and the committee’s responsibilities with the parties and how they engage young people. Certainly, the council encourages parties to be prioritising their policy issues and their the subject matter to do just that. From experience, it does not always happen. Back to the area of responsibility, I think as a society we value our democratic process and young people clearly value that as well. However, we need to embed more discussion around the importance and the opportunity that we have as citizens to take part in the voting process, and through schools is a great way of doing that. Rather than just, “Well, do it, or you’re going to get a fine”, do it because you can do something great with your vote. That message of purpose needs to be embedded back into why young people should be part of this process.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Just taking that a step further, I have a sense when I talk with young people in my electorate that people are pretty aware of the responsibility of voting, but they actually do not like what they see, so there is an active process of choosing not to participate, and I am wondering —

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: We cannot just talk about you, Don!

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Predecessors, I think!

I just ask if you have a view about whether you think that is a significant component of that non-participation, because it goes to the heart of what sort of interventions might be needed in terms of how we engage people?

Mr WORTHAM: Only eight per cent of respondents to our original survey felt that politicians were discussing issues that mattered to them, so absolutely that has a large part to play.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is a relevance issue.

Mr WORTHAM: Absolutely.

Ms SHENGEB: I think it is also how simple the process is. Information is usually presented in a very complex way, so when kids are at school, they are more likely to just be focused on what is at school—what they are there to do, to study, to do their exams and things like that. Also, it is for them to engage—my mind went blank!

[10.00 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Where I have an issue comprehending what we are hearing, because obviously it is clearly a message, is the complexity. I often get this complexity thrown up. When you distil the voting process down, there is an election day plus some pre-polling period. You roll up, you get your name ticked off the list, you get given two ballot papers, and you fill out one one way and one the other way. That is when you distil it down to its bare bones. You put it in the box and you go home. Where is the complexity, because clearly there is? That is what we are getting back. That is what your surveys tell us from young people, from the voters. So we cannot dismiss that and say, “Oh, that’s silly.” Where does the complexity come in? What is making it so complicated or distorting that pure version in the minds of the people who are getting the information?

Mr WORTHAM: Thank you for the question. I think it is worth acknowledging that it is actually quite simple and the issue is simple, and that is about connection between young people, their current experience of the world, their desires and their views and the systems and processes that we use in our political system in our electoral system. There is a very strong disconnect there, and that is not one of lack of desire for young people to be active citizens; it is a disconnect of interest and relevance. So the bridge needs to be built in both ways and we need to encourage and motivate more young people to take part in a process that they might not be personally interested in because the messages and the topics are not areas of interest. The other way is, naturally, the system engages, as the commission tried to do with the Dark Lord campaign, more with young people and so, as well, with political parties and their policies and such that they are speaking on.

The CHAIRMAN: Just on that, are we really seriously, at the end of the day, pointing in the direction that there is a group of people in society, be they young people or not young people, who do not want to be forced to participate in this process at a particular point in time, and they may pick and choose when they want to vote and when they do not want to vote; and, if they do not want to vote, we should not be penalising them for it?

Mr WORTHAM: That is a deep —

The CHAIRMAN: Take it as a rhetorical question if you want.

Mr WORTHAM: I would say not specifically young people but anyone; no-one likes to be forced to do anything. So I would not pigeonhole young people in that space by any means.

The CHAIRMAN: That is why I said from any age. I was clear on that, I think.

Mr WORTHAM: We believe that engagement within the political process is important and the electoral process is critical as a society that is based on democratic values, and young people believe in the value in that as well. The point is motivation. I do not want to leave today without noting the commission's efforts today should be commended and that no doubt the resources that would have gone into the Dark Lord campaign and the intention behind that and other campaigns is extremely valued. It is about the delivery of it and so we would like to see that continued investment; however, it may be potentially delivered in different ways.

The CHAIRMAN: We have reached the end of the session. Do you mind if we run over a few minutes because there are still some issues to discuss?

Mr WORTHAM: No problem.

The CHAIRMAN: We will try to get them done as quickly as we can.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: I have just been listening and it seems that the underlying issue here is the distance between the Electoral Commission and youth, and particularly youth and that distance. You are saying that it has improved and the evidence of that is the Dark Lord campaign. Although it was poorly, I suppose, implemented, it was not thought through and they are saying, "Yes, we engaged with our youth; this is the evidence we have got in relation to this." But then you have come back with some survey results saying, "Yes, okay; it was interesting, but, no, they've missed the mark." What I am trying to say is that that distance and that communication—we have heard from, if you have read the other transcripts, a lot of other stakeholders in relation to this. I go back to particularly—supervision is maybe not the right word—oversight to make sure that they are actually doing what they are meant to do. Part of their charter is to engage with the youth and it clearly has not occurred. What are your thoughts?

Mr WORTHAM: One of the things that we do as a council to ensure we are accountable and the views of our constituents—in this case, young people and those that support young people—is that we ensure they are involved in all aspects of our work from our governance structures through to our thinking. So a potential accountability structure for a commission in that space—we would highly encourage this—is to have a committee of young people have a governance structure around particular groups of people that they are trying to engage. As we have demonstrated in our submission and through nearly 40 years of experience as a youth affairs council, the creativity and innovation that can come from young people being involved can solve a lot of these challenges. In terms of just simply encouraging or mandating the commission, to have a constructive council or committee of young people to govern and guide and influence the delivery of future engagement strategies would be welcome. It is a potential opportunity.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: Obviously, today politicians, political parties and lobby groups are using every medium possible out there when it comes to campaigning. Whether it is Facebook, Twitter—you name it—they are using it. Probably more money than ever before has been spent on campaigning to the extent where even I turn off the TV when stuff comes on nowadays. So you cannot say that you do not know there is an election. You cannot say that you do not know that there are policies and there are issues being discussed. Whether you are actually paying attention is a different story, but you cannot say that you do not know this is happening. At the same time, young people are more capable than ever before of finding things online and finding information if they are interested in looking for it. It would be very easy for a young person to go online and say, "There's an election coming up. What's the story? What's going on?" There are, no doubt, YouTube videos and all sorts of things going on telling you how to do these things. As my son says to me, anytime he wants to find something, he goes online and in five seconds, he has got it; there it is—the information. The information is there, everybody knows what is going on, everyone knows what the policies are, and

everyone knows these people—politicians—impact on every aspect of your life and every decision that they make in terms of what you can and cannot do and when you can and cannot do it almost. That being the case, today more than ever before in history, why would young people not be the most informed and the most engaged than ever before, especially looking forward? Does your view of where things are heading differ looking forward as it does looking backwards? Is the Electoral Commission really in a position to do more than it is currently doing on the basis that everyone else is spending a squillion dollars and going through every other medium possible?

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: I guess this is where the lines get blurry in terms of what you are talking about—the engagement with politicians and the engagement with the electoral process itself. That is obviously quite out of the scope of this committee and it is a tough line to cross, because they are quite interlinked. In terms of the commission’s capacity to engage young people in this day and age where everyone can be informed online is like going back to the idea of schools: it is embedding this idea of engagement with the electoral process from a very young age, even before they turn 18—when they are 17 or 16 in school—and actually informing them of these processes. Then, as they get older, you can have that more blanket overall marketing engagement strategy to actually get them to vote. When they are younger, they know what the electoral process is, they know how to do it and, as they get older, you actually put in place these marketing strategies to actually go out and get them to vote so they have that previous knowledge, they know what is going on and you can put that in place and make them go out to vote.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I suppose the same-sex marriage vote is a good example where they obviously know that they need to register, they know how the system works, but they just have not bothered to participate for some reason and then, all of a sudden, an issue has come along that they are interested in and are locked in now. I think it goes back to what the Chair said; they are choosing to opt in or opt out—potentially some of them—based on whether they are interested or not or think, “I don’t really care; it doesn’t bother me. You’re going to decide what you are going to decide anyway. I am living my life over here.” Maybe there is a degree down that path as well.

[10.10 am]

Mr WORTHAM: There is and I think that is human nature in that we have to have an interest in and a connection to something to action it. To your point around the plethora of information that is out there, it is actually a saturation of information and there is so much in it and so selected for the consumer—that information, whatever it may be—it can actually be a distraction from what it used to be 20 years ago when we did not have that, or 10 years ago when we did not have that. It is almost that we have to try harder now to get that message across, not just to young people, but to any audience. Tony mentioned what does the future look like. We, as a council, know we are living in a rapidly changing society and that can be daunting, but at the same time we need to see that as a huge opportunity and the efforts of the commission and other organisations in trying to engage with young people or others can be leveraged on. I do not think we need to be investing more money; we just need to be spending that money in the right way, and getting guidance from young people in the day will help do that.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I was going to say that if you want to use my state seat of Carine as an example of how to engage young people, I am happy to work with you to try to do that!

The CHAIRMAN: There are some issues that we do need to tick off on, because they are very important issues. The first one I want to cover off is that you mentioned that access to polling places for young people is difficult because of the nature of the fact that many young people are students in particular and work on a Saturday. We do have early voting. I will discount postal voting for obvious reasons that have already been canvassed, but we have early voting, and we had it open

for three weeks. Is it an issue of a lack of knowledge about early voting or is it that the time of early voting that effectively works around 9.00 am to 5.00 pm is also of itself a prohibitor and we should look at extending the times of early voting?

Mr WORTHAM: Based on a conversation we actually had just before coming into the committee room, it is both of those things, of course. The early voting process that is in place is great; it is welcomed. We are pleased that it is there, but having access to that and information about that is the challenge. It is worth acknowledging that on voting day—which many young people and Tamkin have given testimony on—some people just cannot get out to vote. It is an additional process to do it early, but if the information is there and the desire from the young person is there, that would be a solution.

The CHAIRMAN: On polling day, a polling booth is decked out with banners, streamers, balloons and lots of people; we sort of have this colloquial term “running the gauntlet”. We have had some anecdotal evidence to suggest that young people in particular are turned off by that. Do you have any comments or any feedback on that?

Miss ESSA: From personal experience, I think it is overwhelming, because then you are like, “Okay, I have to give my vote.” Some young people I know get a bit overwhelmed with what they see and they are then a bit unsure of who to vote for, so sometimes they make on-the-spot decisions and they regret it afterwards.

Mr Z.R.F. KIRKUP: Especially in Carine!

Miss ESSA: There are a lot of decorations and everything, so it is not very simple. When you go, there is a lot of Labor, Liberal, One Nation—a lot of banners just everywhere and people giving you out things. Some people, especially people from CALD backgrounds—I went with my parents this year and my parents were grabbing any kind of flyer from anyone and thinking, “Yes, this is who I am going to vote for”, but they did not know what that person stands for and what that party does. With CALD young people especially I think there is a bit of disconnection as well, but it is very overwhelming, with a lot of posters and handouts being given to people. I think a lot of young people find it overwhelming, just from my experience.

Mr BRUCE-TRUGLIO: Yes, it is overwhelming. I guess for myself, I generally know who I am going to vote for before I come to the polling booth, so I just ignore those people who are going up to you and handing out flyers very vigorously. But especially for people who are a bit less involved and engaged and who are going up to vote, they might feel, I guess, overwhelmed and maybe either accept everything or ignore everything and maybe just do a donkey vote or something because they are just fed up with being harassed outside the polling booths. It would be better for young people to make it with a bit fewer flyers and things everywhere and simple stations where people have their information—someone can go up to them and look at it, rather than people standing around everywhere—and making it a bit more organised.

The CHAIRMAN: The other issue I wanted to address was online voting. We have received evidence about concerns around the efficacy of the process of online voting, so that is an issue that needs to be addressed before it is rolled out any further. But quite clearly from young people in particular we are getting this feedback: “We want to be able to vote electronically at least, if not online.” What drives that? Is it the fact that the rest of life has gone off paper and pencil to an online world or is there something deeper there?

Mr WORTHAM: Just to respond anecdotally to that, it is worth doing a PhD on this very subject. The accessibility of information online and the culture of accessing information online is embedded within the experience of most people today, certainly within young people, so it is outside the norm

then to, as you said, conduct an activity like voting by paper. The paper vote in its own right is quite an intimidating process. It has gotten better in Western Australia, but that in its own right is a bit of a challenge added to the point of the intimidation of the parties outside polling booths. Do you guys have anything to add in terms of engagement with prioritisation of online versus paper?

Ms SHENGEB: I think it is just easier, especially for young people. They are juggling a lot of things—study, work, other commitments that they are interested in—and it is just easier to do it online and is more effective than having to put out another day to just vote.

The CHAIRMAN: I am trying to just distil whether it is the attendance that is the issue. So, if you got people to attend the polling booth and instead of having to fill out a piece of paper, you pressed buttons on a screen, or is it simply the convenience of not having to attend that is really the inhibitor or is it both?

Mr WORTHAM: It is probably both, I would expect. The idea of utilising technology in the polling booth is something that is certainly happening in other countries. The efficacy of that in its own right is a challenge. On the attendance naturally, if you could vote whilst sitting in your living room, I imagine it would certainly garner more engagement than having to make a purposeful trip to a community hall or a school. But at the council, we do not have recommendations on the efficacy and the challenges faced by that. I certainly would encourage the committee and the commission to explore potential online voting or digital voting. As the naturally and rapidly changing society we are, that is a space that we should be exploring.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes. I think that is something that we need to be cognisant of, despite the logistical challenges. The desire for this to become a reality is clearly strong and it is particularly strong the younger the voter is.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Can I just ask a follow-up on that? I can fully understand the convenience issue of being able to do it when you are on the run. Is there any sense in your mind of whether young people would see that as a trade-off in terms of the security of the vote?

Mr WORTHAM: That is a good question. I think that would be more than just young people—I mean, any voter online. That would need to be very clear through the research that the commission and the committee could do in that space around the security and/or efficacy of the vote. I would say yes, we should all be concerned, unless there are very clear parameters on why it is a safe process.

The CHAIRMAN: Remembering, of course, in Western Australia that we have lost ballot boxes off the back of trucks! We have to live in the real world sometimes!

Mr WORTHAM: And that is true!

The CHAIRMAN: We have really welcomed your attendance today; thank you. We had loads and loads of questions and could probably go on forever. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections have to be made to the transcript within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If you do not return the transcript in time, we will just deem it to be correct. You cannot include new material in that correction process; it is simply a process to correct any minor defects and you cannot change the sense of your evidence. But if you want to provide new information, you can do that through an additional submission and you are welcome to do that. Thank you for your attendance today. I will conclude the hearing.

Hearing concluded at 10.20 am
