

Chapter Eight

The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia

Rob O'Connor, QC

In October, 1993, after the defeat in Western Australia of the Labor Party government and the election to office of the Liberal Party - National Party Coalition government, the then Premier, Richard Court, announced the establishment of the Western Australian Constitutional Committee. This followed the activities of the previous government which were encapsulated by the description "WA Inc". The Committee had the task of examining a wide range of issues relating to the Western Australian State Constitution. The Committee conducted its investigations by using a variety of methods, including written and oral submissions, State-wide public seminars, and consultations.

The Committee delivered its report in January, 1995. It emphasised that political and civic education is even more important in Australia than in almost all other countries, because of the highly democratic nature of the Australian Constitution, which can only be altered by popular vote under the referendum provisions in s.128 of that Constitution.

The Committee was of the view that all adult Australians should have at least a basic understanding of the following matters:

- The Commonwealth Constitution and the State Constitutions;
- The Australian federal system;
- The roles of Parliament and the Executive, including the features of responsible parliamentary government;
- The parties system;
- Electoral laws;
- The assumptions and values on which Australia's system of government is based;
- How to participate in government; and
- The limits of government.

A 1992 survey undertaken by researchers from two Western Australian universities found that, while the levels of interest in political matters revealed in the survey were surprisingly high, an overwhelming majority of respondents admitted that their personal understanding of politics was only fair, poor, or very poor. Around 80 per cent of the respondents were not even aware that Western Australia had its own Constitution. I suspect that a similar situation would exist in other States.

In June, 1994 the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, appointed the Civics Expert Group to develop a plan for a program of public education and information on Australian government, citizenship and the Constitution.

The Group's report was released in December, 1994 and stated:

"..... that a major survey conducted on its behalf had revealed widespread public ignorance about many aspects of Government and the Constitution. Most Australians, it appears, are not aware that the Parliaments of Australia have a legislative role, nor do they understand the federal system and its history".

The Group determined that there was a need to provide balanced, non-partisan, high quality civic education that is readily available and suitable for people of all ages and backgrounds, including people who have come from a different political culture.

The foregoing information led to the formulation of Recommendation 33 of the *Report of the Western Australian Constitutional Committee*, namely:

“That the State Government support the establishment of a Constitutional Centre incorporating a museum and with community education functions, ideally to be situated near Parliament House”.

This recommendation became a reality in October, 1997.

The Western Australian Constitutional Centre (“the Centre”) is unique, being the only one of its kind in Australia. It is not a museum in the true sense of the word, despite the wording of the recommendation of the Committee which led to its creation. It does not have appropriate facilities to hold and conserve collections. Instead, the Centre works with State Archives, the Public Records Office, the Batty Library and the Western Australian Museum to ensure that appropriate documents and artefacts are held under suitable conditions at their premises.

Two important aspects of the Centre which need to be emphasised are:

- The Centre was set up with bi-partisan support and, seven years on and with a change in government, still enjoys that privilege. It works very hard to remain neutral on all issues and to provide resources to allow all sides of any issue to be discussed.
- It has an Advisory Board, which is balanced in its political composition, as well as having some very good academics and committed community members amongst its membership. This ensures that the Centre always presents a balanced viewpoint on issues, and does not become an advocate beyond objective and academically sound research outcomes.

Advisory Board

By way of illustration, the present Advisory Board consists of the following:

- The Chairman is Malcolm McCusker, QC, the Leader of the Bar in Western Australia, who was the chairman of the above-mentioned Western Australian Constitutional Committee.
- The Hon Bill Hassell, a former Liberal Party Leader of the Opposition in Western Australia.
- Five persons with academic backgrounds, namely Associate Professor David Black, Professor Greg Craven, Janice Dudley, Dr Kanishka Jayasuriya, and Associate Professor Harry Phillips.
- Diana Warnock, a former ALP Member of the State Parliament and a former current affairs journalist and broadcaster. Ms Warnock succeeded the Hon Ian Taylor, a former Deputy Premier of the State in an earlier ALP government.
- Anne Conti, a former Channel 2 and former Channel 9 newsreader, who has a high level of interest in civic matters.
- Irene Stainton, representing the Aboriginal communities.
- I also am a member of the Board, a Queen’s Counsel with a keen interest in Parliament, government, current affairs and the Constitution.

The Advisory Board meets every two months for about 1 to 1½ hours. Its role is to provide:

- overall strategic policy advice to the Premier about the Centre’s activities;
- advice on appropriate subject matter for exhibitions and educational activities for the Centre; and
- an avenue for community consultation on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Centre’s programs.

Objectives

The objectives of the Centre are as follows:

- To promote public awareness of the federal system of government, with particular

emphasis on its constitutional basis;

- To encourage balanced debate about the development of our system of government;
- To educate the public about our electoral and parliamentary systems;
- To foster a sense of ownership and to encourage participation in the political process.

The Centre provides the opportunity for everyone to participate in programs and to examine their political inheritance. People are encouraged to explore ways to contribute to the State's democratic development. The Centre goes about achieving its aims by various means, such as schools education, adult education, exhibitions, public talks, seminars and lectures, publications, its website, interactive display units and public forums.

The busiest time for the Centre is during September and October each year when, through its various displays, exhibitions, lectures, and courses, it sees around 20,000 people.

Schools education (primary and secondary)

The Centre runs education programs for both primary and secondary school students, both at the Centre and in an outreach form to more distant metropolitan schools and regional areas. This regional outreach is done in partnership with the Electoral Education Centre and Parliament.

All of the programs of the Centre for schools are interactive. The students become involved; they do not just sit and listen. They take away an understanding of how things happen and how they work.

In primary school programs, innovation is important. This is reflected by one program which has had a huge amount of success, namely Larfalot's Letter. This program was designed for students aged 6 to 8 years and is an introduction to rules and Constitutions. Through a large storybook approach, and using puppets, the program explores the concepts of democracy and rules forming a Constitution in an imaginary town. The program has been highly successful in developing understandings and appropriate language in students. It shows that "you really cannot start too early".

Other more traditional programs include subjects such as Federation; the Western Australian and Commonwealth Constitutions; female suffrage; and rights and the Constitution.

Secondary school programs are aimed at the curriculum and provide particular support for political and legal studies students. The programs include:

- Creating a new Constitution for Western Australia – examining the elements of the State Constitution and discussing its relevance to current issues;
- Changing the Constitution – how to change both the Commonwealth Constitution and the Western Australian Constitution;
- High Court of Australia;
- Concerns and crises – examining issues which have divided the nation; and
- Understanding the Constitution – looking at the sections of the Commonwealth Constitution and becoming conversant with their intended purpose.

Networks

In some matters the Centre works with other civic education providers. In Western Australia, several bodies provide educational programs and materials, namely the Centre; the Western Australian Parliament; the Electoral Education Centre in Subiaco; and the Francis Burt Law Education Centre, a body sponsored by the Law Society of Western Australia.

The Centre was instrumental in setting up the Civics Education Reference Group, involving all of the organisations above plus university lecturers, the Education Department, curriculum writers, classroom teachers and representatives from the major professional organisations involved in this field. Together, they undertake professional development, develop materials, and co-ordinate the programs which will assist teachers in this field.

The Centre also encourages professional organisations, such as historians and political educators, to see it as a resource and a home. This has led to increased visits and the provision of access to the latest research and directions for future programs.

Special schools programs

In addition to special programs for schools, the Centre undertakes special targeted programs. For example, the Schools Conventions were established by the Constitutional Centenary Foundation in 1994. The Centre has been responsible for this program in Western Australia since September, 2000. The first such Schools Convention was held at Parliament House in September, 1994 and involved 93 students, mostly from the metropolitan area. The latest one was held on 23 September, 2003 and involved 200 students from as far north as Karratha and as far south as Esperance.

Adult education

Schools programs make up about only one-third of the Centre's visitors and programs. The Centre also provides a large number of programs for adult learners. To facilitate this, it maintains:

- An ongoing exhibition program;
- A regular program of changing exhibitions, such as the annual exhibition of political cartoons from the National Museum under the titles "Bringing the House Down" and "Behind the Lines";
- A program of public talks, lectures and seminars;
- Publications;
- A website; and
- Interactive display units.

The Centre runs regular seasons of 10-week courses for adult learners, a recent one being *The Workings of the Western Australian Government* which featured the Governor as well as leading politicians and heads of major government departments. It receives superb support from the public service, often from the Chief Executive Officer level. The Centre has no lack of people willing to give talks, provide information, or review materials.

Tertiary education

The Centre's position as a provider of quality information is well-established with tertiary education facilities. It joins with politics and education lecturers from the major universities and provides specialist sessions for tertiary students. This is particularly useful for politics students, as the Centre often brings together a diverse range of speakers and takes then outside the views of their own "home" institution and lecturers. Teacher education groups are a particular target, as Civics is often not taught in schools because of a lack of familiarity and confidence on the part of the teachers. The Centre tries to give such groups a starting point, information and materials to support their programs.

Public forums

The Centre provides the opportunity for public debate on topical issues. Because it is seen as being non-partisan, it is able to provide a forum for frank and open discussion, exploring all points of view. An example of this was the announcement in 1997 by the Commonwealth government that it would hold a Constitutional Convention early in 1998. The Centre conducted a series of people's constitutional forums right throughout the State. The forums gave Western Australians the opportunity to debate the range of constitutional changes, both State and national, which would affect them. They covered three themes, namely the Republic implications; the State Constitution; and Federation issues.

Another recent example is the forum held to discuss the Prime Minister's suggestions for addressing Senate deadlocks. The Committee consisting of Neil Brown, QC, Michael Lavarch (former Attorney-General) and the inaugural Commonwealth Ombudsman Professor Jack Richardson addressed a public audience and took comments and questions from the floor.

Last year the Premier, the Hon Geoff Gallop presented an inaugural John Forrest Oration, his topic being Lord Forrest himself. Future orations will be on some aspect of Western Australian politics and/or history.

Public talks under consideration for 2004 are:

- Western Australia in the Federation;
- The history of Western Australian women in politics;
- Legislation relating to civil liberties and security;
- The role of the independent;
- The role of the Upper House of the State Parliament;
- Constitutional reform in Western Australia after 175 years of European settlement; and
- Paid political advertising and public funding.

Research and publications

Research and publications are central to the Centre's role in informing the public. The Centre offers annual research grants to both new and established researchers through the Proclamation Day Grants (October 21). The resulting research is published and made available free of charge to the public. Topics have included:

- The role of the contemporary Governor.
- Preparing teachers for a civil society.
- Review of the State Constitution.
- The forms of governance in Aboriginal Western Australia at the time of European settlement.
- The structure and operation of proportional representation in the Legislative Council of the Western Australian Parliament.
- Has the GST financial system strengthened or weakened the federal compact, in particular the financial independence of Western Australia?
- "I've been appointed a Minister! Where do I start?"
- The history and implications of the Braddon Clause.

In addition, the Centre participates in supplementing the funding of external applications, such as:

- A biography of the first Governor of Western Australia, titled *James Stirling – Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia*, by Dr Pamela Statham-Drew.
- An *Encyclopaedia of Western Australian History*, which will be published this year to commemorate the 175th anniversary of European settlement in Western Australia.

The Centre has also undertaken internal publications such as:

- Guide to the workings of the Western Australian government.
- Changing Constitutions.
- Premiers and Governors of Western Australia.
- Proclamation Day guide.
- Female suffrage – "A Vote of Her Own".
- Implications of a Republic for Western Australia.
- Federation issues.
- Western Australia's *Constitution Acts*.
- Secession.

In 2003, three conferences were held. One, on the Commonwealth Constitutions, was held jointly with the Association for Australian Constitutional Law. The second was on

Proclamation Day, with an emphasis on constitutional topics. The third was on the Centenary of the High Court of Australia with particular reference to Western Australia. Publications containing all papers presented are in the course of being printed and will be made available free of charge to members of the public.

Exhibitions

The Centre has a changing exhibition program. Topics have included changing Constitutions; female suffrage; the Western Australian Constitution; Federation; the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and what happened in Western Australia during those 50 years; Cabinet records; the Australian Honours system; and democracy and you.

Accommodation and staff

The Centre is housed in one of Perth's finest heritage buildings, the old Hale School in Havelock Street, West Perth, only 150 metres from Parliament House. In 1858 the then Anglican Archbishop of Perth, Dr Matthew Blagden Hale, was concerned that there was no secondary school available to boys in the fledging Colony. He established what was known as the High School in St George's Terrace, as the first boys' secondary education facility in Western Australia. In 1914 the school moved to the West Perth location and in 1929 became known as Hale School. It remained there until 1961, when the urgent need for large classrooms, administration buildings, chapel and playing fields led to Hale School moving to much larger premises at Wembley Downs. The old Hale School building of limestone and bricks has been extensively and beautifully restored and refurbished and now houses the Centre, where the first-class facilities are once again being directed to excellence in education.

The Centre is available at no cost as a prime venue for functions, meetings, lectures, exhibitions, and so on which have a connection with the fields of government, Parliament, politics, the courts and citizenship. It is frequently used for these purposes. The well-appointed Board Room is available for private hire for board meetings.

The Centre has a full time Director and 4.5 full-time other staff. It has an annual budget of \$779,000.

Website

The website is one of the Centre's major success stories. From 13,000 pages of information downloaded in the first year, the Centre had over 100,000 pages downloaded in 2002-03. Indications are that this figure continues to increase. Contents on the website include:

- Text and images from every exhibition which the Centre has curated;
- Education materials for students and teachers;
- Quizzes;
- Research and seminar papers;
- Links to other significant sites;
- Events diary; and
- A Civic Educators' Network.

The website is constantly being added to and upgraded. Several schools use it to teach research skills in the Political and Legal Education subject.

Conclusion

As a measure of the Centre's success, attendances have increased from around 20,000 in the first year of operation to 60,000 in 2002/03. Figures for the current financial year indicate that this demand will continue to grow.

Only time will tell if the Centre has been successful in encouraging people to engage with our political systems. The Centre is slowly making inroads into the consciousness of that

body of people who confessed little or no understanding of our systems of government.

I hope that this outline of what we have set up, sought to achieve and have achieved in Western Australia will encourage other States to set up similar Centres to further the cause of civics education and informed debate throughout Australia.

Endnote:

In the preparation of this paper, the author acknowledges the assistance he has had from the Director of the Western Australian Constitutional Centre, Ms Betty O'Rourke. More information is available from the Centre's website at www.ccentre.wa.gov.au.