



Foster debate on the difficult issues

The launch of the Learning Circle kit on civics and governance (reported in this newsletter) was an enjoyable occasion. It brought together people of all ages and from different backgrounds and reminded us that governance extends beyond parliaments. The federal election caused me to give this some more thought. Now that the election campaign is over, we can reflect on it and the electoral process as a means of determining our future directions. I wonder how many people can say they are happy with the nature and content of what passes for debate in Australia today.

We witness a presidential-style campaign that focuses almost entirely on the two leaders, homogenised images, carefully arranged appearances, and rigorous disciplining of party members who express ideas that are considered 'off message'. Indeed, the major parties strive to control as much as possible. During this campaign, Julie Bishop and Peter Knott were hauled into line by John Howard and Kim Beazley respectively, for voicing concerns about the

parties' policies on refugees and terrorism.

One message to take from this is that the parties want to avoid any genuine, unscripted discussion on critical issues – an irony given that the war on terrorism is supposed to defend free speech among other freedoms. Australia's population size and composition, immigration policy, national security, our standing in the Asian region and race were dominant during the election campaign. How comfortable are we that the discussion on these issues has progressed our nation? But these issues must be debated seriously. They won't go away, and while they are ignored or used as a means of winning an election, they will not be resolved in a way that will increase our sense of security as a nation and make us genuinely welcome in our region.

Despite what some political leaders will say, there is a deep division within the community. During the election campaign, former political leaders of both major parties, diplomats, authors, and leaders from church

and business groups all intervened to alert us to the long-term, negative effect of using race as a political issue. Their warning was reiterated in international press reports about the threat to Australia's reputation, culminating in the New York Times rhetorical question "which candidate will be the most hard-hearted"? The majority of voters rejected the warning but many people are clearly uneasy about these issues. We must ask: in the aftermath of the election, do Australians feel the same sense of collective satisfaction we did after the Olympics?

How can we undertake the necessary community discussion? How can we involve more people in the discussion in a non-partisan way? Adult educators have a role to play here. Learning Circles are a much needed part of a broader approach to developing a society that fosters discussion and debate. Political parties can also play a leading role by fostering debate, instead of silencing those within their ranks who want to suggest alternatives.

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