



# PRIME MINISTER

7/12/94

## STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP REPORT OF THE CIVICS EXPERT GROUP

It is my pleasure to announce that I have today received the report of the Civics Expert Group.

The Report is appropriately entitled *Whereas the people ...*, which is the opening phrase of our Constitution and declares the popular basis of our national government. Yet there is a sting in the tail of this title, as it reminds us how few people in the general community or even in this place would know the source and importance of these words.

The Commonwealth established the Civics Expert Group in June 1994 to prepare a strategic plan for a non-partisan program of public education and information on the Australian system of government, the Australian Constitution, Australian citizenship and other civics issues.

The Group is Chaired by Professor Stuart Macintyre, the Ernest Scott Professor of History in the University of Melbourne. The other members of the Group are Dr Ken Boston, the Director-General of the New South Wales Department of School Education, and Ms Susan Pascoe of the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne.

The report reflects considerable credit on them all. They have completed their task with considerable style and thoroughness. It is obvious that a great deal of careful thought has gone into the report's recommendations, and that the Group has genuinely come to grips with the difficult subject of educating Australians about our system of government.

The Report sets out a program to help Australians participate more fully and effectively in the civic life of our nation. It reflects the wide program of consultation undertaken by the Group, which met with State governors; representatives of State and Territory governments; leaders of federal political parties; Australia's government and non-government education

sectors; community groups and interested bodies in the field such as the Constitutional Centenary Foundation and the Parliamentary Education Office.

I endorse the view of the Group that an active and informed citizenship should be "the mortar that holds together the bricks of our contemporary, multicultural Australia". For this, Australians need a better knowledge of how our government works, they need skills to become involved effectively, and they need an appreciation of the benefits of active citizenship.

Education is the key. As part of its inquiries, the Group drew on a national survey of community understanding of civics issues. The findings of that survey, which are detailed in the Report, indicate widespread ignorance and misunderstanding about the structure and function of Australia's system of government, about its origins, and about the ways it can serve the needs of citizens. The ignorance is not just of matters of detail, it goes to a basic lack of understanding of the system and the principles on which it is founded. This reflects a fundamental failing in our education system which the Government is determined to address.

The remedy is to build an active and informed community through our education system. The Group has put the view that education for citizenship is an essential component of a liberal education and should rank with English and mathematics as a priority for school education. I agree that it has been neglected for far too long. To feel confidence in our future, to be active participants in our national life, to feel pride in our democratic and inclusive society, people must understand our democratic institutions and have a sense of their history and the ideals on which they are based. To participate fully and effectively - to be good citizens, in other words - they must understand both the role of those institutions and the way they can become active participants in our civic life.

This will require cooperative action by Australian governments. The Commonwealth government recognises that Commonwealth financial support would assist the State and Territory education authorities to implement proposals along the lines recommended. The nature and extent of the Commonwealth's support will be considered following consultations with the States and Territories.

The Group has recommended that its report be made available for public comment and discussion for three months. I am happy to agree and would welcome comments on the report and its implementation by the end of February 1995.

**7 December 1994**  
**CANBERRA**