**Dr Ellie Foomani (Ellie):** Today, we will be talking with Dr Zareh Ghazarian about the Victorian Curriculum Civics and Citizenship. In particular, the Government and Democracy strand. Firstly Zareh, what is the importance of content knowledge in teaching civics and citizenship?

**Dr Zareh Ghazarian (Zareh):** Thanks Ellie, content knowledge is so important for teachers because it builds their confidence in teaching the Victorian Curriculum Civics and Citizenship and empowers them to design effective lessons and assessment based on that knowledge.

**Ellie:** That makes a lot of sense, Zareh. If you are thinking about the Victorian Curriculum Civics and Citizenship Levels 3–10, why is Government and Democracy so important?

**Zareh:** It's so important because exploring Government and Democracy allows students to examine the principles, structures, and institutions that underpin Australian democracy. These features are crucial as they impact virtually every aspect of government and democracy in Australia. Exploring this strand is also very useful for students to contextualise and analyse contemporary issues occurring in Australia and abroad. It also helps provide information and equips students for enacting changing areas they are concerned about.

**Ellie:** That sounds like a really important thing for students to explore. If we were to think about democratic values, for example, could you talk about what they are and how they're enacted in the Australian political system?

**Zareh:** It's really important to always remember that Australia is a liberal democratic system. This means that the structure and operation of Australian government and politics has characteristics of liberalism and democracy. A key feature of liberalism, for example, is that the power of government is constrained by rules and laws, while individuals should be able to enjoy certain freedoms and liberties. In return for these liberties and freedoms, however, people are required to act within the law. We can also see important characteristics of democracy in Australia, especially as citizens participate in regular elections and select who will represent them in parliament.

**Ellie:** The Victorian Curriculum Civics and Citizenship Levels 3–10 also highlights the importance of Westminster traditions. Why is the Westminster system important to civics and citizenship?

**Zareh:** The Westminster system is critical because the Australian system of government is based on the Westminster model from England. And this has implications on our system of government, politics and democracy. For example, the fact that we have two houses of parliament and the fact that the party or coalition of parties that win the majority of seats in the lower house forms government reflects those Westminster traditions. The role of and power of the prime minister and the premiers at state level is also something we can trace back to the Westminster model.

**Ellie:** That is really interesting. What about the Australian Constitution? Why is it important?

**Zareh:** The Australian Constitution is essentially the rule book for the government of Australia. It is important because it spells out the powers of the national government and the areas in which governments can make laws. For example, the document also makes it clear that people will directly choose their representatives in parliament. The constitution also sets out how the nation's rule book may be changed by what is known as a referendum.

**Ellie:** You mentioned the different levels of government in Australia. Can you briefly describe their roles and responsibilities and what this means for teaching civics and citizenship? How are decisions made in the Australian political system?

**Zareh:** In 1901, Ellie, Australia became a federation. This meant that the previously self-governing colonies gave up some of their powers to a new national level of government, whose powers were outlined in the Australian Constitution. The colonies, which then became known as states, however, kept many of the original responsibilities. As a result, the Australian system of government is quite complex and it is important to be aware of this division of power between the national and state governments. As you'd expect, the national level of government is responsible for national matters, including defence, immigration and quarantine. The state governments are, however, very powerful. They have responsibility for many of the areas, including law and order, planning and public transport. There are also local governments, which also play a crucial role in the day-to-day lives of all people. Local governments of course provide a range of services including waste services and libraries.

This division of powers is an important element of content knowledge because knowing who's responsible for decisions allows members of the community to more effectively enact change and also hold decision makers accountable. As a liberal democracy, decisions made by governments in Australia are to be made through democratic processes. Obviously our democratic system uses elections to facilitate this participation and representation, but there are many ways people can have a say about all sorts of matters outside of the electoral process. For example, groups, whether they are made up of concerned citizens or representatives from specific sectors of the economy, may mobilise and seek to advance an issue they're concerned about. At the school level, democratic decision making can also be practised by having a class discussion and then even voting on a particular issue, for example.

**Ellie:** A question students often ask is, how can participating contribute to positive change in society?

**Zareh:** Participating in democratic processes is absolutely vital to contributing, to making a positive contribution to the community. And it is important for ensuring that everyone's voice is heard. Elections, as we know, are crucial to the Australian system of government and democracy. A critical purpose of elections is to allow citizens to not only run for parliament, but also have their say and select who will represent them in parliament. This then impacts what types of policies and laws are likely to be implemented. People can also participate and contribute to shaping the community outside of elections. Contacting elected representatives, joining parties or organising and signing petitions are important ways we can all participate in the democratic system. Action at the local level, such as being involved with local sports or community organisations, can also make a strong and meaningful contribution to the community.

**Ellie:** So you've talked about the local level there but so then what is the role and purpose of the federal system?

**Zareh:** Well, having the federal system in Australia means there is a national level of government with specific areas of responsibility, in addition to state governments with their own responsibilities. For example, the national level of government is responsible for areas such as national defence and immigration while state governments are responsible for planning laws, public transport, and law and order. In addition, the national level of government also has a number of international obligations. These relate to areas such as human rights, migration and the climate. Australia has a role in the global community by being part of international organisations and signing or ratifying treaties and conventions. We can see this through Australia's involvement in the United Nations. As well as humanitarian and peacekeeping contributions, Australia's international relationships are important in areas such as trade and diplomacy. This can be seen in Australia's place in the Commonwealth of Nations, for example, or its role in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Ellie:** This is great to know about Australia but how does our Australian democratic system, processes and values then compare to other countries? What's so different about us?

**Zareh:** There are differences between Australia's system of government and those of other countries in the Asian region. Voters in Indonesia, for example, elect the president of the country. Indonesia, which has a population of approximately 190 million people, does not have compulsory voting. The Indian system of government provides another interesting case for comparison. One difference compared to Australia of course is that voting in elections is also not compulsory in India. The Australian system like other liberal democratic countries allows us to participate in shaping the policies, laws and direction of the community in which we are in.

**Ellie:** Thank you so much for joining me, Zareh.

**Zareh:** It's my pleasure to be with you, Ellie, thank you.

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