



Putting the politics back into Politics: Young people and democracy in Australia **Discussion Paper**

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Whitlam

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Foreword

In late 2007, when the Whitlam Institute together with the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Office of University Engagement embarked on a modest project to explore the question of community engagement and political participation by younger Australians, we were driven by a desire to understand how young Australians participate in the democratic life of the country, how they imagined democracy might work better for them, and indeed all citizens, and the potential implications for policy makers. With the support of the Foundation for Young Australians, our colleagues at UWS and importantly, the input from representatives of youth organisations and young people themselves, we have come quite some way in understanding the contribution being made by young people and what their aspirations are for our democracy and its institutions.

This report is the culmination of our project developed under the banner *Young People Imagining a New Democracy*. The report's authors, James Arvanatakis and Siobhan Marren, build on the findings from the project's earlier work to offer a fresh analysis combined with insights of their own.

The first stage of the project was a Literature Review, authored by Philippa Collin, Policy Manager at the Inspire Foundation, released in August 2008. This was followed, in July 2008, by a series of focus groups across NSW conducted by UWS academics Dr Mike Horsley and Dr Debra Costley. Their report was released in October 2008. Then in September 2008 we convened a one day forum at the State Library, attended by 45 experienced and younger changemakers for a facilitated discussion on the experience of change in Australia and civic and political engagement.

This final report has deep roots. The authors' advice on general policy direction - and the more specific recommendations - is fertile ground and should excite discussion and debate.

Our research provides strong grounds for optimism. It reveals that "young people are already active...just in ways not always understood". They are thoughtful, innovative and adaptive. They bring to the democratic endeavour new ways of inter-acting and challenging questions.

However, not all young Australians are such active participants in the political or civic life of the nation. That too is clear from our research. It is imperative that the door be opened for these young people - a number of whom have no exposure to a genuinely civic engagement - to the experience, knowledge and benefits of democratic participation.

The challenge is not simply to listen to what young Australians think, but to give due weight to what they are saying, to find a way for the voices that are unheard to be heard, to support, encourage and acknowledge the contribution of young people to civics and democracy in Australia.

We are greatly indebted to our collaborators who have worked with us over the past year.

We commend this paper and its recommendations to you for consideration. We intend to pursue the important issues raised, in this paper and our research, further. Your comments and feedback would be most welcome.

Eric Sidoti
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Table of Contents

Overview	5
Executive Summary	6
Introduction	8
Methodology	9
Part I: Background – setting the scene	10
Disconnection between formalised Politics and everyday politics.....	10
Lack of opportunity for young people in formal Politics.....	10
Australia has changed but not our political system.....	11
Structural changes in the economy and social consequences.....	13
Change is possible to confront long-term trends.....	13
Part II: The Challenges	14
The experience of young people and formal Politics.....	14
Perceptions of Politics.....	15
Civics Education.....	16
A changing world.....	17
Part III: Key Findings and Recommendations	18
Key Findings.....	18
Recommendations.....	20
Concluding Comments	21
Bibliography	22

Overview

This Discussion Paper, *Putting the politics back into Politics: Young people and democracy in Australia*, was commissioned by the Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney (UWS) to consider the existing research on young Australians' participation in democracy. This was undertaken with the purpose of developing a series of recommendations to promote the active citizenship and participation of young people in the democratic life of Australia. By extension, this paper also makes a number of observations regarding the current state of Australia's democratic environment – identifying trends that affect all Australian citizens – not just young people.

This Paper represents the culmination of twelve months of research undertaken by the Whitlam Institute and the Office of University Engagement at UWS throughout 2008 on a project, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy*. The project sought to:

- Better understand young Australians' attitudes towards and participation in democratic processes;
- Work with young people to 'imagine' how democracy might work better for them and indeed for all citizens;
- Identify the potential implications for public policy; and
- Promote consideration of these matters by policy-makers and the general public.

The project is supported by the Foundation for Young Australians.

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Executive Summary

Key findings

Research undertaken in this project has delivered a rich body of material. This Discussion Paper distils key elements from the earlier reports. However, additional observations and further findings are to be found there and we would suggest that this report should be read in conjunction with the earlier work.

We have chosen here to highlight those findings which, taken together, offer guidance on how Governments, educators and others might better promote, acknowledge and nurture the active citizenship and political participation of young Australians:

Young people want to be involved in decision-making processes and should be offered opportunities to do so within existing Political structures.

It is clear that young people neither believe that they have all the answers nor do they seek unrealistic responsibility. Rather, they desire to be part of decision-making processes that encourage and welcome their efforts and that go beyond their participation in appointed consultative committees, groups and fora. There are strong grounds to support a move towards the establishment of structures within existing democratic institutions that promote the interaction of young people with established decision-makers, whilst at the same time offering appropriate mentoring. Our research shows “that young people are already active – just in ways not always understood” (Lina). It is important that we understand their activity, what motivates it and where it impacts – and that we do not lose their enthusiasm, commitment and engagement through our failure to involve them in the decision-making mechanisms that will determine their democratic future.

Young people express frustration that their participation in formal Political institutions and processes are neither acknowledged nor seen as relevant.

Young people, for diverse reasons, are participating in activities that deliver short-term, visible and efficacious outcomes, that eschew traditional hierarchies, operate through transparent processes and afford agency. These activities are often issues-based or have a local/community focus. The challenge is to open the doors to young people to enable them to directly contribute to Political decision-making. This will necessitate a broader, stable decision-making model that: encourages transparency; articulates relevant principles and reflects perspectives that sit outside political cycles to address longer-term issues (such as climate change); that acknowledges the role of short term action models as a counterbalance to longer term decision-making models; and that values and acknowledges the contribution of young people through a process of accountability back to those young people.

The contribution that young people can make to the civic and Political life of the nation through their utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICT) should be acknowledged.

Young people have demonstrated their capacity to embrace changing communication technologies at a pace and breadth that is unprecedented – a development that is not limited to the Australian experience. We are now starting to understand the impact of utilising these technologies – the recent American Presidential campaign being a prime example. Opportunities exist to involve young people in the development and evaluation of ICT initiatives that go beyond ‘information only’ web pages. These initiatives should offer practical and innovative opportunities for young people to engage in formalised Political structures and could include mechanisms such as digital storytelling, online workshops, petitions and forums. Decision-makers, often perceived by young people as operating within an ‘old guard’ information and communication mentality, could benefit from the experience, knowledge and initiative of young people in ICT usage, and open up not only opportunities for young people themselves but also for a positive dialogue about new ways of participation and engagement.

Schools-based civics education programs have failed to equip young people with the tools, knowledge and experience that promote and encourage active citizenship.

A healthy democracy is a reflection of its active citizenry. Secondary school-based civics programs should play a pivotal role in offering young people the experience of being an ‘active citizen’ in a democratic society. It is broadly acknowledged that schools-based civics programs are not delivering outcomes. To deliver an authentic and effective ‘active citizen’ civics syllabus, schools must themselves demonstrate through their own internal structures and mechanisms that they operate as a democratic institution. What students are told about the advantages of democracy and what they experience at the secondary level needs to be consistent. Schools civics programs need to be afforded syllabus status, delivered with appropriate professionalism and support, and be tailored to achieve specific and tangible outcomes – particularly to encourage students to make the vital connection between effecting change and formal political mechanisms. It is not suggested that educators propagandise but that a balance be sought in allowing for political debate and content to be recognised as integral to our political and democratic processes.

More needs to be understood about the (formal and informal) political influence young people exert as well as their attitudes towards and active participation in our democratic processes.

Our modest research has provided a number of insights into the nature and forms of participation that young people embrace and provides some clues as to what

they imagine democracy to look like. However, there are many aspects of youth engagement that demand further attention. Critically, there is little, if any, research that considers the impact of youth activity. More work needs to be done to understand not just how young people use ICT and the new media as a participatory tool but also whether it is effective.

Due account needs to be taken of the impact structural changes in the economy have had on the political and civic participation of young Australians.

While it is generally recognised that socio-economic circumstances affect an individual young person's – or an identified group of young people's – capacity to be an active participant in the political and civic life of the community, the implications and associated policy responses are inadequately understood.

“If you were to start parliament today, there’s no reason for people to sit on two sides of the room – that’s designed for voting, but today they could just vote by pressing a button on their computer... then they could sit anywhere, they could sit according to issue, according to state, according to how they felt today, who were their friends... I dunno, the whole idea of separation is based on technical limitations it seems to me, which doesn’t exist. So if you were to imagine parliament today it wouldn’t be set up in this adversarial way, there’d be some multimedia displays with the internet over here, and they’re all looking at research, they’ve got their computers happening, and they’ve got video conferences to people who are actually interested in the topic around the country... I think that needs a recommendation that Parliament is actually brought in, that formal politics is actually brought into that multi media immersive, multi tasking, conversational, peer networked environment that young people actually inhabit rather than this very like, structured, bizarre thing that’s based on some technical limitations.” – Markus

Recommendations

The Research Agenda

Recommendation 1: That a national program of research and monitoring be instigated that investigates the democratic engagement of young people.

There are strong arguments for the implementation of an ongoing national research initiative to interrogate young Australians’ democratic engagement.

Recommendation 2: That the national youth research findings on democratic engagement be tabled in the federal Parliament on an annual basis with the Minister for Youth reporting on trends and outlining strategies to lift youth engagement.

It is important that strategies are developed and implemented by government in an accountable manner to address the challenges of youth engagement.

Recommendation 3: That a research program be instigated that examines the ways in which young people participate in formal and informal politics and the efficacy of their participation.

A better understanding of how young people conceptualise the “political” – both in formal Politics and localised politics – is only a first step towards assessing the extent to which their participation is meaningful and their efforts are effective.

Recommendation 4: That research be conducted into the efficacy of e-democracy as a participatory mechanism.

Young people feel alienated from traditional democratic institutions. Is it time to look at how those institutions might adapt to, or embrace, new participatory mechanisms?

Civics Education

Recommendation 5: That civics education be considered as a compulsory stand-alone subject in secondary schools.

There is strong argument that civics education should be considered a stand-alone subject rather than being confined to parts of the History or Commerce syllabi.

Recommendation 6: That all civics education curricula incorporate action-based learning.

Civics education should utilise action-based learning to encourage a sense of agency and provide insights into the complex nature of formalised Political processes.

Recommendation 7: That educators be provided with appropriate professional support and development to ensure the effective delivery of civics education curricula.

For civics education to be effective and afforded priority, teachers need to be supported professionally and in terms of workload.

Introduction

There is little doubt that Australia is a robust democracy: a dimension of our society that Australians view with great pride (Gelber 2005). Our democracy has weathered a number of storms including the dismissal of a Prime Minister, potential invasion by an imperial power during World War II, social instability including race riots, economic depression, recessions and stagflation, as well as uncertainty in times of global instability such as the recent 'war on terror' and the challenges associated with climate change.

The challenge in monitoring and reflecting on the strength of a democracy is not to evaluate it during times of massive shock – it is at such times that the citizenry rallies in defence of their rights. Rather, like a frog that, to its own detriment, cannot judge slow changes in water temperature in which it is immersed, our challenge is to reflect on barely noticeable, incremental changes. During such times, it is easy for the citizenry generally, and decision-makers more specifically, to ignore challenges and argue, 'if it ain't broke, why fix it?'

It is exactly these slow, incremental changes that this Discussion Paper aims to confront: specifically, examining the changing attitudes of young Australians to our democracy and civic obligations. These changes are, in many ways, reflected internationally, but they also possess unique features because of Australia's multicultural and historical context.

This Paper examines two broad and challenging questions. The first is, 'what do young people want our democracy to look like?'. The second question we ask young people to answer is, 'what mechanisms would encourage greater participation in formal structures?'. These questions are not only embedded in this Discussion Paper, but have guided the broader project throughout each of the four stages of research (see Figure 1). In attempting to examine these questions, we have sought to identify both the challenges that decision-makers must confront if we are to ensure that Australia's democracy is to remain healthy and the myths that are associated with young people's attitudes. In so doing, we have established a framework from which to examine the above questions, as well as making a series of both short and long term policy recommendations. These recommendations, however, should not be seen as conclusive, but as part of a democratic conversation open to discussion and debate.

One thing is clear: young Australians are engaged in everyday and localised politics while simultaneously disregarding formalised Politics because the latter is seen as both distant and unwelcoming. We draw an important distinction between formalised Politics (which we specifically capitalise) and informal politics (or small 'p' politics). Importantly, when discussing 'politics' we are not limiting our discussion to localised community involvement, but use this term to describe broader engagement in non-government organisations and informal structures that may cross the local, national and international divide. The division between Politics and politics is discussed in more detail below, but

"Teenagers must be valued and encouraged to create a better Australia. The phase of 'adolescence' should not be treated as a safety net for teenagers; young adults have important and valuable opinions which need to be heard." – Zoe

should be seen as a development that has important social and political implications and must be addressed to ensure the ongoing health of our democratic structures.

Importantly, this political engagement is one that is often innovative and offers the opportunity to learn from young people. Notable examples include the way that organisations such as *Vibewire* bring together political commentary through their 'Election Tracker' program, arts and issues specifically relating to young people in accessible and enjoyable forums (<http://www.vibewire.net/>). This Paper not only investigates young people's engagement in democratic institutions to understand current and likely future trends, but also acts to encourage decision-makers to actively engage with young people in order to find creative solutions to entrenched challenges: further capturing what young people want our democracy to look like.

The finding that many young Australians are engaged in 'politics' is cause for optimism and offers an opportunity to further promote Australia's democratic culture. This engagement is driven by feelings of relevance and also a belief that informal structures promote a sense of 'agency': a sense that the efforts of young people are valued and important in setting the agenda as well as influencing outcomes. At no point did we find that young people believe they have all the answers, but rather, they demonstrate a desire to be included as part of broader decision-making and consultative processes. This split between Politics and politics, however, should also be seen as a threat to our democratic culture and unless it is addressed, our democratic institutions will be open to abuse resulting from neglect.

This brings us to a second important division that young people refuse to accept: young people do not acknowledge the split between government and governance. Hence, young people see that governments are responsible for the act of governing (or governance) including establishing agendas and achieving outcomes. Consequently, elected representatives are seen to be responsible for both process and outcome, and not some government agency. This means that any negative experience that young people have had through interactions with agencies becomes personally attached to politicians – not something that is just part of some immovable system.

For young people then, the Political system is one that has been created by people, and can therefore, be changed by people. It is for this reason, amongst others we discuss below including changing technologies, that young people do not accept that structural change is not possible.

Methodology

This Discussion Paper is the culmination of a twelve month project that has included four clear phases (see Figure 1). The first phase was a detailed literature review released through the Whitlam Institute in August 2008 and written by Philippa Collin, Policy Manager at the Inspire Foundation. This was widely distributed across government, non-government and academic sectors, with comments and detailed feedback invited. This review covered academic and non-academic material, as well as investigating the practical aspects of young people’s democratic engagement both internationally and in Australia. The findings set a number of flexible parameters which guided the next stages of the project.

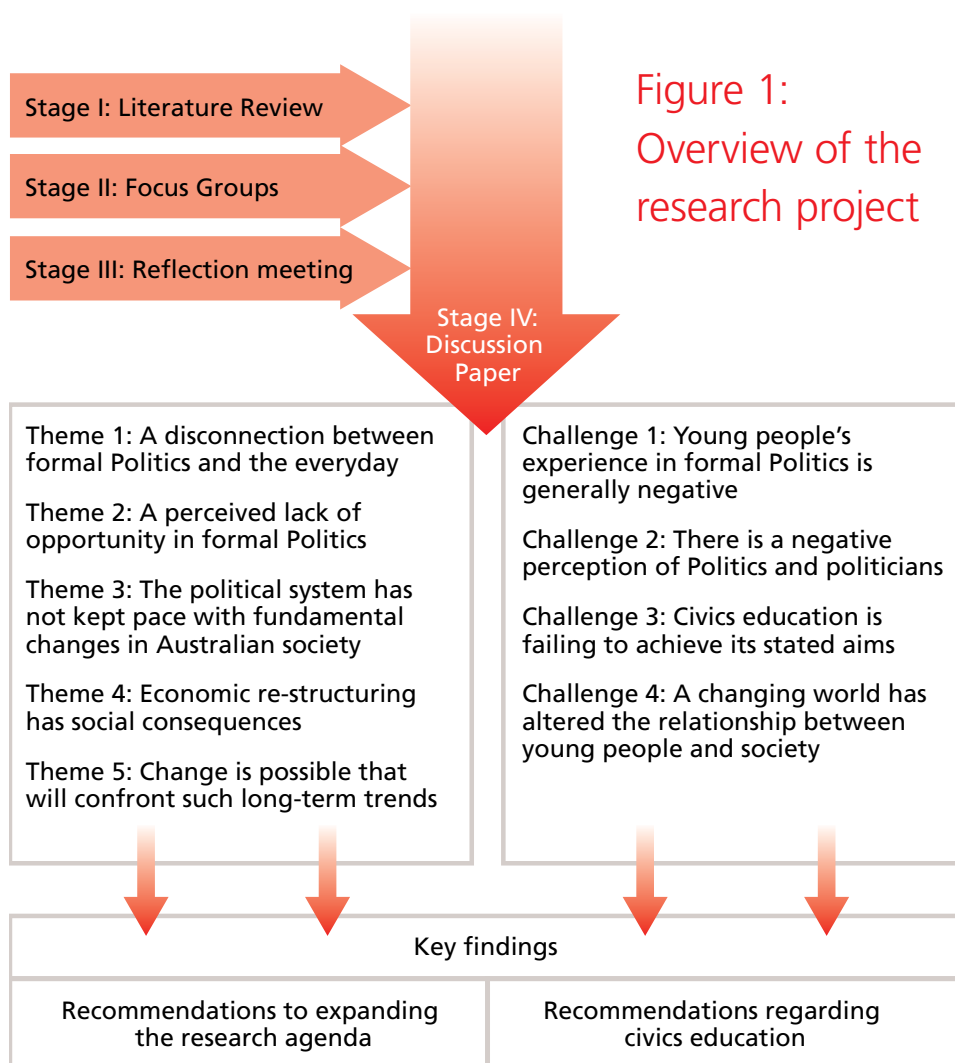
Stage II of the project involved focus groups research commissioned by the Whitlam Institute and the Office of University Engagement (UWS), and undertaken by UWS academics Dr Mike Horsley and Dr Debra Costley. The focus groups targeted young people who were engaged in formal Politics and informal institutions, as well as those considered politically inactive. In total, there were ten focus groups involving 52 young people held across NSW including both the inner-city and western suburbs of Sydney, as well as regional NSW (including within the Central Coast and Riverina districts). The young people who participated in these groups ranged from those who were described as politically active (18 percent), community active (51 percent) and politically and community inactive (31 percent). The findings of the focus group research were released in October 2008, and once again comments and feedback were invited from the broader community.

The third stage was a full-day facilitated forum that brought together young people active in both social movements and formal Politics with experienced politically active citizens. With over 40 participants, the forum provided an opening for cross-generational dialogue that focussed on the opportunities and threats within Australia’s democratic mechanisms, as well as

reflecting on possible future challenges. Within this context, participants also discussed the future direction that reform to Australia’s democratic structures should take.

This final stage of the project brought together the key findings of the previous three stages, as well as instigating a new set of research tasks which focussed on recommendations that would bridge the gaps between young people and formal Political institutions that were identified in the previous stages of the research. A draft of the Paper was then circulated to a number of participants involved in the previous stages of the research and a facilitated workshop was held that interrogated the recommendations in detail. The final draft of the Discussion Paper is a culmination of the previous research undertaken and provides a theoretical framework in which we make the recommendations at the end of this report.

Importantly, when presenting the recommendations in the final section of this Discussion Paper, we do not aim to provide definitive solutions, but rather make a number of recommendations that encourage reflection, discussion and action.



Part I: Background – setting the scene

Throughout the four stages of research, a number of recurring issues emerged that ultimately directed the Key Findings and Recommendations of this Discussion Paper. Five clear themes that examine the current relationship between young people and our democratic institutions run through these issues.

Theme 1: There is a growing disconnection between formalised Politics and everyday politics

A clear theme that emerged from the Literature Review and the Focus Groups Report was that young people feel an increasing disconnection from formalised Politics. Consequently, we see that everyday life and experiences are slowly, but increasingly, moving away from a connection with formal Politics and structures. This trend highlights how the areas of overlap between everyday life and formal Politics are becoming increasingly smaller, indicating that formal Political structures are becoming more remote in our everyday lives.

This split is driven by and also drives an important distinction that continues to materialise between formal Politics involving participation by the ‘dutiful citizen’ (Bennett 2007) and the ‘politics’ of the everyday. The Literature Review clearly showed that there is a need to distinguish between formal political processes (Politics) and localised politics (politics) within a community setting or those involving social movements. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the latter should not be understood as existing only on the local level, but includes engagement with social movements and non-government organisations that operate anywhere along the local, national and international scale.

This presents us with a clear message: young people do not see all ‘politics’ as being the same. This growing disconnection from formalised Politics combined with the sphere of informal politics signifies a need to recast our understanding of political engagement. For example, studies repeatedly reveal that low levels of youth participation in traditional Political activities are not evidence of apathy or indifference, but instead represent a generational change in forms of political participation (Collin 2008). This highlights a shift away from the traditional ‘politics of loyalty’ towards a ‘politics of choice’ and new forms of political action.

Citizens, especially young people, are increasingly moving towards motivation and mobilisation around specific causes or issues, such as climate change. These are new forms of individualised and ‘micro-political’ actions, aimed at a range of political targets (such as big business, specific

injustices or policy platforms). These are forms of political action that typically relate to people’s everyday lives and are also less likely to involve traditional political actors and are more likely to involve professionals, colleagues, friends and family (Pattie et.al. 2004:119). Participation is most often connected to cultural, sporting or community activities, and tends to involve loose networks. Young people also seek to exercise citizenship in order to influence the decisions that affect their everyday lives (such as family, home and school). Although young people recognise the voluntary and political dimensions of their participatory activities, most describe participation as “just something that they do” – a form of cultural and personal expression (Collin 2007:14).

Young people in Australia demonstrate positive attitudes towards ‘community’ and ‘getting involved’ which can be contrasted with distrust of broader formalised Political structures. Again, this concept of ‘community’ may refer to the local level, or something much broader such as international human rights networks (Arvanitakis 2007).

In contrast, we find clear evidence that young people in Australia feel alienated by formal Politics and are less likely to be involved: something discussed in more detail in Theme 2. This evidence should dismiss the ongoing myth that young people are not engaged in politics – for they are, but in ways that do not fit traditional understandings.

Theme 2: There is a perceived lack of opportunity for young people to become involved in formal Politics

The disconnection described above has a number of important consequences which include mistrust towards the efficacy, practices and processes within formal Politics. This includes a perception by young people that there are few, if any, opportunities to be involved in formal Politics. This should not be confused with indifference or apathy; however, there is a belief that formal structures and decision-makers do not take account of or encourage the involvement of young people. While this may be real or perceived, it is sufficient to stifle the desire of many young people for Political involvement. This further drives young people’s attraction to local and informal political structures including social movements that are governed by few, if any, hierarchies. This is driven both by a sense of alienation as well as the fact young people “seek participatory experiences that afford them agency and where they can see tangible results of their efforts” (Collin 2008: 6).

“The reason people get most engaged is they see something happen that they didn’t expect to happen, but it happened because they contributed to it, they did something that then saw the change happen... they did something and there was a cause and effect.” – Markus

A related yet separate problem here is a strong belief that many politicians are not trustworthy, and are incapable of instituting fundamental changes to our system of Politics (Beresford and Phillips 1997:15). A recent Youth Electoral Study (YES) that explored young people’s attitudes to Politics, politicians and political processes, concluded that young people tend to be distrustful of politicians and governments more broadly (Edwards et al 2006: 3). This mistrust was echoed in the responses of the focus groups undertaken in Stage II of our research project, and was strongest amongst those described as ‘politically active’ (Horsley and Costley 2008).

Civics education – via school syllabi – has been the dominant policy response to dwindling rates of youth participation in formal Politics. However, civic education programs and participatory experiences where young people have little or no control over the process or outcomes may actually be counterproductive. Further, this perceived lack of opportunities is aggravated by increasing evidence that such civics education is not achieving its aims of encouraging active citizenship. One of the recurring themes identified in the literature is the tendency of school curricula and pedagogical approaches to construct young people as ‘becoming’ citizens, rather than ‘being’ citizens (Holdsworth et.al. 2007: 9): that is, young people come to see Politics as something distant, that they will be invited to join when they are judged to be ‘full’ citizens.

“On the civics education, I think part of one of the big problems with it is that schools and teachers would be very scared to debate the issues first of all. So that’s kind of taken out of the civics education so you’re left with this dry, let’s mock up a parliament and have a vote and that sort of thing. So the issues are never discussed, so people aren’t really energised to be thinking about these processes. I think that’s one of the key failings of it.” – Dylan

This reflects the fact that most social policy takes what can be described as a ‘deficit’ approach to youth citizenship as young people are painted as ‘citizens-in-the-making’ to be pushed towards a path of becoming ‘ideal’ citizens (Collin 2008).

Theme 3: Australia has changed but our political system does not acknowledge this

The last few decades have witnessed dramatic developments and changes in the Australian social and cultural landscape. These changes include the increasing awareness of Indigenous history, struggles and relationship to place and land; the changing demographics of Australian society; and the emergence of information technology and communications. There has also been a great deal of discussion regarding the need for Constitutional reform that recognises Australia’s Indigenous history and also reflects the changing nature of the three tiers of government including the need to acknowledge local government and reform the role of state governments: themes repeatedly emerging throughout this project.

There have also been significant lifestyle and demographic changes that have seen the transition processes of young people extend well beyond what previous generations have experienced. This is just one aspect of changes to Australia’s ‘culture’ identified by Kate Crawford in her recent work *Adult Themes* (2006).

These are important changes that have reverberations across Australian society, but our Political structures are seen not to have kept pace with or appropriately responded to these changes (see Figure 2). As a result, the research we have undertaken highlights that formalised Political structures are perceived to lack relevance in the lives of young Australians.

“I think the government will often seek to create forums of participation, like yesterday they launched a new blog to discuss digital economy – did you see that? Which isn’t really a blog at all, I don’t know what technology they’re using, but it’s not a blog. Anyway, to what degree...to contribute to that blog will actually change government policy is very questionable I think.” – Markus

Combined with the changing nature of political engagement identified in Theme One, we are witnessing a dramatic change in political participation that our democratic institutions have failed to adequately respond to (see Figure 2). Consequently, two challenges follow. The first is for those attempting to engage young people – and also young people themselves – to assess how participatory practices interrelate with formal institutions of democracy. This is a difficult task, and we must first attempt to understand how young people conceptualise ‘the political’ before being able to assess levels of participation (O’Toole et.al. 2003). Consequently, there is a need to overcome narrow definitions of political participation, the construction of the citizen-as-adult, and the assumption that opportunities to participate are equally distributed regardless of structural inequalities (including socio-economic status and cultural background).

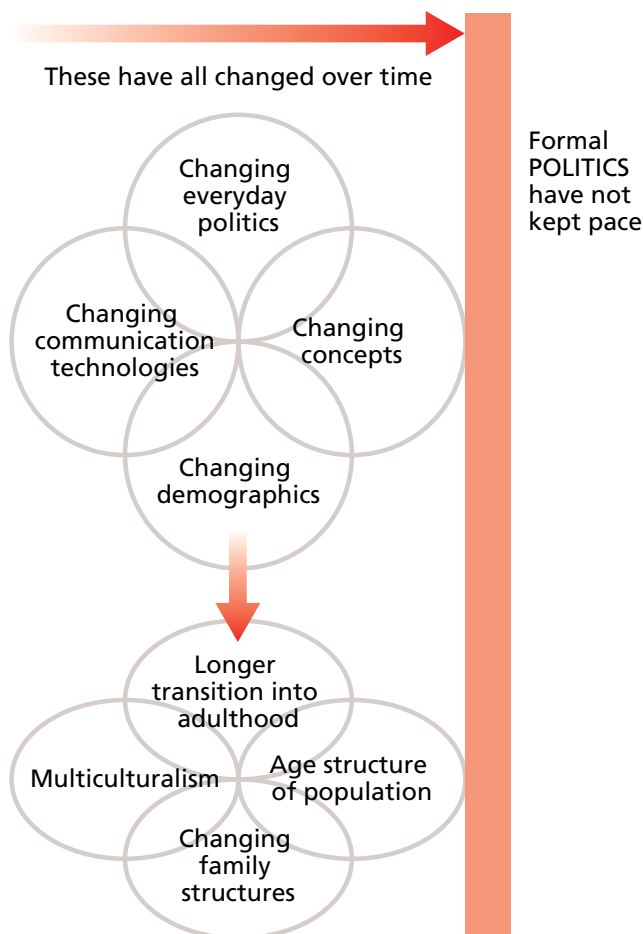
Political actions, therefore, may not be understood in the same way as they were in previous generations. As Elizabeth Von Benschoten notes, “young people are seeking different paths by which to create social change than have previous generations, which relied on political structures as their primary change mechanism” (2000: 302). In this way, young people often participate and offer resistance in a form that is not familiar to many and will be manifested through the various ‘rituals’ that are commonly associated with young people.

Paul Corrigan’s research into the working-class youth in Britain, for example, reveals the ritual that is central to this idea: “the main action of British subculture is, in fact, ‘doing nothing’” (1995: 103). This ‘doing nothing’ can be seen as a ritualised form of resistance aimed at the roles assigned by adults to various mechanisms and spaces. By ‘doing nothing’ then, young people may often be attempting to exert their own form of power and agency, even though this may not be recognised as such.

The second challenge is to assess the health of traditional democratic practices as the changes described here do not simply impact young Australians. While the literature on the participation of young people in democracy in Australia reflects not only international patterns, it also mirrors attitudes from the broader Australian community. Internationally, similar patterns of declining trust and interest are evident in participation across high-income nations (Cornwell 2008): although the 2000, 2004 and 2008 elections in the US have ‘bucked’ this trend (FEC 2008).

The various trends identified here mean we should not confuse disengagement with apathy; something else is at work here. The system may not be broken, but it certainly needs to be examined.

Figure 2: Changing Australia while political structures stay the same



Theme 4: Structural changes in the economy have social consequences

Over the last 20 years, the large-scale changes in economic structures driven by the implementation of economic liberal policies have had dramatic social impacts – which have led to a number of fundamental challenges we outline in the next section. The casualisation of the labour force, for instance, has altered attitudes towards traditional solidarity structures such as unions, as well as encouraged a more mobile workforce. This has been accompanied by a steady withdrawal of government from areas that were once a central part of nation building. For example, Brendan Gleeson (2004) describes the rise of ‘privatopias’: large-scale, private housing estates in which all the services from schools to road maintenance are catered for by private contractors.

Such changes are described as creating a process of ‘individuation’ by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1997). Beck argues that this creates a disconnection between broader (formal) Political structures and the general population. Importantly, the focus groups in Stage II of this project highlighted that a sense of economic security is an important expectation that young people have from Australia’s democracy (Horsley and Costley 2008). There is a need to acknowledge and respond to the ways that structural economic change impacts upon social cohesion and community interactions. Importantly, we should not confuse the promotion of the individual through economic liberalist ideology as advancing a sense of agency: rather, it means many young people are vulnerable to the vagaries of the market and hence, impedes a sense of agency.

One response to this has been the move to implement a ‘social inclusion’ agenda that includes the specific targeting of young people. The Federal Labor government is positioning education and training for young people as one of the central achievements for its social inclusion programs (Gillard and Wong 2007). While there is great potential here, particularly in the area of employment, there are concerns that social inclusion programs simply extend previous economic liberalism ideologies that define citizens as ‘stakeholders’ whose interests are primarily economic rather than political (Seddon 2007).

In a recent report, the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence warns against such a limited implementation of this agenda and encourages the Rudd government to extend an understanding of inclusion well beyond the economic dimension (Kemp and Horn 2008). In order to do this, there is a need to implement mechanisms that comprise programs targeting political inclusion for young people, not just education and training (Seddon 2008).

Theme 5: Change is possible that will confront such long-term trends

While much of this Discussion Paper lists the fundamental challenges that have long-term repercussions on the functioning of Australian democracy, we remain optimistic that these challenges can be confronted in ways that will strengthen our democratic structures. Our research has found that many young people’s experience in both formal Politics and informal politics means that there is a great potential for political re-engagement on various levels. The focus groups undertaken in Stage II of this project, for example, found that young people active in both community and formal Political settings believed that, while Australia’s democratic institutions needed to be reformed to better engage citizens, there was also a strong belief in the overall effective functioning of the system (Horsley and Costley 2008).

This optimism, however, is tempered by a number of concerns. The first is that any fundamental shift in the way Political structures engage and include young people and consider them beyond economic agents requires a fundamental shift in both norms and values within the policy context (Adshead and McInerney 2006). Government agencies must identify young people not as consumers or clients, but as citizens. In this way, the relationships between young people and agencies should not be one mediated by the market, rather than one based around mutual citizen obligation. There is also a need to respond not only to young people generally, but to sections within this population who are particularly marginalised, including indigenous youth, those from a low socio-economic background and those from recently settled communities, including refugees (Bell et al 2008).

In the final section we present a number of policy proposals that are designed to begin the process that will encourage further debate, discussion and most importantly, action with these goals in mind. Before doing so, we outline the challenges that decision-makers must overcome if they are to successfully engage young people.

Part II: The challenges

The five themes outlined in the previous section led to four fundamental challenges that need to be confronted to overcome the disconnection between young Australians and our formal Political institutions. While we have focussed on the issue of young people, the challenges identified have much wider implications and consequences.

1. The Experience of Young People and Formal Politics

As outlined in Part One, various sources confirm that young people have a general disengagement from formal Politics. The existing literature and the research that we have undertaken confirm that this disengagement is partially driven by negative experiences when many young people have attempted to become involved in formal Politics. We found that many young people see a lack of genuine opportunities in formal Politics, which they feel is dominated by an 'old guard'.

Many of the available opportunities are seen as being through consultative committees that exist to fulfil formal obligations and policies, rather than providing any real prospects to influence political decision-making or structures. As a result, many of these consultative committees are seen as mere 'tokenism' and part of a broader process of political and media 'spin'. For example, Bridgland Sorenson (2007) found that some young people involved in the National Youth Roundtable saw the experience as tokenistic and highly controlled, with their opinions having no influence on policy agendas. These types of opportunities are only available to those young people who have both the time and resources to dedicate to such formal processes and are open to charges of (both real and perceived) elitism and non-representation: a concern also raised by members of the former Coalition government's Youth Advisory Group of Australia (Youth Roundtable 2007).

"I think when young people are portrayed in the media...It's never young people speaking for themselves, it's always moderated by an older person." – Dylan

We also found that when young people have participated in formalised forums, there is often an initial sense of excitement and commitment. This commitment quickly erodes, however, if there is a sense that the forums are tokenistic, there will be limited feedback or if recommendations are likely to be ignored, significantly delayed or watered down.

It is important that we do not homogenise the experiences of young people. The focus groups undertaken as part of this project found a number of young people actively involved in formalised Politics (Horsley and Costley 2008). While the experiences of these young people were generally positive, it should be noted that the greater the involvement in formal structures, the more likely they are to express high levels of distrust of both political leaders and democratic structures.

"...there's mechanisms for young people to get engaged in formal and informal groups in politics. But there is, I guess, again very little in terms of ethnic issues. I feel that there's sort of a boundary there saying ok, we don't want to really delve into what's going on within the ethnic communities because we want to say that Australia's this mainstream broad community..." - Vijay

For many young people their involvement has led to feelings that their efforts are rejected, stymied or sanitised. Formal Politics is also seen to lack any cultural specificity or account for the heterogeneous and complex nature of contemporary Australia. Consequently, many young people see no efficacy in their efforts. This is particularly the case when young people compare their efforts to localised or informal politics where results are more immediate and their work is encouraged (Harris et.al. 2007: 24). Rather than seeing this engagement in informal politics as 'being political', young people tend to define such efforts as 'making a difference': even when their actions are overtly political such as working on mitigating climate change.

The desire for political engagement, then, is driven by a sense of 'agency': a sense that young people may exert an influence in decision-making processes. This sense of agency is desired in both setting the agenda for action as well as in achieving results. Importantly, young people do not take the position that they have 'all the answers'; it is an agency driven by desire to work with, and be mentored by, decision-makers in setting agendas for change, instead of being consulted as an afterthought or 'add-on'.

For decision-makers there is a need to confront this lack of agency and redirect their energies towards efficacy, while still maintaining a stable policy decision-making platform that focuses on both immediacy of results and long-term structural change.

Some direction in overcoming these challenges can be found by looking at the processes employed at local community-level politics in three ways: encouraging agency through decision-making and setting the agenda; making the connection between informal political actions and the impacts on formalised Politics; and ensuring formalised Political structures include dimensions that are culturally specific (Bell et al 2008). These programs that facilitate youth participation in decision-making are often project-based and are seen to encourage a sense of agency if managed and evaluated by young people (Saggers et.al. 2004:105).

It is important to note, however, that little evidence or research exists regarding exactly how much influence young people exert through their actions in either formal Politics or informal settings (Collin 2008). While the structure of informal politics allows young people greater involvement, there is a need to expand research on the nature and impact of this participation.

2. Perceptions of Politics

The second major challenge that must be confronted emerges as many politicians are perceived to behave inappropriately as well as being distrustful, adversarial, confrontational, insincere and inaccessible (Collin 2007; Beresford and Phillips 1997). Young people perceive the culture of formalised Politics to be one of conflict, cynicism and distrust, resulting in a lack of political authenticity. This is exemplified by the behaviour of some members of parliament during Question Time – which is often the only televised exposure that many young people have to parliamentary processes.

There is also a general lack of faith that politicians specifically, or governments more generally, have the ability or willingness to produce any tangible or meaningful result (Print 2004). Importantly, many of these views are not limited to young people, but extend across the broader community (Cornwell 2008). If governments and politicians do not have the ability to achieve meaningful outcomes, then it follows that young people perceive ‘political power’ to lie elsewhere. This was the finding of a report undertaken by the Youth Commission on Globalisation that found tensions emerging between young people and decision-makers across the private sector (Arvanitakis 2003). Power is often seen to lie outside of government and in the hands of corporations and multinational authorities who seem even less accountable and accessible in the view of young people. Despite this, there was a clear message that governments need to take direct responsibility for policy outcomes.

“...even as someone who is extremely knowledgeable about politics relative to the rest of the population, I have no idea how government decisions are made in Australia to some degree...Even if you are seeking to find out as a young person, what you’ll probably be told is something very different from reality which I think is very confusing for a lot of people.” – Markus

Another perception that clearly emerged was that there is often a sense of intentionality by political leadership to distance young people. The decision by the Howard government to disband the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC) in 1998, after 20 years as a national youth peak body, is an example of this. AYPAC’s function was not only to represent young people, but also youth organisations and the wider youth sector. Though it was AYPAC that suggested the concept of National Youth Roundtable as a complementary mechanism, the Howard government decided that the National Youth Roundtable would replace AYPAC. AYPAC’s disbanding has left a void and has resulted in no real representation at the national level. The Federal government’s Australian Youth Forum (AYF) – launched in October 2008 – is seen as the first attempt to overcome this. At the time of writing this report, there was no feedback available regarding the AYF which has existed for less than six months, though its implementation is being closely monitored and there is a clear expectation that the void will be filled.

“There was a lot of excitement each time a mechanism is there, put out by the Government to engage young people. And, sort of that is slowly eroding away because whilst the consultation process is great in terms of the government actually trying to engage people, it starts to feel a bit tokenistic because there is no feedback coming back through those people saying ok, these are the ideas and suggestions that you put forward, and this is how we actioned this...” – Vijay

The existing literature on young people and their perceptions of power reveal a clear message: young people who feel marginalised and are excluded from decision-making and other roles associated with 'power' are likely to disengage and harbour resentment towards those they perceive to possess power. This is aggravated by the hierarchical and stagnant nature of formal Political institutions in Australia that do not suitably accommodate alternative perceptions of young people and their desire for agency.

In contrast, young people who are engaged by adult groups in meaningful two-way information sharing and exchange are more likely to work within existing organisational structures to effect positive changes to their local and wider communities. Newcastle City Council (United Kingdom), for example, instigated a consultative budgeting process titled UDecide, that saw decision-makers working with young people in setting budgetary priorities for projects that impact their lives (Dunn et al 2007).

3. Civics education

“Civics education needs to recognise that children and young people are citizens, and that the role of education is to support them in their growth as citizens and as participants in our democracy.” – Lina

Civics education is an integral part of a 'healthy' democracy, providing for citizens who are knowledgeable and keen to participate (Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters 2007). The lack of engagement by young people with formal Politics may be seen as the direct result of an inability to make the connection between issues that are relevant and important to young people, and the mechanisms and processes that would enable them to effect change. This disconnection is intricately linked to the delivery of civics education in Australian primary and secondary schools.

Between 1997 and 2004, the federal government provided over \$31 million to implement a national civics and citizenship education scheme (Department of Education, Science and Training 2007). Realised through the Discovering Democracy program, one of the key objectives was to create "active citizens" able to "discharge the formal obligations of citizenship [and] make an informed judgement about the extent of their civic engagement" (Civics Expert Group 1994: 6). The results from the 2004 national testing of students clearly demonstrates a key policy failure and misdirection of funds on the part of the Howard government in their attempts to revitalise civics education: 92% of Year 6 students and 60% of Year 10 students failed to acquire the minimum proficiency levels required (MCEETYA 2004).

Not taught as a stand-alone subject, but rather incorporated into existing syllabi (predominately History at the secondary level), civics knowledge is not demarcated from existing syllabi content in any way. Rather, the assumption is made that if young people are taught about the nature of citizenship in Australia, then somehow the connections between participation and change will become apparent to them. Suzanne Mellor (2008) argues that the current curriculum structure is not conducive to the prioritisation or implementation of an explicit civics program, which detracts from the benefits students may receive from this form of education.

In 2007, over 25% of Australian high school students were identified as being of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE), with this figure rising sharply to over 65% in areas of South West Sydney (NSW DET 2007). As a nation with a long history of immigration, Australia must be aware of ethnic exclusion at an institutional level: our education system "presents the prevailing wisdom concerning the norms pertaining to what civic engagement is, and how one ought to feel toward it" (Sanchez-Jankowski 2002: 239), cementing the important place of our schools in engaging young people from diverse backgrounds. The embedding of civics education in the History syllabus at the secondary level leads to a retrospective pedagogy of citizenship, rather than a progressive, dynamic and future-focussed form of instruction. It also promotes the exclusion of LBOTE and immigrant students: static views of civics and citizenship contribute to these students' sense of disengagement from Political and community life. Stepick (2002: 242) argues that this disengagement is a direct result of the confrontation with institutional discrimination that many immigrant youth face, while Sanchez-Jankowski notes that this sustained and systematic exclusion leads to an "ethnocentric view of civic engagement", in which young people prioritise issues affecting their country of origin over their present community.

“Young people within the ethnic communities are getting more involved in, I guess social, politics and social inclusion within their home country more so because they're feeling left out of the mainstream issues.” – Vijay

Of additional concern, while the study of citizenship and education in 28 countries showed that ninety-one percent of Australian teachers surveyed believed that civics education is of tremendous importance to our nation (Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood 2001), they do not feel competent or confident to teach many of the concepts (Mellor 2008).

While the 2006 Youth Electoral Study found that parents and family were fundamental actors in political socialisation, civics education is undoubtedly a core part of informing young people about Australia's democratic institutions (Edwards et al 2006). If those responsible feel that they are unprepared to teach this area, then a significant knowledge gap will continue to emerge. As such, a revitalisation of the way in which teachers are prepared for civics instruction is necessary in order to confront this alarming trend, both through tertiary teacher-education courses, and professional development for established educators.

4. A changing world

The disengagement of young people from formal Politics may also be seen as a 'depoliticisation' of young people, who have had their sense of political agency or efficacy obfuscated as a result of long-term structural changes in our society. These slow-emerging trends have seen the naturalisation of the corporatisation of government, resulting in the role of the individual diminishing. While the effects of economic liberalism have been felt throughout all strata of society, the vulnerability resulting from the exclusion of young people from formal Political structures and processes warrants immediate attention.

There are several key areas of change that must be examined in order to assess the effects of the changes to our market economy on young people: the precarious labour market; housing affordability; and, the rise of the individual. While it is impossible to provide a detailed analysis of these issues, it is important to note the key areas and the impacts upon young Australians.

i. The precarious labour market: Australia ranks second amongst OECD nations for the number of young people who are not students and who are engaged in part-time work (Long 2006). Wooden (1998) notes four principal reasons for the growth of non-permanent employment: structural changes in various industries; a determined move towards privatisation; reduction in unionisation; and, the preference of new workplaces for casual labour. Employment directly impacts a young person's efficacy: uncertainty surrounding job status and income may adversely affect their ability to act autonomously and participate fully in social or community activities. An uncertain and irregular income and the inability to accumulate wealth may also negatively affect the life-chances of young people. This trend towards casualisation in the workplace is not merely a reflection of broader, global economic changes: as the labour trends in Australia over the past two decades stand in contrast with nations who experienced similar economic prosperity (Spierings 2002).

ii. Housing affordability: Housing is generally regarded as 'affordable' when necessities such as food, education, transport and health care are within a household's means after paying their housing costs, which are measured as being less than 30% of household income (Centre for Affordable Housing NSW). Over 800,000 lower income households are experiencing 'housing stress' where at least 40% of their income is spent on meeting the cost of housing (ACOSS 2008). The current Minister for Housing, The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, recently noted that the average house costs seven-and-a-half times the annual wage, compared to four times in 1996, while rental vacancy rates are now below two percent in most capital cities – with some cities even below one percent (2008). Young people are denied access to the housing market both as purchasers and private renters, and consequently constitute an alarmingly high proportion of the estimated 100,000 Australians who are homeless (National Youth Commission 2008). The problems currently faced by young people are not simply the result of cyclical housing trends, but rather are the consequence of what the National Youth Commission describes as an "extraordinary failure" to adequately provide for the basic needs of young people (2008: iii).

iii. The rise of the individual: Federal policies over the last two decades have been predicated on the 'individualist model'. The economic liberalism discussed in Part 1 of this Discussion Paper has altered social values and resulted in any commitments to the community at large being subsumed by the promotion of individual autonomy. Economic policies have dominated where once social agendas took centre stage, and research indicates that the promotion of individual rights over communal values directly contributes to the decline of civic engagement (Funk 1998; Bos et al 2007). The willingness of governments to allow social functions to be replaced by a 'user-pays' society has resulted in young people not only being excluded from the benefits of citizenry, but "seeks to redefine membership of the political community in terms of the acceptance of a set of core cultural values" based on individual "moral responsibility" (Jayasuriya 2003:2). This should not be confused as encouraging a sense of agency – for this individualism has impeded the political agency of many young people.

The effect of the changes in these broad areas cannot be underestimated. Davis (2007) asks the question: "What kind of citizenship has been allowed young people?". We believe, in light of the structural changes resulting from the domination of economic liberal policies, the question must be: How can young people be expected to be involved in formal Political structures when dealing with the multifarious pressures and difficulties that have arisen over the last two decades?

Part III: Key Findings and Recommendations

So what do young people want?

This final section of this Paper presents a broad set of key findings that may guide governments and policy-makers in their efforts to encourage greater participation and engagement by young people. In addition, a small number of more specific recommendations are offered for consideration. The following key questions have guided our suggestions:

- What do young people want our democracy to look like?
- What mechanisms would encourage greater participation in formal structures?

As noted these questions were also embedded within each of the previous three stages of this research project (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, answering such questions proved much more challenging than simply identifying the current limitations associated with democratic engagement. Despite this, a number of premises emerged:

- **There must be mechanisms that encourage agency for young people in both decision-making and establishing the agenda.**

Such mechanisms should not be 'tacked on' as consultative processes that may be considered tokenistic or elitist, but must be an integral and valued part of the decision-making process as demonstrated by the Newcastle City Council's *UDecide* participatory budgeting project (Dunn et al 2007). Furthermore, these mechanisms should include experienced practitioners to both support and guide young people. This type of process would bring together both young people and established decision-makers to form more 'pluralistic' arrangements that should be incorporated into broader Political structures;

- **These mechanisms should not consider young people as merely 'adults-in-waiting', but must acknowledge the heterogeneous and complex nature of Australian contemporary society.**

As such, they should be "fun, culturally relevant, flexible, efficacious" (Collin, 2008). It is important to not interpret 'fun' as 'frivolous', but rather as a call for democratic mechanisms that are enjoyable, challenging and that utilise alternative media. Organisations such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition (<http://www.aycc.org.au/>) and Inspire Foundation (<http://www.inspire.org.au>) provide examples that are at the nexus of political action and Political engagement within an enjoyable and challenging framework;

- **The results of young people's efforts should be evident in both the short-term and also in the longer-term reflecting a changing culture that seeks a sense of immediacy (Harris et al 2007).**

The need for immediacy is to be counter-balanced with the beneficial nature of long-term consultation and deliberation, in dealing with challenges such as global warming; and

- **Information communication technologies (ICTs) have an important role to play.**

This must be carefully considered and implemented and not simply an 'add-on' such as a simple website or including a Facebook or MySpace page. Such actions will be ignored and are unlikely to increase participation.

The following findings and recommendations aim to confront the various challenges listed above. We do not present them as clear 'policies', but as discussion starters that aim to promote more inclusive policy and decision-making.

Key findings

Research undertaken in this project has delivered a rich body of material. This discussion paper distils key elements from the earlier reports. However, additional observations and further findings are to be found there and we would suggest that this report should be read in conjunction with the earlier work.

We have chosen here to highlight those findings which, taken together, offer guidance on how Governments, educators and others might better promote, acknowledge and nurture the active citizenship and political participation of young Australians:

Young people want to be involved in decision-making processes and should be offered opportunities to do so within existing Political structures.

It is clear that young people neither believe that they have all the answers nor do they seek unrealistic responsibility. Rather, they desire to be part of decision-making processes that encourage and welcome their efforts and that go beyond their participation in appointed consultative committees, groups and fora. There are strong grounds to support a move towards the establishment of structures within existing democratic institutions that promote the interaction of young people with established decision-makers, whilst at the same time offering appropriate mentoring. Our research shows "that young people are already active – just in ways not always understood" (Lina). It is important that we understand their activity, what motivates it and where it impacts – and that we do not lose their enthusiasm, commitment and engagement through our failure to involve them in the decision-making mechanisms that will determine their democratic future.

Young people express frustration that their participation in formal Political institutions and processes are neither acknowledged nor seen as relevant.

Young people, for diverse reasons, are participating in activities that deliver short-term, visible and efficacious outcomes that eschew traditional hierarchies, operate through transparent processes and afford agency. These activities are often issues-based or have a local/community focus. The challenge is to open the doors to young people to enable them to directly contribute to Political decision-making. This will necessitate a broader, stable decision-making model that: encourages transparency; articulates relevant principles and reflects perspectives that sit outside political cycles to address longer-term issues (such as climate change); that acknowledges the role of short term action models as a counterbalance to longer term decision-making models; and that values and acknowledges the contribution of young people through a process of accountability back to those young people.

The contribution that young people can make to the civic and Political life of the nation through their utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICT) should be acknowledged.

Young people have demonstrated their capacity to embrace changing communication technologies at a pace and breadth that is unprecedented – a development that is not limited to the Australian experience. We are now starting to understand the impact of utilising these technologies – the recent American Presidential campaign being a prime example. Opportunities exist to involve young people in the development and evaluation of ICT initiatives that go beyond ‘information only’ web pages. These initiatives should offer practical and innovative opportunities for young people to engage in formalised Political structures and could include mechanisms such as digital storytelling, online workshops, petitions and forums. Decision-makers, often perceived by young people as operating within an ‘old guard’ information and communication mentality, could benefit from the experience, knowledge and initiative of young people in ICT usage, and open up not only opportunities for young people themselves but also for a positive dialogue about new ways of participation and engagement.

Schools-based civics education programs have failed to equip young people with the tools, knowledge and experience that promote and encourage active citizenship

A healthy democracy is a reflection of its active citizenry. Secondary school-based civics programs should play a pivotal role in offering young people the experience of being an ‘active citizen’ in a democratic society. It is broadly acknowledged that schools-based civics programs are not delivering outcomes. To deliver an authentic and effective ‘active citizen’ civics syllabus, schools must themselves demonstrate through their own internal structures and mechanisms that they operate as a democratic institution. What students are told about the advantages of democracy and what they experience at the secondary level needs to be consistent. Schools civics programs need to be afforded syllabus status, delivered with appropriate professionalism and support, be tailored to achieve specific and tangible outcomes – particularly to encourage students to make the vital connection between effecting change and formal political mechanisms. It is not suggested that educators propagandise but that a balance be sought in allowing for political debate and content to be recognised as integral to our political and democratic processes.

More needs to be understood about the (formal and informal) political influence young people exert as well as their attitudes towards and active participation in our democratic processes.

Our modest research has provided a number of insights into the nature and forms of participation that young people embrace and provides some clues as to what they imagine democracy to look like. However, there are many aspects of youth engagement that demand further attention. Critically, there is little, if any, research that considers the impact of youth activity. More work needs to be done to understand not just how young people use ICT and the new media as a participatory tool but also whether it is effective.

Due account needs to be taken of the impact structural changes in the economy have had on the political and civic participation of young Australians.

While it is generally recognised that socio-economic circumstances affect an individual young person’s – or an identified group of young people’s – capacity to be an active participant in the political and civic life of the community, the implications and associated policy responses are inadequately understood.

Recommendations

The Research Agenda

Recommendation 1: That a national program of research and monitoring be instigated that investigates the democratic engagement of young people.

There are strong arguments for the implementation of an ongoing national research initiative to interrogate young Australians' democratic engagement. Throughout the four stages of this research project, we have identified a number of significant gaps in the literature. We encourage a national approach be implemented that further interrogates young Australians' engagement with democratic institutions, and tracks changing attitudes and behaviour over the long-term. Such a project should be appropriately funded.

Recommendation 2: That the national youth research findings on democratic engagement be tabled in the federal Parliament on an annual basis with the Minister for Youth reporting on trends and outlining strategies to lift youth engagement.

It is important that strategies are developed and implemented by government in an accountable manner to address the challenges of youth engagement. Reporting on trends requires a follow through commitment to action by government.

Recommendation 3: That a research program be instigated that examines the ways in which young people participate in formal and informal politics and the efficacy of their participation.

Our research has shown that many young people who are active in politics engage in innovative ways that are not adequately understood. A better understanding of how young people conceptualise the 'political' – both in formal Politics and localised politics – is only a first step towards assessing the extent to which their participation is meaningful and their efforts are effective.

Recommendation 4: That research be conducted into the efficacy of e-democracy as a participatory mechanism.

Young people feel alienated from traditional democratic institutions. Is it time to look at how those institutions might adapt to, or embrace, new participatory mechanisms? The current structure of Parliament is reflective of a historical period that required representative members to be in Canberra. At a time when politicians are seen as removed from their communities, we encourage an investigation into the efficacy of e-democracy as a tool to enhance the opportunities of young people to participate in more formal political processes.

Civics Education

Recommendation 5: That civics education be considered as a compulsory stand-alone subject in secondary schools.

There is strong argument that civics education should be considered a stand-alone subject rather than being confined to parts of the History or Commerce syllabi. We encourage the establishment of a specific syllabus that promotes citizenship, 'questioning minds' and democracy, and is not focussed on achieving arbitrary benchmarks. Within this, teachers need to be encouraged to actively engage with students rather than feel that their political views will come under scrutiny: there is a need to balance general education with 'openness' from the teachers and the curriculum itself.

Recommendation 6: That all civics education curricula incorporate action-based learning.

Civics education should utilise action-based learning to encourage a sense of agency and provide insights into the complex nature of formalised Political processes. This will promote greater engagement and allow for the connection between informal politics and formalised Politics that is currently absent in civics education. As part of this curriculum development, it needs to be acknowledged that many young people are already engaged and active politically, and they should be encouraged to pursue their interests and activities as part of their schooling.

Recommendation 7: That educators be provided with appropriate professional support and development to ensure the effective delivery of civics education curricula.

For civics education to be effective and afforded priority teachers need to be supported professionally and in terms of workload. Our research found that many teachers see civics education as an 'add-on' to other subjects such as History, and also felt uncomfortable and unsupported teaching such a potentially controversial topic. Consequently, we recommend that teachers receive appropriate support – both educational and otherwise – to promote civics education.

Concluding comments

In 2007, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that young people in Australia are living in a context of increasing awareness and experience of cultural, national and religious diversity (ABS 2007). In this Paper, we have found that this diversity has combined with changing global and local structures that have not been incorporated into formalised Politics. This has placed young people in a situation where they have altered their behaviours to compensate for these changes but in ways that older generations neither acknowledge nor fully understand. This diversity is also framed politically and through media by a climate that fosters personal and national insecurity (Matthews 2005).

It is in this context that young people have re-defined their political agency, moving away from formal structures, to informal ones. This has been misunderstood as apathy and indifference, whereas in reality it represents both a response to, and an anticipation of, the changes outlined in this Discussion Paper.

We contend that it is important for young people and decision-makers in formal Politics to meet halfway and find the means to accommodate each other. It is through such action that agency may be encouraged and the tremendous energy and potential of young people may be utilised.

We acknowledge that urgent attention needs to be focussed on young Australians who are not active, who have no experience of democratic life and who are not 'invited in' to the opportunities for participation. We need to better understand the particular needs of these young people and afford them priority in the discussion and debate that we hope this Paper will engender.

We encourage decision-makers and young people to read this Discussion Paper with a strong sense of optimism. We believe that the recommendations in this Discussion Paper are achievable and, if implemented, set the scene for promoting active citizenship on the part of all Australians, particularly young Australians, within a complex and changing world.

"Australia's youth must be convinced that they have the power to make a difference to Australia. This ultimately starts by giving Australia's youth a voice." – Zoe

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