

# A new chapter in youth participation

By Luke Bo'sher

**Australia is often identified as a pioneer when it comes to democracy and democratic processes. Australians are often proud to state that Australian women were enfranchised to vote and stand for election before other western democracies. Yet this suggestion that Australia is a leading light of democracy obscures the fact that just 35 years ago, Australia did not afford even those aged 18 to 21 years of age the right to vote.**

The mainstream discourse in Australian society has not yet moved to entrust young people aged less than 18 years with the ability to participate in Australia's democratic system. Australians younger than 18 years—who are passionate about their communities—remain disenfranchised and without adequate platforms to convey their concerns and aspirations to the Australian Government. Even many of those aged between 18 and 24 who have the right to vote, are often marginalised in the political discourse and struggle to find effective ways to contribute to national debates.

In this context of young people's marginalisation from the political system, this article considers what alternatives should be put in place to ensure young people's ideas and views are communicated to government and that young people's rights and interests are recognised and upheld.

## Why consider young people's perspectives?

What is the virtue in considering young people in decision-making? The first reason is that the democratic deficit identified above excludes young people from the formal democratic

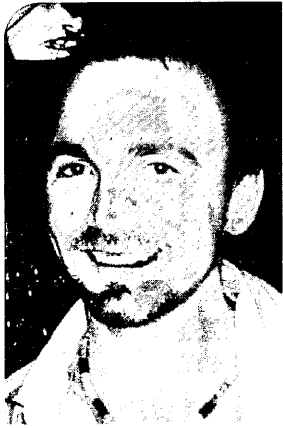
system or highly marginalises those who are able to vote. Without the ability to influence Australia's political system through voting, young people under the age of 18 are unable to hold Ministers, Governments or Parliaments accountable for decisions they make that impact on young people. Obviously, this falls far short of our democratic ideal.

The second reason is that young people also occupy a unique space in Australia's society. Young people experience a high level of regulation from government—from requirements mandating what they must do (for example, attend school) and what they must not do (for example, driving or purchasing alcohol until a certain age).

The unique space young people occupy also includes the particular 'problems' they pose policy makers and Australia's 'community leaders' who are responsible for fighting the many 'wars' currently underway, such as those against binge drinking, homelessness and obesity. Young people are identified as a central part of these, and other issues, currently being debated in the Australian community, and they deserve to be heard in the discussions.

Additionally, by virtue of their age, young people are inherently more likely to have less life experience, hold fewer positions of influence and rely on adults, whose views—regardless of whether or not they have been informed by expertise or experience—are often regarded as more authoritative. These barriers diminish the power of young people's voices being heard, and perhaps more importantly, being listened to by those making decisions affecting young people's lives.

In short, young people attract a significant amount of attention when it comes to 'problem



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creating', but less attention when it comes to problem-solving. If Australia wants to create effective responses to these problems, and not further marginalise young people, it is vital that young people are involved in the development and delivery of solutions.

### Imagining a space for youth participation

There is an enormous challenge for young people and those who wish to create a society where young people's voices are not only heard and listened to, but are actively sought in national debates and decision-making.

There are three types of voices that can advocate for the views and interests of young people:

- o Government: positions and institutions that are designed to provide advice or to advocate on behalf of young people within government processes.
- o Non-government: bodies and organisations independent of government that exercise collective advocacy on behalf of young people. These bodies and organisations can be entirely youth run or run by adults with the involvement of young people.
- o Individual: young people engaging individually, speaking on their own behalf about issues that affect them and others they identify as being similar to themselves.

We can use these three levels of young people's voice to examine the strengths and weaknesses of previous mechanisms for young people's participation and identify some learning for the future.

### Looking backwards to learn from the past

The current state of youth participation in Australia belies a history not merely of disinterest in young people's views and ideas, but also, at times, active attempts to silence dissent amongst young people and their advocates.

At a government level, representation has been minimal, with a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs established and then abolished following the Hon Larry Anthony MP losing his seat in the 2004 election. This left young people without a Ministerial voice in decision-making.

Importantly, it also lessened the accountability

of government in youth affairs matters. Without a Minister, there was no one directly responsible for young people and thus the intersection and interactions of issues impacting on young people became fragmented along departmental lines. This moved away from a whole-of-government approach to young people and further removed the already limited voice that young people had in government.

Additionally, there has never been a federal Commissioner for Youth, a position which exists in almost every state and territory with statutory responsibilities relating to the wellbeing of children and young people. This further highlights the of accountability of the Australian Government on youth affairs issues.

The Youth Bureau, located in the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs remained, administering many youth programs and providing some policy advice on youth affairs, albeit limited. The Bureau was responsible for four programs that related to young people's participation: the National Youth Roundtable, the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group, the Australian Forum of Youth Organisations and the Youth Consultative and Advisory Committee.

The National Youth Roundtable was the centerpiece of the Howard Government's approach to youth participation. The Roundtable was an annual program, bringing 50 young people from Australia together to discuss youth issues. Young people would be flown to Canberra for a week of induction and meetings with Ministers and develop the model for a research project that they would undertake in the following months. They would then return to Canberra to present their findings and conclude the program.

in many ways, the Roundtable offered the young people involved a highly valuable experience. Access to senior Ministers and public servants and the opportunity to meet other young people were often cited as very positive experiences by the young people involved.

However, the Roundtable model was also widely criticised by members of the opposition and minor parties, academics, youth workers and young people themselves. The model was highly limited in its membership—with just 50 young people each year—and faced serious limitation as it was delivered within government.

The model minimised the independence of young people to set their own agenda, develop collective positions on issues and then systemically advocate for these over time.

Research undertaken by Jude Bridgland-Sorrenson from the University of Western Australia with Roundtable participants exposed the dangers of engaging young people in a process which was (in young people's words) 'so fake' and where young people found themselves 'crashing back to reality' and becoming 'jaded'.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the National Youth Roundtable and National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group (a similar program for young indigenous Australians), the Australian Forum of Youth Organisations and the Youth Consultative and Advisory Committee were established to engage with youth service delivery organisations. The membership of these groups was highly limited and handpicked by government. The majority of youth organisations were unaware of their existence. For these reasons, these bodies were largely seen as token efforts of engagement with the youth sector, and indeed, over time, their agenda diminished until they stopped meeting altogether.

Non-government level representation was fragmented following the defunding of the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC) in 1998. As the peak body for youth affairs, AYPAC advocated on behalf of young people and the youth sector. It was a forum that brought together the voices of young people from around the country and was able to systematically advocate on these issues over long periods of time.

AYPAC also represented youth organisations and created a space for organisations to engage in discussion and debate with each other over the direction of issues such as community services funding and the viability of the sector.

The defunding of AYPAC was a significant loss to young people and to the youth sector. The existence of a body whose core business is advocating for the interests and wellbeing of young people was—and remains—essential. Without a peak body, young people have lacked a national voice and the youth sector has suffered from a lack of coordination and coherence in both policy development, youth participation and sector development.

A range of other youth organisations have undertaken selected advocacy with many



service delivery organisations advocating on youth homelessness, welfare changes and mental health funding. These have been useful but have not been able to provide sustained advocacy across the myriad of issues relating to young people.

At the individual level, young people remain largely unsupported to undertake individual advocacy. There are no coordinated programs or mechanisms in place to support young people to speak out on issues important to them. Some youth advocates are fortunate enough to have the support of mentors—many of whom work within organisations whose core business is not advocacy. However, for the majority of young people who wish to speak out on issues, they must either become involved in an existing organisation with its own policy positions and values, or go it alone.

Young Australians have been largely sidelined from a variety of important national debates, including, most recently, those around changes to laws governing the Australian electoral roll; the introduction of WorkChoices; plans for a new health and social services access card; and the reform of Australian higher education.

### A new chapter in youth participation

The election of the Rudd Government has led to a number of election commitments being fulfilled. These included a Minister for Youth (the Hon Kate Ellis MP), the establishment of an Office for Youth with greater responsibility for policy advice and an Australian Youth Forum (AYF) as a peak body for youth affairs. Other important measures—including a Commissioner for Children and Young People—have not yet been addressed.

The AYF is especially significant. It was announced as a peak body for young people and those who work with them, acting as a direct communication channel between young people and the Australian Government.<sup>2</sup> The 2008–09 Budget announced \$2 million per year for the AYF and the Government has produced a discussion paper and invited submissions on the proposed AYF model.

As the unfunded peak body for young people and those who support them, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) has developed a submission to the discussion paper that builds on the lessons from the past.

To develop an AYF which strengthens young people's voice in national debates and truly represents the views of young people, the AYF must:

- o be delivered external to government;
- o adopt a social justice perspective and actively include young people who currently experience a high level of marginalisation and disadvantage;
- o involve young people at every level of organisation—including on the board, staff and advisory groups;
- o be structured as a single peak body which represents both young people and the youth sector, as the sector's existence is predicated on the issues young people face in society;
- o engage in partnerships to build on the existing structures and knowledge that individual organisations have with particular groups of young people; and
- o work collaboratively with government while maintaining a healthy level of independence.

The AYF presents an exciting new chapter in youth participation and representation, and will see the re-establishment of a peak body which is able to support young people to speak out about issues affecting them and communicate directly with government decision makers.

### Conclusion

There is little debate that our society is enriched and better decisions are made when all members of a community—both young and old—can participate in designing and building its future. Young people are entitled to be heard on issues that impact on their lives and that are important to them, but have often been neglected in our public discussions. But whilst the problems of the past are clear, the wealth of discussion, research and experience in the sector also defines clear ways forward. The Rudd government appears to be listening—let's hope the progress continues.

### Endnotes

1. Bridgland-Sorrenson, J (2007) *The Secret Life of the National Youth Roundtable*. paper presented at the national Youth Affairs Conference, Are We There Yet?, May 2007, p 16.
2. Plibersek, T. (2007) *Labor Commits To Australia's Youth*. Media Release 3 May 2007.