

Every Voice Counts! Student Forum, Celebrating Democracy Week 2006 18-20 October 2006

The topic: Living harmoniously in our democracy. How young people can influence the future of our democracy.

The students investigated:

- a. whether young people had a vision for a democratic Australia;
- b. whether governments could do more to encourage young people's participation in Australian democratic life;
- c. whether the perspectives of young people were reflected in the current political debate;
- d. whether there were opportunities for young people locally and nationally to foster their own participation; and
- e. whether there were alternatives to the current democratic processes which could provide young people with greater opportunities for participation in Australia's democracy.

Observations

Young people's civic participation is essential for a healthy, vital and viable Australian democracy. The decline in young people's electoral participation is seen as a measure of the overall engagement of young people in Australian democratic life. This decline has occurred at a time when young people's involvement in Australian democracy has become crucial for fostering social cohesion.

1. Perspectives of Australian young people reflected in the debate

The students found that while there is a strong belief that young people's participation is essential, many young people feel that they do not have their views satisfactorily represented.

Many young people feel that they do not have sufficient access to politicians, and this situation is exacerbated by a perception that politicians seem to believe that young people are incapable of understanding political issues.

The students also found that many young people do not understand political issues and feel uninformed. This situation has apparently contributed to complacency and a belief amongst young people that political issues do not affect them.

Recommendation

1.1. The students recommend that an independent body be assigned to compose summaries and abridged editions of government issues including Hansard. These editions would also make summary references as to the impact that particular government affairs could possibly have on young people.

2. Opportunities for young people's participation both locally and nationally to influence the future of Australia's democracy

The students found that while many opportunities existed for young people's participation in the Australian democratic process, these opportunities are insufficiently publicised, and are therefore only attended by a minority of already politically-aware students

Young people consider they can make a contribution and influence the future of Australia's democracy now, and not just as voters in the future. The students found that opportunities similar to *Every Voice Counts!* should be more widely available, at both Federal and State level.

The students found that many opportunities were available to young people to make a difference locally. They considered aid organisations such as the Oaktree Foundation provided evidence that young people can instigate local initiatives, which can be of international significance, and provide avenues for Australia's young people to shape their world both within and beyond national borders.

Recommendations

2.1 The students propose an initiative of school based workshops be established which would enable schools to expose students to the political world. The primary target audience

would be students in secondary schools. These workshops would be complemented by an interactive DVD dealing with the democratic process in an accessible manner. With appropriate involvement of local parliamentary members, this would imbue students with a greater knowledge and possible interest in political affairs, as well as an understanding of the processes by which they can have their voices heard.

2.2. The students recommend that there be a higher focus on publication of young people's participation in democracy to both the media and politicians. The students recommend that a greater relationship be developed between young people and the media. This would hopefully come about through a broadening of channels by which young people can make their involvements in political affairs known to the media.

2.3. The students recommend that further inquiry into potentially altering voting age requirements be made.