



## Preface

The Tasmanian Youth Government Association is a group of young Tasmanians working to educate young people about their system of government in an enjoyable and innovative manner. TYGA represents two separate programmes working to educate young Tasmanians about formal civic and parliamentary process in an engaging and participatory manner. Firstly, the Tasmanian Youth Parliament program, currently in its seventeenth year. Secondly, the Tasmanian Youth Local Government program, a recent initiative of the association, currently in its second year.

In 2005, the Association drew together more than 100 young people at our programmes.

As a non-government organisation seeking to improve the civic education of young people, we will firstly comment upon the ways in which we approach civics education. Feedback from our programmes indicates that we are successful at increasing student's knowledge of the electoral and legislative processes, and inspiring them to learn more about and become further involved in these processes.

This submission also draws together our experiences of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system. Our knowledge is limited by our geographical focus; our programmes are restricted to Tasmanian students, and as such our knowledge is biased towards Tasmanian education systems. In addition, we are typically involved with students who are academically successful, know substantial amounts about politics and current affairs, and care about these issues. These two factors will have some impact on the content of this submission.

## How TYGA Addresses Civics

### Youth-for-youth programmes

While the programmes of TYGA continue to be conducted as Young Men's Christian Association (**YMCA**) programmes, their support is primarily manifest in financial auspicing, insurance and auditing support. Practical organisational autonomy is granted to the Taskforce of each program.

Only young people aged between 15 and 25 are eligible for TYGA and Taskforce membership. Taskforces usually comprise ten to 15 people, typically (though not exclusively) University of Tasmania students. Taskforces are also typically sourced from former participants in TYGA programmes. The result is that

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programmes are undertaken in a *youth-for-youth* manner, and are necessarily reflective of what young people consider to be an effective approach to teaching other young people based on their own, recent, experience.

Implementation by fellow young people also seeks to prevent the culture of self-censorship prevalent in "top-down" youth consultative mechanisms. Self-censorship, or cultural constraints in which young people are expected to only deal with youth-specific issues in consultation with groups of adults, is a constant problem avoided by such youth conceived participatory education programmes.

Furthermore, youth and peer led programmes are able to generate environments of greater accessibility and openness. In such environments, students are more likely to both express their opinion on issues of concern to them and also to actively investigate aspects of the civic and electoral process that they do not know about or understand.

- **TYGA programmes are organised and undertaken entirely by young people.**
- **TYGA considers *youth-for-youth* programmes:**
  - **likely to avoid the considerable impediment of self-censorship;**
  - **accessible to young people; and**
  - **likely to be effective for their target audience.**

## **Youth Parliament**

The Tasmanian Youth Parliament draws together up to 56 politically minded young Tasmanians each year. A week-long residential camp is held in the first week of the September holidays for senior secondary students, during which time participants take part in a wide range of both educational and recreational activities. Prior to the camp itself, teams of students draft Bills on any State issue of concern to them, to be debated over three days in the House of Assembly chambers at Parliament House, Hobart. This submission will consider particularly relevant aspects of the program. For a comprehensive review of the program, please refer to the 2005 Annual Report attached to this submission and to other reports available on the Youth Parliament website (<http://www.youthparliament.org.au>).

### Learning Parliament

While subscription to Youth Parliament typically includes "engaged" young people, in that participants are likely to be active in their school communities, the backgrounds and experiences of Youth Parliamentarians are diverse. In 2005, eighteen schools were represented, nine of which were public and nine private, from all three regions of Tasmania. In recent years, members of the migrant and refugee populations of Tasmania have also attended. Levels of parliamentary knowledge and understanding are similarly diverse. In order to equip students with the skills to actively participate in Youth Parliament,

students participate in Taskforce run training days in both Hobart and Launceston prior to camp. Although voluntary programmes such as Youth Parliament usually engage already civically-minded young people, this does not necessarily mean that these people have prior knowledge of the electoral or parliamentary process. Youth Parliament thus serves a purpose in providing this knowledge not adequately served in typical curricula.

- **Youth Parliamentarians come from a diverse range of backgrounds, locations.**
- **Youth Parliamentarians have diverse levels of civic / electoral awareness.**

### Experiencing Parliament

The distinguishing aspect of Youth Parliament compared with solely instructive civic and electoral programmes is its interactive nature. At training days, participants are taught about the responsibilities of each level of Australian government and asked to decide on a State issue of concern to them. Participants, in teams and assisted by a Taskforce mentor, then draft a Bill on this topic. In writing their own Bill, participants learn to interpret and understand important aspects of legislation. They also learn how to critically examine social issues and the methods of legislative remedy for social problems.

Students are also taught the basics of parliamentary process. While attending Youth Parliament, students simulate the process of passing their Bills, including parliamentary debate (with the House divided into Government and Opposition, although all votes are by conscience) and Committee stage.

Debate in the House of Assembly chambers to comparable Standing Orders and procedures as are actually employed in parliamentary debate allows students to experience the legislative process first-hand. The experience of Parliament and Parliament House also allows students an insight into the value of freedom of speech and representative democracy. While students undoubtedly receive these benefits from school trips to Canberra, Youth Parliament demonstrates that comparable benefits are gained through visits to State Parliament.

- **Allowing students to directly participate in simulated civic and electoral process is an effective method of teaching.**
- **Students benefit from exposure to State parliamentary institutions.**

### Demystifying Parliament

Inevitably, first-time participants at Youth Parliament, especially those entering with little or no parliamentary or electoral knowledge, are initially intimidated by the environment of public speaking, debating and the grandeur of Parliament. Most students have no prior experience with Parliament and, until undertaking the program, contact with Parliament and Parliamentarians is alien to them. Indeed, most students feel that they 'have no right' to be engaged in Parliament.

Apart from attempting to defuse the intimidation of the overall environment by facilitating an accessible program and holding a camp, one aspect of which is attempting to make Youth Parliamentarians comfortable enough with their colleagues to speak out on issues important to them, Youth Parliament also attempts to demonstrate the accessibility of political representatives.

Members of Tasmanian Parliament typically act as Speaker during sessions of the Youth Parliament. In the middle of the week, a "mocktail" party is held at Parliament House. During the party, students are able to interact with their real-life counterparts in a relaxed and informal setting. Experiences derived from making Parliament and Parliamentarians accessible to young people are invaluable in allowing students to feel capable of participating in civic and electoral matters, rather than simply being told.

- **Students do not feel Parliamentary engagement is a natural part of civic and electoral participation.**
- **Accessibility of Parliament and Parliamentarians allows students to feel capable of genuine engagement.**
- **Contact with Parliamentarians reduces the barrier to engagement felt by many young people.**

## Youth Local Government

The Tasmanian Youth Local Government (YLG) is an annual programme that ran for the second time in 2006. YLG brings together students from around Tasmania to participate in a mock local government. Running similarly to Youth Parliament, YLG teaches students about the process and powers of local government before they write by-laws and debate them in Hobart City Council chambers. While Youth Parliament focuses on students in the final two years of school, YLG focuses on students in Grades Nine and Ten, addressing an entirely different range of issues. The programme also only runs for three days, as opposed to a full week. In other respects, however, it is quite similar to Youth Parliament: debate follows similar procedure to Council and we encourage students to interact with Aldermen, Councillors and Mayors in attendance.

Due to the age difference and the means of our promotion, students at YLG tend to be selected for attendance, rather than being the driving force behind their own attendance. Initial engagement in the programme by selected participants is generally less than their self-motivated counterparts. Nevertheless, involvement in consultative mechanisms, such as debate, is consistently high across all participants. Everyone has something to say, even if they are not aware of how to say it. This is perhaps the key point of our submission.

## Civic Knowledge and Young People

Young people want to be engaged but often are unaware of means by which they can be. Most students involved in TYGA programmes are entirely unaware of formal participation and consultation mechanisms like the Tasmanian Youth Consultative Committee (**TYCC**) or local government consultative programmes. Fewer are aware of mechanisms behind voting. While many can name the major political parties, few, if any, can name Members of Parliament from those parties. Most are wholly unaware of the existence of the Legislative Council. At Youth Local Government in 2005 not a single participant could name their electorate for either house of Tasmanian Parliament. Few were able to positively identify their local government jurisdiction by name.

What is perhaps more shocking is the lack of knowledge of the operation of the voting system. Few participants in our programmes are familiar with the concepts behind "above-the-line" Senate voting, other than being aware that "it's easier". None had seen a ballot paper before and few knew about the requirements of voting.

The reason for this, as we see it, is a lack of relevant electoral education in schools. Teachers have a legitimate fear of being accused of introducing a political bias into their classrooms. The result of this is that electoral education, especially at a junior secondary level, tends to focus on mundane and structural details. Students will learn that there are seventy-six Senators, but not about the activities of Senators, Senate committee processes or how voting in the Senate works in practice. There is no discussion about preference-swapping or the practical implications of Group Voting Ticket (GVT). Inevitably, when topical issues are discussed students will air their views on opposing sides for a few minutes before moving on. Rarely, if ever, is a topic considered at length with the capacity for students to learn more than is written in a newspaper. This is less true at a senior secondary level, but by that stage there is no compulsion for students to participate. The result is that a small number of deeply interested students become better informed. The large majority of students who find greater attraction in any pre-tertiary course other than Legal Studies will remain uneducated about these important issues.

Part of TYGA's role is to provide an informed environment in which young people are able to debate issues which are important to them. They generate the issues, research them and consider them in detail. There are amendment meetings where the participants consider possible changes. The process of the Youth Motion not only provides an outlet for every issue people see as important but also provides access to experts in various fields so that young people can make an informed choice.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of any TYGA program is the social atmosphere it creates. Participants are able to communicate with like-minded individuals and discuss pressing issues. More than that, participants are encouraged to form social relationships with the Taskforce. The informal environment leads to many dinnertime discussions on politics, electoral systems and voting. It is this culture of engagement which gives young people the confidence they need to become more directly involved in the civic process.

For young people to become involved in the civic process they require two things: knowledge of its operation and the confidence to become involved. This confidence arises from an ability to consider issues in an informed manner. There is always a culture, instilled by educational institutions and society in general, that young people are a class beneath "adults". This, while not intentional, is certainly felt by young people. Unless they are sufficiently confident in their beliefs, unless they are capable of justifying and arguing for them, they will never present them before adults – the people with power. TYGA programmes aim to provide this confidence by beginning with informal discussion of ideas and ending with a formal, often heated, debate between young people.

TYGA and its predecessors have always provided experiential programmes as these are demonstrably the most effective in educating the participants. TYGA is aware of a number of similar organisations with such focus, conducting programs which emphasise experience of civic institutions as a key to developing understanding and engendering a desire to participate. We are aware that you have received a submission from the United Nations Youth Association (Tasmanian Division), for example, which hooks into a national network conducting experiential United Nations focussed programs.

A further case study is Empowerment Australia Inc., an organisation founded in 2005 by current TYGA members wishing to conduct a mock election to run in parallel with the 2006 Tasmanian House of Assembly elections. This program was designed to provide an opportunity for all people approaching the age of voting, i.e. aged sixteen or seventeen, to have practical experience of the way voting worked. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding or support from the then Minister for Education the program was abandoned. The proposed operation of that program, being a practical and experiential approach, is strongly supported by TYGA as the most successful means of providing that necessary education in the operation of voting. Although not certain, Empowerment Australia is to consider running a similar program for the 2009-10 House of Assembly elections in Tasmania.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from TYGA's operations is that young people who experience the democratic process are more likely to become involved directly in civic processes. We believe that practical, experiential programmes are by far the best way to ensure appropriate civic and electoral education.

## TYGA Recommendations

1. Youth-led education the most effective tool for conveying knowledge in non-traditional learning areas, especially electoral and civics education where young people tend to be nervous. While often young people are happy to volunteer to run these programmes, operating costs remain large. Funding needs to be provided to ensure these programmes are able to continue and expand. **Governments need to recognise financial competence in youth organisations and young people with a proven background in financial management.**
2. Young people flourish in an informal environment. Making both educational programmes and actual operations more youth- and user-friendly will be incredibly helpful in ensuring young people want to be engaged. Moves towards plain-English legislation, explanatory memoranda and notes in legislation are positive moves towards ensuring accessibility. **Wherever possible, informality in civics and electoral processes should be encouraged. When dealing with young people, having young people running the process assists this greatly.**
3. Civics education can be taught most effectively by replicating actual processes used. Young people enjoy this and it ensures that they are able to face these challenges with confidence in future. **Practical and experiential programmes as a means of education should be actively encouraged.**
4. Young people want to be engaged and want to be heard. Interaction with politicians and other representatives provides this for them. **Educational programmes should include as much interaction with Parliamentarians, Councillors, Aldermen and public representatives as possible.**
5. Physical participation in civic institutions, such as Parliament House, allows young people to feel valued in and become accustomed to civic and political engagement. **As much as possible, venues like Parliament House should be used.**
6. While current educational practices have some merit it is essential that issues are discussed and that they are discussed with appropriate depth. This may require involving non-teaching staff to prevent allegations of bias. **In-depth discussion of issues should be strongly encouraged in all schools, utilising external organisations if necessary.**

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7. When given the opportunity to feel that their opinions are important, young people are capable of making substantive contributions to contemporary policy debates. The output of Youth Parliament and Youth Local Government programs, developed entirely by young people themselves, demonstrates that young people are impassioned and informed on a wide variety of issues, including those traditionally outside of the scope of youth consultative mechanisms. **The opinions of young people should be sought on a wide range of policy issues.**
  
8. Young people are able to make important contributions to their governance if given the chance. While TYGA can draw on its experience to make recommendations, it is essential that young people are regularly engaged through effective mechanisms on their own terms. There would be no better way to avoid the need for this type of inquiry than to have an effective, broad-reaching youth consultative process. **A strong youth consultation mechanism needs to be developed to ensure that, amongst other things, young people are consulted on issues of concern to them.**

(Attachments: Youth Parliament Annual Report 2005; Youth Local Government Annual Report 2005)