



## **Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education**

Joint response by  
Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, Queensland  
NSW Commission for Children and Young People  
Commissioner for Children, Tasmania

# Contents

<b>The scope of our response</b>	<b>• 3</b>
<b>Summary of our key issues</b>	<b>• 4</b>
1. Historical assumption that education will generate participation	4
2. ‘Civic literacy’ might not be the significant problem that requires redress	4
3. Potential issues with Australia’s political system	4
4. Young people in Australia – excluded and ignored	4
5. The need to look beyond civics and electoral education	4
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>• 5</b>
1. Programs that provide young people with explicit reasons to engage with governments and the political process. For example:	5
“‘What about having a ‘mock voting’ program in schools?”	5
“‘What about having a ‘mock election’ aligned with when the election is on, and years 11 and 12 students can do a practice vote. The votes can be counted and see how close they were to the actual final outcome.”	5
2. Visible evidence that the local, state and federal governments are genuinely seeking to listen to, engage with and represent children and young people. For example:	6
3. Programs to help young people to perceive that their involvement will ‘make a difference’.	6
<b>Key issues</b>	<b>• 7</b>
1. Historical assumption that civics and electoral education will generate participation	7
2. Civic literacy might not be the significant problem that requires redress	8
“‘If you had to vote next week, would you know who to vote for?’”	8
3. Potential issues with Australia’s political system	9
“‘Why are your friends not interested in voting?’”	9
4. Young people in Australia – excluded and ignored?	10
5. Looking beyond civics and electoral education	12
<b>Research notes</b>	<b>• 13</b>

## The scope of our response

This response is made jointly by the Queensland Commission for Children Young People and Child Guardian, the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Children, Tasmania. We have a mandate and a commitment to engage with children and young people and to advocate for their interests and wellbeing. From our joint perspective, the inquiry's terms of reference make assumptions about the causes of perceived disengagement among children and young people and narrowly emphasise civics and electoral education as the key solution. Because children and young people report to us that inadequate civics and electoral education is not the key barrier to participation, we take this opportunity to provide the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters with a broader perspective on young people's engagement with political and government processes.

From the perspective of children and young people, a healthy democracy in Australia requires structures of government that are better able to engage with young people and respond to their needs. Without these basic foundations, the use of civics and electoral education as a tool for improving young people's civic participation rates will not fulfil its real potential. However, if these foundations are laid, quality civics and electoral education may have the ability to engage young people genuinely in our democracy and electoral processes.

For these reasons, this submission points to significant issues beyond those outlined in the terms of reference to respond to the inquiry's over-arching concern with strengthening Australia's democracy through the active involvement of young people, while also making some proposals for improving civics and electoral education. However, our key issues and recommendations also respond to some of the inquiry's stated questions. For example, section two of the key issues provides insights to aid understanding about 'the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system', and recommendation one provides practical examples of programs that have 'the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs'.

## Summary of our key issues

1. **Historical assumption that education will generate participation**
  - Since at least the 1980s, governments in Australia have been concerned with the idea that young people have poor levels of ‘civic literacy’ which, if improved with education, will lead to more active participation in civic society. Research reveals that this is a problematic assumption.<sup>1</sup>
2. **‘Civic literacy’ might not be the significant problem that requires redress**
  - From the perspective of children and young people, inadequate civics and electoral education may not be the significant problem that requires redress for enhanced youth participation in civic society. Research based on broader interpretations of ‘active citizenship’ shows that a large percentage of young people are already active and engaged citizens.
3. **Potential issues with Australia’s political system**
  - Low levels of participation by young people in formal political processes could more usefully be seen as an indicator of structural problems with the Australian political system itself (its formal political processes, institutions and culture) rather than just issues with young people’s levels of civic literacy and/or the adequacy of the civics and electoral education they receive.
4. **Young people in Australia – excluded and ignored**
  - Many children and young people feel excluded and invisible in society. Some avenues for youth participation have been constricted.
  - Given a real perception that governments are not responding to the needs of young people, and a lack of meaningful avenues for participation, cynicism among young people is not surprising.
5. **The need to look beyond civics and electoral education**
  - An emphasis on civics and electoral education may inspire some young people to engage, but this will have broader consequences, because the rhetoric of youth participation does not seem to match real world avenues for participation for many young people.

<sup>1</sup> Details of all research informing this submission are outlined in subsequent sections.

# Recommendations

A high-level acknowledgement that the root causes of young people's disengagement relate to the fact that they feel excluded from decision making in government and that engaging them requires three important changes:

1. **Programs that provide young people with explicit reasons to engage with governments and the political process. For example:**
  - a. Federal and state level mock elections, called simultaneously with state and federal elections, to provide young people with an exciting and practical opportunity to put their knowledge about electoral processes into practice. As part of this activity, young people could be encouraged to examine the information provided by the different political parties in Australia.
  - b. Civics and electoral education and training programs that emphasise the actual application of civics and electoral education knowledge in a way that fits with young people's engagement and communication preferences (e.g. campaigning through, and supporting, NGOs, personal internet blogs).

## **“What about having a ‘mock voting’ program in schools?”**

- “That’s a good idea ‘cos it teaches you to care about your opinion.”
- “If they think they are going to win an ice cream voucher at the canteen then they might do a bit of research”.
- “Doing something like that doesn’t just teach young people to vote, it also shows what young people are thinking (about politics) as well.”
- “If you had that information, it might also make some of the political parties care about young people.’

## **What about having a ‘mock election’ aligned with when the election is on, and years 11 and 12 students can do a practice vote. The votes can be counted to see how close they were to the actual final outcome.”**

- “That’s great”
  - “I like that”
  - “It’s real, it’s live, its happening and you get to have a say”.
  - “But maybe those sort of things already happen at schools that don’t need it as much’.
  - ‘Maybe target more disadvantaged schools’
- Young people from New South Wales, 2006<sup>2</sup>

2. **Visible evidence that the local, state and federal governments are genuinely seeking to listen to, engage with and represent children and young people. For example:**

a. substantial youth engagement embedded as core practice in policy development and practice,

b. resourced implementation of practical and accessible youth participation toolkits and guidelines,

c. the re-establishment of a national peak body for youth affairs with a mandate to be the national coordinating centre on youth engagement, advocacy and research, and

d. the re-establishment of a Ministerial or Parliamentary Secretary portfolio of Children and Young People at the national level.

3. **Programs to help young people to perceive that their involvement will ‘make a difference’.**

This requires a self-reflective and critical look at the culture, institutions and practices of the Australian political and governmental system to identify how they currently act as barriers to engagement and what needs to change to better engage with children and young people and respond to their needs. An important first step would be a national youth engagement strategy produced in consultation with young people. This would be more than an aspirational document and would clearly state goals, performance indicators and an implementation plan. Programs to provide more adequate civics and electoral education could be just one component of this broader strategy.

Prior to any further work on the perceived youth disengagement problem, a current and comprehensive evidence base for informing policy responses should be developed, including surveys that examine possible sources of youth disengagement (including, but not restricted to ‘civic literacy’).

## Key issues

### 1. Historical assumption that civics and electoral education will generate participation

Since at least the 1980s, governments in Australia have been concerned with the idea that young people have poor levels of ‘civic literacy’ (knowledge and understanding of the basic principles, institutions and processes of government), which if improved with education will lead to more active ‘civic participation’ (participation in civic society). The assumption has been made that if young people’s lack of knowledge can be remedied (through civics and electoral education) then they will be in a better position to ‘understand and take part in decision making structures’.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of the Australian Parliament’s Politics and Public Administration Group, the Federal government ‘seemed to assume’ that young people would be encouraged to participate in civic activities (defined then as participation in formal politics and community-based activities such as meals-on-wheels and land care groups) when they acquired more knowledge about Australia’s political system and their roles, as citizens, within that system.<sup>4</sup>

This assumption has been questioned by academic research and analysis. In 1998 and 1999, just before the second of two Senate Inquiries into ‘education for active citizenship’,<sup>5</sup> concerns were raised that electoral education initiatives were not leading to increased political participation.<sup>6</sup> Youth engagement researchers argue that this is still the case today.<sup>7</sup>

Those who believe that students ‘don’t possess acceptable levels of political knowledge and understanding to become effective citizens’ and that ‘a direct relationship exists between the levels of political participation and individual levels of political knowledge’,<sup>8</sup> have presented very strong arguments but limited research evidence to support the notion that electoral education is the key problem (and logical solution) to young people’s disengagement with formal political processes. Furthermore, while surveys showing weak civic literacy amongst young people are frequently referred to by civics and electoral education advocates, few qualitative insights into the reasons for young people’s disengagement have been provided. More qualitative research would improve understanding about the exact nature of youth disengagement and surveys could be usefully broadened in their scope to provide data on how much of youth disengagement is actually due to ‘civic literacy’ weaknesses when compared with other potential factors.

<sup>3</sup> Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1998, p15.

<sup>4</sup> Krinks, K., 1999, ‘Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education, Politics and Public Administration Group, Australian Parliament, Discussion Paper 15, 1998-99.

<sup>5</sup> Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1989, Education for Active Citizenship in Australian schools and Youth Organisations: A Report by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, pp. 15; Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1991, Education for Active Citizenship: Revisited, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

<sup>6</sup> McAllister, I., 1998, ‘Civic education and political knowledge in Australia’, Australian Journal of Political Science, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 7-23 and Kennedy, K., Watts, O. and McDonald, G., 1993, Citizenship Education for a New Age, both cited in Krinks, K., 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Consultations with Dr Ariadne Vromen, Senior Lecturer in political sociology and an expert in young people’s political participation, May 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Print, M., 2005, ‘From civics education to critical mass: the new civics education’, discussion paper, University of Sydney

## 2. Civic literacy might not be the significant problem that requires redress

From the perspective of children and young people, inadequate civics and electoral education might not be the significant problem that requires redress for enhanced youth participation in civic society. Research based on broader interpretations of what constitutes ‘political’ or ‘civic participation’ shows that many young people are already active citizens who are engaged in charity and community work outside formal politics and who choose activist participation (rather than formal political participation) in response to their issues of concern (e.g. the environment and the war in Iraq).<sup>9 iii</sup> Research also reveals that young people are knowledgeable about the key political issues of the day and are aware of how the political parties stand on these,<sup>10 iv</sup> a finding that concurs with our own consultations with children and young people in Queensland<sup>11</sup> and New South Wales.<sup>12</sup>

### “If you had to vote next week, would you know who to vote for?”

- “Yes” / “No” (about equal)

### “So some of you do, some of you don’t... Would you know how do go and find out?”

- “Read the newspaper”
- “Go online”
- “Read the brochures they send out”
- “You probably shouldn’t read what they send you... no matter who it’s from its going to be biased”
- “Do your own research to develop your own opinion”

Young people from New South Wales, 2006<sup>13</sup>

This consultation indicates that these children and young people knew about the mechanics of the electoral system, and that their knowledge may have been on par with the average adult. They also had a general understanding of what the major political parties stand for, knowledge passed on by their parents rather than their school. The young people were also particularly interested to learn about the policy positions of the different parties on the issues that mattered to them, their families and their friends. Mistrust with political parties and organisations was expressed, as was a concern that politicians do not tell the truth and that they do not know or care about young people and their interests. Finally the young people perceived that ‘relevance to their lives’ was the major issue that stops their friends and schoolmates from being interested in politics and government, particularly the belief that it ‘would not make any difference’ if they did vote and get involved.

<sup>9</sup> Vromen A, 2006, Young people’s participation and representation during the Howard decade, conference paper, John Howard’s Decade Conference, March 4, 2006, ANU, p 2

<sup>10</sup> Krinks, K., 1999, ‘Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education, Politics and Public Administration Group, Australian Parliament, Discussion Paper 15, 1998-99,

<sup>11</sup> Consultation with the children and young people at Albert Park Flexi School Community, Brisbane, 23 May 2006

<sup>12</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People, reference group meeting, May 2006

<sup>13</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People, reference group meeting, May 2006



### 3. Potential issues with Australia's political system

Low levels of participation by young people in formal political processes could perhaps more usefully be seen as an indicator of broader problems with the Australian political system (its institutions, processes and culture) rather than just problems with young people's levels of civic literacy and/or the adequacy of the electoral education that they receive.

#### Why are your friends not interested in voting?

- "They've lost faith"
- "They just don't care enough"
- "I can't do anything about it – my vote won't make a difference"
- "They think it doesn't affect them, when it actually does"
- "They say, 'Well they're not going to do anything for me anyway so why bother?'"

Young people from New South Wales, 2006<sup>14</sup>

In 2001, the European Commission White Paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth' highlighted to member states that not only do young people express a 'clear will' to 'participate and to influence the choices made by society', they also 'wish to do so on a more individual and more one-off basis, outside of the old participatory structures and mechanisms'. The White Paper reported that 'As a rule, young people in Europe are keen to foster democracy and more especially to play their part in it' but that 'mistrust has set in with regards to the institutional structures' through which democracy is traditionally achieved. From the perspective of the European Commission, 'it is up to the public authorities to bridge the gap between young people's eagerness to express their opinions and the methods and structures which society offers.'<sup>15</sup>

In line with the European Commission's position, a recent independent inquiry into the state of Britain's democracy identified that structural weaknesses with Britain's political institutions, processes and culture was causing widespread disengagement and weak participation amongst British citizens (and that nearly all established democracies are suffering from similar problems)<sup>16 v</sup>. Importantly, while the inquiry report highlighted that people felt that they lacked information or knowledge about formal politics, this was noted as being just one of many other significant factors and, significantly, electoral education was described by the report as being a 'typical' and 'ill-suited' response to addressing the problem of disengagement.<sup>17 vi</sup>

<sup>14</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People, reference group meeting, May 2006

<sup>15</sup> Commission of the European Communities, 2001, European Commission White Paper: a new impetus for European youth, Brussels, 21.11.2001, COM(2001) 681 final, pp. 10

<sup>16</sup> The Power Inquiry, 2006, Power to the People: an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy, pp. 17-18

<sup>17</sup> The Power Inquiry, 2006, Power to the People: an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy, pp. 112

#### 4. Young people in Australia – excluded and ignored?

Many young people in Australia report that they feel excluded and invisible in our society. For RMIT's Professor David Saunders, 'the social and political response to young people in Australia falls somewhere between the lack of a consistent commitment to youth at best, and social exclusion at worst'.<sup>18</sup> Independent research and our own consultations with children and young people reveal that, for many, their issues of concern and the problems that they face (in the areas of housing, education, health, nutrition, child care for young mothers) are not being adequately understood and addressed.<sup>19 20</sup> This is particularly the case for significant numbers of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people who, according to the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'continue to be in need of a considerable improvement of their standard of living, health and education'.<sup>21</sup>

"Our indigenous youth remain some of the most disadvantaged in the world; indeed, when countries for which suicide data are published by the World Health Organization are ranked according to rates for young males, Australia ranks in the highest third. In 2003-04 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimated that there had been one formal notification to authorities of child abuse every two and half minutes. As one colleague put it, 'a true crisis but we are unable to even discuss it openly'" Sebastian De Brennan , 2006, former member of the National Youth Round Table<sup>22</sup>

At the federal level, avenues for youth participation in government have been constricted and those that are left have been criticised. The fact that members and agenda items at the National Youth Round Table (NYRT) are selected by politicians has caused concern, as has the recent reduction in the number of youth participants, leaving no representatives from Tasmania.<sup>23 24</sup> Interestingly, 450 young people applied to join the NYRT last year.<sup>25</sup> Those that are involved are doing their very best to represent young people, providing more evidence that young people do actively seek out engagement opportunities.

18 Maunders, D., 2001, 'Excluded and ignored? Issues for young people in Australia', Development Bulletin, October 2001, pp. 70  
19 Maunders, D., 2001, 'Excluded and ignored? Issues for young people in Australia', Development Bulletin, October 2001, pp. 70

20 Consultation with the children and young people at Albert Park Flexi School Community, Brisbane, 23 May 2006, age range 14-25 years.

A number of the children and young people at Albert Park are disadvantaged and vulnerable because of limited and low incomes, homelessness, poor housing, and barriers to child care, transport, education, training and employment. Taken together, these factors place these disadvantaged young people at greater risk of entering the child protection and youth justice systems.

On the issue of 'getting their voices heard', the majority were very cynical - they did not perceive that the federal or state governments cared about their needs and interests, and many did not readily perceive that they would gain benefit from involvement beyond voting. An in-depth knowledge of civics and electoral education was not evident, although the majority of the group was aware of the main avenues for participation (voting, writing to their representatives, signing petitions). The general discussion also revealed that many within the group had a sophisticated understanding of current political issues (such as the environment, the war in Iraq, immigration) and they had made considered choices about who they would vote for in an election.

21 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 44 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child - Concluding Observations, CRC/C/15/Add.268, 20 September 2005, pp. 4  
22 Sebastian De Brennan, 2006, "Generation Y bother!", Perspective interview, ABC Radio National, 2 May 2006,  
23 Sebastian De Brennan, 2005, 'National Youth Round Table chopped in half', On-line Opinion  
24 Maunders, D., 2001, 'Excluded and ignored? Issues for young people in Australia', Development Bulletin, October 2001, pp. 73  
25 Online opinion forum, 'If youth are the "leaders of tomorrow", why they are not considered as the leaders of today?'

The UN has expressed concerns about the downgrading of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs position to that of Parliamentary Secretary.<sup>26</sup> Since the UN report, even the Parliamentary Secretary position has lapsed. The Australian Youth Policy Action Coalition (previously the Youth Affairs Council of Australia), was stripped of funding in 1999, ending almost 40 years of government support for research and advocacy on youth issues. While a declaration to involve young people in government planning and decision making at the state and federal level has recently been published,<sup>27</sup> practical guidance and an implementation plan are also needed to ensure that youth engagement does actually happen.

“Like it or not, the ‘youth consultation mechanisms’ heralded by Australian governments have, for all the fanfare, quickly been dismissed as ‘tokenistic’ and ‘disappointing’ by former and current participants. This not only stifles important youth-for-youth advocacy domestically, but also impacts upon our ability to highlight the plight of those millions of youth less fortunate than us throughout the globe.” Sebastian De Brennan , 2006, former member of the National Youth Round Table<sup>28</sup>

“We are therefore left with a dangerous situation in which youth play very little role in the development of public policy. Yet, in the not too distant future, they are expected to be the guardians and drivers of it. The fact that Australia is a “greying population” makes it all the more important for older generations to engage with youth now.” Sebastian De Brennan

Considering the perception that governments are not responding to the needs of young people on the one hand, and the weakening of avenues for participation by young people in some jurisdictions on the other, cynicism amongst many young people is not surprising.

“Through civics and electoral education, the government is essentially seeking to encourage young people to participate in a process that in many ways discourages young people’s participation. This is an oxymoron. Unless governments seek to become better at engaging with young people, which means addressing the sources of their disengagement, there is a risk that civics and electoral education initiatives will be seen as tokenistic.”  
Rachael Uhr, 2006, Youth Policy Project Officer, Local Government Association of Queensland<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *Contributing and Changing: Young People's Involvement in Government Planning and Decision Making*, Parliament of Victoria

<sup>28</sup> Sebastian De Brennan, 2006, “Generation Y bother!”, Perspective interview, ABC Radio National, 2 May 2006,

<sup>29</sup> Rachael Uhr, Youth Policy Project Officer, Local Government Association of Queensland, consultation response, May 2006

5. **Looking beyond civics and electoral education**

An emphasis on civics and electoral education may inspire some young people to engage, but this will have broader consequences, because the rhetoric of youth participation does not seem to match real world avenues for participation for many young people. It is therefore questionable whether more adequate civics or electoral education alone will solve the perceived youth disengagement problem. It may be a mistake to emphasise civics and electoral education as a priority problem area when other, arguably more significant, factors exist.

## Research notes

### i The history of education initiatives for active citizenship

Krinks, K., 1999, 'Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education', Politics and Public Administration Group, Australian Parliament, Discussion Paper 15, 1998-99

This discussion paper articulates the history of government concerns about the lack of interest and knowledge about citizenship displayed by those between ages 15 and 35 (in particular). This report cited a number of civic literacy surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s which revealed that young people's knowledge of Australian political history and of the country's political system was extremely limited. Quotes from parliamentarians about the research revealed a broad understanding of the many factors that help to explain young people's limited citizenship knowledge but narrow policy responses focused almost entirely on 'education initiatives for active citizenship'. Initiatives took the form of civics education programs which aimed to produce informed and active citizens through teaching students about Australia's history, system of government and democratic values.

### ii Broader interpretations of what constitutes 'civic participation'

Krinks, K., 1999, 'Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education', *Politics and Public Administration Group*, Australian Parliament, Discussion Paper 15, 1998-99

Since the 1980s, criticisms have been made about the way in which terms such as 'politics' have been narrowly defined in surveys of political knowledge and interest. Traditionally, the concept of politics tended to be understood in terms of government, and accordingly 'political activity' was defined and measured as activity relating to what government does. Responding to these concerns, research found that young people are more interested in, and more likely to participate in, issues that are not governmental, but are political in a wider sense. For example, the social values and agendas for change of the individuals and parties in the Senate (non-governmental political issue) as opposed to the role that the Constitution sets out for the Senate (governmental issue).

### iii The realities of youth participation

Vromen A, 2006, *Young people's participation and representation during the Howard decade*, conference paper, John Howard's Decade Conference, March 4, 2006, ANU

In this paper, Vromen highlights a mismatch between the participation forms chosen by young people and the participation forms currently legitimised by the Australian government. Vromen found four main ways in which people participate in their democracy (*activist* - rallies, boycotts and environmental/human rights organisations; *communitarian* - community and church groups; *individualist*

- donating money, volunteering time, membership of a sporting group; and *party-oriented* - party or union membership, contacting a Member of Parliament, registering to vote). Vromen's surveys revealed that young people in Australia are rejecting participation in formal political processes (*party-oriented participation*), in favour of communitarian and activist forms of participation .

Analyses of the Youth Electoral Survey and the Australian Study of Social Attitudes revealed similar findings for school-age children in relation to their participation in community activities such as volunteering and involvement with community groups. Importantly, civic participation (defined in Vromen's broad terms) does not seem to have reduced or weakened. In fact, some commentators have arguing that participation has actually increased and strengthened amongst young people in recent years demonstrated, for example, by the growth of the Greens party which has attracted record numbers of young members and voters.

Discourse analysis of the political 'framing' of these different participation types reveals that the Federal Government has framed party-oriented participation as the most legitimate and activist participation (the participation choice of many young people) as the least legitimate. Of concern is that this narrow emphasis on party-oriented participation may be acting as a barrier to understanding the true nature of young people's participation and, importantly, the factors that encourage and discourage participation in the different areas.

iv Krinks, K., 1999, 'Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education', *Politics and Public Administration Group*, Australian Parliament, Discussion Paper 15, 1998-99

"For the purposes of this paper, the most significant finding is that, while many young people feel alienated from the political and decision-making processes in this country, and appear to show little interest in learning about its formalities, they seem to be an informed, articulate and concerned generation with a clear agenda for change. A number of developments in recent years even indicate that, when they believe that their actions might make a real difference, many young people will participate in the formal political processes that in the traditional view are truly 'civic' arenas."

#### **v The likely root causes of disengagement amongst young people in established democracies**

The Power Inquiry, 2006, *Power to the People: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*, pp. 16-18

The United Kingdom's Power Inquiry report identifies the following root causes of disengagement from formal democracy amongst people in Britain and argues that 'nearly all the established democracies are suffering from similar problems':

- *Citizens do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions – this includes party members who feel they have no say in policy making and are increasingly disaffected.*

- *The main political parties are widely perceived to be too similar and lacking in principles.*
- *The electoral system is widely perceived as leading to unequal and wasted votes.*
- *Political parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies.*
- *Many people feel they lack information or knowledge about formal politics.*
- *Voting procedures are regarded by some as inconvenient and unattractive.”*

The inquiry’s response to the problem of disengagement was to highlight three necessary shifts in political practice and to make thirty individual recommendations:

*“Power has set its recommendations within the context of a changed society. These recommendations primarily aim to create a political system which allows citizens a more direct and focused influence on the political decisions that concern them... The recommendations are based on three major shifts in political practice:*

- *a rebalancing of power away from the Executive and unaccountable bodies towards Parliament and local government;*
- *the introduction of greater responsiveness and choice into the electoral and party systems; and*
- *allowing citizens a much more direct and focused say over political decisions and policies.*

These three imperatives stand or fall alongside each other. The implementation of only one or two of the three will not create the re-engagement with formal democracy which many people now want. Cherry-picking – a folly repeated time and time again by our political masters – will not work.”

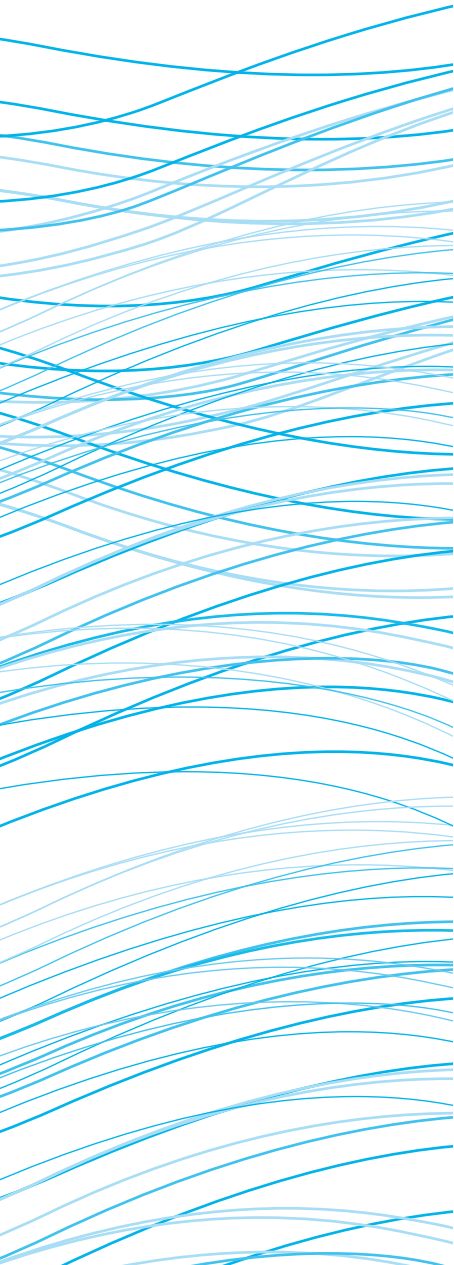
#### **vi Electoral education as an ill-suited policy response**

The Power Inquiry, *Power to the People: An Independent Inquiry into Britain’s Democracy*, p. 112

The Power Inquiry report also described electoral education as one of a raft of ‘typical’ and ‘self-interested’ electoral responses alongside alternative voting procedures (voting in shops, all-postal ballots), more consultation (forums, surveys and focus groups) and greater regulation and scrutiny (to restore public trust in the system). The inquiry found these typical responses to be problematic not in and of themselves but because they were ill suited to tackling the problem of disengagement:

“What has been particularly striking to the Commission has been the extent to which none of the above responses, whether to the rise of the post-industrial society or disengagement itself, have been fundamentally democratic in their inspiration. They are primarily technocratic or self-interested electoral responses. At best, one could say that citizenship education and tighter regulation of MPs and Councillors are useful addendums to a democratic system, but no-one in government seems

to have looked seriously at the principles, practices, or history of democracy as a possible source of answers to the worrying problem of disengagement. We believe it is vital that this is done. It is our view that going back to first principles is necessary because recent technocratic and electoral solutions seem particularly ill-suited to resolving the problem.”







**Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education**

Joint response by

Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, Queensland

NSW Commission for Children and Young People

Commissioner for Children, Tasmania