

## Young people's civic engagement

...there is a worrying trend of disengagement from our democratic processes particularly amongst younger Australians. The issues that interest them are often overshadowed by the rough and tumble of politics, however justified that may be in a robust democracy. If we cannot find ways to spark their interest and involvement, we risk the consequences of more young Australians simply turning away.<sup>1</sup>

- 2.1 Young Australians are, according to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), significantly under-enrolled and many commentators have interpreted this as an indication of young people's disinterest in conventional forms of democratic engagement. This chapter examines these trends amongst 17-25 year-olds in Australia.

### Defining civic engagement

- 2.2 Citizenship infers both rights and responsibilities. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship, for example, notes that as citizens, Australians are entitled, *inter alia*, to:
- stand for public office or nominate for election to Parliament;

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<sup>1</sup> Address by his Excellency, Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, on the occasion of his Australia Day Address, 26 January 2005.

- vote for Australia's parliamentary representatives;
- apply to enlist in the armed forces and for government jobs;
- live in Australia and apply for an Australian passport and leave and re-enter the country without a resident return visa; and
- seek consular assistance from Australia's diplomatic representatives while overseas.

2.3 In return, Australian citizens are required to:

- obey the laws and fulfil their duties as an Australian citizen;
- enrol on the Electoral Register and vote at Federal and State/Territory elections and referenda;
- serve on a jury, if called on; and
- defend Australia, should the need arise.<sup>2</sup>

## **Are young people apathetic and cynical?**

2.4 In evidence to the Committee, it was submitted that if young people are to be characterised as apathetic and cynical, it is essentially because:

- they see conventional forms of politics as unappealing, often due to the media's negative portrayal of politics and politicians;
- young people tend to perceive conventional politics and the democratic process as removed from them – that these processes do not directly effect their lives; and
- there is a sense that conventional forms of politics and democratic processes do not take heed of young people's voices.

## **Conventional forms of politics as 'unappealing'**

2.5 Whether it be because of the way politics is conceptualised and portrayed in society, the media or at school, many of today's young people appear to

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2 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, *Privileges and Responsibilities of Australian Citizenship*, available online at: <<http://www.citizenship.gov.au/becoming-a-citizen/why-should-i.htm>>. Accessed 24 January 2006.

consider politics unappealing and therefore tend not to want to be associated with it.<sup>3</sup>

- 2.6 Some students attributed young people's civic apathy to the fact that they considered the political system itself unappealing. A student from Melbourne High School explained:

I think you need to draw a distinction between cynicism and apathy. Cynicism generally denotes some form of informed decision making. I think that is a large issue with the youth today – that a lot of it is not to do with informed decision making; it is a general apathy towards a political system. So it is not that they are going to take the time to involve themselves enough in the process to make such decisions.<sup>4</sup>

- 2.7 Another student suggested that it was the party system in particular that contributed to young people's apathy:

It might be apathy due to the fact that in a country like Australia things are good, but also you have a two-party system where it is all about safe seats versus marginal seats. No matter what happens, the outcome is that it will be one of those two parties that gets elected. I live in a safe Liberal seat; I may not necessarily vote Liberal but, in that sense, my vote will not count. It is easy to convince me that my vote will not count in that sense because I think Goldstein returns some of the highest Liberal primaries in Australia. In that sense, with an adversarial system where there will be one of only two outcomes, I think it is easy to convince people who live in a safe seat not to care. That is probably indicative of one factor of young people's apathy.<sup>5</sup>

- 2.8 Mr Patrick McConville, of the United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania, submitted that 'the onus is really on the formal structure of civic involvement to make itself known and to make itself attractive to young people and indeed to the broader population.'<sup>6</sup>

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3 The advent of televised parliamentary proceedings (and, more particularly, of Question Time) has often been blamed for the low level of political distrust amongst citizens, see for example, Mutz, D.C. and B. Reeves, 2005, 'The new videomalaise: Effects of televised incivility on political trust', *American Political Science Review*, 99(1), pp. 1-15.

4 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, p. 16.

5 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, p. 16.

6 Mr Patrick McConville (United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania), *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 August 2006, p. 6.

- 2.9 The media's negative portrayal of politics was most frequently referred to as a major contributor to students' apathy.<sup>7</sup>

Too often young people are surrounded by negative presentations of political and civic figures and situations. Politics is offered to the public as problematic, limited, lacking in connections, dichotomised, confusing, superficial and media driven.

Characterised like this, it is hardly surprising that young people in particular are not expressing an interest.<sup>8</sup>

- 2.10 Students themselves are not blind to the machinations of the Canberra Press Gallery. At the Committee's school forum in Canberra, one student remarked:

I think the media sometimes blow things up just for the entertainment value. We watched question time yesterday and the way that they managed to pull out the big uproars and stuff. As far as I can see, that is one part of government, but having been here I can see that there is a lot more stuff that goes on that the media just ignores because it is not entertaining and with-it and fast action for the public to get interested in.<sup>9</sup>

### Conventional forms of politics as 'irrelevant'

- 2.11 Young people's apathy is possibly derived from a belief that the world of politics bears little or no effect on their lives. Politics, according to this theory, is about budgets, interest rates and housing prices, and these are issues that will only have an impact on young people in the future.<sup>10</sup> Students are also, by definition, primarily concerned with their studies, particularly in the more senior years of schooling.
- 2.12 When they become aware, however, of the significance of politics on their daily lives, it was evident that young people were more likely to take an interest.<sup>11</sup>
- 2.13 Teachers often submitted that while they did not consider students to be apathetic, it was important for teachers and other adults to draw an

7 See, for example, Mr Stephen Paul, *Transcript of Evidence*, 23 October 2006, p. 42.

8 The Students' Association of the University of Adelaide, *Submission no. 43*, pp. 4-5.

9 Canberra School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 October 2006, p. 3.

10 Research conducted by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme in 2004 found that only 21.2% of young people ranked the economy as 'very important'. See Manning, B. and R. Ryan, 'Youth and Citizenship', National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, March 2004, p. 43.

11 See for example, Adelaide School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 9; and Centralian Senior Secondary College, Alice Springs, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2006, p. 20.

explicit connection between politics and its relevance to young people's lives. Young people did not necessarily make the connection themselves.<sup>12</sup>

## Conventional forms of politics as 'exclusionary'

- 2.14 Apathy and cynicism also appear to spring from a sense of disconnection; a feeling that young people do not have an impact on the workings of government. The Australian Clearinghouse of Youth Studies 2002-03 report found that, of 800 young people aged 12-15 who were surveyed in 2003, only 13 per cent believed 'that governments were responsive to the views of young people.'<sup>13</sup>
- 2.15 The Youth Electoral Study's second report similarly noted that 'some students express disappointment at their perceived lack of success and older groups' perception that kids are "too young too understand."<sup>14</sup>
- 2.16 Some students, however, argued that civic engagement did not have to be driven by self-interest alone:

I think it is also very easy to categorise the fact that youth are not getting involved in political structures purely because they are not being interested by the political system. But I think a committee like this really should be addressing the problem of youth not being actively involved in the decisions being made by parliament. The issues around such decisions do not necessarily have to influence youth. It is a very individualistic view to say that youth will only be interested in issues that have a direct bearing on them. They should also be interested in military deployment... That issue involves the whole country and everyone in the country, regardless of their age, should be engaging themselves in it. I think that is the problem here.<sup>15</sup>

## Committee comment

- 2.17 There is a view that young people's 'apathy' and 'cynicism' are symptoms of wider concerns. While politics is seen by some as unappealing, young

12 See, for example, Ms Julie Parker, Sir Joseph Banks School (Sydney), *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 25; Dr Harry Phillips, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 44; Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment, *Submission no. 25*, p. 1.

13 Cited in Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 12*, p. 6.

14 Print, M., L. Saha and K. Edwards, 2005, *Youth Electoral Study 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, p. 14.

15 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, pp. 19-20.

people are involved in forms of activism and community engagement not traditionally understood as 'conventionally political'. Where an explicit connection is made between politics and the reality of young people's lives, political and electoral processes are seen as interesting. Moreover, when young people understand the way in which these processes work, they are more likely to participate.

2.18 Equally, it does not seem that young people are simply disinterested. As Dr Phillips noted, 'there is never an insufficient base of interested young people.'<sup>16</sup>

2.19 Nor is it the case that young people lack a sense of pride in their Australian heritage. In fact, the Australian national report of the international comparative study of 14 year-olds in 28 countries noted that four in five Australian students 'are very sure they do not want to live anywhere else, and believe Australia should be proud of what it has achieved.'<sup>17</sup> Mr Stephen Paul, Principal of John Paul College in Brisbane concurred:

I believe there is a degree of patriotism and a great degree of Australian pride, but they do not see that as necessarily a requirement to be knowledgeable about government, knowledgeable about civics and to undertake civic duty by voting responsibly and regularly.

...Young Australians today and young people in schools are very proud Australians, but they then do not make the extrapolation to say, 'I need to be conversant with what is happening in the political context.'<sup>18</sup>

2.20 If, as Print and Saha suggest, 'we need to find more meaningful ways to engage young people', then for many submitters, the key to this challenge lies in providing more information.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Dr Harry Phillips, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 44.

17 Mellor, S., K. Kennedy, and L. Greenwood, 2001, *Citizenship and Democracy: Students Knowledge and Beliefs, Australian Fourteen Year Olds and the IEA Civic Education Study*, p. 6.

18 Mr Stephen Paul, *Transcript of Evidence*, 23 October 2006, pp. 40-41.

19 Print, M., L. Saha and K. Edwards, 2004, *Youth Electoral Study 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission.

## Information sparks interest

2.21 When asked why they had not yet enrolled to vote, a number of students canvassed during the inquiry responded that they did not know they were entitled to vote, or that they did not know how to enrol to vote. Furthermore, some students did not feel that they had enough information at their disposal to make an informed decision. As one student explained:

I think having an interest in voting and so on really comes down to understanding. Personally, I do not know much about all the parties and everything, so I do not think I would be able to make a valuable and proper vote because I do not know enough about all of it... We are not educated enough about the different parties and about what they will do for us, so it really does come down to understanding whether we are interested in all the voting.<sup>20</sup>

2.22 One teacher expressed this as a 'fear' of engaging with the electoral process:

I am quite young myself and I think a lot of it has to do with apathy and a lot of it has to do with fear... Fear that they will make a wrong decision and, if that person gets in and then maybe does not stick with some of the things they have promised, perhaps they will feel responsible for that decision.<sup>21</sup>

2.23 In the first Youth Electoral Study, Print and Saha reported on students' 'preparedness to vote'. They found that:

- about one in two students feel they lack the knowledge to understand the issues, the political parties, to make a decision about voting and about voting in general;
- young people do not perceive themselves as generally well prepared to participate in voting; and
- generally, young people do not understand the voting system.<sup>22</sup>

2.24 While recognising this feeling of being unprepared, students who spoke with the Committee expressed a desire to learn more:

In your opinion, would you say that we need to spark interest? I believe that we do, because we just have no understanding and we

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20 Adelaide School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 9.

21 Ms Rebecca Brown (Heatley Secondary College), *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 October 2006, p. 20.

22 Print, M., L. Saha and K. Edwards, 2004, *Youth Electoral Study 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, pp. 11-12. See also Democratic Audit of Australia, *Submission no. 21*, p. 1.

do not know how any of it ties back to us. We need to basically be more informed so that we can have that understanding that the big things that go on in this very place [i.e. the Parliament] do actually affect our lives and the lives of the people around us.<sup>23</sup>

2.25 Information on voting and other forms of civic engagement comes from a variety of sources. In addition to school,<sup>24</sup> young people tend to learn about these things from three main sources:

- their parents;
- the media; and
- electoral commissions.

## Parents as a source of information

2.26 According to the Youth Electoral Study, parents are regarded as the most important source of information about voting.<sup>25</sup> Parents influence their children in two main ways: first, in some families, they provide a forum of political discussion in which clear and definite political views are conveyed, and second, parents facilitate their children's civic engagement by prompting electoral enrolment processes or other civic activities. Print and Saha note that there is a gender division of labour in the provision of this information: while fathers tend to talk more about politics, it is mothers who get forms signed and take them down to the post office.<sup>26</sup>

2.27 Students were keenly aware of the impact parents' views had on their civic engagement. One student, for example, suggested that if her parents voted a certain way, she would probably follow suit. A show of hands confirmed that this pattern would be reflected amongst most students in that classroom.<sup>27</sup>

2.28 For another student, however, this influence was not necessarily constructive:

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23 Canberra School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 October 2006, p. 18.

24 School education is the focus of the next chapter on 'Civic knowledge'.

25 Print, M., L. Saha and K. Edwards, 2004, *Youth Electoral Study 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission. See also Democratic Audit of Australia, *Submission no. 21*, p. 2.

26 Print, M., L. Saha and K. Edwards, 2006, *Youth Electoral Study 3: Youth, the Family, and Learning about Politics and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission. See also Mr Warwick Gately (Western Australian Electoral Commissioner), *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 8.

27 Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College, Alice Springs, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2006, p. 10.



A lot of people are sheltered by their families and their opinions and who they vote for – Liberal, Labor or whatever it is. It gets to the stage where it is what your parents believe and how it affects them. It is like: 'Mum and Dad vote for them; I don't really care, so I'll just vote for them.' You say, 'You can make a difference.' But, if it gets to the stage where no-one cares and they are just doing it because they have to and their parents are telling them to do it, I do not see how that makes a difference. It is not having your own opinion about it and being strong about it. I think parents influence it a lot.<sup>28</sup>

## The media as a source of information

2.29 During its school visits, the Committee often took a straw poll of students' preferences for where they got their information from.<sup>29</sup> While the responses varied between television, radio and newspapers, it was clear that students today are media savvy – even those in primary school. As Mr Poynter noted about his Year 6 class:

Not only [are] they aware of things that are happening locally and in the state, but they are certainly very aware of stories that are happening around the world as well.<sup>30</sup>

2.30 The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Report on civic engagement noted that for 80 per cent of Australian students, television news is the preferred source of information, though about two-thirds of them also read about what is happening nationally and internationally in the newspapers, and 62 per cent of them also listen to the news on the radio.<sup>31</sup>

2.31 During school visits and forums, the students expressed some concern that information provided by media outlets was not always well targeted. For example, one student felt that:

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28 Adelaide School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 8.

29 See for example, Centralian Senior School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2006, p. 21; Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2006, p. 10; Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006; Adelaide School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 10; and Heatley Secondary College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 October 2006, p. 6.

30 Mr Tony Poynter (Rosetta Primary School), *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 August 2006, p. 45.

31 Mellor, S., K. Kennedy, and L. Greenwood, 2001, *Citizenship and Democracy: Students Knowledge and Beliefs, Australian Fourteen Year Olds and the IEA Civic Education Study*, p. 4.

...more information should be available. Ad campaigns are always being run about everything except enrolling to vote. I think the main target audience watch the TV and listen to the radio and it would probably be really effective if you had some sort of campaign available for them.<sup>32</sup>

2.32 Legal Studies students from Centralian College noted that while they were more inclined to read newspapers, their friends in other classes were more likely to obtain information from current affairs programmes which screen immediately prior to, or following, popular soaps. It was therefore suggested that civics information would perhaps be more accessible if presented through these programmes or through targeted advertising during TV shows popular amongst young people.<sup>33</sup>

2.33 A student from Melbourne High School referred to an initiative of *The Age* newspaper whereby students can subscribe to receive a newspaper every Monday to Friday for \$10 a year.<sup>34</sup> In fact, 73 per cent of Victorian primary schools and 88 per cent of Victorian secondary schools take up *The Age's* initiative.<sup>35</sup>

2.34 A second concern was with the factual content and level of objectivity evident in media sources. The students of Heatley Secondary College, particularly, were quite critical:

With the media, each show's biased towards one party most of the time.

...I think it is more that the media is based on false representations of parliament and politics and everything that is going on at the moment.

...We do see what is going on, but we feel that there is no truth to it.<sup>36</sup>

2.35 In addition to these more traditional forms of media, however, the Internet has come to play a critical role in the dissemination of information for young people. Students today are able to Google any topic, anywhere, anytime. Personal web logs (or blogs) have become a new source of

32 Adelaide School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 September 2006, p. 5.

33 Centralian Senior School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 28 July 2006, p. 22.

34 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, p. 22. It appears that this sort of subscription service is also offered by a number of newspapers around the country, although the number of schools taking up these offers is unknown.

35 Personal communication, Youth Marketing section, *The Age*, 30 January 2007.

36 Heatley Secondary College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 October 2006, p. 5.

information, or more precisely, a source of other people's views on global events and issues. As one student noted:

When I look at blogs, I am actively looking out for different viewpoints on the subject. So I will go to global security and then to global issues, the left- versus right-wing ideas on different issues. That is what I would actively be doing. I would be consciously trying to find different viewpoints.<sup>37</sup>

- 2.36 Students submitted that blogs are also an alternative to the 'dry' newspaper based media:

When you are finding information, you find that a lot of the stuff that is written is really dry. Unless you are really interested in a particular topic, it is boring. Reading and getting interested in matters is hard. You have to have your interest engaged in some way...<sup>38</sup>

- 2.37 As with more traditional media, students are aware that information found on the Internet needs to be understood within particular contexts:

Personally, I think you have to be careful about any information you get on the internet, whether it is political information or for a school project. You have to approach it with the mindset, 'Right, I am reading this blog; obviously it will not be correct.' Obviously it will not be totally objective, otherwise the person would not be writing it. You have to read it more out of interest or maybe to gain some new insight, but you cannot read it saying, 'Hey, this is the whole story; this guy is showing both sides of the issue.'<sup>39</sup>

...you will find that most young people are not the passive consumers of the media that people would make us out to be. They critically consume information. They do not always take it as factual. Young people do not just absorb what is given to them at face value. They need to be given a lot more credit for how they pick and choose what they consume in the media.<sup>40</sup>

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37 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, p. 21.

38 Canberra School Forum, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 October 2006, p. 19.

39 Melbourne High School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 22 August 2006, p. 20.

40 Ms Amber Sierek, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 43. See also Ms Daniela Giorgi, *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 September 2006, p. 12; and the Australian College of Educators, *Submission no. 10*, p. 2.

## Electoral commissions as a source of information

2.38 Electoral commissions have, as one of their key functions, the role of promoting electoral awareness in the community. The success of electoral commissions in reaching their audiences, however, depends very much on the methods of communication used. As the United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania indicated:

The AEC has a vital role in providing electoral education. Young people are generally unaware about their ability to enrol at age seventeen. It is also an effort for young people to enrol, as they are generally not provided with enrolment forms without asking for them. Active engagement is required rather than passively waiting for young people to express an interest.<sup>41</sup>

2.39 Since 2003, the AEC has considered its younger target audience ‘a priority’, and in conjunction with its state and territory counterparts, has worked to improve levels of electoral awareness and enrolment amongst young people.

2.40 During the inquiry, it was evident that different approaches were used across the states and territories. In some states, birthday cards were sent to young people when they turned 17, inviting them to enrol provisionally.<sup>42</sup>

2.41 Other states used a ‘bounty system’ whereby students are offered an amount of money (e.g. \$2.50) for a completed enrolment form.<sup>43</sup>

2.42 The Victorian Electoral Commission advised that it also sent invitations to enrol to students applying to tertiary education institutions, to new drivers licence holders, to those applying for a Proof of Age card, to new tenants, and those who notify utility companies of a change of address.<sup>44</sup>

2.43 Much of this activity depends on data-matching activities between electoral commissions and a range of other government agencies. In some states, the degree to which electoral commissions engage in these data-matching activities and actively seek young people’s enrolment falls short. The Democratic Audit of Australia, for example, was concerned that:

The Electoral Council of Australia’s Continuous Roll Update Report 2004-2005 noted that NSW and NT were the only

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41 United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania, *Submission no. 44*, p. 2.

42 See for example, Victorian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 36*, p. 11, and Western Australian Electoral Commission, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 September 2006, p. 3.

43 Elections ACT, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 August 2006, p. 29. This system is also used in Tasmania.

44 Victorian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 36*, p. 11.

jurisdictions where there had been no specific school enrolment programmes undertaken to get young people enrolled. In the other jurisdictions, these programmes capture up to 20 per cent of the eligible 18 year-olds.<sup>45</sup>

- 2.44 Students in New South Wales confirmed that they did not receive birthday cards. While not universal across the state, one Sydney-based teacher noted that at their school:

Just before federal and state elections, the local enrolling officer comes to the school to speak with Year 11s and 12s and they are all given forms and have the opportunity to enrol. The local enrolling officer from Banks, which is our local area, comes out a few months before elections to give that information out to students, just in case some do turn 18 at the time. It also gives the chance for a whole group to be enrolled. He will come to the school to do that just before the next state or federal election.<sup>46</sup>

- 2.45 In New South Wales and South Australia, privacy concerns were often cited as a principal reason for the lack of shared information between government agencies and electoral commissions.<sup>47</sup>

- 2.46 However, in evidence to the Committee at its final public hearing in Canberra, the AEC stated:

We have been working with each of the state electoral commissions to bring on [the birthday card] program next year. We have locked in just about every state now to do that, including South Australia, where there had been some initial difficulty; that now seems to have been rolled out.<sup>48</sup>

- 2.47 The birthday card rollout forms part of the AEC's comprehensive communications strategy in the lead up to the next federal election. As part of this strategy, the AEC will also:

- in conjunction with the ABC's youth radio network, triple j, promote enrolment at national events such as the Big Day Out and through the Rock Enrol website <[www.rockenrol.com.au](http://www.rockenrol.com.au)>; and

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45 Democratic Audit of Australia, *Submission no. 104*, p. 1.

46 Ms Sarah Hawke (Sir Joseph Banks High School), *Transcript of Evidence*, 29 September 2006, p. 4.

47 See for example, Ms Daniela Giorgi, *Transcript of Evidence*, 13 October 2006, p. 8.

48 Ms Gail Urbanski (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 3.

- write to the principals of every secondary school, advising of a national 'enrol to vote' week, in which coordinators in each school will develop a range of promotional activities for that week.<sup>49</sup>

## Committee comment

- 2.48 If the students canvassed in the course of this inquiry are typical of their generation, then it seems that for young people today, not only are they media savvy, but civic engagement for them is not simply a matter of blindly following their parents' footsteps. Nor do young people digest news and current affairs uncritically.
- 2.49 However, many of these young people do not actively seek information on electoral enrolment. In this respect, electoral commissions are faced with the difficult challenge of engaging them 'on their field'.

## Communicating with a generation of 'digital natives'

- 2.50 A common view put to the Committee was that the communication methods used to reach young people needed to be updated, for, as Mr Stephen Paul noted, this is a generation of 'digital natives'.<sup>50</sup> Young people, he stressed, communicate digitally. Other submitters agreed:

I am making a tentative statement at this stage that I think there are certain characteristics out of this new group... this is a group that has grown up entirely in a very strong technological age. These are people who are wired. These are people who are on the move. These are people who want instant responses to things, because they can get it through technology.<sup>51</sup>

- 2.51 This digital reliance has an impact on the way in which young people expect to receive information and engage with their communities.

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49 Ms Gail Urbanski (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 3.

50 Mr Stephen Paul, *Transcript of Evidence*, 23 October p. 41; see also, Dr Print and Dr Saha, *Transcript of Evidence*, 7 August 2006; Dr Lucas Walsh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 August 2006; and United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania, *Transcript of Evidence*, 31 August 2006.

51 A/Prof Murray Print (Youth Electoral Study), *Transcript of Evidence*, 7 August 2006, p. 58.

## Civic engagement

- 2.52 A significant body of research has investigated the public's changing interactions with Parliament, parliamentarians and political parties in light of information communication technologies (ICTs).<sup>52</sup> A common underlying assumption has been that young people could be better 'captured' if these bodies became more 'digitally accessible'.<sup>53</sup>
- 2.53 The Bristol City Council (2006) report, *Democracy, what does that mean?*, commissioned as part of a United Kingdom Local E-Democracy National Project, found mixed results about young people's digital engagement. While e-democracy is seen as being less intimidating for many young people, and they are very comfortable with text messaging as a medium, many would question whether or not they would really want to engage in text messaging as a means of participation in democracy. Text messaging would only be appropriate for 'one-off' contact, and/or for the council to send them information.
- 2.54 In his evidence to the Committee, Dr Lucas Walsh also confirmed that research into digital democracy has, to date, produced mixed results. He agreed that while SMS usage has risen 'exponentially', it had not yet resulted in increased democratic participation.<sup>54</sup> However, Dr Lucas suggested that:

As the technology becomes more integrated – that is, the way we use this technology becomes more seamless, moving from newspaper to web page to SMS – [from blog to email] – I think the possibilities there will... increase significantly.<sup>55</sup>

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52 See, for example, Lusoli, W., S. Ward and R. Gibson, 2006, '(Re)connecting Politics: Parliament, the Public and the Internet', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59(1):24-42; Åström, J., 2001, *Digital Democracy: Ideas, Intentions and Initiatives in Swedish Local Government*, Paper presented to the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Grenoble; Campbell, A., A. Harrop and B. Thompson, 1999, 'Towards the virtual parliament – what computers can do for MPs', *Parliamentary Affairs* 52(3): 388-403; Coleman, S., 2001, *Democracy Online: What do we want from MPs' websites?*, Hansard Society; Hoff, J., 2004, 'The democratic potentials of information technology: attitudes of European MPs towards new technology', *Information Polity*, 9:55-66; Kerber, M.R., and J. D. Bloom, 2005, 'Blog for America and civic involvement', *Press/Politics* 10(4):3-27; Pedersen, K., 2006, 'Danish Party Members: Plugged or Unplugged?', *Representation*, 42(3):223-33, p. 230.

53 See, for example, Iyengar, S. and S. Jackman, 2004, 'Technology and Politics: Incentives for Youth Participation', The Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Working Paper 24; and Pammett, J. H. and L. LeDuc, 2003, 'Chapter 9: Youth and Education' and 'Chapter 10: The Internet' in *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters*, Elections Canada, pp. 50-59

54 Dr Lucas Walsh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 August 2006, p. 42.

55 Dr Lucas Walsh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 21 August 2006, p. 42.

- 2.55 Blogging itself has become a form of political activism, and the digestion of other bloggers' views has become a form of political dialogue. The Australian Children's Television Foundation referred to blogs and podcasts as the first stage of children's production and creation of their own media. The Foundation notes that:
- Digital technology and simple software applications are increasingly giving children the capacity to create sophisticated, broadcast quality content.<sup>56</sup>
- 2.56 Given the capacity of young people to broadcast their own ideas and views on a wide range of issues, the submission from the Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmanian children's commissioners recommended that policy makers take into account young people's preferred media when developing strategies to enhance their civic engagement, (e.g. campaigning through, and supporting, NGOs, personal internet blogs).<sup>57</sup>
- 2.57 Political parties also have a role to play in encouraging the involvement of young adults. Rebecca Huntley has argued that the political parties 'must become more open, flexible and democratic if they are to recruit younger members.'<sup>58</sup>
- 2.58 Daniel Shea and John Green recently summarised the 'best practices' of political parties with regard to mobilising young voters, including strong leadership, targeting youth in their media, giving volunteers meaningful work, using peer-to-peer programmes and rewarding achievement.<sup>59</sup> Shea has argued elsewhere that:
- local parties will have to develop novel outreach programmes and expand their social activities. Simply put, they have to get hip. A sharper focus on Internet-based communications will likely bring

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56 Australian Children's Television Foundation, *Submission no. 82*, p. 2.

57 Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Queensland, New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, Commissioner for Children, Tasmania, *Submission no. 74*, p. 5.

58 Huntley, R., 2006, 'Politics a turnoff for Generation Y', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2006.

59 Shea, D. and J. Green, 2006, *The Fountain of Youth: Political Parties and the Mobilization of Young Americans*, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, University of Maryland. Available online at: [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/Fountain%20Youth\\_CPP.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/Fountain%20Youth_CPP.pdf). Accessed 23 January, 2007.



more young citizens into party politics and the electoral system as well.<sup>60</sup>

- 2.59 In Denmark, political parties have introduced new ICTs to facilitate only party activities. A recent study has found that while limited, ICTs have made some difference in increasing the participation of young (particularly male) members.<sup>61</sup>

## Committee's conclusions and recommendations

- 2.60 Disconnection with politics appears to have the greatest impact on enrolment levels. More must be done to improve young people's interest in the political process.
- 2.61 The Committee remains concerned that the AEC has, to date, been unable to access students' contact details from education authorities, including boards of secondary school studies, for the purposes of inviting students to enrol to vote. While the AEC indicated to the Committee at its final public hearing that it had 'locked in just about every state',<sup>62</sup> the Committee will require a progress report. The Committee therefore recommends that the AEC report back to the Committee on the success of its birthday card roll out.

### Recommendation 1

- 2.62 **The Committee recommends that in the lead up to the expected 2007 federal election, the Australian Electoral Commission should keep a detailed record of the number of electoral commission birthday cards sent to Australian secondary students and report on the success of this rollout in its submission to the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of that election.**

60 Shea, D., 2004, 'Throwing a better party: Local mobilizing institutions and the youth vote', CIRCLE Working Paper 13, Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, p. 2.

61 Pedersen, K., 2006, 'Danish Party Members: Plugged or Unplugged?', *Representation*, 42(3):223-33, p. 230

62 Ms Gail Urbanski (Australia Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 4 December 2006, p. 3.

- 2.63 The Committee is aware, however, that education authorities also have a role to play in ensuring the AEC has appropriate information and therefore recommends that the Australian Government, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, ensures the cooperation of state and territory education authorities.

## **Recommendation 2**

- 2.64 **The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, encourages the cooperation of state and territory education authorities, including boards of secondary school studies, in providing the Australian Electoral Commission with appropriate data for the purposes of electoral enrolment.**
- 2.65 The exponential rise of information communication technologies, particularly in the form of the Internet, email and SMS, creates an expectation amongst young people that they can be reached instantaneously and that they, in turn, can access vast amounts of information instantaneously.
- 2.66 There may be, therefore, significant potential to involve young people through this media, rather than through paper-based methods used in the past.
- 2.67 The Committee is of the view, therefore, that in addition to birthday cards, the AEC, in collaboration with secondary school and tertiary education institutions, should try to reach young people in a more 'digitally-friendly' format.

## **Recommendation 3**

- 2.68 **The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission determine the feasibility and costing of the following initiatives, and implement these initiatives where possible:**
- **emailing all Year 12 students an electoral enrolment form at a school email address;**

- **sending out enrolment forms with tertiary institution (including university and TAFE college) application forms; and**
- **establishing an SMS service by which young people can ask the AEC for an enrolment form.**

- 2.69 The Committee notes that some submissions called for lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, and that this is being considered in a number of jurisdictions overseas. The Committee, however, is not convinced that this will achieve the desired effect.
- 2.70 Civic engagement, of course, does not only concern electoral enrolment. The Committee accepts the role of both Members of Parliament and political parties in encouraging young people to become active citizens.
- 2.71 The Committee therefore encourages all Members of Parliament to create interactive personal websites to facilitate young people's access to Parliament.
- 2.72 The Committee further encourages all political parties to create distinct and engaging youth sections on their websites which will actively seek the involvement of young people and an exchange of views. Internships and opportunities to volunteer for the party should be prominently displayed. In this way, parties can also make an explicit link between politics and its relevance to young people.

