



Submission

To

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry Into Civics and Electoral Education

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Young People's Participation In Civic Society

Much has been made of the supposedly apathetic nature of Australia's youth, and NUS is constantly quizzed about why young people are not interested in electoral politics. We often cite the lack of extensive and analytical civic education in schools as a cause. Too many young people are not taught to contribute to politics, they are not given the impression that their opinions matter, and many are not even enrolled to vote because they are so disengaged, Civic education should aim to inform students of the myriad of ways they can contribute to our political process, and provide them with opportunities to do so.

Australia's youth have a similar pattern of political engagement as in many other Western countries in recent times. Firstly there is a significant level of disenfranchisement from formal electoral processes compared to other demographic groups – the AEC estimates that only 80% of eligible young voters between 18-25 are on the electoral roll, This missing 20% amounts to 300,000 voters – the equivalent of about 3 federal seats. Of even greater concern was the finding in the AEC-commissioned *Youth Electoral Study* that the majority of secondary students (50.2%) said that they would not vote in a federal election if voting became non-compulsory.¹

The flip-side is that this should not be equated with apathy towards politics more broadly defined to include issues and social movements. The *Youth Electoral Study* showed that 55% of secondary students had signed a petition, that 46% would be prepared to take part in a demonstration (15% already had), 21% had been involved in collecting signatures for petition, and 10% had contacted or written to a politician. Many will continue this pattern of active political participation when they go to university. A comparison with data from 1987 shows a slight drop in the level of political activity, but not enough to justify the claims of generational apathy toward politics.

NUS believes that one of the core reasons behind this apparent contradiction is because governments and the major opposition parties do not give enough priority to the issues that most young people are interested in. For example education was ranked as very important by 61.8% of young people but the economy was ranked as very important by only 21.2% of young people.² Another factor is that young people don't believe that their participation in formal political processes will make a real difference. The *Youth and Citizenship Report* confirms that these perceptions are widespread amongst young people:

“The survey also asked respondents to what extent they thought that governments are responsive to the views of young people, whether society values the views of young people, and whether young people really want to be actively involved in decision making

¹ Youth Electoral Study (Saha L, Print M, Edwards K), *Youth Political Engagement and Voting, Research Report No. 2*, 2005 (on AEC website)

² National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, *Youth and Citizenship*, NYARS, Manning B and Ryan R, March 2004, pg. 43

processes. Overwhelmingly the respondents felt that young people did want to be involved, but that society in general, and governments particularly, were not responsive to young people."³

One way to break this down is through education. A good example is this parliamentary inquiry. Any individual can contribute to this process, and use it as an opportunity to put their opinions forward. In particular NUS would venture that the Parliament would value young people's thoughts on this topic, yet how many individual young people have made submissions? The answer is likely to be very few, and this is indicative of the problem. Most young people probably don't even know that they have the opportunity to submit their opinions to our representatives in this manner. Civic education should aim to inform young people about these options open to them, and make them feel like if they have something to say about Australian politics then there are ways that they can do so.

Need to Educate Young People About The Proposed Impact of Voter Registration Changes

NUS is concerned about the impact of one aspect of the *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures Bill) 2005* that was passed by the House of Representatives in May this year. The clause in the bill that closes the electoral roll to new enrollees on the day the writs are issued has the potential to disenfranchise many young voters.

In the seven days after the writ was issued for the 2004 election 78,000 persons enrolled for the first time and 345,000 updated their details; after the seven day period, a further 150 000 tried to enrol. Under the proposed law all of the 78,000 will be excluded from voting, as will an indeterminate percentage of the 345,000, while the large number attempting to enrol late suggests that the period of grace should be extended not shortened. 54,000 out of the 78,000 new enrollees (69%) were aged 20 or younger.

The Special Minister for State, Gary Nairn, has argued that this is merely returning to the pre-1984 situation.⁴ However, ANU Politics Professor Marian Sawyer⁵ countered with:

Gary Nairn has also argued that for the first 83 years of federal elections the rolls closed on the day the writs were issued. This is indeed true, but overlooks the convention that for there to be about a week between the calling of the election and the issuing of writs – providing plenty of time for voters to get on the roll or update their details. That convention was broken by Malcolm Fraser in 1983. Today the writs are usually issued

³ National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, *Youth and Citizenship*, NYARS, Manning B and Ryan R, March 2004, pg. 48

⁴ For example see *Hansard*, House of Representatives, May 10

⁵ Sawyer, M, "Damaging Democracy ? Early Closure of Electoral Rolls", *Democratic Audit of Australia*, March 2006, www.democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/papers/20060308_sawer_dam_dem.pdf

until a day after the calling of an election. That is why, in the absence of fixed terms, it so important for there to be statutory provision of a week for eligible voters to get onto the rolls, whether that week is between the calling of an election and issuing of writs, or after the issuing of writs.

This inquiry is about the civics education and not the electoral amendment bill. The point that NUS wants to make here is that if this Bill is eventually passed by the Senate that extra efforts need to be taken through civic education programs so that young people do not wait until an election is called to get on the electoral roll. Also we should put on record here the efforts of many student organisations who have run enrol to vote campaigns on campuses to complement the efforts of the AEC and those running civic education programs towards this goal.

Impact on voluntary student unionism on civic education

The *Youth and Citizenship* survey found that in terms of perceptions of political power that more young people (77.9%) felt that they were affected 'a great deal' by decisions made by education institutions than any other institution. This contrasted with 68.2% for family, 46.8% for the federal government and 5.4% for religious groups. The survey also asked which methods of political participation they had participated in and which were seen to be effective. The top three forms of participation the respondents had participated in were petitions (74.2%), community groups (72.1%) and student representative bodies (69.4%). Student representative bodies were ranked as the most effective form of youth participation. 71.5% of respondents rated them as 'effective' or very 'effective'. The next closest were 'youth rep panels/organisations' (70.1%) and 'voting in elections' (67.7%). By contrast only 25.5% believed that 'writing to politicians' was very effective/effective.

Students can also learn through the process of disagreeing with some of the activities that a current leadership team of a student organisation are supporting. They learn that they can get a petition together to call a general student meeting or referendum to change a policy or form a ticket to run in elections on an alternative platform or that there ways to remove a particularly bad leadership team. Students can get involved in a more on-going way through getting involved in running a club or an action group, or learning how to run the student newspaper or radio station or the faculty society's magazine. University student organisations are an example of an institutions which allow citizens to engage in the debate and activities of direct relevance to them - look at the number of arts community, politicians, journalists, community leaders and sports people who gained their initial experience in student organisations. In short they traditionally have played a major role in introducing young people to the practical aspects of civic participation.

The impact of the recent voluntary student unionism legislation (*Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Union Fees) Act 2005*) is uneven, depending on the financial capacity and willingness of universities to make up funding shortfalls. However, it is clear that on the campuses most seriously affected by

VSU, the opportunities for practical civic education participation and development, will be severely diminished.

Civic Education

NUS believes that civic education should not be an opportunity for nationalistic parochialism, but an opportunity to engage young people in the Australian political process as active and informed participants. They should emerge knowledgeable about Australian and our democratic history, understanding our electoral system and how to take part, and feeling that they are worthy participants in the policy dialogue and debate that happens in our community.

Active civil education programs should be more than just learning about the constitution and institutions of parliament. They need to connect with the practical activities that many young people are already involved in, or prepared to get involved with. The curriculum around the *Discovering Democracy* programme contains positive steps towards an active civic education, although a: “review of the project found that its level of implementation varies considerably, and often depends upon the level of interest on the part of individual teachers.”⁶

The *Youth Electoral Study* also found that active involvement by young people in political activity would lead to a beneficial impact on their inclination to vote:

In conclusion, this report has established, in a preliminary manner, that a wide range of political activities experienced in schools or during adolescent years in community organizations, can have beneficial effects on attitudes towards, and intentions to engage in adult political behaviour, such as voting. Therefore the experiences of young adults in secondary school are crucial determinants, as we see it, to the kind of politically aware and active citizens they become as mature adults.

There is widespread support amongst young people for active and participatory civic education programs becoming more widespread. The Youth and Citizenship report found in its survey of 13-25 year olds that:

“The third most common response to the survey question on what the respondents thought would be helpful to support young people to be meaningfully involved in society, was for programs that encourage youth participation in government and in schools to be more widespread and more genuinely participatory.”⁷

Unfortunately civic education is only a compulsory part of the secondary school education in NSW. NUS would be *in principle* supportive of moves by the Commonwealth to work with State Governments to ensure that active and participatory

⁶ National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, *Youth and Citizenship*, NYARS, Manning B and Ryan R, March 2004, pg. 34

⁷ National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, *Youth and Citizenship*, NYARS, Manning B and Ryan R, March 2004, pg. 93

civic education programs become a compulsory component of all state and territory secondary school curricula. Commonwealth and State Governments also need to collaborate to ensure that such programs are properly resourced across the spectrum of our secondary schools to ensure that all our future citizens are provided with the civic education necessary for them to play a democratic role in shaping Australia's future.