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Voices & Votes: An Inquiry into Young People Engaging in Democracy in Queensland

**A Submission by the
Youth Affairs Network of Queensland**

November 2005

Voices & Votes

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About YANQ

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland. YANQ represents young people and youth organisations across the State of Queensland. YANQ advocates on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. The interests and well being of young people across the state are promoted by YANQ in the following ways:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

Introduction

YANQ welcomes the opportunity to give the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee advice on strategies that could be used to encourage more young people to participate in our system of Democracy in Queensland.

The views expressed in this submission have been formed during many years of experience among YANQ and its members advocating to Government for policy and legislative changes in the interests of young people. Our position is that:

- For as long as Australia remains a largely unequal society with significant numbers living close to or below the poverty line, democracy is seriously weakened.
- Civics education is important for young people, but needs to be underpinned by providing many opportunities for young people from an early age to participate in decisions that affect their lives.
- Young people from 16 years of age upwards should have the (voluntary) right to vote.
- Our democratic institutions need reforming to address sources of mistrust among the public. In particular:
 - private donations to political parties require further regulation;
 - Queensland needs to introduce a system of proportional representation within the Legislative Assembly.

Inequality and Democracy

An almost fundamental condition for democracy is a relatively equal citizenry. Aristotle, for instance argued that a good society would be characterised by a democratic State run for and by a free and equal citizenry. He also argued that in addition to being democratic, the State must also provide "lasting prosperity to the poor by distribution of public revenues". His point being that

relative equality of outcome was vital for democracy, as the persistent existence of an underclass would threaten the stability of society.

During the past several years in Australia there has been growing concern among many that, despite a sustained period of economic growth (as measured by Gross Domestic Product³), Australia is a more unequal society with too many people living below the poverty line. For instance

- Roughly 13% of Australians generally, and 15% of children, live below the poverty line⁴
- Only 1 out of every 10 jobs created in Australia over the past 10 years pays (annually) more than \$26,000⁴ (compared to today's average wage of roughly \$53,00⁵ per annum)
- 850,000 children live in houses where no adult has a paid job⁶.
- Between 1975 and 1998, the bottom 10 percent of workers income (as a percentage of the median income) fell from 76% to 65.5% for men, and from 80.2% to 71.8% for women. For the top 10 percent of earners, their incomes as a percentage of the median increased from 141.1% to 162.6% for men, and 136.5% to 150.4% for women⁷ (these figures cover just full-time non managerial workers).
- Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys between 1994-95 and 2002-03 suggest there may have been a small increase in inequality of disposable incomes⁸, meaning that there has been no recent improvement in the overall levels of inequality in Australia that worsened during the period between the 1970 and 1995.
- Those living in poverty are concentrated in regional and outer urban areas⁹
- The average remuneration of executives is now 74 times more than average weekly earnings, up from 22 times average weekly earnings in 1994¹⁰.
- In 2004, 8% of young people were unemployed or not in the labour force.¹¹
- Students between 16 and 24 years of age receiving the Youth Allowance have an income that is 33 percent below the poverty line¹².
- 53,800 children (under 18) accompanied their guardian to a homeless service in 2002-2003 and each day during 2002/2003, 200 children and their families were turned away from the homeless service system¹³.

Living in poverty is associated with poor access to education and low education outcomes¹⁴. It also means experiencing higher levels of poor health^{15,16} and stress. Hardly the preconditions for active citizenship.

Seriously addressing poverty and inequality, in Australia and Queensland would make it much easier for many young people to participate in our Democracy. For instance, many of the young people that YANQ's members work with are receiving below poverty-line social security payments. Many are also attempting to live independently from parents because of conflict within the family, and thus do not receive support (in cash or in kind) from parents. For these young people, maintaining stable accommodation (which is required in order to vote) is an ongoing struggle. Suggesting ways of making it easier to register to vote misses the point entirely. Lifting social security payments to (at least) the level of the poverty line would help these young people to secure stable accommodation, and thus make it easier to register to vote. Therefore, as a bare minimum, YANQ recommends:

- lifting all social security payments to, at least, the level of the Henderson Poverty line (at the time of writing, this was \$318.92/week for a single person with housing costs¹⁷)
- increasing the stock of public housing to match current levels of demand.

Democratising Young People's Institutions

The reality is that in 2005 the majority of young people are relegated to the spectator stands in both small and large decisions that affect their lives. This might include the activities of their local youth service, planning for their public spaces, processes within their schools or the development of government policy. The cumulative effect of this is to limit young people's development of a culture of engagement. This experience is amplified for culturally and linguistically diverse young people, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and for those marginalised by poverty or other barriers.

A culture of youth engagement is developed where young people are able to participate in systems that they are members of. This includes non government organisations, local council initiatives, schools and other State and Federal government bodies. Schools are a fantastic place to start, not by merely teaching citizenship, but also by providing real opportunities for young people to make informed decisions regarding their education.

Unfortunately, for many young people schools do not provide real opportunities for young people to 'have a say', let alone make crucial decisions about what they learn at school. There is no reason however why this needs to be the case. A small number of democratic schools do exist in Australia and overseas that encourage and support students to make decisions about what and how they will learn. There are a number of schools that operate on this model, including:

- Currumbena Primary and Preschool (NSW): <http://www.currumbena.nsw.edu.au/>
- Kirra School (NSW): <http://www.kirra.nsw.edu.au/index.html>
- Pine Valley School (QLD): <http://www.uq.net.au/~zeps/home.html>
- The Boorobin Sudbury Democratic Centre of Learning (QLD): <http://www.boorobin.com>

Engaging young people, in schools or elsewhere, calls for a range of opportunities including outreach, culturally appropriate and interest based activities. Young people are less likely to engage in formal decision making processes where they haven't previously had the opportunity to participate informally. Informal strategies provide a relatively safe environment for young people to take some initial steps in active participation. Informal strategies could include surveys, facilitated group discussion or sports, cultural and arts based projects. Furthermore, young people are more likely to become actively involved in decision making in areas that they have a real interest.

YANQ's members have provided a number of examples of how this can work. Here are two:

1. Many community based youth engagement projects provide for levels of participation. The 'Wired Up' project in Logan City involved a number of strategies allowing for diverse interests and/or capacities to participate. A core group of young people were able to participate in fortnightly meetings. They identified topics and survey questions. A larger group of young people were then able to participate at another level, simply responding to surveys and participating in informal discussions using those tools developed by the core group. In this way a large number of young people were able to identify experiences, concerns and ideas regarding their communities.
2. Logan Youth Events provides an example of strength based youth engagement work. Young people from diverse backgrounds are involved in weekly meetings, planning music events and festivals. Their interest in music and festival culture provides a natural opportunity for hands on experience in active citizenship. A 'peer based' working group provides further safety for participants to engage. They make and act on decisions with consideration for their needs and

expectations and those of the broader community.

When YANQ asked its members for their advice on this submission, a number expressed the view that civics education in schools was vitally important and expressed concern at the perceived lack of civics education in schools. While there can be some debate over whether schools should focus more or less on civics education, it is clear that it does form a part of the curriculum, and at the very least most students in Queensland would be exposed to the ideas behind our system of democracy. However without an array of genuine opportunities to practice some of the principles of democracy in their own lives (rather than act as spectators or 'play' actors), is it any wonder that some young people leave school without much knowledge or interest in how our formal democratic systems work.

The general oppression of young people in Queensland Communities needs to be addressed if we are to see young people develop a culture of formal engagement in democracy. The responsibility for this is shared by Local, State and Federal Governments and non-government organisations that young people are involved in. There is a role for all of us to provide the diversity of young people with real opportunities for self determination.

Supporting Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Young People

According to the 2001 census, 17.1% of Queenslanders were born overseas. For those that have arrived recently, they face a number of obstacles to becoming active citizens. Not being able to speak English or not understand the 'Australian' way of doing things can make it difficult to understand how our democracy works and to participate in it.

One way of overcoming this is by supporting non-government organisations that can provide information about Queensland's democracy in ways that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds can understand. For example, prior to the last Federal Election, the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland conducted information seminars for people from CALD backgrounds that explained the processes of voting and voter registration as well as the policies of the major parties. Should they wish to, groups and organisations for people from CALD backgrounds could, with the support of Local, State and Federal Governments organise similar seminars in the lead up to future elections.

Lower the Voting Age

Despite being treated as adults in other important areas, sixteen and seventeen year olds in Queensland have no political say.

In a society like ours, voting in elections is the major way most people take part in the political process. There are other methods, of course. They can take grassroots action without waiting for Governments to do anything. Some would say this is a more empowering approach. They can consider setting up community organisations to address a particular issue. They can take part in community activities, volunteer for Red Cross, St. Vincent de Paul Society, or a local neighbourhood centre. They could organise a protest with other local people, write letters or emails to the newspapers or write or lobby local Council representatives, State MPs or Federal Members of Parliament. They can push for change in institutions like schools, hospitals, local councils and so on.

But the efforts of young people under 18 can be largely ignored because politicians know that

they're not losing votes by ignoring issues that are important to those young people. So the right to vote is a very important part of living in a democracy. Perhaps if 16 year olds had the right to vote, politicians wouldn't be so quick to jump to the youth-bashing "law and order" agenda every time an election loomed.

Young people are often portrayed in the media and by older people generally as being unthinking and unable to make important decisions. Some people argue that 16 year olds are too young to make important decisions about how to govern a country or a state. Similar arguments have been made about allowing young people to decide for themselves what they should learn and how they should learn it. The success of democratic schools such as Currumbena Primary School in NSW expose the fallacies of these arguments. We already trust sixteen and seventeen year olds to make important decisions in a number of areas, and people less than 18 years of age already:

- pay taxes on the income they earn, and have NO SAY in how these taxes are spent
- at 17 are able to join the armed forces and fight in wars (making life and death decisions)
- at 17, are locked up in adult prisons in Queensland if they commit a criminal offence
- may easily be parents or carers of children themselves
- drive cars on public roads.
- are held criminally responsible for their actions
- can sue or be sued as part of a civil action in Queensland courts
- can fly a plane
- may hold a firearms licence
- provide evidence in court
- rent houses
- get married

If we can ask young people to die for their country, allow them to take civil actions, or expect them to be legally responsible for their actions and the effect they have on others, it is unreasonable to deny them a vote in who governs. It is time therefore to lower the voluntary voting age to 16, with the compulsory voting age remaining at 18.

Reforming Our Democratic Institutions

The discussion paper accompanying this Inquiry concludes by arguing that there are three broad options to increase the participation of young people in Queensland's democratic system¹⁸. These options are:

1. Coercion – enforcing electoral law or requiring the Government to enrol all eligible people.
2. Persuasion -- convincing young people to participate of their own free will by increasing their motivation, knowledge and opportunities to vote.
3. Rewards – using incentives to entice young people to enrol and vote.

There is strong support for democracy in Australia, but widespread mistrust of our democratic institutions and politicians¹⁹. Furthermore, young people are politically active, but, perhaps because of high levels of mistrust for formal political processes, choose to participate in non-traditional ways such as boycotting products, donating money or time or taking part in rallies²⁰. This mirrors research by Professor Pat Seyd from England who found, through interviews with over 13,000 people, that three out of four citizens took part in political activity during the year²¹.

This would suggest that either a carrot (rewards) or stick (coercive) approach to encouraging young people to vote misses the point. Young people already support the idea of democracy, and do take political action of one form or another, without the need for punishment or rewards.

The sensible approach then would be to persuade young people that participating formally in our democracy is meaningful and useful political action. The first step would be to respond to the high levels of mistrust in our institutions. Our political parties, politicians and parliaments need to regain the trust of young people, and the electorate generally. There are a number of practical steps that the Queensland Parliament could take to address some of the sources of mistrust in our present form of democracy. These include:

- Regulating private donations to political parties
- Introducing a system of proportional representation
- Allowing closer scrutiny of contracts provided to business

Regulating Donations to Political Parties

In the early 1980's Federal Parliament passed legislation that provided public money to fund the operating costs of political parties. At the time of this legislation corporate donations accounted for roughly 40% of revenue of political parties. Kim Beazley argued then that public funding of political parties was "small insurance to pay against the possibility of corruption", implying that it would lessen political parties reliance on corporate donations²². Today however, and despite this legislation, corporate donations to the major political parties account for roughly 80% of their total revenue²³. This is a major concern. John Menadue, former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet said of corporate donations in 2003:

Money has replaced membership as the driving force of political campaigns. Corporate donations are a major threat to our political and democratic system, whether it is State governments fawning over property developers, the Prime Minister providing ethanol subsidies to a party donor, or the Immigration Minister using his visa clientele to tap into ethnic money.²⁴

In theory, disclosure rules limit the threat of corruption and "[p]oliticians and business figures alike know that any explicit change in public policy that favoured one particular industry or enterprise would alert the media and opposition"²⁵. However, this may not be the case. As Peter Andren, independent Federal MP points out:

As the disclosure rules stand, there is ample opportunity for companies or individuals to avoid disclosure by donating multiple amounts at just below the \$1500 limit. Donations could be made to individual state or territory branches, as well as federal offices of political parties, with any multiple of \$1499.²⁶

This loophole, which the Commonwealth Government wishes to expand (raising the limit of disclosure to \$5000) weakens the extent to which the public can scrutinise the influence of private business or wealthy individuals on Governments and needs to be tightened up. YANQ recommends:

- Requiring political parties to make public the details of *all* donations from private sources
- Limiting the amount that political parties can accept from private donations to 40% of total revenue, the level it was at prior to the introduction of public funding for political parties.
- Capping the amount that parties can spend during elections (on a per candidate basis).

These reforms would reduce the public perception that our major political parties are 'in-the-pocket'

of big business. It would reduce the influence of wealthy individuals and big business and encourage political parties to focus more on individual citizens.

Proportional Representation

In practice "control over the Parliament's agenda, its legislative program, order of business and even frequency of meeting are all in the hands of ministers"²⁷. This comment was made in relation to the Commonwealth Parliament, but applies equally well to Queensland. The problem with too much power lying in the hands of the Executive (i.e. ministers) is that it diminishes the role of our elected representatives. Power is in the hands of those chosen not by the electorate, but by the Premier. The opportunity for the Parliament to hear a diversity of views is limited, and ultimately we all lose out.

Besides executive domination of the Parliament, another problem with our current system of voting is the exclusion of minorities from parliament. This is particularly the case for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. 15% of the Australian population were born in non-English speaking countries, yet they are consistently under-represented in our parliaments²⁸.

There are a number of solutions to this problem. One solution favoured by YANQ is to introduce a system of proportional representation, such that the make up of Parliament more closely resembles the preferences of the population. Queensland's electorate based, first-past-the-post system makes it difficult for minor parties or independents to gain seats, despite being supported by significant numbers of voters. This system also can result in parties gaining total control of the parliament, without gaining a majority of votes. The current Legislative assembly is dominated by the Labor Party which holds almost 71% of the seats (63 out of 89), yet it only received 47% of the primary vote²⁹.

A proportional voting system would make it easier for minor parties to be represented and thus reinforce the need to build and maintain coalitions³⁰. This would enrich parliamentary debates by introducing a diverse range of voices and allow more citizens to feel that, at the very least, their concerns were heard in the State's primary decision making forum, the Parliament.

Conclusion

YANQ's view is that strategies to encourage young people to participate more actively in Queensland's democracy need to:

- address high rates of poverty and inequality in our society;
- provide a variety of opportunities for young people to practice democracy in their day-to-day lives;
- provide information about our system of democracy in an accessible way to young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;
- giving young people of 16 or 17 the option to vote in parliamentary elections; and
- addressing the causes of mistrust in our democracy by:
 - limiting the influence of corporate and private donations to political parties; and
 - reinforcing the role of Parliament as the 'people's house' by introducing a system of proportional representation.

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