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Submission to Queensland Parliamentary Legal
Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee:
Inquiry into Young Peoples' Engagement with Democracy

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This is a submission to the Parliamentary Legal Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee of Queensland's Inquiry into Young Peoples' Engagement with Democracy. For the purposes of this submission, democracy will be defined as active and continuous participation and scrutiny in the political process. Therefore, the bureaucracy of the Queensland government will be examined in relation to its access to young people and how it best serves them. In particular, the role of the state education system will be examined, being the principle impact of the state on the lives of young people.

For several years I have been involved in trying to bring young people closer to the government and its services. In 2002, I was invited by the former Minister, Matt Foley, to the policy launch of 'Stepping Forward'. A year later I was also part of the steering group for the inaugural SpeakUp festival as part of Youth Week. I am very grateful for this Committee opening up an inquiry into this topic.

I greatly admire the former Minister Foley, who after drafting the aforementioned policy with bureaucrats and other high officials, would ask, "have any young people seen this? What do they think?" In all my experience and research, I have seen this as a wholly unique approach, recognising that young people have no representation in policy formulation. Even institutions like the Young Parliament are effectively powerless in this regard. This is also crucial when considering that people under the age of 18 do use a wide variety of state government services; I put the case that they should be allowed to provide their critique of those services. For example, there is current debate about removing asbestos in schools. This debate has been wholly taken up by bureaucrats, politicians and parents' groups; input from students – and even teachers – has been conspicuous in its absence. Perhaps the voting age for state elections in Queensland could even be lowered to 16, commensurate with the majority of other legal rights gained at that age.

The above statements are made acknowledging that many policies and institutions have been set up to facilitate young peoples' engagement with democracy, such as the State Youth Advisory Council, the Young Workers Advisory Council, and the Young Parliament. However, there is limited capacity for the targets of these policies to engage with these processes, since they are specifically not engaged. I doubt many young people

not already politically connected somehow will have even heard of this inquiry. This arguably even contributes to economic mistreatment of young people, who remain unaware of workplace entitlements and other industrial programs.

A problem identified in previous contact with the Office of Youth Affairs has been the lack of connection between young people and the institutions which affect them. OYA can release many statements, policies and directives to schools as a channel of communication to their students, but the schools simply ignore these for varied reasons, and so the communication fails. If the schools were to recognise their role as the principle institution in contact with young people, and to forge links with other departments for mutually beneficial goals, this situation could be changed for much greater gains for young people.

Due to the importance of the school and TAFE system, it is worth mentioning education in a political sense. Learning about the numerous parliamentary and extra-parliamentary democratic practices would also empower young people to be able to access them. It could also rejuvenate political parties in Queensland, all of whom are experiencing declining membership, and specifically finding it especially hard to engage with the young. A case can be made for the curriculum of secondary schooling – and especially compulsory secondary schooling – should be reworked over the next two parliamentary terms to devote more hours to citizenship education, including workplace laws, legislative systems, extra-parliamentary state support mechanisms and so forward.

This submission has discussed the vulnerability of young people engaging with democracy, in both a social and political sense. It has been argued that since young people already engage with many government services, it doesn't seem sensible that they be prohibited from directly critiquing those services, and thereby contributing to democracy in Queensland. The education system is particularly worth mentioning in this regard, since education about political rights and duties for democratic contribution and participation are severely lacking, and could be changed to make Queensland stronger economically and a more robust democracy, and therefore curriculum changes could be amended to stimulate young people's democratic engagement to a greater extent. It has also been argued that while opportunities currently exist specifically for young people to engage in democracy, these institutions are not widely known due to a lack of connection

between different government departments in pursuit of a multi-faceted policy goal. These combine to generate an atmosphere in which young people can not engage in Queensland democracy to the maximum extent possible.