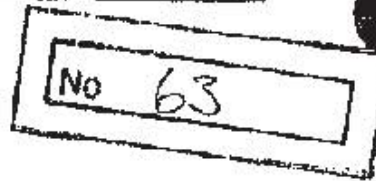
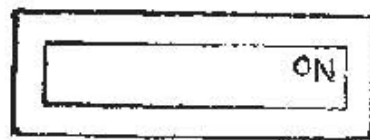




Hon Mike Reynolds AM MP
Member for Townsville

Our Reference: CS/M02/51; CS/06/1595

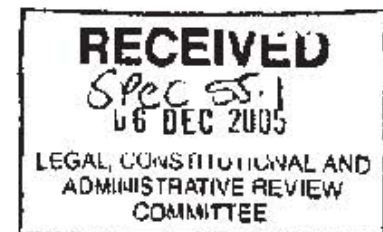


**Queensland
Government**

Minister for
Child Safety

5 DEC 2005

Ms Julie Copley
Acting Research Director
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000



Dear Ms Copley

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Young People's Engagement in Democracy in Queensland. The following information is based on the perspective of young people who have been in care of the Department of Child Safety.

The young people involved in this consultation were contacted through the Create Foundation, an organisation that supports children and young people in care across Australia. The Create Foundation aims to connect children and young people to each other and their communities; build skills and resources for children and young people in care; and change the care system through the participation of children and young people themselves.

The young people shared their own thoughts and beliefs as well as represented the views of their peers. The questions asked of the young people were based on the Voices and Votes Response Form and their responses are outlined below.

What do young people think about voting?

There was some ambivalence about voting generally. The young people stated 'why vote?', 'it doesn't matter who wins', 'you don't feel like you make a difference', 'it doesn't mean anything'. However, they also expressed the feeling that voting is important and that young people need to 'put their voice across and stand up for Australia'. They stated that they see voting as a big decision because it means that they have to choose the leader of a country. When the young people spoke of leaders, they tended to refer to world and national leaders rather than those within the state context. They all agreed that many of their friends and peers have a negative attitude to government and 'can't be bothered' to vote.

The young people interviewed stated that they have been inspired to vote from encouragement of adults in their lives, in particular youth workers who have suggested that one person can and does make a difference. One young person was inspired by the movie and novel 'Looking for Alibrandi' where character discusses voting and says that voting does count, and the freedom Australians have to vote should not be taken for granted. They were extremely interested to hear that as many as 52,000 young people did not vote in the 2004 State Election despite their eligibility.

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What could the Electoral Commission do better or differently to get its message across to young people?

Generally, young people suggested that other young people were best placed to communicate with young people, and grab their attention. They thought that peer processes were important to minimise the challenges posed by a 'generation gap'. They suggested that young people might experience adults as confronting, boring and are likely to 'switch off' and ignore what they have to say. They thought it important to communicate the message that one person can make an impact on the outcome of an election, particularly when individual votes add up to such a significant number.

How could the Electoral Commission make it easier for young people to enrol to vote and to vote on the day?

The young people believed that in general young people need to relate to the issues of an election, and see that there is a reason to vote if they are to be motivated to enrol and then vote. They thought that it would be a good idea to have programs in schools that explain in detail how to vote and where to vote, and it would be helpful if young people could register to vote at school. One young person suggested visual approaches would work best, for example television advertisements and posters that feature young people.

Do you think more people would vote if they could do so at any time in the week leading up to an election?

Some young people thought this was a good idea and others thought that it would not really matter. Those who were in favour suggested that the idea of having to do something on a particular day, in particular on a weekend, was annoying and inconvenient. They were generally not supportive of an Election Day becoming a public holiday, particularly as this would cause changes to the public transport schedule.

Do you think that you should be taught about voting at school? Were you taught about voting and 'civics education'?

This was seen to be a good idea, however the young people could not recall their own experiences of civics education. One young person felt that this type of education is 'as important as maths or English'. They agreed that it would be a mistake to present this as a lesson about 'voting' because that would seem boring and young people would not pay attention.

They suggested that one way to learn about voting and civic responsibility could be through a debating process, where young people learn about and discuss the issues that are important to them, and then relate this to the political process. Other strategies included using special assemblies, pamphlets and videos and getting a 'face that everyone knows', for example, an athlete or an Australian Idol to come along and talk about the issue.

It was believed that this process needed to take place before young people left school and before they turned 18 years of age, to ensure that young people would be fully prepared for voting. The emphasis here was on attracting the attention of young people and then putting into place processes where young people could explore the 'real' issues that they care about.

Should the voting age be lowered to 17 or 16 years? Why or why not?

Young people felt that the voting age should not be lowered because they believe young people need to be mature enough to be informed when they vote. For them, this means that young people need to be able to understand the issues, and know what they are voting about.

How can political parties encourage young people's engagement in democracy?

The young people thought that young people within political parties and parliament would create role models for other young people and encourage engagement in democracy. However, they also felt that it is important that such participation is not tokenistic, and that young people in these roles are treated equally and that their participation in politics is meaningful. When asked, the young people said that they didn't feel ready or able to run for parliament themselves. They felt that political parties in general need to find out about the issues faced by young people, and to develop strong campaigns based on these issues.

How can politicians themselves restore faith of young people in democracy?

The young people suggested that they and their peers don't believe what politicians say, and some would prefer to have fun and socialise than talk about politics. They felt that politicians are a 'whole other class', that they talk 'in another language' and don't always 'relate to young people'. They suggested that politicians need to be more down to earth and communicate with young people in 'real language' not like a 'dictionary'. Children in care in particular dislike government representatives talking about them as statistics and not real, feeling human beings.

One young person suggested that she has had positive experiences talking with some local members who had come to her school. She said this was successful because they communicated well and listened to her issues, and tried to respond and take some action. Action was very important to her – she stated that young people are disillusioned by consultation without action. She also suggested that these interactions helped her see her local members as real human beings rather than label them as politicians. Another young person suggested that it would be helpful for politicians to share their motivation for going into politics, and talk about what they are hoping to achieve, or what they want to change.

Have you used any of the government opportunities to voice your opinions about issues? How effective was it?

The young people consulted are experienced in, and supported by the Create Foundation, to participate in government processes. They spoke passionately and articulately about how important such processes and experiences have been to them, and how they seek to support other young people to participate. They realised that their passion for these processes is based in their own personal experiences as children in care. Young people had also accessed youth web-sites such as Generate, developed by the Office of Youth. They thought the websites were useful, and in particular they mentioned a forum where young people could talk online with politicians. They suggested that there needed to be more opportunities to talk with politicians about a wide range of issues.

How do you think government should involve young people in the decisions it makes? What methods work best for you – face-to-face, web based/online methods or written?

As previously mentioned, the young people involved are experienced in engagement and participation processes, including web based methods. They suggested that the best way to approach engagement processes is by developing methods for real communication that involve both listening and action strategies. In particular, they suggested less paperwork and more interactive forums. For example, one young person expressed himself through rap and he felt that creative processes would successfully engage young people. Other ideas included focus groups, small groups and the use of youth events and festivals. They agreed that one essential component of effective participation for young people includes support for them to process and debrief their participation, as well as the development of positive working relationships.

What assistance or encouragement do you need from government to take action about the issues you feel passionate about?

Generally, young people said that government needs to go to the places that young people gather, and engage with them in their environment. Forums suggested included schools, festivals, community groups and community agencies. They felt that positive relationships between young people and government representatives are essential.

What role can family and friends play in getting young people active and involved in democracy?

Peers were seen as being very important, in both providing opportunities for young people to care about issues as well as supporting each other to participate. The young people stated that they try to share their passion, and encourage their friends to participate, although they recognised that such participation is a personal decision for each individual.

What role can non-government foundations or community organisations play in getting young people active and involved with democracy?

Non-government foundations were seen to be essential in facilitating the engagement and participation of young people. In particular, they described the support that they have received from the Create Foundation and how empowering they have found experiences of advocating to government on their concerns and issues. They suggested that through their personal experiences and with support from Create, they have been encouraged to consider and act on relevant social issues.

Summary

In conclusion, while young people felt strongly and passionately about social issues, and current events, there was some apathy about the purpose of voting. Young people expressed energy and enthusiasm about being involved in government and political processes, especially when they could relate to them on a personal level. Overwhelmingly, young people were calling on those involved in the parliamentary system to be 'real' and to communicate in language that they could understand. They emphasised the need for engagement and participation processes to be dynamic and youth friendly and to tap into what interests young people.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to represent the views of young people who have been in care of the Department of Child Safety, and I hope this submission offers you some insight into strategies to further engage young people in democracy. Should you require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Mr Michael Power, Director, Strategic Policy and Research Branch, on 3404 3502. I wish you every success in the continuation of the Inquiry and I sincerely look forward to the outcomes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Reynolds', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

HON MIKE REYNOLDS AM MP
Minister for Child Safety