

Is the future of democracy safe in the hands of the under-30s?

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IN A STABLE, prosperous country such as Australia, it can be easy to take democracy for granted. Democracy has become a somewhat dirty word, especially with the ‘Millennial Generation’ (born 1982–2003).

In 1999, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) disbanded its door-knocking function to check voters were correctly entered on the electoral roll. By 2010, about 1.5 million adults were not registered to vote, 70% of them under 25. Changes to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 2012* slowed this trend, particularly as online enrolment is now allowed. However, of the 1.2 million people currently not registered to vote, the AEC estimates 46% are aged between 18 and 29.¹

Lowy Institute 2013 research shows that less than half (48%) of Australia’s 18- to 29-year-olds think democracy is the best form of government,² yet most care deeply about democratic ideals such as equality and human rights.³ The Lowy Institute researcher Alex Oliver asked the same question in India, Indonesia and Fiji, and concluded that ‘Australian young people of that age group were the least wedded to the idea of democracy’.⁴

Millennials make up a third of the earth’s population, yet feel ignored by those making decisions that will impact their

future.⁵ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, they are the largest generation in Australia, representing 30% of the population; Baby Boomers represent only 20%.⁶

The Millennial Generation doesn't trust, and is fed up with, politicians and formal institutions, but it is open and interested in political ideas. They eschew political parties but support issues and causes.⁷ Those who do participate are largely doing it online.⁸ According to MTV's research, Australian Millennials are typically tolerant, open-minded and happy, but only 3% trust and 6% are inspired by, their government.⁹ The main influences on the under-30s are family, friends, themselves, celebrities and sports stars.

Traditional media has less influence because Millennials curate their own content from many sources, and share, recreate and customise media their way. Peer review is a key source of information and analysis for Millennials. Almost all (97%) of Australians aged under 25 use Facebook,¹⁰ making young Australians the highest users of social media in the world.¹¹

The emerging 'sharing economy' is being powered by Millennials. Success stories such as Airbnb and SeeClickFix (to fix problems such as potholes) are examples of this. Personalisation, crowdfunding charitable causes and apps to run their lives are central to how the Millennial Generation operates in the world. They operate sideways to their elders, rather than obey the hierarchy.

Why are we failing young people in making a connection to the fundamentals of our society? How do we reframe democracy outside of voting and bring the focus back to equality, human rights, access and inclusion? There is clearly a communication, branding and participation gap between how Australia's youth see the world and their perception of democracy.

The Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka (M.A.D.E) was conceived to encourage national conversations about what democracy means in the 21st century, inspired by the events at

the 1854 Eureka Stockade. Young people — aged from 16 to 27 — fought injustice about the conditions on the goldfields and won some of the first democratic rights in the world. The diggers on the goldfields of Ballarat had tried a range of democratic measures to get the cost of the gold licence lowered and reduce the rough treatment they received from the police — largely made up of ex-criminals.

They held regular public protest meetings, formed the Ballarat Reform League, drew up a set of demands, and finally fought for their rights. Thirty people died as a result of the Eureka Stockade, but it drove the colonial administration to agree to the diggers' demands. Victorian men over 21 (without property) were given the first male suffrage in the British Empire. They were also able to stand for Parliament and be paid to be a Member of Parliament.

M.A.D.E has gone back to the original Greek word — democracy = people + power. The focus is about each individual finding the issues today that they think will improve the lives of their family, friends and community. Interestingly, this is the way the future generation — the Millennials — see the world.

We knew that many of the Millennial Generation care deeply about societal issues, yet a large number had disconnected from formal political processes. So how were we to reach out to the Millennials? How could we hear what they think and learn from the ways they are enacting democracy differently from their parents and grandparents?

We came to the conclusion that part of the answer lies in going where the Millennials already are: pop culture, online and social media. We thought about suitable partners that we could work with. MTV Australia was an obvious choice.

MTV recently conducted a 24-country research project on the Millennial Generation. They are seen as easily distracted, bored and wanting instant gratification. They see themselves as

curious, tolerant, sharing, flexible and optimistic. Being authentic and real is a priority for the Millennials; 84% see that they have the potential to make the world a better place and 73% think that the way they connect to the internet changes the way they see the world. Happiness for this generation is being part of a loving family and doing a job you enjoy. Key issues for them are dealing with the economy after the Global Financial Crisis, world hunger and finding a cure for cancer.

M.A.D.E and MTV Australia launched MOVEMENT: Search for the Millennial Leader on 15 September 2013, the United Nations International Day of Democracy.

MOVEMENT is M.A.D.E's first major foray into the national conversation — it is an innovative way to give a platform to youth and promote wider, deeper and different discussions about what kind of democracy we want. We formed an extraordinary alliance with two corporate partners — MTV Australia and Deloitte Digital — who are very much in that space, with support from some of the nation's largest youth and social action groups: Australian National Development Index (ANDI), Australian Youth Climate Coalition, change.org, Collabforge, Deakin University, Foundation for Young Australians, Foxtel, Global Poverty Project, High Resolves, House of Representatives (Australian Parliament House), National Centre for Indigenous Excellence, Oaktree Foundation, OurSay, Pro Bono Australia, Reach Foundation, Ruffin Falkiner Foundation, Young and Well CRC and Youth Without Borders.

Eighty Australians aged from 15 to 30 nominated themselves as a candidate for the Millennial Leader by uploading a video of up to 60 seconds in length and answering questions at made.org (and click on movement): what they care about; what they have done; and what they would want to address as leader. There have been over 40,000 views of the candidates' video entries.

A panel comprising ten of their Millennial peers has determined the shortlist of the top five candidates, who will then campaign during a three-week public voting period to elect the Millennial Leader. People will have to register to vote. OurSay will hone the questions to be answered in the election campaign. (OurSay is an independent organisation started by a team of young people passionate about harnessing the power of social media to revitalise participation in Australian democracy.)

The elections will finish on 13 November and the inaugural Millennial Leader will be announced on 14 November 2013.

The Leader will be 'in office' until 15 September, 2014: next year's UN International Day of Democracy.

There will also be an anonymous questionnaire on the Movement website that will ask a series of questions of Millennials. Those who may not wish to nominate as a Leader can still have their say by sharing what they most value. Their views will help to inform a future Youth Progress Index being developed by the Australian National Development Index (Australia is one of about 15 countries developing a societal progress index other than GDP, which only measures economic throughput).

The Millennial Leader will have experiences that money can't buy, including MOVEMENT at the House — where the Millennial Leader will be based at Parliament House in Canberra for up to two weeks to meet politicians, media and lobbyists and report on the parliamentary session (with support from an MTV producer).

The Leader will have access to a Brains Trust comprising 29 of Australia's top creative thinkers. They are available to discuss contemporary leadership and effective social action with the new Leader. The Brains Trust comprises sports stars, media figures, business people, social justice leaders, entertainment industry figures, entrepreneurs, health specialists, youth and

wellbeing experts, innovators and policy specialists. MTV is offering to mentor the Leader, who will produce a blog, monthly TV news items, three video diaries and manage the MOVEMENT social media account.

We hope MOVEMENT will become a platform for many Millennial voices and potential leaders. All generations have a lot to learn from each other, so it is really important that younger people feel they can be heard and have the potential to change things for the better.

The launch of the MOVEMENT campaign coincides with the first 100 days of the new government — how great would it be if more Millennial views were taken into account during the crafting of policies that will affect their future?

Key findings from the questionnaire are:

- Millennials are considerate of others in need, and friends/family are important.
- Millennials believe that everyone is entitled to be treated fairly and equally and that it's okay to be different. They also believe that everyone is entitled to a good education, food and shelter, and are concerned about the natural environment.
- Millennials also feel that they can influence things locally and globally.
- For Millennials, it's about being fulfilled; it's about doing — not saying. They are restricted with their cash, but not restricted with their time, and are willing to give their time and energy for a cause they believe in. They are also keen to live in a way that supports what they believe — all part of their 'keeping it real' trait.

Material from the Millennial Leader campaign will be used for wider public education use, including for teachers of the new Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum, due to be introduced in 2014.

The Millennial Generation is the first completely connected generation. They see the world as their canvas and want to use technology to make the world a better place. There are lessons for older generations to learn how the Millennials' savvy and energy can be used to campaign for important social issues and create a different kind of democracy.

Endnotes

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- 8 The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP), Youth and Participatory Politics Survey Project, retrieved from <http://www.ypp.dmlcentral.net/>
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- 12 Retrieved from <http://oursay.org/about>