

What Difference Does Writing Make?

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Youth and Democracy: A Way Forward?

By Primrose Riordan

Jean Jacques Rousseau stated that “As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State ‘What does it matter to me?’ the State may be given up for lost”.¹ In 2006 Australia is faced with two issues. Firstly, the relationship between youth and traditional politics is ailing and not substantial enough to ensure a democratic cohesive state. Secondly, Australia has so far been unable to engage politically disenfranchised youth into our political system and environment. We have to deal with these two issues knowing that although interest in traditional politics has unquestionably declined over the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, the blandly named Generation Y’s reputation as consumerist, apathetic, disinterested and selfish² is fundamentally flawed.

In a recent poll young people were quizzed on whether they were interested in politics and an astounding 75% surveyed said no.³ Falling newspaper sales, and the fact that most Under 25s reported their main source of hearing news was from FM radio⁴ is also not very encouraging. Yet when asked whether they are interested in poverty alleviation, their

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Victor Gourevitch, Raymond Geuss, and Quentin Skinner, 1997, “Rousseau: ‘The Social Contract’ and Other Later Political Writings”, Cambridge University Press London U.K.

2 James Norman, 2006, “Howard’s Youth are Shallow and Disengaged”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 23, 2006.

3 Steven Threadgold, Pam Nilan, 2001, “Young People, Habitus and Opinion’s about Politics”.

4 Nielsen Media Research, 19th June, 2003, “Young People Tune In” [Online] Available At: http://www.commercialradio.com.au/news.cfm?show_year=2003#100108.

local council's allocation of civic space, police powers, the war in Iraq, the environment, nuclear weapons — most young people will answer yes to at least one of these. If young people were asked different questions by opinion writers there is little doubt they would find that there is a high level of interest in caring, in creating, formulating, policy making, helping, theorising and communicating with our governance.

The majority of youth simply do not aim their political activism at Canberra or at State Parliament. The revolution in multimedia has also created its own challenges — with multiple communication channels for young Australia's voice and media 'noise' dispersed multiple ways. And frequently, even those who want to may not have the means or avenue to do so. Would-be political activists end up living an enclosed life away from traditional civic engagement.

So there are reasons why stories of young Paul Keating jumping joyfully into an ALP meeting in his teenage years seem so remote.

Firstly, we should look at the existing education system. The current lack of serious civic education curriculum effectively programs students to remain unaware of the political system and how this relates directly to social and political issues. This has two main outcomes; it stops many young people's interest in issues reaching over into an interest in politics. It also stops the political engagement by young, interested individuals being taken seriously by power structures as it is presented in an unconventional, inappropriate way. As a result of this young people fail to understand why the issues that matter to them are continually sidelined to appeal to the wider vote. They wonder — "Why didn't anyone see my blog post about that?" There are also very few youth media outlets which deal with political subject matter. Tom Dawkins of Vibewire Youth Services said that to activate youth political engagement "media is the crucial linchpin along with education as media is the marketplace of ideas in a democracy".⁵

⁵ Personal interview 2006; Tom Dawkins National Coordinator of www.vibewire.net and Vibewire Youth Services.

Many young people ignore their political power on a national level as they do not have or know the ways and means to assert that power.

Pete Doherty of Libertines fame might be crazy most of the time, but it might have been an enlightened moment when he sang “I can’t tell the difference between death and glory, new Labour and Tory”. Having two sides of politics is not enough for generation Y. In a survey of young people and political interest across socio-economic boundaries conducted by Pam Nilan and Steven Threadgold;⁶ “responses claiming less interest in politics were often cynical about politicians’ behavior”. Having politicians who bicker and slander is a turn-off to Gen Y. Young people needs leaders who barrack for genuinely different sides yet are able to make compromises so that decision-making conforms to humanistic values. It’s the old story — we need to make politics about issues and people and not parties and factions.

This comes back to political parties needing to (a) attract more varied individuals and (b) the need for independence in politics so that courageous new visions of the future can be considered. Furthermore, political leaders in response must begin to act with respect to fellow politicians and to all their constituents. To accommodate this, we must as media consumers be prepared to accept the emotional and more human expression of politicians. Many of the young people surveyed complained about politics being too enveloped in bureaucracy. Oxford University’s Professor Coleman pointed out the need for empathy to re-enter political discussion to connect with this generation. He said in April 2003 that “*Big Brother* viewers tend to say they are good at judging people; political junkies are the opposite — they are good at analysis, but their emotional intelligence is low. The political class has fallen into the trap of understanding itself, but not those outside it.”⁷

6 Steven Threadgold, Pam Nilan, 2001, “Young People, Habitus and Opinion’s about Politics”.

7 Quoted in Nick Barham 2004, “Disconnected: Why Our Kids Are Turning Their Backs on Everything We Thought We Knew”, Ebury Press, United Kingdom.

With no structural outlets of youth policy-making, opinion or decision-making in order to supplement this lack of formal youth representation, a young interest in politics is forced out of the public eye and into the internet and café corners.

If the percentage of seriously politically engaged young people, evident in most generations, cannot be easily located or documented, then it is easy to suppose that young people are disengaged with politics, especially when it is compared with youth political participation in the 1960s–'70s. However, this can be traced to the affect of a central event — the ongoing Vietnam War. This international crisis deeply affected the younger generation more than other generations around at the time. Along with the wider cultural flowering of freedom of speech through the 1960s–'70s, this event prompted young people to make the link between their ideals and interests and political issues and systems which began to vividly appear on nightly television. This style of mass emotional protest has not been aroused in generation Y as their historical experiences are not really specifically discriminatory towards them. Larger city populations and a wider media spectrum would also contribute.

In our generation there still are many young people interested in parliamentary politics, there are many more young people simply interested in specific ideals and issues. It is an essential and ongoing challenge for Australia to interest and engage more of its young people in traditional political processes — essential for the maintenance of democracy in our country. It is a challenge which requires bold and innovative responses.



Primrose Riordan wrote this essay in 2006 when she was in Year 12 at Loretto, Kirribilli, New South Wales.