

Young people's participation and representation during the Howard decade

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On Australia Day this year the PM complained about young people's lack of knowledge about Australian history, that they didn't understand the evolution of democracy since federation. A year to the day earlier the Governor General Michael Jeffrey also lamented young people's lack of political knowledge and engagement:

And there is a worrying trend of disengagement from our democratic process particularly amongst younger Australians. The issues that interest them are often overshadowed by the rough and tumble of politics, however justified that may be in a robust democracy. If we cannot find ways to spark their interest and involvement, we risk the consequences of more young Australians simply turning away. So how can we prevent this? I am not advocating changes to our existing system of government ... There is scope however, through our schools, to engage students by placing more emphasis on the informed teaching of civics and citizenship. (January 26 2005 see http://www.gg.gov.au/html/fset_speeches_media_vr.html).

These are just two of many public statements by a long line of politicians and commentators that tend to characterise young people as ignorant and apathetic and consequently in need of remedial 'fixing'. Many like to blame young people for being self serving individuals, not making their proper contribution to society. For example, in his book *Crowded Lives* Labor federal MP Lindsay Tanner characterises young people as the individualistic 'options generation', arguing that they 'tend to make selfish choices' (2003, p. 33). American political scientist Robert Putnam (2000), famous for popularising the concept of social capital, also criticises young people, homogenised as 'Generation X', for their lack of political and community involvement compared to 'baby boomer' and older generations. Thus while the Howard government frequently utilises this negative discourse about young people it also has been used more generally by the Opposition and by social commentators.

However, young people do, like most adult Australians, participate in a variety of collective political and social experiences. Why complain about decline in traditional forms of association, like service clubs, when environmental and human rights groups thrive and the peace movement against the war with Iraq helped to politicise a new generation? My research found that 93 per cent of Australian young people (aged 18-34) were involved in collective activities and had been involved in a group of some kind within the last five years. When community and political groups only were taken into account, and sporting and recreation groups excluded, a still healthy 69 per cent of 18-34 year olds have participated in group activities. This contradicts the myth that young people are apathetic and not community-minded (Vromen 2003). The existence of a range of types of participation also demonstrates that young people are not a homogenous category with the same political experiences or policy needs.

But it is not just my research that suggests young people are actually active and engaged participants. Similar findings about young people still at school being active in their communities was found in the Youth Electoral Survey, conducted by Murray Print, Kathy Edwards and Larry Saha (Print et al 2005). And on young people's involvement with volunteering and community organisations, as compared to older people, in Andrew Passey and Mark Lyons' (2005) analysis of the Australian Study of Social Attitudes.

Despite the evidence the persistent debate on young people's apathy suggests that some forms of participation are more acceptable than other forms. There seems to be an unwritten hierarchy of acceptable actions that characterises appropriate citizenship behaviour. Many people from the Prime Minister down believe that young people do not conform to society's broader expectations – and are not engaging properly with the political world - and thus ought to receive more intervention. We could see that there are four broad characterisations of participation in this unwritten hierarchy and these are shown in the Table below.

I argue that during the Howard decade the positive frame for legitimate and acceptable forms of participation by young people has changed. Young people are now steered towards an increased involvement in formal and social capital generating forms of participation. Much political rhetoric is used to de-legitimate activist forms of participation – think anti-war protests and student anti-VSU activism – and to undermine community formations that young people choose to create based on their own identities – think the disparaging of feminism, indigenous politics and/or the construction of ethnic gangs, and even young people's appropriation of the internet as political space. This occurs at the same time as young people are told they are not involved enough and they are instructed on how to be compliant community members who receive civics education, build social capital, and, if they want to be political, the only option is to vote or join a political party.

The Table also separates the types of participation into two broad types of processes. The first type are adversarial political processes that characterise the Australian two party political system, are based within the confines of government and, as a result, receive positive endorsement from dominant political actors. The other adversarial processes are social movement-oriented, society versus state participation that is framed negatively. The second type of process is consensus oriented and based on groups and organisations that arise from common interests, location or identities. The consensus-based processes are divided between traditional community formations that government endorses and sometimes financially supports; and emergent community groups and organisations predicated on expression of shared identity that are framed negatively.

Table 1: Four types of participation and change during the Howard Decade

<i>Political framing by Howard Government</i>	Adversarial	Consensus
Positive	1. Formal political participation	2. Social Capital/ Community participation
Negative	3. Activist participation	4. Identity/ Community participation

I will now discuss each of these four types of participation to examine where they fit in Australian political processes and how they reflect young people's diminishing opportunities for involvement in political and social change.

1. traditional types of political participation including voting, party membership and other type of engagement in formalised politics

Most politicians tend to believe that the only legitimate way for young people to get involved in politics is to vote and maybe even join a party. The notable exception is Mark Latham (2005) when he provided ten reasons why young people should not join parties just after his diaries were released last year. This prompted many responses such as this from Foreign Minister Alexander Downer:

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has made a “metaphorical call to arms” to young people, urging them to become involved in politics and join a party. Describing politics as “an honourable profession” ...“And being an elected representative in this system - a politician - is one of the most honourable positions that one can hold” (Grattan 2005, p. 4).

This quote reinforces the idea that to be involved in politics is to be involved in formal political participation such as joining a party, and to express your political preferences through voting. Recently there has been a growing concern that not all young people are enrolled to vote, despite the legal requirement that once you turn 18 you go on the electoral roll. The Australian Research Council together with the Australian Electoral Commission has funded University of Sydney and ANU based researchers to do the Youth Electoral Study, studying young people's attitudes to voting. The basis of their study is to find out why approximately 82% of young Australians (17-25 years of age) were enrolled compared with 95% of older Australians (Print et al 2004). Some might answer that this is about young people's apathy about politics, but increasingly this is becoming a questioned analysis with others suggesting that young people are not consistently or directly approached to enrol. For example it is only in Victoria that young people are directly sent an enrolment registration form coordinated with the motor registry when they obtain their drivers' licenses.

In analysis undertaken by Clive Bean of the Australian Electoral Study after the 2004 federal election it was found that there are some differences emerging in who young people vote for. That is, while the split between young people under 30 choosing to vote Liberal or ALP is relatively even young voters are more likely to vote for “alternative” parties than older voters. For example almost 20% of under-25s voted for the Greens at the last federal election, compared to about 7% of over-30s. But the differences along left and right lines are much more apparent when comparing young men with young women. That is, 18-30 year old women were significantly more likely to vote for ALP and/or The Greens, and young men significantly more likely to vote Liberal. For example, among 18-25 year olds nearly 50% of young men voted Liberal but only 35% of young women did (Bean forthcoming). This research demonstrates that even when describing engagement with the formal political system it is not possible to make universalising generalisations about young people's political experiences. The differences among young people, and gender in particular, are important to highlight.

It is estimated that at most 2% of Australians are currently members of a political party and this is more or less the same for Australian young people. However, the exact numbers within parties are difficult to find out as most parties are not obligated to reveal their membership numbers nor do they tend to choose to disclose them. The reasons for such a small number of people participating in Australian parties has probably got more to do with the *structure* of the parties, than it has to do with an apathetic political culture in Australia. Mair and van Biezen (2001, p. 14) attribute the European decline in party membership to the general population's increasing disenchantment with political institutions and traditional forms of participation. This pattern is similar in Australia with decrease in party membership, union membership and traditional community associations, such as service clubs, all happening at the same time. We also ought to address questions of why young people may feel disillusioned about party politics, voting and elections. Do they feel that parties are trying to actively win their vote with their policy platforms? While the Australian major parties have well developed youth wings (Young Labor, Young Liberal Movement) that aim to organize and attract young people, we know very little about how many, and what kind of, young people join the youth wings or how long they stay. From what we do know it seems that the youth wings are well integrated with the senior party in terms of ideas and election campaigning activity, and it is rare that the youth wing is able to challenge or shape the senior party on a major policy or ideological issue. Thus the youth wings are mainly training grounds for party players rather than innovative arenas for youth-led participation.

2. the second form of participation is through community-based formations

This approach to community-based participation extols voluntarism in traditional organisations, focuses on the implementation of civics education to increase knowledge and a subsequent desire to build community and increase social capital. This approach to a community sphere that is separate and distinctive from both formal politics and activist politics receives bi-partisan support – even from Young Labor as we saw in January this year with their call for compulsory voluntarism! Federal politicians from both major parties such as Peter Costello, Lindsay Tanner and the former parliamentarians Mark Latham and Ross Cameron have all spoken extensively in public forums about community cohesion, family relationships, and the values of volunteering. All assume that we have lost a sense of community and that we need to reclaim it. They all exclude the experiences of young people as community members *on their own terms*. Peter Costello (2001), for example, argues that Australians ought to volunteer more to reclaim a better sense of shared community:

Going outside our homes to share an experience with the volunteer organisations of society is a big part of building community. We could revive the volunteer spirit in Australia—we could revive all these non-government community organisations—if each of us were to spend one hour per week in volunteer activity.

Costello lists activities Australians might participate in, and the only ones that include young people are the traditional organisations of Guides, Scouts, and Young Farmers' Associations. Unsurprisingly it is exactly these sorts of community organisations that form the exclusive membership of the Federal government's Australian Forum of Youth Organisations, whose "mission is to provide high-level advice to the Australian Government on key youth related issues, and to progress key policy objectives on

behalf of all young Australians and the organisations working with them” (see http://www.thesource.gov.au/find/youth_affairs/afoyo.asp). These organisations are not youth-led nor youth created as they are mostly youth service-oriented, the majority also do not have a major commitment to fostering youth participation within their own organisational structures (those organisations that do have an *).

Table 2: Membership of federal Australian forum of youth organisations

1. Police and Community Youth Clubs NSW Ltd	2. Australian Red Cross *
3. Guides Australia	4. Lions Clubs of Australia
5. The Scout Association of Australia	6. Australian Council of YMCA
7. YWCA of Australia *	8. Duke of Edinburgh’s Award in Australia
9. The Boys’ Brigade Australia	10. Australian Rural Youth
11. St John Ambulance Australia *	12. The Girls’ Brigade Australia
13. The Foundation for Young Australians *	14. Surf Life Saving Australia

The Howard government has been controversial in its youth policy making and its interaction with youth oriented community organisations. Arguably it has reduced and restricted opportunities for young people, and their advocates, to have direct consultation with government. The National Youth Roundtable was established in 1999 to replace government funded advocacy organisations such as the Australian Youth Policy and Action Committee (AYPAC). The Roundtable represents a policy shift that is a retreat from advocacy and interaction with a broad range of youth serving organisations and youth policy experts to consulting youth leaders (‘professional young people’). This is a top-down approach based on non-threatening consultation mechanisms and there is little guarantee of how government incorporates issues and projects that are meaningful to either young people in general or even just the young people selected for the Roundtable. Some of the Roundtable participants have actively campaigned for the reintroduction of a broader representative structure such as AYPAC. Their request has not been addressed and the range of participants in the Roundtable itself is now only 30 young people, down from the original 50. The Roundtable is not a youth-led participatory mechanism as young people do not even choose the topics for discussion. For example Sussan Ley (the Parliamentary Secretary for Youth Affairs) said at the opening of the current Roundtable in December 2005:

“Understanding that you can make a difference and influence policy-making through working with government is an important part of this. In working together, as a Roundtable and with government, everyone achieves more. This year, as part of its evolving nature, Roundtable members will be able to develop their topics of interest within areas that Australian Government departments have identified as being of immediate interest to government”.

Through the government's careful delineation of community organisations that they are prepared to engage and meet with, and the establishing of very limited parameters for youth participation and advocacy, they are also signalling what they frame as unacceptable community formations.

3. the third form of participation is involvement in non-parliamentary politics including activism, protest, and social movements.

In the general discourse on alternative political forms young people's participation tends to be belittled and discouraged, and especially so by the Howard government. Young people's involvements in overtly political campaigns, ranging from anti-war, voluntary student unionism, to global justice (and so on), reveal the issues that some choose to mobilise on. Young people's views on these issues that seek to challenge the status quo, and more often than not challenge the framing of government policy, are rarely fully engaged with or taken seriously by politicians or the media. Instead the focus is often on the uselessness of protest, inevitable violence and the problem of disruption by an unruly group.

For example, the peace movement that arose against Australia's involvement in the US-led War in Iraq led to several weeks of media reportage. There were several youth-led protest marches – these invariably were reported on to accentuate violence and police confrontation. The title of an article in *The Australian* 'Mayhem not war as kids riot for peace' - war on Iraq: Day Seven (27/3/2003, p.1) is just one example of how student marches attended by up to 10,000 young people, and a handful of troublemakers, were reported on. John Howard's response did not focus on the motivations for these youth-led anti war protest events. Instead he argued that young people's participation in these demonstrations "reflected badly on their schools" and "that he thought it was inappropriate for students to protest during school hours". He condemned this type of activist political participation by invoking majority opinion to support his views: "I think most Australians take the view that young people of school age ought to be at school during school hours" (Shepherd 7/3/2003, p. 5).

Overall the emphasis during the Howard decade has been to further undermine and question young people's use of alternative means of political participation to put their views into the public sphere. This has meant there has been little recognition of the right to any sort of dissent or challenging of the status quo in general, and government in particular. There has also been very little acknowledgment of the capacity of youth-led political spaces to facilitate political engagement and activist participation. For example, young people are the most frequent users of the internet (Lloyd & Bill 2004) and are increasingly using this accessible space as an outlet for political activism.

4. the fourth form of community formation is young people's groupings formed through their own, chosen, identity

Young people's own community groupings have been framed in political debate as potentially deviant and inferior to both formal politics and acceptable community and social capital building groups. During the Howard decade there has been an increased questioning of community groups based on a shared progressive identity (e.g. feminism, gay and lesbian) or a shared cultural identity (e.g. indigenous, ethnic or non-Christian). These types of groups are argued to be superseded by a single, and by extension harmonious, Australian identity as a basis for community group formation.

‘Community’ often becomes a term in popular and policy-making usage during periods of alleged social fragmentation. That is, politicians use the term when aspiring to closer social bonds, or harking back to the ‘good old days’ of how the world ought to be. In a scholarly sense the term ‘community’ is used to refer either to a group of people in a geographic location or to a group of people bound together by a set of common interests, or a common identity. Although politicians invoke the idea of community as an overwhelmingly positive ideal, communities based on shared location and/or shared values are not always forces for the good. Community can be coercive when a dominant set of values unites members and maintains group cohesion by excluding individuals or subgroups that challenge these dominant values. Thus, when prescriptions for strengthening community ties deny internal community differences—differences of class, gender, race and ethnicity, religious affiliation, or generation—there will be political consequences (Vromen 2004).

Part of the focus on the need to fix or change young people when evaluating community participation rests on assumptions about young people’s general deviance from society’s expectations. Violent protest, promiscuous sexuality, and rampant drug use, are all routinely used to portray young people as deviating from community standards and expectations (see, for example, Tanner 2003, p. 33). The last federal election campaign with its focus on interest rates and economic policy tended to ignore young people’s interests and life experiences. When young people were included in policy discussion and debate they were constructed as a social problem that needed fixing. For example, young people were discussed as boys suffering from inadequate male role models, or girls with eating disorders, or those who are homeless or drug dependent (see Latham 2004).

This is not to suggest that young people don’t face real inequities and difficulties or sometimes present real policy problems —they *do*, and it *is* government’s responsibility to deal with them appropriately and sensitively. However, it seems politicians only consider young people when they present a problem, and as a result young people tend to be talked *about* rather than talked *with*. That is, young people’s own perspectives, community choices and life experiences are rarely included in these public debates.

Analyses of social power have probably always ignored the differentiated experiences of young people (see Irving et al. 1995); but now that political discourse has returned to the idea of community, we need to re-examine how it portrays young people. There is very little evidence that social change has led to an increase in individualistic behaviour and/or deviancy. There is ample evidence to show that neo-liberal economics and structural change affects *different* young people differently. While some have benefited from increased access to university, others have faced a contracting labour market that offers casual, short term paid work in industries where there is not a strong union presence. There is still significant youth unemployment. Young, well educated women are less likely to have children because, unsurprisingly, they have found that it is difficult to combine family and careers. Maybe these problems should be of greater concern to society, rather than concern about young peoples’ deviance and potential lack of conformity.

How will (young) people remember John Howard?

Larry Anthony, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs until 2004, rarely actually spoke about youth. After a perusal of both his media releases and speeches it can be seen that he tended to focus on children and child care. When young people were discussed it was as a problem or as a group that needed protection from, for example, obesity or from child prostitution. Or it just happened to be April and there was National Youth Week to launch. After the Coalition's win in the 2004 federal election, and Larry Anthony's loss of his seat, the Government decided to downgrade the portfolio by only appointing a parliamentary secretary for Children & Youth Affairs, rather than a Minister.

The minimal policy-making attention the Howard Government has given to young people aligns with how young people have been inaccurately constructed as political citizens over the last ten years. Despite the empirical evidence that young people do engage and participate in a broad range of political and community-based activities there remains the strong discursive position that they ought to be *more involved* in both formal political and traditional community organisations. Simultaneously the Howard government has delivered the message that young people choosing to participate in activism or in identity based community formations are less legitimate as political citizens. The inability of the government to see and understand young people's diverse approaches to political engagement and participation, that build on their everyday life experiences, will have future political consequences.

Economic and social change in Australia has differentially constrained young people's access to education, work, housing and remuneration. The effects of this will become politically apparent in the years to come, as recently reflected upon by *Sydney Morning Herald* economics writer Ross Gittins:

If you're old, you shouldn't be asked to pay tax. If you're on the same income but are a young couple saving for a home or a family, however, you should pay full freight. This sounds like a fair thing? Today's young people are compelled to save for their superannuation while also paying taxes to cover their parents' pensions and prescriptions. They have been lumbered with HECS debts. And the Howard Government's economic miracle has priced them out of the housing market, while delivering a huge, tax-free windfall gain to their home-owning oldies. If the pollies can't control their urge to buy the oldies' votes at every election, they're pouring petrol on a generational powder keg that may one day blow up in all our faces. (Gittins 2004, p. 15).

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