

(i) WHO
COUNTS?:

Youth Engagement and
the Age of Majority

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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN Electoral Commission

FOREWORD

The Western Australian Electoral Commission exists to provide quality, innovative and accountable electoral services every time for all Western Australians. Functions of the Electoral Commissioner include promoting research into and public awareness of electoral matters, and publishing material on these matters.

Given these roles, in 2007 the Commission was pleased to sponsor a public sector intern for a research project that may inform and advise Members of Parliament, the Government, departments and authorities of the State, and others interested in youth electoral engagement, participatory citizenship and public involvement in decision-making.

As noted by the Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Ms Lyn Sirkett, in her 2006 Public Sector Fellowship paper, the legitimacy of representative government mandates and the practicality of implementing public policy are affected by the extent of this engagement.

The opportunity to participate is a key to democratic maturity, and is evident in growing calls for a 'youth voice' across Australia. But opportunity alone is unlikely to fully engage electors. Civic and electoral education is also vital.

The enfranchisement of young people, and extending the idea of democracy as lived experience, is crucial to the democratic activity of voting. As this paper concludes, changing the voting age needs to be addressed alongside democratic processes in the lives of young people, through genuine inclusion and participation and civic discussion in the Western Australian context.

Ms French's paper makes a valid contribution to a debate on lowering the voting age, for example in supporting optional voting for electors under 18 who are provisionally enrolled, as one element of youth engagement. Issues of automatic enrolment, voting locations, interactive online services, research into awareness-raising and education models, legislative reform, and a 'youth charter' cannot be resolved by the Electoral Commission in isolation.

I commend this paper to those interested in our democratic process and youth engagement generally, and trust it may assist in wider public debate on the issues.

Warwick Gately AM
ELECTORAL COMMISSIONER
[insert date] March 2008

*It's best to be involved
in the decision process*



Who Counts?

Youth Engagement and the Age of Majority

Rachel French

**A Public Sector Internship Report Prepared by Rachel French for
The Western Australian Electoral Commission
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This Public Sector Internship was a cooperative arrangement between the Western Australian Electoral Commission and Murdoch University through which the student undertook research with the collective guidance of the WAEC and an academic supervisor.

The analysis and views expressed in this report are those of the author only, and neither reflects nor should be taken to be the views of either Politics and International Studies at Murdoch University, or Murdoch University.

But it seems you are not allowed to say what is true unless you are at least 18 years of age. And Mrs Wilburton is in charge of the truth and she gets to say what is allowed to be the truth and what is not. She says, “I think we would *all* appreciate hearing less from you, madam.”

Clarice Bean Spells Trouble, by Lauren Child

Truth, in a postmodern era belongs to everyone, or so they say. But not for Clarice. For Clarice, the grownups hold on to truth like a possession - dangerous in the wrong hands. Clarice has her truth anyway; she subverts it through the rabble rousing of her poorly spelling hand. It is a 'childish' truth, but it sees her through her day governed by school and rules - other people's truths, which turn their back on hers. How will she feel when one day, at eighteen, the legitimate 'truth' is handed to Clarice? Will she want it? Or will it be too late for her to embrace this particular form of truth?

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Executive Summary

This paper was written for the Western Australian Electoral Commission as part of a Public Sector Internship conducted through Murdoch University. It examines the issues of youth voting and engagement in the context of lowering the voting age.

The question of whether or not to lower the voting age, and the connected problem of youth engagement, are issues being debated at an international level. On the one hand voting is a democratic right enjoyed by most adults, yet denied to young people who are able to engage in other adult responsibilities; on the other hand there is evidence to suggest that more and more young people, who *are* able to, are disconnecting from the process of voting. The question of the voting age, therefore, is somewhat of a conundrum. Often the solution to the latter problem is sought in the answer to the first - that is, by lowering the voting age we can substantially address the problem of engagement by catching the youth vote earlier. *Or*, because of the latter problem - disengagement, it is not worth addressing the former - age. As this paper stresses though, these are misguided approaches which avoid the depth of the problem. In order for voting to become a democratic right available to all people, including the young, it needs to be addressed alongside the issue of engagement.

This paper firmly endorses a lowering of the voting age from the present age of 18 but argues for a deeper understanding of the position of young people and their so-called disengagement, in order to support a process of reconnection to the democratic principles of inclusion, participation and equality. The paper places the question of the voting age in the context of citizenship and the rights of the child and in so doing it

highlights the characteristics of a decent citizenship and links them to the human rights' needs of children and young people. The Western Australian Citizenship Strategy is used as a model of citizenship with the potential to embrace and support the needs of a younger electorate.

With a participatory citizenship in mind, five recent Australian reports on youth voting are discussed in order to expose the problems underlying the enfranchisement of young people, and to extend the idea of democracy as lived experience which leads to, rather than begins with, the crucial democratic activity of voting. If young people were to experience participation and inclusion as a real part of their daily existence, the problem of disconnection at election time would be non-existent. At the same time, earlier enfranchisement can be offered *now* to young people as a first and genuine step towards a progressive and inclusive democratic citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Australia is just now awakening from 'the dreamy period', according to social researcher Hugh McKay, having been numbed to sleep by national issues too large for contemplation. In this slumbering state we disengage from the big picture and turn our attention to our own backyards. Disengagement though, is not the same as apathy. It is simply a shift in focus away from problems so huge as to seem beyond our influence towards the still highly controllable details of our own lives. And the issue here is 'control', says McKay. Whilst our interest in lifestyle programmes and reality TV has risen, interest in current affairs programmes and politics has plummeted. Every incumbent government (State, Federal and Territory) was returned between 2002 and 2007, and the reason, suggests McKay, is that the perception of the world, including Australia, as a newly hazardous place has led to the need for the status quo to be maintained (2007, pp.239-262).

The irony in such a position becomes evident when the very fear which causes us to disengage now lays us open to the loss of certain political rights. According to former High Court chief justice Gerard Brennan, it is 'possible for fundamental human rights to be extinguished by statute' because Australia does not have a bill of rights, and that 'incursions on the rule of law may be essential to combat the risk of terror'. The introduction of control orders for terror suspects and ASIO's recent authority to detain people are good examples of this (Merritt, 2007). Philosopher A. C. Grayling points out, however, that as Western governments lean ever closer to authoritarian rule, such subtle but incremental steps erode the hard won freedoms of a liberal society (Grayling, 2007). Whilst commentators have tried to alert us to the erosion of civil liberties in new anti-terror legislation, we have paid little attention (McKay, 2007). If Australia's youth is

showing signs of disengagement, are they also suffering from this sense of loss of control, or have they simply lost faith in a system from which the adults in their lives have already disconnected? Or - are they disengaged at all?

In a political climate which purports to engage with 'rights' and 'freedom' it would seem timely to take stock of the debate surrounding the issue of youth voting and participation. Too often, young people have been pathologised as a problem in need of fixing. Labelled variously as 'apathetic', 'deviant', 'technologically dependent', and 'at risk', they have become the subject of a debate which seeks their participation as a solution to the 'problems' which they apparently cause, whilst ignoring the problem, very real for them, of their marginal position in the political landscape (Vromen, 2004; Bessant, 2003). Participation needs to be hauled back from the ranks of political tokenism and recast as an extension of real and enfranchised, democratic principles for Australia's young people. In this context the question of the age of majority becomes part of the larger question of just how a picture of inclusive and accountable citizenship might look.

If such a reformist move seems too hard to contemplate as we emerge from our somnambulant cocoon, we need only remind ourselves of the enormous changes already made during Western Australia's relatively short Parliamentary history. With women's suffrage achieved in 1899, and their eligibility to become members of Parliament in 1920; with the voluntary vote for Indigenous peoples achieved in 1962 and made compulsory in 1983; and with the voting age lowered from 21 to 18 in 1970 (Parliament of Western Australia, 1998), Western Australia and its Parliament need not be too alarmed by the prospect of including yet more citizens into its extension of the democratic franchise.

* * *

This project is part of a continuing focus on the issue of youth voting and participation

and extends the discussion of the issues of Helen Loreck's 2004 Parliamentary Internship, and the Deputy Electoral Commissioner Lyn McKay's 2006 paper entitled *The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation: a Western Australian Perspective*. Part one examines ideas of citizenship and rights in a West Australian context, and concludes that Western Australia is well placed to support a lowering of the voting age. The focus of part two is on recent reports on youth and participation, as follows:

- The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Civics and Education*;
- The inquiry of the Queensland Parliament into youth voting, *Voices and Votes*;
- Lyn McKay (Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Western Australian Electoral Commission): *The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation: a Western Australian Perspective*.
- The paper by the Victorian Electoral Commission *Lowering the Voting Age*; and
- The Youth Electoral Study Reports by Larry Saha, Murray Print and Kathy Edwards.

This section uses current sociological discussion to highlight particular points of interest and includes these under the headings *Inclusion*, *Education*, *Practicalities aid participation*, and *The question of age*. It concludes with the point that democratic processes in the lives of young people must be addressed alongside the lowering of the voting age.

Part three concludes with suggestions for future thought and exploration. It elaborates the point that a lowering of the voting age needs to be offered as genuine inclusion and participation and reconnects the discussion to citizenship and human rights in the Western Australian context. Contained in the appendices are summaries of the relevant

points from the inquiries discussed in chapter two (Appendix A), and examples of local and international initiative (Appendix B).

The question to be posed in this paper is one of *value*: what is the *value* in changing the voting age? If it is deemed to be a positive one, for whom? And in what spirit will it be done? In other words how should adults support any process which such a change may bring about and how should we, as a community, engage in an international debate on youth, participation, and voting? If voting is offered as an extension of real democratic principles towards a proportion of the population who are, at present, excluded from this, then its value will have effect well beyond its impact upon electoral turn-out.

PART ONE

Citizenship and the Western Australian Context

The legal right and obligation to vote is implicit within the notion of citizenship. The wider parameters of citizenship are important, therefore, to the focus of this report, as they shape and inform any discussion of electoral behaviour or obligation toward the community. This section examines the nature of citizenship from a human rights perspective. It looks first at the citizenship debate within Western Australia and then at recent developments concerning the rights of the child. It concludes that Western Australia is well placed to open up to a more inclusive form of government for young people.

Citizenship in Western Australia

In Western Australia human rights and the citizenship debate has made itself evident in the recent push for a Western Australian Human Rights Bill; the move by the Greens (WA) Party in 2006 to lower the voting age and extend enfranchisement to itinerants and prisoners; and the introduction, by the Gallop government, of the Western Australian Citizenship Strategy, *A Voice for All* (2004). Clearly West Australia has both the desire and motivation to pursue a more inclusive vision of citizenship and also has the capacity to open up the notion of 'voice' to previously marginalised people.

The Western Australian Draft *Human Rights Bill* was released in 2007. In the *Statement of Intent by the Western Australian government*, the Attorney General, the Honourable

Jim McGinty MLA, points out that the Australian constitution does not contain a bill of rights, and that Australia is the only common law country in the world without a national bill of rights. As it would be unwise simply to assume that the rights to which we have become accustomed today will always be respected by governments, and as the common law itself does not provide adequate protection of human rights, West Australia needs a bill of rights, according to McGinty, in order to 'avoid the complacency which has seen human rights diminished or abrogated elsewhere' (2007, p.2). Such encroachment has already been noticed in Australia with the introduction of the aforementioned new anti-terror legislation (McKay, 2007; Grayling, 2007).

Whilst a human rights bill does not address the question of the voting age directly, it does, however, highlight the growing concern of the Western Australian Government to ensure that all its citizens are treated with equal respect and dignity by government departments and agencies. Under section 18 of the draft bill 'every person has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination -

- a) to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen elections; and
- b) if eligible according to law, to vote and be elected at periodic State and local government elections that guarantee the free expression of the will of the electors' (Government of Western Australia, 2007).

If participation in public affairs is to be a right enjoyed by 'every person', then the question remains as to just how a young 'person' might be encouraged and enabled to participate in the future.

* * *

In a move to alter the *Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill 2006*, the Greens (WA)

argued for an amendment to lower the voting age to 16. Referring to the report by the Victorian Electoral Commission (discussed later in this paper), the Honourable Giz Watson MLC pointed to the current discrepancy of 16 and 17 year olds gaining certain adult responsibilities and rights at this age, whilst not being able to vote until the age of 18. Recognising this stage of life as a transitional period for young people, and that many of them would choose not to vote at this age, she suggested that voting should be optional from 16 to 18 (Watson, 2006). This amendment to the *Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill 2006* was not successful, but it remains a policy of the Greens (WA) to support a lowering of the voting age to 16 years of age.

* * *

The introduction to the Western Australian Citizenship Strategy, *A Voice for All*, states that while the most fundamental expression of a person's democratic right is the right to vote in elections, citizenship concerns 'extend well beyond the ballot box' and that it is important therefore that the views of the people are reflected in public policy (2004, p. 1). In acknowledging the cynicism and disillusionment felt across all levels of society, not just youth, it makes a firm commitment to engage its people in 'all levels of decision-making' (2004, p. 2).

To improve West Australian citizenship status *A Voice for All* lists four key objectives:

- *Knowledge and Understanding* - Knowing how to make a difference so that you can make a difference.
- *Inclusion* - The opportunity for all to participate effectively as active citizens.

- *Participation* - Creating the partnerships that put the public back into public policy.
- *Democratic Governance* - Public trust and confidence in democratic processes.

At a purely practical level, the qualifications of the key objective *Knowledge and Understanding* have a particular relevance to the questions of voting, age and effective engagement. These stress the need to

- Ensure Government information is objective, complete, relevant, easy to find and understand, and accessible to all;
- Provide practical information on how to navigate WA government systems;
- Raise public awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, human rights and the meaning of citizenship;
- Strengthen understanding of the benefits of increased participation and active citizenship;
- Provide information regarding topical issues and key life events; and
- Foster a 'learning society' where citizens play an active role in generating knowledge and understanding.

Beyond this, all qualifications of all key objectives are important for genuinely including the voice of young people in participatory citizenship; particularly, under *Inclusion*, to

- Identify and address barriers to participation such as discrimination, violence, and structural and institutional barriers;
- Unleash the potential of all citizens by working to develop the capacity and skills necessary for effective public participation;

under *Participation* to

- Ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place so that all people and all sectors are

able to participate effectively throughout policy process;

and under *Democratic Governance* to

- Work towards appropriate electoral, legislative and constitutional reform based on the full and equal participation of all.

Crucially for this report, *A Voice for All* emphasises the need for participation at all levels of society and the need for thought and change in order to bring this about. Whilst it recognises the democratic needs beyond voting, it stresses the importance of voting and emphasises: a) the need for accessible and relevant information as a support to participation, b) an environment which encourages understanding of democracy as active experience, and c) the need for parliamentary reform in order for there to truly be *A Voice for All*.

* * *

The ‘Rights of the Child’

This section examines recent children’s rights discussions which draw on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to argue for *child-inclusive practice* at all levels of decision making. Using the parallel of family law it posits the concept of ‘citizenship-in-context’ (Smart, Neale, and Wade, 2001) as an included, yet supported, position for young people to occupy within the type of reciprocal community which *A Voice for All* offers.

The idea of participation and ‘a voice for all’ emerges from the worldwide human rights movement which stresses, in article 1 of the Charter of United Nations, the right for “fundamental freedoms for all”. Following this the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Australia in 1990, takes up this theme in articles 12 and 13, quoted here:

Article 12:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters, affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance of the age and maturity of the child.

Article 13:

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.

The UNCRC is considered to be ground breaking for its inclusion of civil-political rights as rights that should be guaranteed to *all* people, not just adults, thereby paving the way to involve children and young people in a civil and political participation movement which stresses the need for inclusiveness at all levels of decision making (Cohen, 2002, p. 51-65).

A useful parallel for child inclusive practice can be found in the area of family law. The rights of the child, and the notion of the child’s best interests, have been embraced by family law and are now expressed as child inclusiveness in formal and informal legal practice. The principle guiding this development is that a child should have the ability to influence the outcome of the separation process (Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001). Undoubtedly the extreme vulnerability of a child experiencing conflict and change in the

home has influenced the pressing need for change in family law. A young person simply approaching the age of majority would appear not to be in the same position, and yet the comparison is pertinent for its attempt to recognise the fundamental right of the young person to have their voice heard, and for that voice to be influential.

As young people make the transition to adulthood, they take on more of the responsibilities of adult legal status. Helen Loreck and Giz Watson MLC have already pointed out that young people are able to leave school, marry, obtain work, and drive, all before they are eighteen (Loreck, 2005; Watson 2006). Opposing these adult privileges, though, is the inability to rent a home, open a bank account, or vote in an election until the majority of eighteen years of age is reached (Loreck, pp. 20-21). According to Smart, Neale and Wade, supporters of child inclusiveness make a clear link to articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, arguing that a child should be offered the opportunity to participate in all decisions regarding their present and future well being (p. 65).

Maturation capacity of young people is often cited as an argument against the move to lower the voting age, and it could be argued that leaving the voting age as it is at present is indicative of the gradual acquirement of adult responsibility reflected in the current legal status of a young person. Judith Bessant (also Smart et al., 2001) dispenses quickly with assumptions that young people are not 'fully developed human beings' as popular prejudice. She argues that traditional 'child expert' views have contributed to a knowledge 'that has been a long-standing obstacle to young people's participation in democratic process' (2003, p. 96). This view is supported by child psychologist and Norwegian Children's Ombudsman, Flekkoy, who states that it is crucial both for the young person, and for the future of democratic society, that young people are included in

democratic participation (2002, pp.83 -84)¹. To leave young people with certain privileges but without the corresponding and supporting privileges of independent financial control, home rental, and the vote, is to render them stuck and disenfranchised.

Bessant recognises, however, the relative vulnerability of young people due to age and inexperience, and stresses the need for some protection. Smart, et al, develop this thinking with their idea of '*citizenship-in-context*' which acknowledges the partial and contested nature of citizenship status for young people, whilst insisting that citizenship must be practised 'in a context for *all* citizens' (2001, p.110). Implied within the *citizenship-in-context* concept is the responsibility which adults need to take to allow young people to take on their own rights and responsibilities within a supported and enabling environment.

Without a *citizenship-in-context* approach, the value of lowering the voting age is lessened. If voter turn-out is indicative of the disillusionment felt by the young people who are able to vote, lowering it will have little effect for a youth who already feel themselves to be disenfranchised by a lack of voice, vote or no vote. To open up a wider space for youth voice, which includes the opportunity for them to achieve the vote at a younger age, would seem to be of far greater value. Smart, Neale and Wade caution that it is misleading to simply present 'rights' as if they are solutions. They argue that rights bring their own problems of implementation and that 'there need to be parallel strategies that will influence cultural change which work in tandem with more legally focused strategies' (2001, p.108). In the context of this paper's topic, lowering the voting age, whilst we can think here about the right of young people to vote as a solution to the problem of youth engagement, what is also needed is a willingness on the part of both

¹ According to Flekkoy, teenagers are less likely to suffer depression or commit suicide if they feel they are able to influence the world in which they live.

the political system and the broader community to embrace a wider understanding of inclusiveness. To simply 'allow' young people to achieve enfranchisement is to remain in a society of individuals and does not acknowledge our connection as interdependent citizens. Nor does it acknowledge that, at present, young people have good reason to feel disconnected from the process of voting. As adults, our obligations as citizens might extend towards deliberately shifting our stance towards young people.

Following Loreck, and drawing on Smart, et al, and also Bessant, this paper argues that a lowering of the voting age would be beneficial to young people if practised in the context of a supportive, open, and accountable public environment. The approach suggested by Loreck, which allows for voluntary enrolment for sixteen to eighteen year olds, but compulsory voting once enrolled, is one way to provide such support. Others need to be considered. The author of this paper has found no research which supports or advocates raising the voting age, and so sees no value either for young people (who clearly are not seeking this themselves) or therefore, for society as a whole, in pursuing such a position.

The Western Australian Citizenship Strategy has the capacity to address articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, and to open up a space for young people as *citizens-in-context*. In the light of *A Voice for All*, which provides the building blocks for a democratic West Australian government and citizenship, this paper will next consider recent Government and Public Sector inquiries into youth engagement and electoral matters in an attempt to throw light upon areas of participation which might support electoral process for young people, and any possible lowering of the voting age.

PART TWO

Youth, place, and the deepening of education

Recent inquiries into youth and voting.

This section considers five recent reports which inquire into the issues of youth voting. Under the headings *Inclusion*, *Education*, *Practicalities aid participation*, and *The question of age*, and using current youth participatory papers, it emphasises the issues which are important to a discussion of voting age. The reports reviewed are:

- the Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education;
- the inquiry of the Queensland Parliament into youth voting and engagement: *Voices and Votes*;
- the report by the Deputy Electoral Commissioner of the WAEC, Lyn McKay, *The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation: A Western Australian Perspective* (with a particular emphasis on the experience of the Victoria Park by-election);
- the paper by the Victorian Electoral Commission *Lowering the Voting Age*, which looks specifically at the issue of whether or not to change the voting age; and
- the Youth Electoral Study Reports by Murray Print, Lawrence Saha, and Kathy Edwards.

A summary of each of the reports is included as Appendix A.

* * *

The crucial point to be gained from this collection of reports into young people and voting matters is an emergent picture of a youth who are actively and critically engaged in politics, yet reluctant to express themselves through their opportunity to vote. Why is this so? If a lowering of the voting age is to be considered, this reluctance needs to be carefully considered in order to understand the environment in which Australia's youth is choosing to disengage itself from one particular aspect of political process. Without understanding this we run the risk of making a knee-jerk reaction to the symptom of a problem, without addressing the underlying cause. The value of such a move becomes questionable, if not redundant, if we are not listening to the voices of young people when we make it. Writing about the youth vote in Britain, Henn and Weinstein point out that the political system 'faces a crisis of democratic legitimacy' if the need for meaningful participation is not addressed (2006, p.259). Given the similarity of Australia's position to the UK, perhaps this is a caution for us too.

Inclusion

The reports draw attention to a lack of inclusion felt by young people in today's political climate, and all see it as a problem to be addressed. Having noted the problem of voter turn-out and youth engagement, the *Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters* (JSCEM) wonders whether it is the actual 'product' (political process itself) or the 'marketing' (education about political process) which is the cause of the problem. It is an interesting question, for whilst acknowledging that more youth appropriate, practical measures can be taken to ensure ease of voting and enrolment, it also throws open the discussion of the nature of inclusiveness. This would seem to be in line with the ethos of *A Voice for All* which wishes to 'work towards appropriate electoral, legislative and constitutional reform based on the full and equal participation of all' (2004, p. 6). The question also, however, reveals a telling distinction between democracy and education.

According to the JSCEM, a survey conducted by the Australian Clearinghouse of Youth Studies in 2003 revealed that only 13% of people aged between 12 - 25 years believed that the views of young people produced a response from government. For the JSCEM the solution to this problem lies in making better information and education available, both of which will enable young people to make the connection between their own lives and politics. Whilst initiatives such as interactive websites for politicians and political parties will undoubtedly facilitate better communication (JSCEM, 2007, p. 25), education alone cannot reconnect people to a system from which they feel alienated. For Henn and Weinstein education is included in an approach which can appear to place too much emphasis on 'mechanistic solutions' in order to boost election turnout, rather than addressing the deeper conundrum and engaging with people's disengagement (2006, p.520).

The Queensland report, *Voices and Votes*, comes closer to a more complex analysis of the problem. Beyond the recommendation for information and educational assistance it suggests that young people have their own space for consultation and planning. According to Flekkoy, this is crucial for authentic participation of young people, for 'it is in the company of their equals that children learn the rules for democracy and discover how majority decisions are made amongst equals' (2002, p.84). In recognising that young people need to be able to develop their own 'multiple' public spheres, away from the traditional 'single, all-inclusive' public sphere, Bessant also demonstrates the advantages of recasting policies from a young person's perspective. She stresses that:

Venues for communicating that are not under the control or management of dominant groups are necessary to begin articulating the right words, to express particular... interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (2003, p. 97).

To make available to young people public spaces where they can engage in political

process on their own terms, is to offer a place where they can begin to forge their own identity and concerns, free from the dominating influence of adult centred understandings. Politics in this sense becomes known through lived experience, rather than solely through the connective mechanisms of education as information. Good education is vital, though, to any understanding of democracy, and all the reports emphasise this.

Education

Away from the public sphere, and into the private, the JSCEM and the YES Reports highlight the significance of family as a place to learn democratic principles and electoral knowledge. It is important to keep this in mind for, because of the necessarily private nature of this educational source, the importance of school and education, as a nurturing space for democracy, is thrown into the spotlight. As young people spend 12 years of their childhood in formal education, schooling has the potential to endorse democratic principles learnt at home and to fill in the gaps. Saha, Print and Edwards, in the YES Reports, endorse the need for further educational input, but recognise also that schooling *includes* the experience of being at school, as well as the education received there. For this reason they support the involvement of democratically ingrained and inclusive student councils and elections in school life.

At this point the JSCEM's question as to whether the problem with youth engagement is to do with the 'product' (politics) or the 'marketing' of political process (education) becomes particularly salient for if, as the YES Reports indicate, democracy is learned through one's lived experience of it whilst at home and school, then product and marketing become the same thing. Leading from this, if democracy is simply presented to children as a concept to which they must contribute at some future point (rather than a

school ethos in which they are included, and are expected to contribute to on a daily basis) they are unlikely to embrace the notion of democratic principles, presented in such an abstract form. Lyn McKay's paper draws attention to the fact that Australian students have been shown to have a 'problem' understanding concepts such as 'the common good' and suggests that this is due not so much to their ignorance of politics, but more to do with their 'disengagement from current political practice'. This is to be expected if the 'common good' of current political practice is not extended into the lives of children at school (McKay, p. 24).

In her paper, *Citizenship in Schools: the gap between theory and practice*, Sally Varnham, from Massey University in New Zealand asks whether schools are equipping students well enough to take on the role of active citizen upon leaving. 'Citizenship is taught in schools' she says, 'but to what extent is it practised?' (2005, p. 53). In raising this question she argues that school life provides the 'crucial template' for understanding democracy and that often schools pass only lip-service to the right to participate. Research undertaken in New Zealand exposed 'a "mysterious gap" between the rhetoric and the practice of meaningful participation of young people within their schools', while Australian research points to the need to develop an 'innovative approach wider than explicit knowledge required by individual disciplines' (2005, p.57). The question posed by the JSCEM (product or marketing?) itself exposes a gap in understanding between political process and its relevance to students' lives.

The YES team emphasise the importance of student councils as a core part of democratic school life for children, whilst all reports support the need for better education. There existed in Australia, until recently, the organisation *Professional Association of SRC [Student Representative Council] Teachers / Advisors* (PASTA),

formed in 1995, whose aim was to address the principles of student participation mentioned above (this initiative is described in greater detail in Appendix B). Some European countries have taken the idea of student participation a step further and have mandated practice such as pupil councils and regulations which require pupils to be involved in curriculum planning and decisions on teaching methods. Great emphasis is placed on human rights education and the growth of youth parliaments as lobby forums (2005, p. 61-62). In concluding, Varnham has this to say:

New Zealand and Australia are democratic societies characterized by the right to hold a point of view and the freedom to express it. We have representative governments, which ensure all citizens have the right to express political preferences and to participate in decision-making in society. At the age of 18 citizens of Australia and New Zealand are legally required to register on the electoral roll, and they have not only a right but also a responsibility to vote in elections and at national referenda. Practically as soon as young people leave school, and sometimes while they are still there, they are expected to play a part in decision-making as members of society. How do they learn to do this? How does the culture of participation develop when young people are not encouraged to participate in their education, the area which has a major impact on their lives? A school is a powerful setting where children learn social interaction and where roles and relationships work strongly to influence their well-being...The challenge for education policy makers and administrators is to devise and implement systems which not only allow for student participation but ensure procedures for their effectiveness (2005, p. 63).

In the light of this statement many things become clearer. It is easy to understand the reluctance of young people to vote, revealed in *Voices and Votes*, when they are unfamiliar with the sense of responsibility to self and community which a more supportive and inclusive education could give them. Their reluctance is entirely reasonable given the disempowered position they find themselves to be in. Easy to understand also is that lowering the voting age, as the VEC suggests, could have a positive impact on enrolment numbers if approached sensitively, diligently and with an eye to the long term benefit of Australia's youth. The value of such a change would also be to the benefit of a society more prepared to engage with and listen to young people 'on their own field' (JSCEM), as well as to young people themselves.

Sensitive educational practice, with a rigorous eye to inclusion, might also tackle the

gender discrepancy articulated in the YES Reports. The Youth Electoral Study reveals that females participate in more mainstream forms of political activity (such as letter writing, petition signing) and are more likely to vote than males, whereas boys participate in less acceptable forms of political behaviour (such as protest, and demonstrations), and are less likely to vote than girls. Lyn McKay's report raises the question of whether boys need particular attention and, perhaps as a shorter term solution, this might be the case (2006, p. 15). If, however, boys become part of the focus of an overall curriculum which emphasises inclusiveness and social cooperation for all children within a democratic environment, then the concern of gender discrepancy need not become an issue in its own right.

Practicalities aid participation

The particular problem of low youth turn-out for the Victoria Park 2006 by-election (64% - the lowest since 1986), raised by Lyn McKay's report, could in part be explained by the more general malaise of voter apathy, hypothesised by Hugh McKay as 'the dreamy period', mentioned earlier in this paper. Triggered by back-to-back elections and a safe seat, the Victoria Park electorate may simply have lost interest in the process of politics at a local level. Problems such as voter fatigue, recently imposed enrolment cut-off times and unsuitable polling place locations pose barriers which could contribute to the frustration of a disinclined electorate. Lyn McKay argues therefore for particular instrumental electoral engagement strategies when participation is at an all-time low. This is supported in the evidence submitted by young people to *Voices and Votes*, which responds by suggesting, among other things, the trial of new polling locations, the launch of a touring democracy bus, the use of interactive websites by Parliament, and the provision of resources for Members of Parliament to consult with young people. Other instrumental measures are endorsed by the JSCEM, such as tracking the success

of the Australian Electoral Commission Birthday Card initiative, and the Rock Enrol website.

Practicalities such as the use of interactive technology, a democracy bus, and consultation with parliamentary members can help young people who appear to feel ignored by politicians and would like to experience more meaningful contact with the people who represent them. It would also help to address the public perception of youth 'ignorance', raised by Gribbin in the VEC report. The UK Crick report of 1998 stresses the importance of internet use for citizenship education, but cautions that the internet is expected by young people to be interactive, not simply for imbibing information. Crick also points out that not all citizens are online, and therefore too heavy a reliance upon this technology could contribute to the divide between the information rich and the information poor (1998, pp. 67-70).

The question of age:

Both the JSCEM and *Voices and Votes* recommend keeping the voting age at 18, although *Voices and Votes* maintains that further research needs to be conducted into the topic, which continues to be debated at an international level. The report by the VEC appears to favour lowering the voting age and stresses the advantage of effective education for voters who are still at school (2004, p. 10). Whilst the response of young people themselves to the question of whether to lower the voting age is often conservative (*Voices and Votes*, 2006; Office for Children and Youth, Western Australia, 2006), the move is firmly supported by the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA). They have good reason to do so. As an organisation which advocates and facilitates the voice of West Australian youth being heard, YACWA is well aware of the problems faced by youth in terms of their democratic participation in political process.

Beyond advocating that 'young people... have the option to vote from at least the age of 16', YACWA lobbies

for the involvement of young people in the whole policy development process, not simply the consultation period. This will enable young people to get involved in setting priorities; planning and making decisions that have an impact on their lives.

and

removing the barriers that prevent many young people from participating in the community as full citizens, for example, advocating for improved education of young people about political processes and their voting rights and youth friendly versions of policy documents and legislation from all major political parties (2004).

As much research suggests, it does not make sense to lower the voting age without also embracing these two latter points from the YACWA policy. The responses of young people, shown in Part C of *Voices and Votes*, and elsewhere to the question of age (2006, p.58), illustrate a lack of connection between their own lives and politics. If, as Lyn McKay argues, they were able to embrace politics more fully by being, in turn, embraced by *it* (2006, p. 44), answers to this question would begin to change. If politics has no relevance to their lives, why then, should they feel competent, or desirous even, of a vote? (Henn and Weinstein, 2006; Varnham, 2005). This does not mean to say, of course, that a preference by the majority of young people to retain the existing voting age should disenfranchise those who would like to vote.

Gribbin moots the idea of optional voting at 17, instead of 16, as a practical compromise in order to avoid confusion at State and Federal levels and subsequent administrative difficulties. Enrolment at 17 then simply becomes full, rather than provisional. He does point out, however, that in other parts of the world it has been shown to be a manageable situation to have different voting ages at the State and Federal level (Gribbin, p. 11-12). Giz Watson MLC, of the Greens (WA) reminded Parliament, during the second reading of the Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill 2006, that voluntary voting was easily managed by Western Australia when Indigenous peoples achieved a

non-compulsory vote between 1962 and 1983, when it became compulsory (Watson, 2006).

As a postscript to the question of voting age, Gribbin raises the issue of teenage pregnancy by quoting a young woman of 17 who articulates her argument for young people to be able to vote. Listing her concerns for the financial burdens which young people bear, she mentioned the paradoxical situation where a 17 year old is eligible to claim the government's \$3000 baby bonus, yet is not able to vote. To deny young mothers the vote, whilst expecting them to competently raise the next generation, seems unreasonable in the extreme.

* * *

The reports discussed above illustrate a clear need to address the lack of democratic process in the lives of young people. To this end any lowering of the voting age and attention to youth voice and participation need to happen in concert. It could well be argued that the reason for the reluctance of the majority of young people to lower the voting age is due largely to this lack; a lack which inevitably leads to disengagement from electoral processes. The pattern is therefore circular, and needs to be broken.

In the following section, this paper concludes by connecting the evidence of these reports to the ethos of *The Western Australian Citizenship Strategy: A Voice for All*, and the citizen-in-context approach which emerges from child rights' discussions. Finally it makes some recommendations designed to address the problems of engagement on different levels.

PART THREE

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion:

The problem of youth participation and voting could be cast as one of *connection* - connection between issues and their relevance to voting, technology and voting, civics education and citizenship, and, not least, between adults and the young people we are concerned about. Tackled on all levels, some inroads might be made towards ensuring a democratic life for young people which would lead to their desire and propensity to vote at elections.

Mechanical measures to ensure better catchment and ease of voting are important for lessening the difficulties associated with voting for young people. Strongly targeted advertising, SMS enrolment reminders, the continuation of the birthday card initiative, relocation of polling places to more modern community spaces, can all enhance the experience of enrolment and voting for young people. They cannot, however, reconnect young people when used in isolation.

The gap between wanting to 'have their say' and wanting to vote has surfaced many times during this paper. There is a simple and fair, if symptomatic, remedy to this problem and that is to make voting optional for 16 and 17 year olds. After all, no other right of passage into adulthood is enforceable by law and we do not require that young people leave home, drive cars, drink alcohol, or marry once they reach a certain age. Society and the law respect their ability to approach these adult activities at their own

pace, and so it should be with voting. The problems raised by the instigation of optional voting are purely managerial, and can be overcome if we are focussed upon the benefit of young people.

Getting beneath the problem of young people not wanting to vote yet wanting more influence over political decision making is harder to approach. Young people appear to find politics and politicians inaccessible and dismissive. One answer may well be for political parties and Members of Parliament to have lively and informative interactive websites. Genuinely offered and engaged in, this approach might begin to chip away at the gap between young people and politics as the JSCEM hopes. Another answer could be accountability within government towards the input of young people. Queensland has already made steps towards this with the creation of the Queensland Youth Charter and it is to be hoped that this brings some measure of accountability for young people there. Yet another would be to address the nature of schools as democratic institutions which foster citizenship, as well as teaching it.

Much of this requires legislative reform and, as Judith Bessant says, *'There is no legislative or other framework operating, or proposed, that ensures what young people want or don't want will not be overridden by adults who disagree with them'* (her italics) (2003, p. 98). Lowering the voting age is at least one legislative change which will affect a significant proportion of young people. If it is to be done, it needs to be supported by other measures in order that young people do not continue to be disaffected by political processes and instead feel themselves to be citizens within a context of supported rights and obligations. On a practical level it makes sense to lower the voting age to 16 or 17, as at this age, and with the democratic and educational experience of school still to hand, young people may be more likely to cast a vote than an 18 year old (Print, 2006).

More importantly, such an act would recognise and offer enfranchisement to those young people who are already operating in the adult world and who would like the opportunity to influence the outcome of elections, *just like other adults*. There is a range of organisations and approaches which can support democratic and electoral processes for young people.

Appendix B summarises some examples of initiative and commitment to youth participation in a local and international context. At the State level it looks at examples from - the Office for Children and Youth, YACWA, the Electoral Education Centre, and the Educational Reference Group; interstate and Federally - the Queensland Youth Charter, the Australian Electoral Commission publications and PASTA. At the international level examples of youth participation from the Power Report in the UK, and the Euridem Project, from Europe will be examined.

If we are to take seriously the need for legally entrenched human rights currently under discussion in Western Australia, and include young people as 'persons' with the right to participate in decision making; if we are to extend to young people a real notion of participation which becomes part of their known and lived experience of democracy; if we are, as adults, to engage with the fact that young people feel that the 'truth' of democratic living has been withheld from them, then we need to acknowledge to ourselves that the vote is currently denied to them at the expense of their quality of life, and their growth into maturity and responsibility, and therefore at the expense of the community as a whole, and act upon that.

Young Western Australians deserve the ability to influence their own lives and to think of themselves as citizens, and they deserve the support of older people who recognise the

context of vulnerability in which they do this. The Western Australian Government has produced a strategy which extends democratic principles towards its people. We now need to work towards embracing young people into those principles which seek to give *A Voice for All*.

To this end this paper makes a number of proposals:

Recommendations

1. That the voting age be lowered to 16 or 17 and that enrolment and voting be voluntary until the age of 18.
2. That the possibility of automatic enrolment be considered.
3. That the Western Australian Electoral Commission consider the relocation of polling places as the inconvenience of current places is referred to many times by young people.
4. That the AEC, the WAEC, Members of Parliament and Political Parties investigate further use of interactive websites as channels for discussion and information on political issues and process.
5. That the WAEC liaise with the Office for Children and Youth and use the connecting facility of *The Panel* for any future focus group, study or questionnaire they may wish to assemble (see Appendix B).

6. That the WAEC supports further research into education as a model for democratic life and presents to Parliament the need for legislative reform to reflect the values of such, enshrined in the Western Australian Citizenship Strategy.

7. That in the interim, Western Australia develops a Youth Charter similar to the Queensland Youth Charter, which allows for accountable practice within government for young people.

8. That in any advertising, the WAEC underscores the connection between issues and voting, acknowledging to young people that voting is simply *part* of democratic process, if an extremely important one.

Appendix A

a) *Civics and Electoral Education*

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, May 2007

Engagement:

In terms of identifying barriers to engagement, the JSCEM found that young people are turned off conventional forms of politics by three converging points. According to the JSCEM, young people:

- see conventional forms of politics as unappealing, often due to the media's negative portrayal of politics and politicians;
- young people tend to perceive conventional politics and the democratic process as removed from them - that these processes do not directly affect their lives; and
- There is a sense that conventional forms of politics and democratic processes do not take heed of young people's voices (2007, p. 8).

The committee commented that when young people are able to make the connection of the relevance of politics to their everyday lives, elections themselves become more relevant. To enable this connection, a better understanding of political process is needed. In quoting Print and Saha, from the Youth Electoral Study, who suggest that 'we need to find more meaningful ways to engage young people' (Print, Saha, and Edwards, 2004), the committee reiterated the words of 'many submitters' that 'the key to this challenge lies in providing more information' (2007, p. 12).

Apart from the resources of school education, information is seen to be disseminated by parents, the media, and electoral commissions. Whilst parents provide the most obvious link, outside of school, between politics and a young person's life, the committee acknowledges that parental influence runs the risk of not always remaining impartial. Although problems of distrust with the media have already been mentioned, the opportunity remains within the media to explore more relevant sources of information to young people such as advertising during popular television shows, the internet, and blogs. The committee points out that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and state electoral commissions play a vital role in promoting electoral awareness. Initiatives such as the Birthday Card, visits to year 11 and 12 students in NSW in the run-up to an election by an electoral commissioner, and the involvement of the AEC in the youth event Big Day Out, and the Rock Enrol website all help to bring an awareness of the necessity and eligibility to enrol into a young person's life.

The committee cautioned, however, that whilst young people may be engaged and critical, they may not be actively seeking information on enrolment, and the challenge remains to engage them 'on their field'. In an age of 'digital natives' we should be using young people's preferred media (2007, p. 20). In concluding that more needs to be done to improve the sense of disconnection young people feel, the committee made some recommendations, summarised here:

- That the AEC tracks the success of the Birthday Card initiative;
- That the co-operation of education authorities in providing the AEC with 'appropriate data for the purposes of electoral enrolment' be ensured; and
- That the AEC determines the cost and feasibility of initiatives such as -

- Emailing an electoral form to all year 12 students;
- Including an electoral form with tertiary institution application forms; and instigating an SMS service to enable young people to request enrolment forms (2007, p. 23-25).

Whilst the committee noted the call for lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 from some quarters, and was aware of the international debate on this matter, it did not believe this would improve enrolment turnout for young people. It did, however, encourage the use of interactive personal websites to be created by Members of Parliament and political parties to better facilitate young people's access to Parliament and politics.

Education:

Under the heading *Young People's Civic Knowledge*, the JSCEM articulates the themes of the educational initiative *Discovering Democracy*. This programme, initiated by Paul Keating's Labor Government and maintained by the Liberal-National Coalition Government, was intended to 'lay the foundations for ongoing civics and citizenship education across a range of education sectors' (2007, p. 31). Among the lessons learned from evidence to the Committee about the implementation of such programmes are the following:

- given the significant discrepancy in the subjects in which civics and citizenship is taught across the states and territories, a more concerted, coordinated approach is required;
- civics and electoral education can (and should) be taught from primary school up [sic];
- more needs to be done to explicitly link the goals of civic knowledge and civic

engagement and that this is especially required at senior secondary level;

- continuing professional development for teachers is essential;
- while links exist between civics, Australian history and values education curricula, often these are not clearly defined for teachers;
- parents provide an important reinforcement of civics lessons; and
- outside school activities stimulate greater civic awareness, knowledge and engagement (2007, p. 35).

The committee concluded that education is vital to improving civic engagement and recommends that the AEC, in collaboration with the State Electoral Commissions, establishes a short educational unit to be introduced to lower secondary and year 11 and 12 students.

b) *Voices & Votes* :

A Parliamentary Committee Inquiry Into Young People Engaging in Democracy.

Queensland 2006

The recommendations of this report to the Parliament of Queensland by the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee aspire to:

- empower young people to take responsibility for decisions about social and moral issues, to be involved in their communities, and to be 'literate' about democracy;
- empower young people to:
 - ⇒ Be informed citizens
 - ⇒ enquire and communicate
 - ⇒ engage and take responsible action
- ensure our system of representative democracy values the diversity of young Queenslanders and values their engagement in decisions and action (2006, p. 3).

Evidence from young Queenslanders was heard at workshops, by way of an on-line poll and polling at a regional sitting of Parliament, in written submissions, through exit polls, and at a youth jury held at Parliament House in 2006. Through listening to the voices of young people and discussing with them their concerns about democracy, the committee was able to make a number of recommendations to the Queensland Parliament. These included proposals that

The Premier

- launch a 'democracy bus' to tour rural and regional Queensland;
- start a program of Young Democracy Ambassadors who reflect the diversity of young Queenslanders and promote the importance of young people's engagement in democracy in Queensland;

- conduct an annual audit of democratic engagement in Queensland;

The Minister for Communities

- re-launch the Queensland Youth Charter and make sure it is implemented by all Queensland Government departments and agencies;
- employ young people to listen to /consult with young people in their own spaces;
- ask the State Youth Council to advise on a strategy to engage young people who are active in their communities to create an umbrella organisation which would assist young people to create change;

The Minister for Local Government

- develop for local governments a best practice manual about engaging with young people;

The Minister for Education

- provide all students in Queensland (P -12, and equivalent) with an entitlement to learn about democracy, including their rights and responsibilities as citizens and how to take action on local community issues - an Active Democracy program for students;

The Attorney General

- Retain 18 as the voting age;
- Introduce, when possible, 'direct' or automatic provisional enrolment at 17;

Queensland Parliament

- Provide resources to assist Members of Parliament to listen, consult and inform young people;

Committees of the Queensland Parliament

- Use innovative engagement methods, including interactive technologies, to maximise engagement by a diversity of Queensland people in committee activities;

Electoral Commission Queensland

- trial new locations for polling stations;
- evaluate awareness and information activities, with thought given to -
 - ⇒ upgrading the ECQ website to provide more accessible, interactive information for young people about enrolment and voting;
 - ⇒ using young people to liaise with schools, universities and TAFEs, workplaces and young people in Indigenous communities about enrolment and voting
 - ⇒ supporting non-partisan, informative coverage of state election campaigns and election nights, by and for young people.

Political Parties

- provide for distribution, a short, accessible document setting out party history, philosophy and policies;

Media

- make sure news and current affairs programmes include issues of importance to young people;
- produce and air programmes regarding democracy made by and for young people.

Voices and Votes does not recommend lowering the voting age from eighteen years to sixteen, but does suggest the need to revisit this question as more research becomes available. When this question was posed to young people during the inquiry the response was varied, and an online poll revealed that 32% of people aged 12 - 25 believed that the voting age should be lowered, compared to 68% who didn't. When

asked the question, however, 'would you like to have a greater say in the policies and / or laws developed by state and local governments in Queensland?' 93% responded in the affirmative, compared to 7% in the negative. As a result of this indication of a youth population clearly desirous of participation in policy making, the Queensland committee has made its many recommendations of inclusive and youth directed practice. Again, as does the JSCEM, *Voices and Votes* recommends improvements to electoral process and continual monitoring of education initiatives.

**c) *The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation,
a Western Australian Perspective.***

Lyn McKay

The report of Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Lyn McKay, places particular emphasis on youth engagement, barriers to voting, and engagement strategies within a Western Australian context. It points out that while Federal elections produce a consistent 93 - 95% participation rate of the general population, surveys conducted by the Australian Youth Electoral Study showed that only 49% of young people aged 18 - 30 would choose to vote if voting were no longer compulsory. Of particular concern to Western Australia is the poor voter turnout at the 2006 by-election for Victoria Park, where the rate dropped to a record low of 64.04%. Of those aged 18 - 29 in this electorate, only 44% turned out to vote. McKay lists six possible barriers to voting which may be exacerbating this problem, summarised here:

- legislative complexities such as Proof of Identity may especially impede a young person's need for fast and easy enrolment;
- new enrolment cut-off times at the Federal level mean that, for new enrolments, the electoral roll will close at 8pm on the day that the writ is issued. This cut-off will also affect those wishing to change their enrolment details. Given that it is most likely to be young people who need to newly enrol, or have changed their address, this change would seem to impact on them more severely than the general population;
- routine changes to electoral boundaries may cause confusion among the electorate;
- voter fatigue may have a negative effect on voter turn-out when, as with the Victoria Park by-election, the electorate were expected to vote at Federal, State, and local government level a total of four times during a period of less than two years;
- differing ways of marking ballot papers at different levels of government election may

cause confusion and lead to a higher proportion of informal votes;

- international research indicates that the location of polling places may no longer prove to be easily accessible to all people, given the changes in lifestyle and work patterns (responses from young people in the *Voices and Votes* inquiry would indicate this to be true for Australians also).

According to McKay, 48% of young Victoria Park residents did not vote because they were unaware of the election (compared to 31% of 26-39 year olds, and 22% of those aged 40-60). Added to this is the concern that if citizens do not vote for three consecutive elections, they are unlikely to do so thereafter (2006, p.37). This presents the Western Australian Electoral Commission and local and State government with the very particularly focused project of reaching out to its young electorate, and, given that State elections occur every four years, achieving this within the timeframe of twelve years from reaching the age of majority at eighteen. In concluding, Lyn McKay points out the unreasonableness of a society which expects 'today's youth to share and embrace the "common good" and appreciate society's democratic structures, [when] society does not extend a "common embrace" and [include] them in a more meaningful way'. Along with attendance to electoral reform and education, she suggests a way forward which places young people themselves as the drivers of any future participatory and democratic governance (2006, p. 44).

d) Lowering the Voting Age

A discussion of the issues from the Victorian Electoral Commission's perspective.

In approaching the question of whether or not to lower the voting age, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) poses two questions as a guiding framework for establishing a meaningful answer:

1. "Based on what criteria do we decide whether or not to allow people to vote in Victorian elections?"
2. "Based on what criteria do we decide to exclude people who meet the criteria in answer to question 1?" (Gribbin, 2004, p. 1).

According to this paper 16 and 17 year olds have a 'substantial stake' in government decisions, and the only criteria which may then exclude them from voting is that they may come under the category of people who 'by reason of being of unsound mind , are **incapable of understanding the nature and significance of enrolment and voting**' (Gribbin, p. 2). For Gribbin this may relate to immaturity or incapacity due to:

- 1 lack of maturity;
- 2 not enough life experience on which to base decisions;
- 3 lack of interest; and
- 4 ignorance.

Addressing these positions, Gribbin reveals the irony to be found in teenagers own reluctance to take on the mantle of adulthood and responsible voting too early. To draw attention to the fact that they do not feel experienced or informed enough to vote at an

earlier age, is an indication of a thoughtful and mature state of mind. Gribbin questions what additional life experience we may expect from a young person aged 18 as opposed to one aged 16 or 17, and reminds us of the research which indicates apathy is an indicator of *'the effectiveness of voting or the extent to which politicians are actually interested in [young people]'*, rather than a lack of interest in political issues, per se. A study in the UK, he says, suggests that 16 and 17 year olds' lack of enfranchisement relates directly to politicians lack of interest in young people and may be, therefore, a cause in itself of the lack of interest in voting (Gribbin, p. 6).

The category of 'ignorance' receives similar deconstructive treatment and ends with the words of a 17 year old woman who was certainly not enamoured of receiving her entitlement to *enrol* to vote, without the ensuing entitlement to *actually* vote, on her 17th birthday. Citing HECS debt and education as major concerns in the lives of young people of her age, she pointed out the imbalance of societal privilege which allows 17 year olds to be eligible for the Federal Government's \$3000 baby bonus (with all the major adult responsibility which this implies) and yet does not allow them to cast a vote at election time.

In summing up, Gribbin believes that lowering the voting age to 16 or 17 year olds would work towards countering apathy and disillusionment, rather than adding to it. Some of the advantages to be gained from this are quoted here:

- lowering the voting age to an age when people are still in school would allow more effective education programmes due to them being more relevant to student's immediate lives;
- in addition it would be appropriate for the VEC to send 16/17 year olds a specially targeted information package when they enrol;

- these changes would reduce voter ignorance overall;
- by not dismissing younger voters, fewer young people may develop an attitude of “politicians don’t care about me” which continues into later life; and
- democracy will be enhanced by the inclusion of additional viewpoints with a different perspective and the encouragement of politicians to take these perspectives into account when forming policy (2004, p.10-11).

Disadvantages may be:

- Possible confusion among the public about who is entitled to vote due to different entitlements at State and Federal levels;
- Possible confusion if voting is not compulsory for 16/17 year olds but compulsory for people over 18; and
- Administrative difficulties from having different criteria for being on the State electoral roll versus the Federal roll.

As a compromise, and to minimise the above disadvantages, Gribbin suggests lowering the voting age to 17, making voting non-compulsory for 17 year olds, and sending out education packages with enrolment. This he believes would make for a smooth transition into a new system and, drawing on international examples, he adds ‘it is possible to manage a system in which there are different voting ages for different levels of government’ (Gribbin, p. 12).

**e) The influence of family and the impact of gender in
the Youth Electoral Study**

Lawrence J. Saha, Murray Print, and Kathy Edwards

The four year national project (ongoing to date) of the Youth Electoral Study (YES) has raised some interesting points with regard to the gender of the young electorate and the influence of family on their attitude to voting. When answers to questions, such as asking young people *what political activities they had already engaged in*, were sorted according to gender, a clear pattern began to emerge. Whilst females exceeded males, and often quite significantly so, in almost all culturally acceptable avenues of political activity mentioned by the YES team (such as letter writing, petitioning), males exceeded females, again, significantly, in the three less 'acceptable' forms (occupation as protest, damaging things as protest, and use of violence). Saha, Print and Edwards confirm that this is consistent with previous research findings.

When this pattern is examined in the context of a young person's intention to vote, it is revealed that the relationship between 'normative' or non 'normative' political activity and intention to vote is quite different. Students who choose the 'acceptable' channels of political activity are far more likely to cast a vote in a Federal election, even if it was voluntary. Females consistently outnumber males in this category.

Further to this the YES Reports note that a young person's experience of participation at school has an important influence on their adult political behaviour. Participation, for instance in student government, is described as an informal and 'hidden curriculum', and that 'under certain circumstances the hidden curriculum can be more effective and more powerful than the manifest curriculum' (year, report 2, p. 26). Importantly, the effects of

an undemocratic school life may impact negatively upon a young person's intention to vote, for

Where the opportunities for democratic experience in schools are undermined, the ensuing student cynicism and disenchantment may remain into adulthood and be related to adult participation in politics and elections, including the processes of enrolment and voting (ibid.).

Saha, Print and Edwards conclude this section by noting that school experience is vital for determining adult political participation and suggest that more advantage should be made of school election guidelines, such as can be found through the Australian Electoral Commission. The *Discovering Democracy* curriculum is also mentioned as containing programmes which have the possibility to help young people experience participatory democracy in the class room.

Overwhelmingly, both males and females are reported to receive the majority of their political information from their parents and from the television, although as an alternative source boys rely on the internet and magazines slightly more than girls. Young people are far from passive though, in their consumption of information and are revealed to be analytical in their portrayal of family discussions, and more than occasionally distrustful of media representation on the television. Whilst fathers are cited as the greater source of political information, mothers would appear to take on more of the responsibility of helping young people to enrol and vote.

An examination of the correlation between the source of information about voting, and intention to vote, revealed newspapers, followed by parents, to be the two greatest influencing sources. Television was the third. Students who believed their parents to have 'strongly influenced [their] attitude towards voting' (ibid, no. 3, p. 21) had a much

greater intention to vote than those who disagreed with this statement. The experience of voting itself, however, was generally accepted by both parents (as reported by their children) and students as a negative experience. Report 3 points out the difference 'between the active way that participants tended to learn about politics and the passive way they tended to learn about voting' (Saha et al, p. 31).

In concluding Report no. 3, Saha, Print and Edwards point to the complex nature and importance of family as an educational source, or otherwise, for future political participation and voting by young people. Positive school experience is therefore vital to offer a balancing influence in terms of what might be learned at home. Of particular note was the contrast evident between the active desire of young people to express their political views, and the passive nature of their attitude towards voting.

Appendix B

Policy and initiative, home and abroad.

Western Australia:

The Office for Children and Youth

The Vision of the Office for Children and Youth (OCY), is to

- Build an environment that promotes and develops the ideas of young Western Australians.

And its mission to

- Connect all young West Australians with government and community, and
- Shape government policy and programs with insights and experiences from young West Australians (OCY website, Online).

To this end it has taken a number of important steps towards the inclusion of young people in community decision and policy making. *Telling the Emperor* is a publication designed as a guide to youth participation in decision making. Written in two sections, one for young people and one for organisations, it takes as its premise that 'youth' is a socially constructed category which excludes young adult people from the rights and responsibilities of other adults. Its aim is to begin to bridge this gap for young people by advising a path to meaningful, rather than tokenistic, participation. Whilst acknowledging that not all young people can vote, it points out that, never-the-less participation in decision making is a 'fundamental right for all people, regardless of age' (OCY, p. 11) and advises on best practice models for organisations, and participation methods for young people.

Active Participation of Children in your Organisation, is a more detailed publication which aims, among other things, to develop 'policies and services that more effectively meet the needs of children and young people' by advising on how to set up a young person's advisory group (OCY, p. 1).

The most recent initiative by the Office for Children and Youth is the development of *The Panel*. Still in the early days of implementation *The Panel* is an online forum for youth voice, offering email surveys, online discussions and targeted focus groups on the views of young Western Australians. Its aim is to include young people in decision making from a local to a legislative level, the hope being that Members of Parliament will begin to make use of this very available facility. Organisations who wish to consult with young people are required to give their details, and young people are required to fill out a questionnaire - giving their details, and parental consent if they are under 18 years of age. The OCY is advertising this forum widely, including all high schools, and so it is hoped that there will be a good response from all stake-holders.

The Electoral Education Centre

The Electoral Education Centre (EEC), at the Constitutional Centre in Perth, offers a range of interactive educational opportunities for students on class visits to the city. It also has a travelling component which can visit schools on request. Aimed at both primary and high school ages, students visiting the centre can expect to view an informative audio/visual presentation of constitutional history and voting procedure, join in a discussion on the importance and practice of voting - including the opportunity to participate in a mock election, and fill out activity sheets using the interactive panels in a room provided. For secondary students the topics covered can be varied in accordance with student preference. The centre also offers assistance to schools wishing to conduct school elections.

Evidence from the author of this paper suggests that students enjoy this opportunity to learn about electoral matters, particularly the mock election which is offered in an engaging and informal manner, with much opportunity for student input. If the significance of democratic student life is to be better understood in Western Australia, and with it the growth of student elections, the role of the EEC could become even more important as a future mechanism for supporting an inclusive educational experience.

The Educational Reference Group

The Educational Reference Group (ERG) monitors and advises on civics educational matters and draws its membership from Parliament, the Education Department, the Curriculum Council, the EEC, the AEC, the Constitutional Centre, Murdoch University, Francis Burt etc. As such it is a vitally important element to young people's experience of democracy, both as 'watch dog' and instrument for change.

Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia

YACWA describes itself as 'the Peak Body for the Western Australian youth affairs sector', and its aim is to promote rights and social justice for young Western Australians.

YACWA's mission is stated here:

- To strengthen the trust, cooperation, collaboration, professionalism and voice of the non-government youth sector so it can serve the young people of Western Australia.
- To be a united, independent and active advocate for the non-government youth sector that is both supported and respected by the sector and the wider community.
- To actively promote equity, equality, access and participation for all young people in the Western Australian Community.

YACWA supports the principles of human rights and the rights of the child and believes that all people 'have the right to be involved fully in personal development, community life and decision making processes'. In acknowledging the legal inconsistencies apparent for young people in achieving independence YACWA is committed to:

- promoting policies and programmes which empower young people to become independent;
- advocating for the removal of discrepancies between the various 'ages of independence' in consultation with young people and the youth sector; and
- advocating for young people to have the right to vote from at least the age of 16.

Beyond this, YACWA advocates heavily for the involvement of young people at all levels of political and policy making processes.

Queensland

Queensland Youth Charter

Whilst not enshrined in legislation, the Queensland Youth Charter (QYC) marks a significant commitment by the Queensland Government to the young people of that state. Similar in aim to the Western Australian Office for Children and Youth initiatives, the QYC requires in addition that each Queensland Government department 'report annually on the actions developed and processes used to include young people in their policy, program and service development' (generate, Online). This would seem a step towards providing for accountability within Government of inclusive practice for young people.

From a Western Australian perspective, all Ministers for youth in Australia have been required to sign the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) document *Contributing and Changing*. This document does not provide for Government accountability but does acknowledge that 'real challenges and barriers to young people's effective participation still exist'. Accordingly they wish to be committed to, among other things, 'creating more opportunities for engagement in government decision making processes'.

Australia

The Australian Electoral Commission

In response to the growing concern of voter participation, the AEC now offers a range of educational and information aids. Most importantly these include the *Electoral Pocketbook*, which gives a summary of enrolment, voting procedure, history, parliamentary representation; the *History of the Indigenous Vote*, which recognises the struggle for Indigenous Peoples to achieve the vote; the *Happy Birthday* card which encloses an enrolment form for people just about to turn 18; the *Australian Democracy Magazine*; and *Democracy Rules*, an interactive educational package designed for upper primary and high school student - themes include participation, representation and investigation of developing democracies. The AEC also provides resources for student elections.

Such a simple idea as the *Happy Birthday* card has generated a significant increase in enrolments, demonstrating the need for, and appreciation of, instrumental measures when appropriately pin-pointed.

The Professional Association of SRC Teachers / Advisors

PASTA was formed in 1995 but was disbanded this year (2007). It existed to support Australian teachers and students involved in student representative councils in primary and secondary schools. The association offered workshop learning opportunities, professional development, and had a civics and citizenship focus. As part of its mission statement it aimed to:

- Promote student leadership
- Promote student participation
- Promote student representation

The first International Student Representative Conference was hosted in Sydney in 2000, with a proposal for it to continue every four years as an 'Olympiad of Citizenship'. According to PASTA's website the conference was a great success with many proposals put forward by young people to address issues pertinent to their lives. As PASTA seemed to be a step along the way towards Australia embracing such forward thinking changes as the Euridem Project proposes, it is to be hoped that a similar organisation will spring up soon.

The Euridem Project

Commissioned by the Children's Rights Alliance for England, this project was undertaken to investigate the connection between student participation at schools and school effectiveness. Although an investigation, rather than an initiative or policy, the project is included at this point as an indication of the direction needed for inclusive and democratic school experience. The project, which studied four countries of Europe (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden) collected data on

- the law
- top down views (from government officials to student union representatives) on student involvement and the effectiveness of the legislation
- observations of classes, school councils or participatory committees and interviews with pupils, teachers, heads and parents.

Researchers found that

When pupils had a voice and were accorded value, the school was a happier place; when pupils are happy and given dignity, they attend more and they work productively...

Outcomes are affected at a number of levels: individual children's experience and self-esteem as a learner; an enhanced change for the whole school; and the impact on wider society and social structures (Davies and Kirkpatrick, in Klein, 2003).

Significant emphasis is placed in this project, on the importance of school experience for democratic participation in later life:

It is obvious that all formal preparation for citizenship in adult life can be helped or hindered by the ethos and organisation of a school, whether pupils are given opportunities for exercising responsibilities and initiatives or not; and whether they are consulted realistically on matters where their opinions can prove relevant both to the efficient running of a school and to their general motivation for learning (Klein, 2003, p. 29).

The UK was found to lag well behind the European countries studied, in terms of legislation put in place to ensure that students had a voice, and the impact of legislation on school life. Lynn Davies, in her paper *Pupil Democracy in England*, points to the 'bizarre contradiction' in school philosophies which centralise and legislate for curriculum, assessment, and teaching methods, yet fall back on a 'neo-liberal ideology' when it comes to student participation, allowing schools the freedom to decide their own affairs (2002), a view that would seem to be endorsed by Bessant and Varnham, in their

assessment of Australian and New Zealand youth and school policy (ibid. 2003, 2005).

In Europe students are *required*, rather than simply allowed, to participate. In Sweden, for example, attendance at meetings held on curriculum and pedagogy must be equal between staff and pupils. The impact such a move might have on Australian democratic participation can only be imagined, but it is food for further thought (Davies, 2002).

The Euridem Project stresses the importance of Youth Forums and Parliaments as an avenue for democratic youth voice, and this is an area in which Australia is making significant advances. Anecdotal evidence from YACWA, *Voices and Votes*, and PASTA, suggests that such opportunities for young people may be an end in themselves.

The Power Inquiry: Lambeth and Espoo Youth Councils.

The UK Power Inquiry stresses the potential importance of youth councils for the political engagement of young people. It offers two examples of youth council: Lambeth - in London, and Espoo - in Finland, which have responded to different social contexts in their formation.

Lambeth Youth Council is open to all young people from the age of 11 and is chaired by a youth development worker. They have worked on a number of issues relevant to the young people of the area, such as 'stop and search', teenage pregnancy, and helping to train new police recruits. The Council has an important outreach role and has had a 'fairly impressive' impact on the issues it concerns itself with.

Espoo Youth Council selects its representative by election and reflects the high social and political involvement of young people in Finland. Proposals are discussed by means

of an online 'ideas factory', open to all young people in the city, and then presented to the three-weekly general assemblies of the Council. According to the Power Inquiry, '25% of the proposals generated by the ideas factory have been enacted by the city administration' (2006, p.69-71).

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