# Building inter-generational resilience through youth engagement with parliaments: Green shoots in Australia and lessons from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales

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## ABSTRACT

Many communities feel excluded from, or marginalised within, the institutions and processes that govern their lives. For those experiencing social disadvantage, institutions considered to be symbols of healthy democracies, such as parliaments, are increasingly at risk of being perceived as irrelevant, ineffective or even illegitimate. When this occurs, parliamentarians can struggle to generate and sustain the political support needed to advance policy solutions to complex social challenges. To avoid paralysing the institutions relied upon to transition our societies into more equitable and sustainable futures, we must better understand how parliamentary engagement systems can address this downward spiral of citizen distrust and political inaction.  We must be prepared to *listen* to the views of young people themselves.  In this paper, I argue that this type of democratic listening – and refiguring of the younger generation as *citizens now*– is critical to developing and sustaining intergenerational resilience in our modern democracies. Intergenerational resilience refers to the ability of communities to maintain and adapt their well-being and cultural continuity across generations in the face of challenges and adversity. I identify the guiding principles, key objectives, catalysts for change needed to improve intergenerational resilience in modern democracies like Australia, with a focus on strategies that seek to improve the quality of democratic engagement by young people.  I also share perspectives gained from my 2023 Churchill Fellowship that took me to England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Wales, highlighting some key case studies as well as attempting to link some of the ideas I have encountered with the relevant scholarship and literature in this field.  The Paper concludes with a call to action and toolkit for those working within parliamentary settings to use, and contribute to, as we work together to reimagine youth engagement with modern parliaments and bolster the foundations for securing intergenerational resilience in our societies.

## Introduction

Many communities feel excluded from, or marginalised within, the institutions and processes that govern their lives. For those experiencing social disadvantage, institutions considered to be symbols of healthy democracies, such as parliaments, are increasingly at risk of being perceived as irrelevant, ineffective or even illegitimate. When this occurs, parliamentarians can struggle to generate and sustain the political support needed to advance policy solutions to complex social challenges. To avoid paralysing the institutions relied upon to transition our societies into more equitable and sustainable futures, we must better understand how parliamentary engagement systems can address this downward spiral of citizen distrust and political inaction. In particular, we must be prepared to *listen* to the views of young people themselves. As Foa et al observe, ‘there is value in knowing how, why and when younger citizens are losing faith in the ability of democracy to deliver’ (Foa et al, 2022, p. 4).

In order to engage in this type of democratic listening we must also challenge ourselves to move beyond what Threadgold (2020) has described as the conventional ‘figures of youth’ conceptualisation of young people and the role they play in our societies (Waite et al, 2024). Three of the ‘figures’ analysed by Threadgold (2020) position young people as ‘figures of hope’, ‘risk figures’, and ‘revolutionary figures.’ The dominance of these ‘figures’ in our conceptualising of young people -particularly when applied to public policy making - simultaneously burdens and limits the capacity of young people to participate at active citizens, and underestimates their interest, power and agency in the full spectrum of challenges facing modern democracy. For example, as Waite et al (2024) explain, young people as ‘figure of hope’ positions young people as’ a representation of the future’, in which the future ‘can be secured for all if young people are effectively looked after and protected’. This can also situate young people as a ‘surrogate for anxiety about the future’ (Threadgold 2020, 693; Waite et al, 2024)). In this conceptualisation, young people are seen as inherently vulnerable, while also being vital for future prosperity (Gorur, 2015; Waite et al, 2024). Conversely, when young people are conceptualised as ‘figures of risk’, such as in the context of policy responses to ‘youth crime’, they are positioned as a ‘problem that needs to be solved’, rather than an active participant in the identification and development of state responses to criminal activity (Waite et al, 2024). The challenge for those of us in positions of political power or policy influence is to transcend these figures and embrace a conceptualisation of young people *as citizens now,* with the full range of democratic agency that is assumed to belong to other citizens in our polity.

I argue that this type of democratic listening – and refiguring of the younger generation as *citizens now* (rather than citizens of the future) – is critical to developing and sustaining intergenerational resilience in our modern democracies. Intergenerational resilience refers to the ability of communities to maintain and adapt their well-being and cultural continuity across generations in the face of challenges and adversity (see e.g. Hall et al 2023, Williams 2022). Intergenerational resilience can be fostered through supportive family relationships, cultural practices, and community networks that enable younger generations to build on the strengths and experiences of their predecessors (Ungar, 2013). This type of resilience is also supported by deliberative decision-making within and between communities and a participatory approach to resource allocation, that recognises the value and needs of different generations (Kirmayer et al., 2009). In the context of democratic participation, intergenerational resilience demands the establishment and maintenance of systems that promote transfer of knowledge, values, and coping strategies between generations. I argue that intergenerational resilience also requires the transfer of *political and economic power* between generations, to ensure younger generations are equipped with the resources they need to continue to promote the democratic values, and protect the democratic institutions, that are shared between generations. This is reflected in the following description of democratic resilience developed by Selen et al (2022):

The most defining characteristic of a democratically resilient public sphere is its capacity to sustain integrative and tolerant public discourse when subjected to external shocks, such as violent extremist threats and acts. Resilient public spheres can contain and process provocations in a fashion that maintains or even strengthens democratic integrity. By contrast, fragile public spheres descend into polarization, fragmentation and lose their capacity for the inclusive and cross-cultural deliberation on which a functioning democracy depends.

In this Paper I aim to identify the guiding principles, key objectives, catalysts for change needed to improve intergenerational resilience in modern democracies like Australia, with a focus on strategies that seek to improve the quality of democratic engagement by young people. I also share perspectives gained from my 2023 Churchill Fellowship that took me to England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Wales, highlighting some key case studies as well as attempting to link some of the ideas I have encountered with the relevant scholarship and literature in this field. The Paper concludes with a call to action and toolkit for those working within parliamentary settings to use, and contribute to, as we work together to reimagine youth engagement with modern parliaments and bolster the foundations for securing intergenerational resilience in our societies.

### What’s at stake?

Modern democracies like Australia and New Zealand are well aware that they are facing a ‘perfect storm’ of challenges that seek to unsettle, disrupt and even displace the democratic norms and institutions that past generations have taken for granted. This is evident in the recent policy document published by the Australian Government’s Department of Home Affairs’ entitled ‘Strengthening Australian Democracy’ (2024) which observes (at p. 3):

Democracies around the world are struggling with a range of shared problems. Australia is not immune. Global trends are tangling with more localised issues to challenge the foundations of Australia’s democratic strengths: trusted institutions, credible information and social inclusion. While none of these challenges is wholly new, in combination they pose complex and compounding threats to democracy.

Declining trust in democratic institutions like parliaments, for example, is having an impact on our short, medium and long term approaches to economic and social policy, and has also featured in national security debates in Australia. This is reflected in the decision to raise Australia’s National Terrorism Threat Level to ‘probable’ in August 2024. The Australian Government’s National Security website (<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/national-threat-level/current-national-terrorism-threat-level>) explains that:

Australia’s security landscape has entered a vulnerable period and is being challenged by new threats with concerning trajectories. Our landscape is a reflection of the social and political environment in which we live – social cohesion is lower, and trust in governments and democratic processes globally are eroding.

 …

The rise of individual grievance narratives and how they are expressed, are impacting society’s ability to find common ground. Increasingly it is leading to a normalisation of provocative and inflammatory behaviours contrary to community standards and liberal democratic values. Global events such as the conflict in the Middle-East, have resonated in Australia and will continue to do so.

…

Social media is a key driver of volatility, acting as a gateway and platform for violent ideologies and global influences to promulgate at volume and scale. The continued adoption and proliferation of, social media will amplify and enable extremist narratives to find new adherents. Younger people are particularly at risk.

 …

The compounding effects of these issues has resulted in a volatile domestic security environment. This environment has the potential for an increase in acts of politically motivated violence, including terrorism, to occur across all ideological spectrums.

Australians are also beginning to turn away from the ballot box, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and from younger generations. As Hill et al explained in their 2024 submission to the Australian Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters:

The 2022 Federal election saw turnout dip to its lowest level since the first election conducted under compulsory voting in 1925 (89.9% for the House of Representatives (AEC, 2022). Of particular concern is the escalating electoral disengagement of citizens from low SES and disadvantaged socio-demographic backgrounds as well as First Nations peoples (AEC, 2017, p. 13). Equally concerning is the electoral withdrawal of the young who are, after all, the future of our democracy. In March 2024 only 87% of 18–24-year-olds were enrolled to vote compared with 98.2% of all-age Australians (AEC, 2024). Actual voting participation among the young is even lower: in Australia, even with compulsory voting in place, from 2001 to 2016 youth turnout declined from 90% to around 78% of eligible voters (AEC 2017). More recent figures for federal elections are unavailable but figures for recent state elections are telling. For example, in Queensland the turnout rate for 18-29 year-olds at the last state election was 81% (ECQ, 2021)4. For Victoria, at the 2022 state election, despite a relatively high enrolment rate for 18–24-year-olds (91.6%), turnout was only 73.12% for those without VoterAlert and 86.5% for those with VoterAlert (VEC, 2022).

This growing disenchantment with democratic institutions among younger Australians is also evident in the type of people who are being *elected* to parliament. The average age of members of parliament in Australia is 50 (Australian Government, 2023; IPU Parline, 2023). Even though the 47th Australian Parliament is the most diverse we have ever seen (Remeikis, 2022), the people in power right now do not look like the young people I teach at university, or the young people working in our supermarkets, or surfing on our beaches. Their priorities for change a different their hopes and dreams are different too. They are also working harder, longer and for less than older generations, and their economic and social outlook is pessimistic. This is reflected in the findings contained in the Australian Youth Barometer, a report prepared by the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (Walsh, Deng, Huynh, Cutler, 2024) including that:

86% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties to some extent in the last 12 months, with 26% reporting they did so often or very often. 62% of young Australians think they will be financially worse off than their parents. 53% of young Australians think that it is likely or very likely that they will achieve financial security in the future. 68% of young Australians turn to family members as the main source of financial support when running short of money. 31% of young people think it is likely or extremely likely that they will be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months. 60% think it is likely or very likely they will live in a comfortable home in the future. 48% of young Australians think that it is likely or very likely that they will be able to purchase a property or house in the future. Financial security is a core concern for many young people. Not being able to work adequate hours and rising costs of living contribute to financial stress.

The Australian Youth Barometer also provides a useful insight into the key public policy issues that are front of mind for young people in Australia, and the types of democratic participation strategies they consider to be useful or effective:

Affordable housing (73%), employment opportunities for young people (52%) and climate change (40%) are the top three issues identified by young people as needing immediate action. 70% of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the last year, most commonly in welfare-related care and services (50%), arts and cultural services (49%) and environmental-related activities (49%). 88% feel that there is something preventing them from being involved in volunteering. 34% of young Australians believe that it is likely or very likely that climate change will be combated in the future. 39% of young people think there is not enough government support for housing, 26% think there is not enough support in finance and 21% think that there is not enough support for mental health. Young Australians often feel unable to make change on a broad scale and see efforts to do so as somewhat futile. This contributes to a greater interest in individualised forms of political action such as joining special interest groups or voting with their money. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 While social media is seen as a way to share information, build support for a cause and keep others accountable, young Australians are concerned that online spaces are often biased, drive the spread of misinformation and are a platform for complaining rather than taking meaningful action. Young Australians overwhelmingly feel that their voices are not well represented nor listened to in political discussions, in part due to their lack of representation in government and their relatively smaller economic footprint. As a result, some have stopped trying to make their voices heard.

This Australian data aligns with recent international studies that seek to provide an insight into the lives of younger generations. In fact, millennials are the ‘most disillusioned generation in living memory’ (Lewsey, 2023) when it comes to trust in democracy and the implications of this huge. As Foa et al have observed:

Globally, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining – not only in absolute terms, but also relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life. There are notable declines in four regions: Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, western Europe, and the “Anglo-Saxon” democracies, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. In developed democracies, a major contributor to youth discontent is economic exclusion. Higher levels of youth unemployment and wealth inequality are associated with rising dissatisfaction in both absolute and relative terms – that is, a growing gap between assessments of democratic functioning between youth and older generations. (Foa et al, 2022, p. 2)

When people are disconnected from public institutions like parliaments, they turn other places to express their political views and they can become involved in extremism (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). They can also disengage from community activity and experience social and economic exclusion that can lead to loneliness (Chowdhury, 2021), which we know has short- and long-term mental health impacts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021) that can in turn impact a person’s ability to earn a living and to bring up healthy families.

[Y]outh disengagement reflects not merely apathy, but also a rising sense of frustration with the ability of existing democratic processes to deliver tangible change. The result of such frustration may be a growing “antipathy” to core liberal ideals such as compromise, consensus, acceptance of political opponents as legitimate and support for third-party institutions such as the media, judiciary or legislative checks and balances. (Foa et al, 2022, p. 22)

When our young people are disengaged or disconnected from our democratic institutions, we risk becoming type of ‘post democracy’ in which ‘managerial politics has reduced the space for genuine ideological competition’ and democratic discourse is less about norms such as compromise, free exchange of ideas, or the independence public institutions from government, and more about populism or ‘authenticity’ of politicians personalities (Foa et al, 2022, p. 22-23).

When young people are disconnected from our parliaments and our policy making forums, we also lose the opportunity to hear from them about their ideas and strategies for solving the complex set of challenges our society faces. We lose the chance to create the future they dream of. This is why we need *intergenerationally resilient* democracies where young people not only feel welcome but are empowered with the knowledge, trust and resources to reshape and redefine the institutions that we rely upon to preserve and promote our shared democratic values.

## Green shoots of innovation in Australia

In the last decade, concerted efforts have been made by institutional actors (including Education Departments, parliaments, governments and local councils) to adopt evidence-based approaches to engaging with young people and encouraging more diverse democratic participation and engagement. Leadership has also been shown from young people themselves, who have organised into networks and campaigns to advance their own political agency and influence and set forth a youth-led policy agenda to address some of the causes and manifestations of intergenerational inequality discussed above.

The below examples of ‘green shoots’ of innovation of Australia provide a basis for optimism that key decision makers, and those responsible for allocating resources to or investing in youth engagement and intergenerational resilience, are beginning to reconceptualise the role young people play in our parliamentary democracies.

### Evidence-based approaches to civics education

There is a shared recognition among government, experts and community organisations in Australia that ensuring equity access to high quality, tailored civics education is vital to rebuilding and sustaining trust in democratic institutions and fostering meaningful democratic participation including among young people. This is strongly reflected in the 122 submissions to the Australian Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters’ inquiry into inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation which commenced in March 2024 (JSCEM Inquiry). As Park, Lee, Notley and Dezuanni have observed (2023):

there is a clear association between news consumption and civic engagement. Effective civic participation is founded on informed citizens, who are aware of local, national and international events and developments. Citizens become informed about local, national and international events and developments primarily through accessing a diverse range of media. Our research shows that adult Australians who consume online news regularly are 20% more likely to participate in civic activities. In addition, more than half of Australian children aged 12-16 who have high interest in news reported getting involved online in social issues (56%), compared to only 9% of those who have the lowest level of interest in news. Furthermore, children who received news literacy education at school reported higher digital civic engagement levels compared to those who did not receive this education.

Australia’s decentralised education system (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority ACARA) 2020, p.4,5) presents obstacles in achieving consistency and coherence in civic education curricula, as does its non-compulsory nature beyond year 10. As of 2023, the civics and citizenship curriculum for years 7-10 covers four key areas: ‘government and democracy’; ‘laws and citizens’; and ‘citizenship, diversity and identity’, (ACARA 2024). Beyond year 10, the civics and citizenship educational experience differs significantly from state to state (ACARA 2022, p. 56). As a result, there is a growing consensus around the need to ensure that all Australian schools are successfully developing active, informed, engaging and participatory Civics and Citizenship education and to disseminate these findings widely (SCEAA JCEM Submission 2024).

Some Australian schools are embracing the existing civics and citizenship curriculum by developing community engagement through whole-school approaches including making connections to local community organisations, engaging students in authentic and purposeful ways in contemporary issues and taking action around issues that matter to them in their lives (SCEAA JCEM Submission 2024). When this approach is taken, there is evidence that educators are recognising their students as citizens now, not citizens in waiting (SCEAA JCEM Submission 2024). An example of this approach is the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program which facilitates on-site learning about national democratic, historical, and cultural institutions in Canberra.

The PACER Parliament Education Program is an Australian initiative designed to engage students with the workings of parliamentary democracy through interactive and educational experiences. The program includes hands-on activities including simulations of parliamentary processes where students can role-play as members of parliament, debate bills, and participate in mock elections, as well as the provision of a range of resources, including lesson plans and multimedia material to support teachers in delivering engaging civics education. PACER also facilitates student visits to parliamentary chambers as well as outreach activities where parliamentary educators visit schools to deliver interactive sessions and provide personalised support to teachers.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) also provides a comprehensive school-based electoral education program, focussing on experiential learning practices. Through the AEC’s National Electoral Education Centre and Get Voting packs sent to schools, students can practice how to enrol, vote, and count votes and declare a result. The AEC has also developed a 3D online game called ‘Democracity’ available for download by schools via an app, scheduled to launch in 2025. The game will allow students to explore the history of Australian democracy along with key election activities and concepts such as representation and ballot paper formality (AEC submission to JSCEM, 2024) and is designed for use alongside other AEC for Schools education resources such as Get Voting, which provide students a practical experience of voting in the classroom (AEC submission to JSCEM, 2024). In 2024, the AEC is also partnering with the National Capital Educational Tourism Project, Australian Parliament House, and the Museum of Australian Democracy to deliver civics and electoral education to students in the Northern Territory, in addition to teacher professional development. The program will be delivered in Alice Springs and Darwin over four days and is expected to reach approximately 220 students and 25 teachers (AEC submission to JSCEM, 2024).

Every Australian parliament has also established education and outreach offices or appointed appropriately qualified educators and outreach officers, tasked with developing suites of interactive educational materials about the history, functions and business of the parliament for a range of different audiences. These offices and officers are also regularly involved in designing and implementing outreach experiences and activities, including tours of parliament and visits by parliamentarians or parliamentary education office staff to regional locations. For example, the Parliament of Australia has a Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) has developed :digital programs accessible to regional and remote students; professional learning programs for teachers and preservice teachers; outreach programs that deliver on-site parliamentary education to students and teachers who are unable to travel to Canberra; and a website that provides curriculum-aligned resources (online and printable) about the Australian Parliament and Australia’s system of government, (PEO Submission to JSCEM Inquiry 2024).

In South Australia, the Parliament’s Education and Community Outreach Office delivers the ‘Civics in the City’ grants program (also supported by the South Australian Department for Education and the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People). Under this program, schools that are outside of public transport access to Parliament House can apply for financial support for a Parliament excursion. A similar Regional Outreach Program exists in Western Australia and is one of a suite of educational programs delivered by the Parliament of Western Australia to develop student awareness of the role of the Western Australian Parliament and parliamentary processes.

Many Australian Parliaments also host Youth Parliaments or Schools Conventions. For example, the Parliament of NSW Education team hosts the NSW Schools Constitutional Convention each year, which a keynote and group discussions on the selected topic. At the conclusion of the day, delegates peer select 30 delegates to attend the National Constitutional Convention held in Canberra each year.

The scope and focus of these activities and their intended audiences has changed in recent decades, with many parliaments actively seeking input from key stakeholders including school teachers, curriculum designers, adult education institutions, First Nations communities and marginalised or minority community groups. For example, the PEO is guided by an Advisory Committee, comprised of members and senators and jointly chaired by the Deputy Speaker and Deputy President, which contributes to the strategic oversight of the PEO (PEO Submission to JSCEM Inquiry 2024).

Explicit efforts to measure or report on the effectiveness of parliamentary education and outreach programs have also become more common, with indicators of success often focused on increasing the rate and diversity of participation. For example, the South Australian Parliament has reported that in 2024, 29 schools received financial support to visit Parliament House under Civics in the City. Of the 29 schools, 27 of them were over 100km away from Parliament House, including four over 400km away (Parliament of South Australia, Submission to JSCEM Inquiry 2024). The Australia Parliament’ PEO has reported that in 2022–23, 1.4 million people used its website, with 3.4 million unique page views (PEO Submission to JSCEM Inquiry 2024).

Other initiatives designed to ensure traditionally marginalised groups have access to high quality civics education include the work of the Michael Long Learning and Leadership Centre(MLLLC) in Darwin, which aims to ‘harness the power of AFL football in the NT to give young Indigenous Territorians the same opportunities as all Australians’ (<https://www.michaellongfoundation.org.au/>). Student groups from the MLLLC visit Parliament House almost every week of the school term across the year to watch parliament in action and to meet their local Member of the Legislative Assembly. Groups are accompanied by an MLLLC staff member, and a teacher from the students’ home community, providing an opportunity for both student engagement with parliament and teacher professional development.

These education and outreach activities align closely with the first three elements of the ‘public engagement journey’ described by Leston-Bandeira above: information, understanding and identification. Some also have features that assist the *identification*  by citizens of the relevance of the parliament to their own lives and experiences, which can in turn lead to *participation* in the business of parliament.

However, as discussed further below, unless education and outreach activities form part of a broader, strategic and *systematic* approach to parliamentary engagement, there is a risk that their overall effectiveness could be undermined or underestimated. Without a broader institutional view of their impact, there is also the risk that these programs and activities will miss out on the investments required to secure their sustainability and improve their capacity to build intergenerational resilience through the sharing of knowledge between generations. As discussed further below, I argue that by reconceptualising what counts as youth-led democratic engagement, we can re-imagine these already high-impact programs and activities in a way that empowers young people to exercise more control over their experiences, and incentivises adults and older people to position themselves as learners as well as teachers.

### Participatory Approaches to Integrating Youth Voice in Government Decision Making

In Australia, participatory approaches to integrating youth voice in government decision-making have become increasingly prominent, reflecting a commitment to involving young people in shaping policies that affect their lives. For example, various local and state governments in Australia have established Youth Advisory Councils (YACs) to provide a platform for young people to offer input on policy and community issues. These councils, such as the Victorian Youth Advisory Council, enable young individuals to provide government ministers and senior department officials with feedback on policy proposals relating to education, mental health, and employment (Victorian Government, 2023). The Australian Government's Office for Youth is a government agency dedicated to supporting and addressing the needs of young Australians. Operating within the Department of Social Services, the office focuses on policies and programs that promote the well-being and development of youth across the nation. In March 2024, following a consultation process that involved collecting the views of over 4,600 young people (p. 3), the Office for Youth launched a new youth engagement strategy, entitled ‘*Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make’* that centres on   three priority areas for youth engagement with government:

We will recognise and listen to young people.

We will empower young people to advocate and engage with government.

We will support government to work with young people.

The strategy also includes a commitment to review progress towards these goals, by measuring the percentage of:

* program participants who felt they directly influenced a government policy or program.
* young people who report a positive experience at a government event or program.
* program participants who feel they are recognised for their contributions in the community(at p. 18).
* young people who engage with the digital youth hub and social media channels.
* young people who were able to access the government information they needed on the digital youth hub.
* First Nations young people and underrepresented young people participating in a program who feel more confident to engage with the government (at p. 20).
* young people who feel that the Australian Government considers the views of young people.
* Australian Government departments and agencies that worked with the Office for Youth and felt supported to engage with young people.
* Australian Public Service who feel confident engaging with young people on the development of policy and programs (at p. 21).

Programs like the Australian Youth Parliament offer young Australians the chance to draft and debate legislation, mirroring the parliamentary process, and provide an avenue for selected young people to develop and design new policy or legislative proposals that respond to pressing concerns within their communities (YMCA Youth Parliament, 2023). The YMCA Youth Parliament website (https://ymca.org.au/what-we-do/empowering-young-people/youth-parliament/) explains that:

Each year around 400 young people take part in the Y’s Youth Parliament program, held in each state’s Parliament House, across six states in Australia, re-enacting the exact parliamentary process with the same number of roles. Youth Parliament delegates formulate bills, debate and then vote on them. The program is designed to give young people between the ages of 16-25 a chance to be heard at the highest levels of State Government on a wide range of issues relevant to young people’s lives, with the bills developed then handed to relevant ministers, providing the government with insights on issues important to young Australians.

Evaluations of the YMCA Youth Parliament programs demonstrate a range of positive impacts for participants. For example, after participating in the 2023 YMWA Youth Parliament : 94% of participants agreed that participation increased their ability to have a voice and be heard on issues in the community, 88% of young people reported an 77% increased sense of belonging post-program reported they were better equipped for teamwork (YMCA Federal Youth Engagement Strategy Submission, ‘What do Australia’s Youth Parliament Think, 2023, p.5 https://ymca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Youth-Engagement-Strategy-Submission.pdf). Australian Youth Parliaments have also proved to be effective forums for young Australians to highlight the key policy issues impacting their lives, and their communities. For example:

 in 2023, approximately 60 Bills were developed, debated and voted on across the country covering a wide variety of policy issues from mental health to housing, maternity services and vaping. Each Youth Parliament also debated a 'national motion to public importance' which this year was a motion for a Federal Human Rights Bill (at p. 2)

However, these programs rarely enable young people to *directly* influence government policy or legislative drafting, and stop short of empowering the Youth Parliaments or Youth Advisory Councils with procedural authority (such as compellable powers to call witnesses when sitting as committees or access to parliamentary privilege) or political influence (such as utilising direct election selection processes).

Some local councils have implemented young mayor programs and participatory budgeting processes where young residents can propose and vote on community projects or improvements and can also lead to access to grant funding for local projects or activities designed to respond to the needs of local young people (Local Government Association of Queensland, 2023). For example, the Young Mayors Program supported by the Foundation for Young Australians designed to empower young people by involving them in local governance and decision-making processes. Targeted at high school students, the program allows young people aged 11 to 17 year olds to take on roles similar to those of a mayor or local councillor, providing a hands-on opportunity to engage with community issues, develop leadership skills, and influence local policies. The Young Mayors Program has been rolled out in selected local government areas including Horsham Victoria, MacKay Queensland and Wollongong New South Wales (<https://www.fya.org.au/program/young-mayors/>).

Non-government youth-led advocacy groups like the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) and the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) are also important forums for young people to engaged in public advocacy and engage with elected representatives and key government actors. These groups support young people to contribute to written submissions to parliamentary committees and provide training opportunities for young people to develop political advocacy and lobbying skills, as well as knowledge of parliamentary processes. For example, in May 2024 the AYAC prepared a Budget Summary that provides an overview of the key initiatives announced by the Australian Government in the 2024-2025 May Budget affecting young people in Australia, and underscoring the need for further cost of living relief to support young people who rely on income support (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60948b9e3847ee0caf0e2dd4/t/6646f78fa10b024ff51baa2a/1715926930319/The+2024-2025+Federal+Budget+and+young+people++.pdf>). The AYAC has also made submissions to a range of parliamentary committee inquiries and regularly contributes to public debates on policy issues impacting young Australians.

Some parliaments have also looked to establish youth advisory committees to assist in enhancing the quality of youth engagement with parliamentary processes, and to improve the impact of education and outreach programs. An example an innovative approach in this area is the Rito o te Pāremata program hosted by the New Zealand Parliament.

Rito is the name for the new shoots in harakeke flax. Harakeke grow new shoots from the middle of the plant, protected by the more mature leaves on either side. The rito eventually become the mature leaves taking care of the new shoots. … The name ‘Rito’ was chosen to symbolise the envisioned life cycle of the group – existing members nurturing new ones.

Young New Zealanders were directly involved in the design of the Rito program which recognises the deficits of conventional engagement approaches designed by adults and aims to be authentically co-designed in approach. The pilot Rito group conceptualised, developed, and produced Rarapa, a four-part video series that shines a light on the different ways New Zealand rangatahi can engage with Parliament. Following the success of the pilot, the New Zealand Parliament sought applications from young people aged 16 to 20 years to provide advise to the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service on how to engage with youth in Aotearoa. Members of the Rito team develop and promote a project of their choice, with the aim of increasing youth awareness of, and participation with, Parliament. Rito team members also provide feedback on youth-focussed resources that Parliament produces, represent young people in their communities, and promote the work of Parliament. Rito team members are also paid and supported to travel to Wellington from regional areas.

These youth advisory bodies and forums provide critical communities for key decision makers to engage in democratic listening and have the potential to move beyond the ‘information’ stage of the democratic engagement journey outlined by Leston Bandeira. However, as explored below, there remain challenges when it comes to ensuring that these approaches move beyond an *advisory* model (wherein young people are consulted with respect to government proposals or to gauge their reaction to government decision making) to a model where young people can actually *influence and impact* the shape of legislation, public policy or government decision making. There also remain challenges associated with ensuring youth advisory councils and other forums designed to listen to youth voices are demographically diverse, and inclusive of traditionally marginalised and excluded communities.

### Youth Led Electoral Reform: Extending Franchise to Young People

As noted above, young people and children care deeply about our collective future and want to be more informed and involved in democratic decision making. They care about local and global communities and have ideas about what is working well and what needs to change. However, they face a range of barriers when it comes to participating in and exercising power within conventional democratic systems, and as a result their voices are often not heard, respected or valued. Many young people do not see themselves represented by current political leaders and they have limited opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives. Government-led processes designed to ‘engage’ with young people are inaccessible to most children and young people, particular those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and when young people do participate, they do not always see action or hear back and their contributions are rarely regarded as equal to those of adults. One of the strategies available to governments to address lack of political empowerment and improve the quality of the connection between young people and democratic institutions is to extend voting rights in elections to 16 and 17 year olds, and to facilitate direct election of youth representatives to other deliberative forums, including youth parliaments.

In his 2012 paper on the politics of lowering the voting age in Australia, Professor Ian McAllister (2012) outlined the arguments for extending the franchise, being: equity; political participation; and political maturity. These arguments are just as compelling in 2024. When it comes to ‘equity’, the post-war arguments for lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 centred on the fact that 18 year olds were old enough to fight and die but not vote. This argument gained traction internationally in the 1960s with the rise of civil rights and the mass youth casualties of the Vietnam War.

The modern equity arguments centre on employment, taxation and intergenerational equity, with many advocates for lowering the voting age noting that large numbers of 16 and 17 year olds work, pay tax, drive cars, care for siblings and parents, and face more challenging economic, social and environmental conditions that ever before. As the Student Representative Council of South Australia (2024) has explained:

The voting age has changed throughout history, and should continue to evolve to reflect the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of young people today. Arguments against lowering the age tend to imply that voting requires a certain level of knowledge, maturity, and judgment, however such a standard is rarely applied to adult voters.

This sentiment was also echoed by Youth Action NSW in a submission to a parliamentary inquiry into this issue in 2018:

Young people aged 16 and 17 are active and contributing members of Australian society, who hold considerable decision-making powers regarding their own lives and who are required to meet a number of legal requirements. Extending the voluntary vote to 16 and 17 year olds would be an instrumental step in assuring that young people are funneling their political motivation into traditional civic avenues, that relationships between young people and politicians are strengthened, and that young people are treated as valued citizens. These outcomes would be positive for Australia’s democracy as a whole. (JPCEM 2019 at [2.18]).

When it comes to enhancing political participation, it is accepted that lowering the voting age may not of itself lead to a more politically engaged generation of young people (Tonge, et al 2021). Civics education, responsible media reporting and meaningful engagement between elected representatives, political parties and younger people is critical. However, without the added element of franchise, young people will remain on the edges of our democratic polity as recipients of political information and representation, rather than active agents.

Several countries around the world have already lowered their voting ages to 16, including Malta, Argentina and Cuba (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). In 2007, the voting age in Austria was lowered from 18 to 16. In Brazil and Ecuador, 16-year-olds are also allowed to vote, but it is not compulsory. In Wales, 16 and 17 year olds can vote and 11 year olds can run for election to the Welsh Youth Parliament, which works directly with adult MPs to generate legislative and policy agendas, scrutinise government action and expenditure and conduct inquiries (Tonge, et al 2021). Scotland reduced the voting age from 18 to 16 for its independence vote in 2014 (Eichhorn & Bergh, 2020). In 2022, the New Zealand Supreme Court ruled that the country's voting age of 18 was discriminatory, although the voting age has not changed (Meagher and Geddis, 2023).

In 2023 a Bill was introduced in the Australian Parliament to lower the voting age in federal elections. It proposed to amend the  *Electoral Act 1918* (Cth) and *Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984*  (Cth) to: lower the minimum voting age in Australian federal elections and referenda from 18 to 16 years; provide for 16 and 17 year olds to be included in the certified list of voters (but not to be given a penalty notice if they do not vote); and provide that an eligible voter, who is not yet on the electoral roll or enrolled at their correct address, is able to cast a provisional vote on election day. The Bill did not pass.

A similar Bill was introduced at the federal level in 2018, which was referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters (JPCEM) for inquiry and report (JPCEM, 2019). In their submission to the inquiry, the Australian Human Rights Commission stated:

Lowering the minimum (non-compulsory) voting age in Australian federal elections from 18 to 16 years would provide opportunities of genuine civic participation to children under the age of 18 years. It would directly involve young people in the democratic process, and would be a measurable way for Australia to demonstrate its commitment to children’s participation rights and meet its obligations pursuant to Article 12 of the CRC. (JPCEM, 2019 at [2.77])

The majority of the JPCEM did not support the enactment of the Bill that sought to lower the voting age to 16 years in Australia, but noted that if the Parliament were to chose to extend the franchise to 16 year olds, ‘this should be on the same [compulsory] basis as Australians aged 18’: it considered that ‘the right to vote should come with the responsibility to vote’ (JPCEM, 2019 at [2.136]). Additional comments were provided by the Labor members of the JPCEM, who expressed ‘in principle’ support for ‘the proposition that 16 and 17 year olds are as capable of participating in elections as older Australians’, whilst also rejecting the 2018 Bill on the grounds that it proposes ‘a different voting regime for voters aged 16 and 17 than for other voters’, with the proposed extension of the franchise to be non-compulsory (JPCEM, 2019 at p.51). The Labor members recommended that ‘[t]he issue of extending the franchise for younger Australians be further considered by this Committee in its review of the 2019 federal election’ (JPCEM, 2019 at p. 53).

The Australian Greens members of the Committee also included dissenting comments supporting the enactment of the 2018 and observing that:

young people–through the rise of digital and social media platforms are more politically aware than ever before by expanding the franchise to allow 16 and 17 year olds the option to vote–and allowing teachers to bring civics education into the classroom in a more tangible way. It also seeks to lower the age at which young people can enroll to vote to 14 years old, ensuring that an understanding of Australia’s preferential voting system becomes more universal.

People who are 16 and 17 years old can work full time, pay taxes, contribute to superannuation, own and drive a car thereby contributing to other associated taxes and duties, join a political party, join the Australian Armed Forces, have sex and make autonomous medical decisions about their own bodies. More often than not, by the time young people reach the age of 16 or 17 they are making a significant contribution to Australian society and similarly are able to recognise the impacts government decisions have upon their lives. It follows, therefore, that 16 and 17 year olds should be able to have their say at the ballot box. (JPCEM, 2019 at 55).

A number of local and national youth-led advocacy groups support the lowering of the voting age in Australia. These include the Foundation for Young Australians, Run for It, Make it 16 and Youth Decide. Make It 16 is a non-partisan campaign advocating for the vote to be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds in Australia. In 2023 they launched a campaign to lower the voting age in Australia, led by a group of people under the age of 19, who live across all states and territories. Youth Decide is another Australian initiative dedicated to empowering young people by advocating for their right to vote from the age of 16. The campaign focuses on engaging and educating teenagers about the political process, aiming to integrate their perspectives into the democratic system.

Members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) also want young people to have a say in the decisions that impact their lives and futures. The 2024 SA SRC cohort comprises 150 students from 80 schools representing 44 South Australian electorates. The Year 10, 11, and 12 students, drawn from across the state, work together to create genuine, student-led change within their communities. For the SA SRC, lowering the voting age is an opportunity to make democracy fairer, improve civics education, recognise young people’s rights and strengthen young people’s participation in issues affecting them. In 2024 the SA SRC conducted a poll at schools throughout South Australia, asking students in Years 7–13 about their thoughts on the voting age, how prepared they feel to vote, and what they would need to feel more prepared to vote. A total of 769 students from 36 secondary schools responded to the poll, representing government, Catholic and Independent schools across 17 local government areas. Just over half of all students who participated in the poll thought that the voting age should be lower than 18 (SA SRC 2024). Those who felt more prepared to vote were more likely to think the voting age should be lower, while those who felt less prepared were more likely to say it should remain at 18 (SA SRC 2024). The most common suggestion for a lower voting age was 16 years, followed by 17, 15, and 12 years of age (SA SRC 2024).

### Missing pieces of the puzzle

The above examples are initiatives and programs to be proud of. They are inspiring young people to learn about democracy. But they remain far too conventional to spark the type of fundamental shift that needs to occur to empower young people to shape and change our democracy to fit their needs. They also stop short of facilitating the type of political and social *shift* that is needed to secure democratic resilience across generations. Such a shift involves not just *knowledge transfer* between the older, more experienced generation and the democratic institutions is has created, protected or sustained, but *power transfer* to re-model, re-defined and re-conceptualise what our modern democracy should or could look like.

The challenge is therefore much greater than just ‘teaching young people about our democracy’. It must extend to *empowering* young people to *shape and change* our democracy to fit *their needs.* Many existing efforts continue to imagine our parliaments, or our politics, with reference the past. Older people – that is anyone over 25 – are out the front, in control, in *the way*. We need a more ambitious agenda - one that is designed and led by young people themselves. As Hill et al submitted in their submission to the JSCEM Inquiry:

Australia has a well-deserved reputation as a democratic innovator and, in particular, an electoral innovator (Sawer, 2001; Hill, 2021). Historically, it has also been one of the most well-managed, trusted, and robust democracies in the world due to its bold and successful experiments in voting inclusion and integrity. But, despite compulsory voting, our citizens are increasingly less able or willing to either vote or to vote formally. We must act now to arrest this problem and to educate future electors about their vital role in preserving Australian democracy. Australia is in a unique position to defend itself from both internal and external threats to democracy, not only because we use compulsory voting but also because of our high standards of electoral management and integrity. However, we can no longer rely entirely on these institutional features to protect our democracy. Citizens must now be better activated to do so.

## Developing systematic approaches to democratic engagement and democratic listening in parliaments: insights from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales

In this next section of the Paper, I provide a summary of my reflections and findings following my discussions and experiences when travelling in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Wales in September – October 2023 as part of my Churchill Fellowship on Youth Engagement with Parliaments (Moulds 2023 and 2024).

Those insights and experiences have prompted me to identify several catalysts for change that I consider to be relevant pre-cursors to the task of building and sustaining intergenerational resilience through effective democratic listening across all cohorts of citizens, including young people.

These catalysts can be sparked by different institutions of government, including parliaments, executive governments and local councils. They can also originate from non-state actors, or global events well outside the control of any individual nation state. Some can be described as ‘external disruptions’ – unpredictable or uncontrollable events taking place outside or around the institution itself. Others are internal cultural shifts – often led by a specific individual champion or group of champions within the institution – that change the way the institution undertakes its core business, but without threatening its key democratic functions, values or identity. My generous and talented friend Richard Dall has captured these thoughts in the below illustration.



In the illustration, the ‘**internal cultural shifts**’ are depicted as things coming up from within the institution, the solid building blocks supporting change or reform. They include investments in people with skills in (1) collecting demographic data, to know more about who is disconnected and why; and (2) building strategic relationships to know how to reach disengaged groups and be seen as a legitimate, trusted partner. They also include creating environments where (3) engagement skills are integrated across core business so that all staff think about how to include diverse range of voices in parliamentary practices and procedures; and (4) all actors are comfortable with alternative forms of democratic engagement and have an open curiosity about digital engagement, civil disobedience and other forms of social action. These internal cultural shifts also include leadership within parliaments (5) valuing quality engagement as a strategic objective and assessing and evaluating progress towards targets and goals collectively and in individual key performance indicators and (6) taking pride in the fact that good quality public engagement has a discernible, positive impact on the democratic outputs of the institution, including the content or shape of laws made, or policies developed. Some of the examples of these ‘catalysts for change’ are described below.

### Youth led approaches to education that incentivise direct democratic participation in parliamentary business

The Welsh Youth Parliament (WYP) is a youth model legislature established in 2018 by the Senedd in Wales. The WYP aims to provide a forum for the voice of young people in Wales, and to bring together young people who want to make Wales a better place for young people. The WYP also aims to provide young people with the opportunity to experience aspects of parliamentary practice and procedure.

The establishment of the WYP occurred within the context of devolution and increasing Welsh independence from Westminster, as well as reforms that enabled 16 and 17 year olds to vote in local elections in Wales. The WYP is a carefully planned model, co-designed with young people, and includes input from experts, schools, and members of parliament themselves. It is also supported by a careful approach to evaluation, that includes independent academic evaluation and 360 degree feedback from the full range of actors involved.

The WYP consists of 60 members, aged 11 to 18. Eighty per cent of WYP Members are elected by their peers in online elections and 20% are appointed by partner organisations that represent various groups and interests of young people in Wales. The appointed WYP Members are encouraged to work closely with the partner organisations to ensure they reflect the views and perspectives of young people from relevant communities, including persons with disabilities, or ethnic minorities.

The election cycles for the WYP Members are designed to coincide with broader education campaigns about democratic engagement for young people, including those orientated around enrolling to vote. WYP elections are also accompanied by a Wales-wide survey of key youth priorities, and are supported by schools-based programs, youth engagement and outreach programs also facilitated by the Senedd.

The WYP members meet three times during their two-year term at the Senedd building in Cardiff Bay, where they debate and vote on issues that matter to them and their constituents. They also hold regional meetings and events to engage with other young people and stakeholders across Wales.

When meeting in the Senedd building, the WYP sits in the Main Chamber, with the President of the Senedd presiding over procedural rules that have been agreed to by the WYP and generally mirror that of the Senedd. During these sessions, Youth MPs have access to other members of parliament, senior clerks, and parliamentary researchers, as well as data collected by the Welsh Parliament about matters of interest or priority for young people in Wales. The WYP also often works closely with the Children’s Commissioner and Future Generations Commissioner, who can also support WYP policy priorities and assist in the provision of relevant research or data. However, the WYP does not have access to the same powers and privileges as the Senedd, for example, its proceedings are not protected by parliamentary privilege and it does not have powers to compel government Ministers or public servants to appear before it to provide evidence. It can, however, make use of the Senedd’s broad cast services, publish reports, prepare media releases and other official statements, produce online content, and host events.

The WYP regularly contributes to policy development in areas such as education, mental health, environment, and children’s rights, and supports local social action in line with WYP Member’s key priorities for change. Increasingly, government departments and other bodies seek to engage WYP Members for focus groups, or to assist in the co-design of policies, or to serve on panels for recruitment of senior public servants or statutory office holders. There has also been positive engagement between the Welsh Parliament’s Finance Committee and the Youth Parliament, that included the establishment of a focus group that helped inform the oversight and budgeting work of the Finance Committee, but also enabled the Youth Parliament to gain insights into the balancing required when distributing funding to different priorities.

### Devolved approaches to outreach that link elected members to the advocacy prioritise of local constituencies

UK Parliament Week is an annual series of events that take place across the UK each November that aim to inspire interest in parliament, politics and democracy and encourage young people and the public to engage with the UK’s democratic system and institutions. In 2023, UK Parliament Week coincided with the State Opening of Parliament, and saw more than 11,000 events take place across the country, as well as in the Crown Dependencies and the British Overseas Territories.

UK Parliament Week aims to connect local communities with their elected representatives and encourages local events or workshops that spread awareness about the practices and processes of parliament and encourage civic participation. Interested individuals, community organisations, teachers or MPs can request a free UK Parliament Week resource kit, which is tailored to different audiences and available in different languages. The 2023 kits included a Parliamentary-themed board game, *The Ayes Have It*, that encourages students to learn more about decision making in parliament.

The first UK Parliament Week in 2011 was centred around encouraging the public to visit Westminster and learn about parliamentary processes through tours and formal events. However, over time it has evolved to be focused on local experiences, with community led activities and events that are supported by specialist parliamentary staff who have integrated UK Parliament Week into broader, more holistic public engagement and education strategies. Careful planning has been put into ensuring that UK Parliament Week is accessible and engaging for hard to reach or ‘seldom heard’ communities, with parliamentary staff and elected MPs building and supporting local networks and local champions to assist in co-designing activities and resources. Since 2017, the digital aspects of UK Parliament have also become increasingly important, with attention given to safe data collection from participants, as well as effective media engagement and promotion across a range of online platforms. This has in turn enabled high quality feedback to be received and supported the integration of UK Parliament Week into engagement activities including the online petitions system, teacher training programs and school visits.

### Embedding participation and engagement expertise in each parliamentary committee

In the Scottish Parliament each parliamentary committee has a member of the Participation Team as part of their secretariat. The Participation Team member will meet with the Clerk supporting the Committee and the Convenor of the Committee to learn about what the Committee needs to get out of the inquiry and to provide engagement advice and support. The Committee will then produce an Approach Paper for each inquiry that will include a framework for any research, plans for public inquiries or submission process and time lines, as well as engagement strategies.

Demographic data commissioned by the research teams can reveal the need for careful, expert, localised and partnered engagement strategies. In these cases, the Participation Team member will consult with their established network of partners to help develop the most effective and efficient public engagement strategy for the particular committee inquiry. Sometimes this will involve working with partner hosts.

One example of this approach is the work of Equal Opportunities Committee in its 2001 *Inquiry into Gypsy Travellers and Public Sector Policies* where the voice of lived experience was given central place because the Committee wanted to better understand the perspectives of Gypsie Traveller communities in order to understand their housing and social security needs. Connecting with these communities necessitated reliance on skills of Participation Team as well as on established partnerships. Through this carefully planned engagement approach, Members of the Equality Committee developed important trusted relationships with Gypsy Travellers by visiting them where they wereand have since become unofficial ambassadors of this approach.

Once Members appreciate the value of using qualitative research methods or lived experience focus groups to accurately assessing the on the ground impact of budgetary decisions, or to help work out if past Budget decisions have actually delivered the outcomes they had in mind*,* they often embrace these techniques in a range of thematic areas. This means the goal should not be to *engage everyone* but rather to providing pathways for people to understand the relevance of the work of parliament in their lives and to *sometimes* participate when the decisions or laws parliament is considering impact their lives the most.

Building and sustaining multidisciplinary and high skilled Participation Teams means that these officers can do the ‘warm up work’ with hard to reach groups that they know committees want to hear from, including young people. These teams can smooth the way for more diverse witnesses in parliamentary committee inquiries, for example, by providing wrap around care and support for witnesses, including providing spaces for preparation and de brief as well as options for giving evidence. Often this involves working with a partnered intermediary.

The Scottish Parliament has also adopted evidence-based approaches to website design and is now using a ‘Your Priorities’ online consultation tool in many committees’ inquiries, that provides participants with the potential to brainstorm solutions and ideas in response to particular issues, proposals or concerns and encourages engagement beyond the passive survey style response.

The Scottish Parliament’s Participation Team is also actively involved in broader discussions about democratic participation. For example, the *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015* has been used to establish pathways and processes for youth and other community groups to assert control of public spaces and field spaces.

### Creating deliberative spaces for reconciliation and shared prioritise for future policy development

The Shared Ireland unit is a part of the Department of the Taoiseach that coordinates and drives the government’s Shared Island initiative. The initiative aims to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island of Ireland, and engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. The Shared Ireland initiative is based on the spirit and intent of the Good Friday Agreement, which is the foundation of peace and reconciliation on the island.

One of the key activities of the Shared Ireland initiative has been the establishment of the Shared Island Youth Forum, which has hosted virtual event engaging over 400 young people from across the island on their vision and aspirations for a shared island. This Youth Forum is designed to bring young people and Members of Parliament together from the North and South of Ireland, and is supported by twinning arrangements for schools. Through this Forum – and related engagement efforts by the Department of the Taoiseach – there has been a notable increase in the young people who have appeared before committees to give evidence, and a growing political awareness of the primacy of engagement with young people.

Some of the other activities and achievements of the Shared Ireland unit include:

* Establishing the Shared Island Fund, which provides €500m in capital funding between 2021-25 for collaborative North/South projects in areas such as health, education, infrastructure, environment and research.
* Organising the Shared Island Dialogues, which are a series of online events that bring together diverse perspectives and voices to discuss key issues and opportunities for a shared island, such as climate action, civil society, education and culture.
* Commissioning and publishing Shared Island Research, which is a comprehensive programme of research to support the building of consensus around a shared future on the island, and to inform policy development and public debate. The research is conducted in partnership with the National Economic and Social Council, the Economic and Social Research Institute, the Irish Research Council, and other partners.
* Convening roundtable sessions with women’s representatives and ethnic minority communities on the island, to hear their interests and priorities for a shared island, and to ensure the inclusion of often under-represented voices in the peace process.
* Hosting the Shared Island Forum, which was a high-level event that brought together political leaders, academics, civil society representatives and other stakeholders from across the island and beyond, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for a shared island in the context of Brexit, Covid-19 and global issues.

### Embracing citizen’s juries as a supplement to parliamentary committee work

The Scottish Parliament has a dedicated Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee focused on exploring ways to engage the public in the business of parliament. The Committee considers all public petitions submitted to the parliament and determines if they meet the requisite thresholds to prompt the holding of a public inquiry or requiring a response from government. The Committee also undertakes other forms of public engagement, such as organising community dialogues and forums. In recent years, the Committee has also facilitated the formation of citizen’s juries to consider and report on policy issues of relevance to the Scottish Parliament.

The committee consists of seven members from different political parties, and is currently chaired by Johann Lamont MSP. The committee meets regularly and publishes its agendas, papers, minutes, and reports on its website. The committee also broadcasts its meetings live and on demand on Scottish Parliament TV.

The committee is currently working on several topics, such as:

* Budget scrutiny 2024-25, which involves examining the Scottish Government’s spending plans and priorities for the next financial year.
* Inquiry into A9 Dualling Project, which involves investigating the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the major road project that aims to upgrade the A9 between Perth and Inverness.
* Public Participation Inquiry, which involves exploring how the parliament can improve its public engagement and participation practices and methods.
* Various public petitions on issues such as aftercare for care-experienced young people, falconry rights, British Sign Language education, abortion law, and student loan debts.

In September 2023 the Committee released a report entitled *Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament*. It includes key recommendations and initiatives following the Committee’s extensive consultation process, which included the appointment of Citizens’ Panel on Participation to look at how the Parliament can ensure that diverse voices and communities from all parts of Scotland influence its work.

To create the Citizens’ Panel, invitation letters were sent to 4,800 randomly-selected households across Scotland. From the replies, the Committee selected a sample of people from all over Scotland who were broadly similar to the Scottish population, taking account of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and education. Of the 24 people we invited, 19 were able to participate. Panel members had their travel and accommodation costs covered, were paid £330 for their time and commitment, and were given IT training and support. They worked together for over 32 hours over two weekends and three remote online sessions in October and November 2022. The Citizen’s Panel also heard from a wide range of people, including MSPs, members of the public who have experienced barriers to participation, political scientists, academics and community organisations. At the end of the process, the Panel made seventeen recommendations to improve how the Parliament engages with the people of Scotland. These were published in the Committee’s interim report on 16 December 2022.

The key finding of the Committee’s inquiry was that ‘scrutiny and representative democracy can be supported and made better through the use of deliberative models’. The Committee explained that this can be guided by overarching principles, rather requiring one-size-fits all processes or structures. The principles recommended were that:

* deliberative democracy should complement the existing model of representative democracy and be used to support the scrutiny process.
* the way in which deliberative methods are used, from recruitment through to reporting and feedback, should be transparent and subject to a governance and accountability framework.
* the deliberative methods used should be proportionate and relevant to the topic, and the scrutiny context.
* participants in deliberative democracy should be supported, empowered and given feedback on how their recommendations are used.

The Scottish Parliament Data Visualisation Team also published the following graphic summarizing the next steps in terms of implementing these principles, and other findings contained in the Report, into practice within the Scottish Parliament.

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### Creating forums to elevate and value the voices of older people in parliament

As discussed above, developing intergenerational resilience requires knowledge sharing and power sharing between generations, and an acknowledgement of the value of including the perspectives of a diverse range of voices in public decision-making. This includes valuing the experiences and expertise of older people and thinking proactively about how to engage and empower older people to connect with democratic institutions including parliaments. Older people’s perspective can help contextualise complex policy problems and reconceptualise contemporary ‘crisis’ in ways that enable alternative solutions to be visible and actioned. For example, as Ward, Ray and Tanner observed in 2020, following their qualitative research with older people on the issue of social care in England:

By contextualising the experiences of our participants as they negotiate the social care market the parameters of the ‘crisis’ become clear. It is not purely an economic crisis of excessive public expenditure and debt, as the government claims in order to manage the fiscal crisis in the banking sec­tor. Nor is it not just a crisis in care for the lives of the millions of ordinary people who have been impacted by the austerity policies. It is a crisis of care and a crisis of democracy in the lack of public debate, agreement and decision-making on major and far-reaching decisions about the basic infra­structure of society (at 237).

The value of included older people’s voices in parliamentary decision making has been recognised by parliaments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in a range of ways, including through the co-design and establishment of Elders Parliaments or Older Persons Parliaments.

The Northern Ireland Assembly’s Older People’s Parliament was first convened during the COVID period of 2021-2022. It provides a platform for older people in Northern Ireland to voice their concerns about public service delivery and other aspects of public decision making directly to elected members and government authorities. The Older People’s Parliament is underpinned by data derived from targeted consultations and surveys of older people from throughout the jurisdiction, which feeds into the agenda of the Older People’s Parliament and is also available to elected members of the Assembly. Another example is the Irish Senior Citizens’ Parliament (ISCP) which represents over 500,000 older individuals through its affiliated organisations. Members of the ISCP are democratically elected at annual elections by delegates to ensure that it genuinely reflects the views of older people when it develops and prosecutes its policy agenda and contributes to the work of the Oireachtas.

In each of these examples, the parliamentary institutions involved have used demographic data and research to identify with precision the types of voices that are seldom heard in their parliaments, and worked alongside members of disenfranchised communities to design and implement engagement strategies that facilitate democratic listening, as well as parliamentary education or information exchange. The institutional actors have learnt to listen rather than lead. The institutions involved have made space for different generations to create their own conditions for change. They have adopted systematic approaches to hearing from the right people at the right time and have invested in collecting rich information that can be shared across agencies and actors. Importantly, when parliaments create space for communities to democratically elect representatives to speak on their behalf – to develop their own mandate for substantive political or policy change – they transcend the conventional teacher/student approach to including seldom heard voices in democratic discourse. This initially requires resourcing and courage – but delivers cost savings over the longer term, as it enables parliaments to develop relationships of trust with communities that are vital to all aspects of their business, and upon whom their long-term institutional legitimacy depends. In other words, when parliaments reconceptualise what counts as valuable expertise and evidence and give strategic value to meaningful democratic engagement across all generations and social groups, they can facilitate democratic listening and become sites of intergenerational resilience.

## Toolkits for designing, implementing or evaluating democratic engagement strategies within parliamentary settings

In the next section of this paper I attempt to transform the key features of above analysis into a ‘toolkit’ or checklist for those involved in designing, implementing or evaluating engagement strategies within parliamentary settings. The toolkit comprises of two tables. The first table sets out the preconditions for meaningful engagement within a parliamentary setting. These preconditions and ‘first step’ actions have been informed by the catalysts for change identified above. They are designed to include actions that are within reach *now* and have a direct impact on institutional capacity to improve the quality of engagement.

The second table is designed to assist with engagement planning and evaluation and draws from the indicators of ‘good’ public engagement identified in the IPEN toolkit, including: inclusivity; diversity of participation; empowering; flexible; meaningful; open and transparent and collaborative. The second table also draws heavily on the work of the Leston‑Bandeira (2022) who has identified ten factors to ensure effective public engagement which are reflected as success factors in the table below. Like all toolkits or checklists, these tables should be thought of as a prompt, rather than a prescription, and as a work in progress that will benefit from ongoing critique and feedback from practitioners.

### Table 1: Preconditions for Meaningful Engagement with Young People

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Precondition  | ‘First step’ actions |
| **Senior leadership recognises and values public parliamentary engagement and commits to improving the quality of engagement with young people**  | Include public engagement as a core strategic goal in strategic planning documents and Key Performance Indicators |
|  | Create specific targets for engaging with young people in all aspects of parliamentary business (including recruitment, training, evaluation as well as democratic lawmaking or policy making functions) |
|  | Develop institution-wide benchmarks and targets for improving the quality and diversity of public engagement |
|  | Evaluate existing outreach and education programs, and celebration of positive outcomes  |
| **Positive institutional culture where staff feel valued and safe to explore new approaches to public engagement** | Survey existing staff to identify skills and strengths |
|  | Co-design activities with existing staff to identify strategies that are working well, and barriers to meaningful engagement with marginalised groups |
| **Appropriate skills and resources within the institution to design, implement and evaluate engagements strategies**  | Audit existing resources and processes employed to build or support public engagement. |
|  | Host workshops with participants from inside and outside the institution to refine and consolidate existing engagement resources and strategies |
| **Relationships of trust with marginalised or disconnected communities**  | Commission in-house research to develop evidence-based profiles of those individuals and communities experiencing marginalization from parliamentary processes and practices |
|  | Identify and acknowledge existing relationships with community organisations forged by education and outreach teams |
|  | Set targets for building relationships with marginalised communities, including through the identification of trusted bridge organisations or individuals. |
|  | Allocate human and other resources to developing and sustaining relationships with marginalised communities |
| **Understanding of self-determined approaches to engagement by Aboriginal peoples** | Audit institutional capacity to understand and access Aboriginal concepts of parliamentary engagement |
|  | Develop benchmarks and targets with respect to increasing institutional knowledge of Aboriginal concepts of parliamentary engagement in consultation with existing treaty bodies or Voice forums  |
| **Experience utilising human rights concepts and principles** | Audit existing processes, practices and skills to identify level of familiarity with or incorporation of human rights concepts and principles |
|  | Develop benchmarks and targets with respect to increasing institutional knowledge of how to integrate human rights concepts and principles within parliamentary processes and practices |
|  | Exchange experiences between staff of different institutions to build peer support for integration of human rights concepts and principles with parliamentary processes and practices |
| **Access to comprehensive and current data about the lives of young people** | Utilise existing education and outreach programs to identify relevant information shared about the lives of young people, and their priorities or preferences with respect to different forms of parliamentary engagement |
|  | Partner with existing youth councils and/or children’s commissioners to consolidate data about the lives of young people within the jurisdiction |
|  | Partner with research institutions to undertake further qualitative research to address gaps in existing data and/or to create accessible profiles of young people across electoral constituencies  |
| **Access to youth leaders and youth co-design partners from with marginalised or disconnected communities** | Partner with existing youth councils and/or children’s commissioners to identify youth leaders and youth-led organisations within the jurisdiction |
|  | Establish ‘upward mentoring’ opportunities within the institution, pairing youth leaders with senior parliamentary staff. |
|  | Co-design forums or workshops with young leaders to identify strengths within existing outreach and education programs, and document areas in need of further investment or innovation |
| **Capacity to identify or support policy and legislative priorities that address intergenerational inequality**  | Partner with research organisations or existing youth representative council or bodies to identify key issues or factors contributing to intergenerational inequality and/or other experiences of marginalisation among young people |
|  | Consider opportunities to orientate existing outreach and education programs, activities and events around the policy issues or priorities identified as important by young people, with a particular focus on those issues of most pressing concern to marginalised communities |
| **Institutional safeguards to protect against corruption, misfeasance or inappropriate conduct** | Review existing policies and procedures with input from youth leaders or youth representatives. |

### Table 2: Evaluating Public Engagement Activities\*

\*Drawn from the ten key success factors identified by Leston-Bandeira (2022)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Success Factor | Indicator  |
| **Accessibility**Language and mechanisms used to engage successfully conveys ideas to a diverse range of potential participants | Resources in multiple languages, styles or formats |
|  | Different modes of communication used to share information with different audiences  |
|  | Feedback sought from young people or youth services about accessibility of materials and resources |
| **Rates of Participation**Actively seeking input from those not otherwise engaged with the processes and practices of parliament. | Increased rates of participation |
|  | Increased geographical diversity of participants |
|  | Increased demographic diversity of participants |
| **Diversity of the audience** Facilitating participation beyond those already familiar with parliamentary processes | Participation beyond those individuals and groups with intersecting privileges and high levels of familiarity with parliamentary processes and practices |
|  | Explicit encouragement for diverse groups to participate, including through hearings ‘in place’ |
| **Identifying and addressing existing ‘divides’**Explicit efforts to understand and overcome existing political, social, economic, digital or other divides | Practical barriers to diverse participation are identified and explicitly addressed |
| **Diverse communication techniques**A multiplicity of communication techniques have been employed  | Evidence of multiple communication techniques e.g. text, audio, video, visual, infographics |
| **Issue-led rather than process-led**Ordinary people are more likely to engage because they care about an issue, not because they know how a process works | Evidence of procedural innovation or flexibility in response to issue-orientated engagement  |
| **Listening rather than broadcasting** Institutional actors demonstrate active listening techniques and explicitly respond to ideas or input from others  | Evidence of two-way communication where institutional actors respond to ideas or suggestions by other participants |
|  | Opportunity for participants to share lived experience in safe environments |
|  | Appropriate acknowledgement of inputs submitted |
| **Closing the feedback loop**Effective explanation of how inputs collected informed parliamentary business | Evidence of clear communication with participants about how their inputs informed parliamentary business |
|  | Evidence that someone did listen, even if not to accommodate the exact demands made |
| **Linking engagement with parliamentary business**Views of the participants are formally and actively linked to the process of considering the bill or policy | Evidence of involvement or acknowledgement by diverse range of Members of Parliament.  |
|  | Evidence that participant views are formally and actively linked to the process of considering the bill |
| **Evaluation and reporting of activities**Parliaments regularly seek feedback and report on engagement performance | Evidence of internal reflection and opportunities for public to provide feedback and reflection on specific and general engagement experiences |

## (Re)conceptualising youth democratic engagement in Australia

The insights and experiences described above, coupled with the global mapping and research being undertaken by IPEN, IPU and others, suggests that it is time to reconceptualise what youth democratic engagement looks like in Australia. This reconceptualisation is a necessary pre-cursor to identifying what interventions or actions we can collectively take to improve the quality of youth engagement with Australian Parliaments.

Photo Credit: Sarah Moulds, 2023, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh

As the Bennett Institute for Public Policy has observed, if we want to improve the quality of the connection between the governed and the governors, we must:

move ‘away from a fixation on the here and now, and beyond the who and what of democratic politics – who is going to get elected, what are they going to do? – to look at the how. How do democratic decisions get made and how can they be made differently? How can the consent of losers and outsiders be achieved? How can new social divisions be bridged? How can the use of technology be brought under democratic control? And if we can’t do these things, how will democracy not merely survive but flourish in the future? (Foa et al, Preface).

In the context of engaging young people with democratic institutions like parliament, this means that we need to move beyond the conventionally dominant ‘teacher/student’ frame. This framing positions the adult or older person in the position of power, and the holder of knowledge and expertise, while the young person is conceptualised as a passive recipient of information or instruction. This is limiting our ability to see and value the experiences and expertise held by young people, and skewing our view of the possible when it comes to youth-led democratic engagement. As Shephard and Patrikios observed in their 2013 research on youth parliaments (at p. 767):

[I]nstitutions rarely translate youth preferences and grievances into tangible and applicable policy outcomes. So, on the whole, Youth Parliaments do not fulfill their potential as direct channels that aggregate youth voice and transfer it to policy-makers (democratic function). Instead, activities are invariable focused upon socializing adolescents and young adults in the workings of a democratic polity (civic education).

Institution-controlled and led engagement activities also run the risk of what Pease has described as members of privileged groups ‘reproducing privilege’ (2022, at p 15). Pease explains:

Members of dominant groups who have started to develop some awareness of their privileged position often look to oppressed groups to educate them. In doing so, however, they reproduce their dominant position and do not take responsibility for their own learning. While it is important that members of dominant groups make their practice accountable to oppressed groups, they need to take initiative in challenging their own and others’ privilege. (Pease, 2022, p.27)

These risks demand that we centre the key principles of youth-led, evidence-based, human rights informed approaches to youth engagement when we invest in public engagement activities in parliamentary settings. This approach helps to address marginalisation and social distance and models a shift in power away from those experiencing privilege to those experiencing exclusion.

The above examples and insights also bring into sharp focus the need to accept that, as a community, we cannot separate democratic engagement from the substantive issues confronting young people, and the intergenerational inequalities that plague our political discourse and decision-making systems. In other words, public institutions and public decision‑makers need to demonstrate that they are prepared to engage in the type of power or privilege shifting that can bring about substantive policy change.

The experiences of overseas jurisdictions also underscore the benefits of using evidence and data to target precious resources to maximum effect. Good people and good programs around Australia are also already prioritising resources on those groups least likely to have access to parliamentary processes or practices, and those most at risk of marginalisation and isolation. But they face an uphill battle if we continue to take a fragmented, silo-ed approach that is often artificially circumscribed by government portfolios, short term funding models and jurisdictional eccentricities. We need a multi-institutional, cross-jurisdictional investment in human and digital resources within parliaments, and data collection and research outside of parliament, to make the most of the pockets of best practice already happening on the ground in Australia. Finally, we need to support youth-led movements in Australia to ensure equality of access to our political system, and to incentivise elected representatives to take the views and demands of young people seriously.

I have attempted to outline how these components of a reconceptualised approach to democratic engagement fit together. These concepts align closely with the guiding principles and key objectives outlined at the beginning of this Report and help inform the actions and toolkit indicators set out below.

### Recommendations for Action … Now!

In this section of the Report, I highlight some of the actions parliaments governments, research institutions and community organisations can take now to create catalysts for change and make progress towards reimagining youth engagement with parliaments in Australia.

Many of these actions are already being undertaken, developed or reviewed by highly skilled and experienced youth service experts, Commissioners, government agencies and parliamentary engagement staff in Australia. Institutional and non‑institutional actors have a shared responsibility for implementing the below actions, which are designed to deliver shared, and long-lasting benefits and positive partnering opportunities. However, the actions coloured in purplefall within the particular domain of parliamentary services. Many of these actions also align with the Connecting Youth to Parliament Toolkits set out below.

The actions identified below have also been selected having regard to the need to preserve the important representative and legislative functions of parliaments, and the independence and professionalism of parliamentary staff. These actions are also designed to be achieved without requiring the allocation of substantial additional new resources, although they do envisage the leverage of win-win partnerships between parliaments, governments, local councils, research bodies and community organisations.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Guiding Principle  | Key Objective  | Catalyst for change | Action we can take NOW |
| Youth-led | Shift InequalityRebuild Trust | Institutional disruption*More young MPs* | Endorse and profile the work of youth-led advocacy including Run for It and Make it 16 by tracking progress towards minimum of 12.5% representation of under 35s in local councils and federal, state and territory parliamentsFacilitate upward mentoring for key political figures at State and Federal level.Engage in partnered research to evaluate existing approaches to improving youth representation in elected positionsSurvey existing political parties for initial responses to the idea of developing targets or quotas for young people in pre-selection processes |
| Youth-led | Shift InequalityRebuild Trust | Institutional disruption*Lower voting age to 16 years* | Endorse and profile the work of youth-led advocacy including *Run for It* and *Make it 16* including through co-hosting forums with Australian Electoral Commission and Local Government AssociationsDraft legislative amendments to existing Electoral Acts, having regard to recent efforts eg Electoral (Lowering Voting Age for Local Elections and Polls) Legislation Bill (NZ) 2023, Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018 (Cth) |
| Youth ledEvidence-based | Shift Inequality | Institutional disruption*Prompt consideration of impact of laws, policies and public decisions on lives of young people* | Utilise existing Youth Councils in each Australian jurisdiction to co-design a *Future Generation Act,* informed by the Welsh modelUse the recent *Intergenerational Report* (2023) to identify key policy priorities for reform, and co-design ‘dashboard’ to monitor progress.Support independent research into drivers of inequality in Australia similar to TASC *The State we are in: inequality in Ireland 2023 Report* Pilot ‘micro-loans’ projects administered by local councils to facilitate youth-led consultation in marginalised communities to identify key policy and legislative prioritiesInvest in Australia-wide youth surveys (such as Mission Australia Youth Survey) to prompt collection of depth of data similar to *Make Your Mark* and *The Big Ask Survey* |
| Human Rights, Respect First Nations  | Shift InequalityBroaden what counts as democratic engagement | Institutional disruption*Adopt effective human rights frameworks*  | Facilitate youth access to public inquiries into human rights frameworks at local, state and federal level including current parliamentary inquiries taken place at federal level and in South AustraliaCo-host youth-led workshops on human rights issues in local constituencies Consult with Australian Human Rights Commission and state and territory counterparts about existing and proposed youth engagement strategies |
| Evidence-based | Shift InequalityRebuild Trust | Internal cultural shift*Know more about who is disconnected and why* | Partner with existing networks and research centers to better understand whose voices are not being heard and why (e.g. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 2021, Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?) Research partners could include: International Parliament Engagement Network; Aboriginal Research Centres; Youth Advisory Councils; University based centres for Democratic Governance or Parliamentary Studies; Australasian Study of Parliament Group |
| Youth-ledInclusive & EmpoweringRespect First Nations  | Shift InequalityRebuild Trust | Internal cultural shift*Know how to reach disengaged groups and be seen as a legitimate, trusted partner* | Utilise existing networks of Parliamentary Education, Outreach and Engagement Officers in Australia to map best practice and identify areas in need of future investment.Partner with demographic researchers to identify local constituencies experiencing multiple barriers to engagement with parliamentary practices and processesCo-host forums with peak social service bodies (including ACOSS) and Aboriginal and First Nations bodies to identify potential partners for developing safe relationships with marginalised communities Partner with youth-led organisations to develop training materials and guidance for parliamentary staff and engagement teams, e.g. Young Manchester, Sharing Power in a Place Report 2023Create opportunities to celebrate and invest in positive relationships between community organisations, experts and institutions, e.g Scottish Parliament’s Third Sector Partners and Parliament Event |
| Evidence-basedInclusive & Empowering | Rebuild Trust | Internal cultural shift*All staff think about how to include diverse range of voices in parliamentary practices and procedures* | Integrate direct participation in social action within civics education and parliamentary outreach programs e.g. Democracy Box Project, WalesPilot (or review existing) ‘Parliament Week’ events that are focused on ‘in place’ engagement between local members and communities, including young people.Incentivise and resource all parliamentary committees to develop public engagement plans for each public inquiry they undertake, informed by Toolkit set out below.Review opportunities to use existing committee and petitions systems to track and encourage further engagement with other parliamentary practice and processes eg Scottish Parliament’s Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Report 2023 |
| Evidence-based | Rebuild Trust | Internal cultural shift*Set strategic goals to improve quality of public parliamentary engagement* | Include public engagement as a core strategic goal in strategic planning documents and key performance indicatorsDevelop institution-wide benchmarks and targets for improving the quality and diversity of public engagementDevelop (or review) specific Public Engagement Strategies eg Scottish Parliament’s Public Engagement Strategy, 2021 |
| Youth-ledHuman Rights, Evidence- based Inclusive & Empowering | Broaden what counts as democratic engagement | Social disruption*Open curiosity about different forms of democratic engagement* | Undertake an audit of protest laws and laws restricting access to public space building on work already undertaken by Australian Democracy Network and Human Rights Law CentreCo-host forum with First Nations and Aboriginal Organisations, Youth-led organisations, Youth Councils and federal, state and territory statutory bodies and local councils on the theme ‘what does democracy look like for young Australians’  |
| Youth-ledInclusive & Empowering Respect First Nations  | Shift Inequality | Internal cultural shift*Use demographic data to create conditions for democratically representative youth* *parliaments*  | Work with existing Youth Parliaments to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of current models Invest in generating or accessing delineated demographic data to identify needs and engagement profiles of young people in each Australian electoratePilot a demographically representative and democratically elected Youth Parliament with design input from existing Youth Parliaments and Youth Advisory Councils Utilise existing treaty processes and First Nations Voice forums to advance self-determined youth engagement |

## **How do we build on the foundations for intergenerational resilience in our communities**?

We have what it takes to create intergenerational resilience in communities and parliaments in Australia and New Zealand. Many of the foundations have already been laid through the hard work of parliamentary staff, educators, elected members and community leaders across demographic and generational divides. We have green shoots of innovation to inspire us, and evidence to support the economic, social and political value of integrating high quality, high impact public engagement strategies and democratic listening techniques across our institutions, including parliaments. We can use these foundations to be ready to respond to external catalyst for change, and to generate our own change conditions for example by changing the way we measure and evaluate success and shifting investment and resources within institutions.

My Churchill Fellowship report (Moulds 2023 and 2024) identified the following key recommendations derived from the insights gained during my Fellowship travels, that are designed to help us reconceptualise what counts as young democratic engagement and in the process, improve our institutional capacity to engage in democratic listening across all generations:

1. Activate curiosity about the lives of young people across institutions and generations. Support this with the collection and dissemination of data that identifies whose voices are being privileged and whose voices are being ignored and excluded and orientate effort and investment accordingly. Strategies for practical implementation of this finding are set out in the Connecting Youth with Parliament Toolkit (above).
2. Understand the institutional context in which parliaments and governments seek to engage with citizens, including young people, and identify internal and external catalysts for change (discussed above).
3. Integrate the human rights principles and First Nations knowledges within institutional work practices and strategic planning and measure progress towards shared goals.
4. Model behaviours and advance reform agendas that actively acknowledge and address intergenerational inequality, including by making space for young people and older people to identify and prosecute their own reform priorities.
5. Increase youth political agency including by taking steps to lower the voting age in all elections in Australia, and by investing in youth representative bodies and youth leaders that are democratically endorsed by young people themselves.

To make progress towards implementing these big picture recommendations, conceptual and practical shifts are required. We must continue to challenge ourselves, and our colleagues and leaders, to *reconceptualise* what it means to ‘engage with’ or ‘listen to’ the voices of young people. And this demands the courageous step of *getting out of the way,* stepping aside to make space for the voices of our young people, so that we can address intergenerational inequality and youth disempowerment head-on.

Youth parliaments could also provide fertile ground for improved youth engagement in Australian democracy, particularly if they embrace the features of the Welsh Youth Parliament and entrench legitimacy through a genuine political commitment by sitting MPs to consider and debate the legislative proposals generated by the Youth Parliament. The Welsh model also ensures that young parliamentarians are elected by young people and includes quotas for marginalised communities. This approach recognises that educative programs aiming to improve young people’s understanding of parliamentary processes and procedures are important, but not enough. Space for young people to identify and prosecute their own reform agenda – and to actively challenge existing processes and procedures – is required.

The humble classroom is also fertile ground for revolutionary change. Current approaches to ‘student representation’ in school settings generally entrench existing power dynamics and privileges (Mayes, 2016). Children who feel isolated or excluded from school decision making process are silenced through these ‘representative’ forums – but this can change. We can make classrooms more democratic. We can put the least engaged students *in charge* for the day (Ferguson-Patrick, 2022). And if we had the courage to do this, we might learn a lot about ourselves and our relationship to democratic decision making and power in the process.

We need to create safe space for young people to tell their stories, and raise their voices, and shape their democracies. As Phillips, Perales and Ritchie (2024) have recently reminded us in the context of reporting on ‘School Strike for Climate’ and related climate change activism:

 children express their frustration at political systems that exclude their voices. This situation is particularly important because children will bear the brunt of future climate catastrophes.

The International Social Survey Program survey analysed by the authors suggests that older generations agree that children and young people’s views should being included in decision-making about the environment, and algins with growing support among the broader population in Australia and New Zealand for lowering the voting age. Phillips et al also report that:

School climate strikes may be having a positive influence on adult attitudes towards including children in the political sphere. Media coverage of young people being politically active could also be shifting adults’ beliefs on young people’s political engagement.

In other words, the more adults hear and see stories of children and young people’s concerns and restorative actions for the environment, the greater potential there is for adults to understand and support their perspectives.

The authors’ recommendations for ways forward align closely with the recommendations outlined in this paper and focus on the transfer of *political and economic power* between generations, to ensure younger generations are equipped with the resources they need to continue to promote the democratic values, and protect the democratic institutions, that are shared between generations.

The body of evidence explored in this paper attests to the need for adults to challenge their assumptions about the lives of younger people, and to resist the temptation to respond to the political and economic needs of younger people by repeatedly emphasising the complexities of the processes and trade-offs that feature in our society and our economy. We often assume that young people need to be reminded about all the barriers that standing the way of change – but they already know they exist. They feel their weight every day. Instead, we need to open the door to our democratic institutions like parliament (both literally and metaphorically through uncovering how these institutions work) but then move out of the way so that young people can see a different horizon, one that looks good to them, and have the chance to tell us how they want to get there.

Our democratic future depends on our young people not just ‘getting involved’ but taking charge. We need the courage to take a power-shifting approach to youth engagement with parliaments in Australia that paves the way for the transfer of knowledge, values, and coping strategies between generations, to safeguard our democracy for all of us.

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