

# ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

**Joan Pease - Member for Lytton**

## **Introduction**

Engaging young people with parliamentary committees is a critical aspect of a vibrant and inclusive democratic process. Ensuring that the voices of the younger generation are heard in the policymaking and legislative processes is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for addressing their unique concerns and needs.

In this paper, we will discuss various factors that impact the engagement of young people with parliamentary committees, highlighting the importance of topic relevance, time availability, and the role of existing networks and organizations. We will also explore specific case studies from Queensland, Australia, where efforts have been made to engage young people in parliamentary committee work.

Further we will explore factors that influencing young people's engagement with parliamentary committees. Whilst evidence suggests that young people, 16 to 24 years old are interested in issues that affect their lives, they feel that party politics and parliament may not be relevant to them.

Young people may also not be aware of the political or parliamentary process. Or that committee inquiries provide an opportunity for community and in this instance young people to engage, to be heard and to contribute to the decision-making process and how to engage.

## **1. Topic Relevance:**

One of the key factors influencing young people's engagement with parliamentary committees is the perceived relevance of the topic under discussion. Both the committee and the young people themselves need to see the topic as significant and directly related to their lives. When topics are abstract or seemingly disconnected from the daily experiences of young individuals, their engagement is likely to be limited.

For example, inquiries into issues such as mental health, education, and youth-related policies tend to garner more interest from young people as these topics directly impact their well-being and future. On the other hand, complex or niche subjects may struggle to attract their attention.

## **2. Time Availability:**

The time available for young people to engage with parliamentary committees is crucial. Some inquiries have tight schedules, requiring quick turnarounds for submissions and participation. However, such short timeframes can be a barrier to meaningful engagement, especially for young people who have various commitments, including school, work, and extracurricular activities.

Inquiries that offer longer timeframes for engagement, allowing young people to express their views without feeling rushed, tend to attract more participation. Young individuals need time to understand the issue, consult with peers, and provide thoughtful input.

## **3. Utilizing Existing Networks:**

Engaging young people effectively often involves leveraging the existing networks and organizations that cater to their needs and interests. In the case of Queensland, organizations like the Queensland Family and Child Commission, Multicultural Australia, Youth Parliaments, and youth advocacy groups have played a significant role in connecting young people with parliamentary committees.

These organizations often have established channels of communication with young people and can help in disseminating information about committee inquiries, encouraging submissions, and even providing support during the engagement process.

## **4. Promotion on Relevant Platforms:**

Understanding where young people are most active and engaged is crucial for promoting committee inquiries. Social media platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn are particularly effective in reaching young people. Committees can create engaging content, such as videos and graphics, to raise awareness about their inquiries and call for submissions.

## **5. Ethical considerations:**

Committees and secretariates have ethical considerations in relation to interactions with young people, particularly those under 18 years.

Has the young person been provided age-appropriate information about committee processes.

Does the young person understand this information, and are they able to understand the purpose and consequences of participating?

Is parental/carer consent required and if so, has a method been put in place to obtain this consent? For example, broadcast of proceedings (or publication of images) of young people who can't provide informed consent.

Have privacy and confidentiality issues been considered where appropriate? Is consent required from the organisation that has responsibility for the young person at the time of the consultation?

Are secretariate staff aware of their legal obligations around privacy, mandatory reporting and information sharing?

Are committee members and staff aware of what to do if they see or hear something that raises concerns about a young person's safety?

Further the committee may need to consider how information gained from young people, particularly those under 18 years of age, is to be presented in the final report. Young people may be less forthcoming if their name is to be attached to a particular statement or be cautious about attributing statements due to the nature of the inquiry.

## **Case Studies**

### **1. Inquiry into Serious Vilification and Hate Crimes:**

This case study demonstrates the success of a communication campaign in engaging young people. The committee employed a multi-channel approach, including social media, newspapers, radio interviews, and promotional materials, to reach a broad audience. Multicultural Australia played a pivotal role by facilitating various forms of submissions, including videos, audio, and written content. This approach enabled diverse cultural communities, including young people, to participate effectively.

### **2. Vaping: An Inquiry into Reducing Rates of E-Cigarette Use in Queensland:**

The Health and Environment Committee (HEC) recognized the importance of engaging young people due to the direct relevance of the vaping issue to their lives. Social media promotion and advertisements in digital newspapers were used to raise awareness about the inquiry. Approximately 10% of the submissions were from young people, while an additional 5% were from organizations advocating for young people. HEC also dedicated a specific day of public hearings to listen to young people's perspectives.

#### **Engagement of Young People with Inquiries Generally**

Young people tend to engage more actively with parliamentary committees when the subject matter directly affects their lives. The success of the Vaping Inquiry in Queensland highlights this point. However, committees should continuously explore new channels for engaging diverse groups of young people. Online platforms, video submissions, videoconferencing, and online forums can be effective means of reaching out to tech-savvy youth.

Paid, targeted advertising on social media platforms, based on age and location, has shown promise in increasing awareness about committee inquiries. Additionally, committees must consider issues like parliamentary privilege, managing inappropriate language, and ensuring the protection of young people's rights and privacy.

The data regarding the reach and engagement of the various social media posts that have been utilised by the committee offices. Further, whilst committee office does keep statistics on the number of submissions received and witnesses at hearings, the data collected from submissions does not include demographic statistics for example the age of submitters or focus areas, such as groups advocating on behalf of for example young people.

The 57th Parliament, from October 2020 to September 2024 to date the committee office has held 523 briefings/hearings with 1398 witnesses from government, 1548 organisations and 390 individuals. The committee office has received 19507 submissions across 92 inquiries. However, as stated earlier, no demographic data is collected from these enquiries, submissions and hearings.

### Opportunities for Participation

The role of a good communication plan is critical to identify key stakeholders. Whilst the committee office has a combined database of approximately 2800 stakeholders, structured by organisation type or focus areas. This data does not include demographic or youth specific detail.

Strategies to reach out to young people through educational programs has seen the Queensland Parliament education team deliver over 100 education programs across the state in 2022-2023.

During the 2022-2023 financial year they engaged with 14,000 students and teachers. 9 Youth parliaments and regional education activities and Parliamentary services partnered with the Department of Education and Training to conduct school constitutional conventions in Townsville and Brisbane.

These sessions provide opportunities for young people to understand the parliamentary process and how they can engage with parliamentary committee and parliament in general. How they can have a voice and be heard.

### **Evaluation of success of young people engagements with committees**

As outlined above, there are a number of factors that inhibit a clear assessment/evaluation of the committee office's engagement with young people. Currently, the Queensland Parliamentary Committee submissions do not request demographic information from submitters or witnesses.

There is also significant ethical considerations that need to be considered as outlined above.

Further, the author has been unable to obtain any hard data on the reach and engagement with the various social media platforms that are used.

Noting that political parties, forums and activities engage significantly with young people which indicates that young people are active on social media platforms.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Parliament to Develop a Social Media Platform Policy**
- 2. Collect demographic data from committee submitters**

As discussed in the paper, engaging with and hearing from young people is an important part of the political process. To provide an avenue for committees to engage specifically with a particular demographic would enhance and improve reach and engagement. Gathering and storing data relating to demographics would provide committees with clearer and more fulsome stakeholder lists.

It should be noted that for this paper, data relating to the reach and engagement of social media posts on the various platforms utilised by the committees was not made available to me.

Developing a social media policy for committee engagement to enable committees to better engage with young people.

No doubt there would be ethical considerations, however for Parliament's to engage with young people they need to be able to access young people in ways and places that young people inhabit and operate such as the various platforms that they utilise.

## **Conclusion**

Engaging young people with parliamentary committees is essential for a thriving and inclusive democracy. It requires a combination of factors, including topic relevance, adequate time for participation, and the use of existing networks and digital platforms and continually exploring new channels that reach young people.

The case studies from Queensland illustrate the positive impact of effective engagement strategies. As committees continue to adapt to the evolving needs and preferences of young people, they can ensure that the voices of the next generation are heard and incorporated into the legislative and policy-making processes.