

TAKING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT SERIOUSLY

Why is youth engagement important? According to the latest Census, 37.2% of Victoria's population is under 30 years of age. Nationally it's virtually the same at 37.1%. In the Northern Territory it's as high as 42.9% where the median age is 33.

If parliaments don't engage with young people, that's over a third of the population that aren't part of the conversation. Having young people as part of the conversation can only positively extend into their adult lives as these foundational experiences carry them through.

I plan to share what we've learnt from young people, and what young people have told us through our youth engagement work at the Parliament of Victoria (PoV).

There are a few consistent messages that have emerged through our work that I'd like to highlight.

What matters most to young people?

There is no one answer to that question. There are no surprises that young people are not one homogenous group with the same interests and concerns.

That's why consultation is important.

Earlier this year, the PoV held a youth forum where 60 young people from across the state were invited to Parliament House to tell parliament what mattered to them. They told us that what mattered the most was climate change, mental health, cultural inclusion, LGBTQIA+, First Nations issues, employment and education, housing and homelessness, regional and rural issues and young people in decision making platforms.

At the time of the youth forum, I held two part time roles, one at Parliament and the other in local government at the Banyule Council. In the same month we held the youth forum, I also held a similar event at Banyule. We went through a similar process to ascertain what matters most to young people. While some issues were consistent between both, Banyule's young people also wanted to talk about gender equality, masculinity, body image, alcohol and other drugs, disability and neurodiversity. Which goes to show that you can go through the same process with two different groups of young people and receive very different results. It's safe to say that we should never assume what issues are a priority for young people.

At parliament's youth forum, a consistent message shone through which was that "every issue is a youth issue." Young people don't want to be just consulted about what we might consider a traditional youth issue – they want to be consulted about everything.

Everything we do has an impact on young people, whether it's now or into the future. We also need to acknowledge that young people are not just the leaders of the future but are already leaders in their communities, in workplaces and in social change. So, they are very much deserving of a seat at the table.

However, in consulting young people we need to consider whether our usual methods of engagement are appropriate when reaching out to younger constituents. An example of this is the committee inquiry process. Keeping in mind that every issue is a youth issue, young people's input is important but it's unlikely they'll go through the formal submission process. Victoria's Public Accounts and Estimates Committee recently recognised the importance of consulting young people on the issues of gambling and liquor regulation, and gambling harm. A youth roundtable was held as a way of facilitating conversations between MPs, members of the secretariat and young people to inform the inquiry.

We pride ourselves that our engagements are genuine and not tokenistic. We're not interested in a photo opportunity without substance. Young people want to see genuine engagement and action. We also need to be accountable. That means maintaining communication and relationships.

How to engage with young people?

Another message we hear consistently is that young people want parliament to engage with them in the places and spaces they frequent (schools, unis, sporting clubs etc). We can't always expect young people to come to us.

When we wanted to hear from young people about their experiences in relation to the conduct of the 2022 state election, we took a young journalism student and a camera out front of the State Library, to ask them directly.

An effective way to consult with young people is to set up a youth advisory group. A number of MPs, government departments, local councils etc. have youth advisory groups. Done well, youth advisory groups can be effective. However, youth advisory groups shouldn't be where conversation with young people ends, they should be the starting point. It's important that we don't rely on the feedback of that small group of young people as the be all and end all. If you have youth advisory groups, I'd encourage you to support your members to hold their own focus groups or conduct surveys and polls to get broad and diverse input. Be mindful of always hearing the same voices and try to engage with the less engaged.

MPs are often very welcoming, inviting constituents to get in touch with them. But be mindful of barriers for young people that come with that invitation. Visiting an electorate office can be intimidating and transport may be an issue. While every young person has a phone, they rarely use it for calling, phone conversations for young people can take them out of their comfort zone. And young people are increasingly not on Facebook.

Communicating with young people via their preferred channels

When we ask young people about the best way to communicate our messages to them, they usually tell us that we need to be on Tik Tok.

Tik Tok is obviously problematic. There are the well-understood security implications and then there's the cringe factor – you need to really understand the platform and create appropriate content for it to work. However, Tik Tok's popularity has led to other platforms hosting short form content like stories and reels on Instagram and shorts on YouTube. They've worked well for us in our social media outreach.

LinkedIn is another platform where you'll find young people. We've found our engagement on LinkedIn has increased dramatically following our efforts to engage with young people and share youth created content. Young people are great networkers and are seeking connections for work or with people and organisations that share their values. As a bonus, it's a platform where almost everyone is respectful. I'd recommend using LinkedIn as an engagement tool with young people if you're not already.

A key way to engage with young people on these platforms is to support young people to create the content themselves. Some projects we've implemented include

- Parliament Express, a program for young writers who are provided with workshops and mentoring around parliamentary processes and basic journalism skills. They then go on to write an article about parliament which is published on our website.
- We've worked with a young filmmaker to produce a series of interviews on the topic of leadership in the lead up to the 2022 state election, asking young people what qualities they look for in their leaders.
- We've engaged a youth social enterprise to create a series of videos about parliament.
- We've also teamed up with SYN Media to produce a 6-part podcast series called Unpack Parliament where the young people devised episodes around topics they were interested in such as a day in the life of an MP, working and interning for parliament and how to get your voice heard.

We are fortunate to have a number of youth organisations that have brought their expertise and level of professionalism to our projects. However, these projects could also be done using

community radio stations or even a young person with a mobile phone and a basic video editing app.

We've also found we've had high engagement with youth produced content, even when the target audience isn't necessarily young people. A series of reels that we created for the annual Heritage Festival has been one of our highest performing social media content to date.

What's in it for young people?

With so much competition for a young person's time and attention, there needs to be an incentive for young people to connect with their local MP or with parliament.

They also need to appreciate the relevance of the work of parliament in their lives. Taking some time to explain the roll they can play in informing an inquiry, the attention to an issue that a petition can attract or recent bills that impact their lives can be a good place to start.

Exchanges need to be mutually beneficial, not just an opportunity for parliament or MPs to get what we need out of the interaction, no matter how noble our cause. Consider what we can offer them – skill building, connections, opportunities, something for their resume, a reference or payment.

What's in it for parliament?

Our youth engagement has led towards the development of meaningful connections with young people. This work has seen young people continue to engage with us past the life of the projects they signed up for. This might mean they pitch freelance articles to us, involve themselves in committee inquiry processes or share our social media posts.

By seeing that we are wanting to invest in them, and that our interactions are genuine, young people are organically becoming ambassadors for parliament. This deeper level of engagement can only be a good thing for democracy.