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Future Leaders: Having a Voice

***for the
Annual Trent Lang Memorial Lecture***

***at
The Chapel of St Paul
St Paul's School
Bald Hills***

***on
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Acknowledgements

Mrs Margaret Goddard, Head of School, Mr and Mrs John and Coral Lang, Trent's parents and members of the St Paul's school community.

Thank you for the honour of being invited as this year's speaker for the *Annual Trent Lang Memorial Lecture* series on Leadership. I follow a succession of significant community members, all of whom have spoken eloquently on aspects of leadership. I suspect many of you are now experts in this field!

I also realise I am among an exemplary body of students here tonight. I read in *The Courier-Mail* in March that three students from St Paul's School took the top three placings in the physics section of the 2001 Rio Tinto Australian Science Olympiad national qualifying examinations¹. I applaud those students and the many others here who have excelled in both their studies and extra curricula activities.

Although I do not intend to ignore any of the school community groups represented here tonight, I **am** the Commissioner for Children and Young People so my comments will be directed predominantly at the younger members of the audience. This does not mean I want to encourage the rest of you to have a snooze. Educational researchers tell me that 90% of learning is achieved through eavesdropping. So I ask you to eavesdrop when I address specific groups in the audience.

My focus tonight will not be on leadership types, attributes, functions, aspirations or 'recipes' for good leaders. I always find it surprising that so many writers reduce a concept as complex as leadership to diagrams, dot points and how to manuals that usually end up on book sale tables. At one stage of my career I was an Ancient History teacher. I have to be careful how I place my emphasis on those three words - and I want to take as my starting point tonight my response to the question about leadership posed by Plato's Protagoras: "*Are there not some qualities of which all the citizens must be partakers if there is to be a city at all?*"²".

For the civil and egalitarian society that Australia purports to be, my answer will encompass youth, democracy, speaking out and listening to.

More specifically, I would like to talk to the young people in the audience about **your** important right, role and responsibility to find avenues for your voices to be heard. You need to participate, to be accountable for decisions made, and celebrate the actions born of your efforts. Having encouraged you to do this, I would also like to share with you some of the innovative ways you can become a leader by having a say and participating.

First, I want to challenge the notion of leadership as belonging to one person in a group. It is easy to be lured by the status of formal positions, and we know leaders often receive the greatest proportion of any glory. But without the voices of their group who 'talk the talk', and those who participate to transform this into 'walk the talk', leaders would achieve nothing alone.

Trent Lang hit on this in one of the essays he wrote not long before he died. He tells a story about two young people who, although recognising their inability to match strength with adults, save their town through their perseverance and speaking out. Above all, they were so tenacious they let no adversary impinge on their ambition to be heard. I hope

tonight you will join me in giving breath to Trent's ideals, and put these into practice while you are still young.

I have held a number of leadership roles in my career - including mother, teacher, Principal, Deputy Director-General of Education Queensland and now Commissioner for Children and Young People. In all these roles I respected and relied heavily on the voices of others to fulfil my duties. These experiences have highlighted to me the importance of encouraging young people to become informed, take a stand, make a noise, be heard and participate. One of our former Prime Ministers, Paul Keating, put it more eloquently:

One of the great challenges we face as a nation is to generate a deep sense of optimism within our young people. We need to do that because without optimism, without a sense that we do have the wherewithal to build a better future, we will find no reason to build that future³.

To fulfil its potential, a democracy demands such active and informed citizens.

Many of you will know I visited here in March and spoke to a number of students. I asked them what they would like me to talk about tonight. One of the major issues raised was that they wanted to be heard. Not only heard, but respected for their views in the same way as adults are. They complained that they are not taken seriously. Because they are labelled as 'youth', their views do not appear to matter. One young person has made the point by saying: *"When a group of wrinklies are seen in a park it is called a picnic; when a group of young people are seen in a park, it is called a gang"*.

Some say it is difficult being a young person, caught between childhood and adulthood. Not belonging to, accepted or acknowledged by either group (though some of you may think this is cool!). Yet, I believe that, as Year 12s, you occupy a special place not only in this school, but in broader society.

Although it may have been one or two or years ago (or maybe more) I still remember the feelings of futility, despondency and desperation at being on the brink of adulthood. While you have many of the skills and competencies to take part in the adult world, you do not necessarily have the permission to do so. There is considerable evidence that young people are "observant, are often capable of analytic and constructive comment, and usually respond well to the serious responsibility of helping identify (issues)⁴". So why do 'youth' sometimes feel, they are treated as invisible?

The dominant language used to talk about young people is relatively recent. Hall first used the word 'adolescence' in a 1904 psychology text⁵ while Burt⁶ first referred to "the young delinquent" in 1926.

The term 'teenagers' was coined in the USA in the 1940s to label pop music supporters, and the term 'youth culture' was first used by Talcott Parsons⁷ in a 1942 article on *'Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States'*.

The approach that emerged in the 1950s and still has much currency today sees young people as "exotic deviants⁸".

"...from the perspectives of the major institutions of social order, youthfulness is excess; it is an implicit or incipient disorder; for society it is a 'problem' that requires handling, control, cooperation or channelling in socially approved directions⁹".

Youth is “a slippery concept”¹⁰. When does it start and finish? Most would agree it is defined by the period that marks the physical, psychological and social transition into adulthood. But we all know someone who has not quite completed that leap!

Many government policies consider youth to be from 13 to 25¹¹. In recent decades, adulthood has been closely linked to the autonomy that results from employment. However, being defined as an “adult” is no longer as important to many young people. They may now seek to define their independence by engaging in ‘adult behaviours’ such as substance and alcohol use and sexual activity. For contemporary society, ‘there is no doubt that the biggest challenge of all will be how to prepare young people for an adult life in which the commonly accepted definition of independence no longer exists’¹²

The concept of youth as an homogenous group is flawed. It infers there are more similarities than differences between young people. This ignores their diverse experiences, levels of maturity, gender, cultural transformations, the relations between groups of young people, the role of institutions, economics and politics, and changes in identity formation, sexuality and work.

Youth is therefore more accurately described as a relational stage¹³, where young people are “very much individuals in their own right, developing through a sequence of critical transitions from childhood to adult life”¹⁴.

On 30 June 1999, it was estimated that 20.7% of the total Australian population of nearly 19 and a half million people¹⁵ were between the ages of 12 and 14 years of age. 14.2% were between 15 and 24¹⁶. This means there are more than 6 and a half million young people under the age of twenty-four in Australia today. That is a considerable number of people! We are poorer as a nation if their views are not expressed, heard or acted on!

The right of young people to have a say in decisions that affect them is enshrined in *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*¹⁷. So it is not surprising that involving young people in decision-making is a rising trend¹⁸. In fact, the *Queensland Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000*¹⁹ states that: “the Commissioner must ... consult with children (and young people) in ways that promote their participation in decision making”.

Although youth participation is recognised as an ideal, there has been little serious investigation of the process of direct youth involvement in decision-making, and little critical examination of the impact of such involvement²⁰. Questions such as: “Are youth truly empowered?” “Do they want to be?” and, dare I say, “Are they capable?” have not been seriously investigated in the past.

But things are changing. Let us take a brief look at why this is so. What does relevant research tell us?

If I asked you to name Queensland’s or Australia’s Minister for Education, I wonder how many here tonight could answer?

A number of studies over the last couple of decades have found that Australian students have low levels of political knowledge^{21,22,23,24}. The findings from the Australian Temperament Study²⁵ in 2000 indicated that only 12% of young people followed the news about politics in Australia, 9% had strong feelings about politics, 15% followed the news about international affairs, and 17% had been politically active. However, young people did

have a strong commitment to the ideal of individual responsibility for problems at the community or global level.

Phase Two of the IEA Civic Education Study²⁶ found that most 14 year olds in Australia expect to vote as adults but do not intend to become actively political, nor are they strong in their understandings of what constitute their civil rights. Australian students ranked eleventh out of the participating 28 countries on civic knowledge. “Importantly, the study found that schools that model democratic processes by creating an open climate for discussing ideas are most effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement among students²⁷”.

This study also focused on the civic knowledge and engagement of fourteen-year-olds in 28 countries. It indicated that although Australian students understand **fundamental** democratic values and institutions, they lack a deeper understanding of the political process^{28,29}.

The *Discovering Democracy National Survey*³⁰ also shows that “our school students have a good knowledge of political symbols... (but) their understanding of our political process and our extraordinary historical events that shaped it is less developed”³¹.

Research sponsored by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) in 1984 confirmed that young people do not see the link between our political system and their own lives³². The Civics Expert Group in a later 1994 report corroborates this. However, there **are** a number of studies have found that students are interested in and aware of broader political issues^{33,34}.

While many young people feel disenfranchised from the processes of power and their ability to make a difference, they still care deeply about issues relevant to them, such as education, employment, the environment, health and sexuality³⁵. Is that how you feel? Do you agree that genuine participation in decision-making should deal with issues of most concern to you?

There are many who believe that involving young people has a compound effect on outcomes. Marketing analysts argue that “every dollar spent on marketing to young people can deliver three dollars of value. Kids are triple consumers – they spend their own money, influence spending among others, and are tomorrow’s adult consumers³⁶”. Although we are talking about consumer marketing, the analogy can be applied to involving young people in the democratic process. You can present your own ideas, you can influence others and, let’s not forget, you are tomorrow’s voters.

With this in mind, it is logical that Federal and State governments are concerned that young people appear to be uninterested in engaging in political processes. Governments have also acknowledged the need to increase young people’s civics knowledge. This is evidenced in the National Profile³⁷ and Statement³⁸ for Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), developed in 1994 in response to the first *Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia*. As you may be aware, a new program of civics and citizenship education called *Discovering Democracy* has been offered to Australian schools since 1999.

At the last Federal election, the Australian Electoral Commission even resorted to marketing strategies – offering first-time voters a chance to win a Playstation if they registered by a certain date!

I would like to explore the notion of participation in more depth.

“Participation in public and community activities provides young people with opportunities that may not exist elsewhere in their lives³⁹”. However, there are many different forms participation can take, and these have been captured in a number of models, 'ladders' or 'typologies⁴⁰'. These models help us understand the level of participation in any particular practice.

Drawing on others' work, Gill Westhorp^{41 42}, of the Youth Sector Training Council of South Australia, identified a six-stage continuum of youth involvement. This continuum does not imply that having more or less control is best, but that options exist and some will be more appropriate in certain situations than others.

The first stage of the continuum is **Ad hoc input**. This looks at input occurring through opportunities such as creative art workshops, or periodic activities held on youth days or during youth weeks to stimulate input. It may also include individual discussions with staff, suggestion boxes, documented policies on client input or complaints procedures, regular staff sessions and information sessions to keep participants informed and enable responses.

The second stage is **Structured Consultation**. This kind of input can be gathered through general forums, workshops and discussion groups involving young people, issue-specific forums, focus groups, cooperation with other youth organisations, research and surveys to gather the views of young people, or reference groups.

Next is **Influence**. This stage embraces the use of advisory groups or youth councils or formal processes to gather input. Input can be acknowledged and acted on through the recommendations of advisory groups, meetings organised between youth forums and others involved in management to ensure interaction and flow of information, and youth representatives given the opportunity to sit on management committees.

Input gathered through **delegation** can come from youth spokespeople, youth researching youth, peer education, employment of young people, subcommittees and staff selection panels. Other input can also be generated through project publicity and media work, fund-raising, hospitality roles, training programs, or documented "terms of reference" to provide guidelines, direction and checks and balances for delegated responsibilities.

Negotiation encompasses integration of young people into existing structures, mentoring, youth advocates, youth participation, documented agreements, policy forums, and adapted meeting procedures and structures that are more "youth friendly".

Finally, **Controlled** input can come from young people's groups with no adult involvement, which limit membership to young people. In this stage, young people have voting rights, balance of power on management, and central involvement in planning or reference groups of young people with responsibility for the strategic directions of the project. When young people participate at this level, adults take only support roles providing advice, helping to refine ideas, and supporting decisions.

What level of participation have you experienced? I know you have a student council - what kind of decisions is it engaged in?

Student councils sometimes have a mandate to preside only over issues like the organisation of the school dance or similar events.

In some schools, student councils are seen by many students as exclusive clubs consisting predominantly of the more academic or “favoured” students. In other cases, student councils’ attempts to deal with issues they see as important are defined as “beyond their scope”. Such an approach does not foster young people becoming active and informed adults.

I have some questions for **everyone** in the audience. Have you ever been in a situation where you thought you would be able to have a say and found out your views were ignored? How did you feel? How did you react the next time you were invited to have a say?

A young person in substitute care asked to describe his reaction when he was not involved in making a decision about his life, said: *“Decisions that involve me are basically my life. This is my life. Why are you talking about it as if I don’t exist?”*⁴³ This seems to happen all too often. You probably will not be surprised to learn that there is clear evidence that students who see their participation as tokenistic are more cynical and negative about democracy than if they had **no** participation at all⁴⁴.

Wilson believes that participation can be classified into two main categories, the first being superficial or tokenistic, the other being **“Deep”⁴⁵ participation** or ‘democratic play’. “Deep” participation is an umbrella term encompassing “active”⁴⁶, “authentic”^{47 48} and “meaningful” participation⁴⁹. “Deep” participation means young people experience elements of citizenship and democracy in their everyday lives, in real and holistic situations with meaningful outcomes or actions. When employed by teachers, this requires more effort and is more time consuming than didactic methods of learning.

I think a rather insightful analogy to this situation is that “babies learn to talk by being spoken to as if they already understand so, arguably, (young people) become members of democratic communities through practical involvement”⁵⁰ in democratic processes.

Teachers can be reluctant to implement “deep” participation because students have to face real questions and reveal dilemmas, which may disturb the status quo⁵¹. In fact, Wilson believes:

*Student ideas should be accorded status and taken seriously, and if rebutted, should be done so on the basis of counterarguments that have validity through reason rather than through the status or power of adults.*⁵²

So the most basic principles of an effective democracy informed by a critical democratic education “encourages, rather than closes down, dialogue, critique, dissent, and social justice”⁵³.

I have spoken about the importance of having the voices of youth heard. But coupled with this privilege is the responsibility of **‘listening deeply’**. We adults seek “the citizen intellectual who is engaged in a society-wide conversation. Conversation is the key word – it implies both sides listening as well as speaking”⁵⁴.

As Wilson points out:

*Student voice also requires of students those skills and courtesies of listening and rebuttal that are extended to them*⁵⁵.

I know most of you are adept at listening, although many parents in the audience may not agree when they think of your responses to their requests to help around the house!

Your generation is growing up in a very exciting time, a time of marked technological advances. This technological boom has honed your listening skills more than in any other era, although you may not realise it. Just think of how much time you spend listening to music from walkmans, stereos, the radio, TV, DVDs or the computer. How intently you listen to conversations with friends over the phone when you have to rely totally on aural communication without the benefit of body language, such as facial expressions. This is quite a feat, as psychologist Albert Mehrabian⁵⁶ tells us that non-verbal cues count for more than 93% of a message's impact!

I believe the definition of "conversation" is currently undergoing radical change. It now needs to encompass the hours spent, mostly by young people, "conversing" on email, in chat rooms, through instant messaging or discussion lists and boards. "Interpersonal relationships require travel across wide emotional landscapes"⁵⁷ and young people manage this fluently as they travel, converse and relate electronically. Communication in these forms occurs in very private and isolated domains. It requires each player to take turns - much like a 'walkie talkie'. Players speak without interruption and in totality before another can reply. In other words, to be a successful "e-chatter", **you have to listen** – although this might not be the traditional understanding of listening.

Let me return to the opportunities for young people's voices to be heard. There is a problem in Australia's political institutions and culture of limited institutionalised avenues for serious participation and representation by young people. Our political institutions and actors fail to be aware of, or respond to, social intelligence about the values and aspirations of young people⁵⁸. What I am proposing tonight, is that you to use these gifts of listening and having your voices heard to overcome the silence of what Norton calls "generational politics"⁵⁹. One way you can do this is by becoming "email intellectuals"⁶⁰.

There are:

hundreds and thousands of ordinary people who have joined online forums and email discussion lists and who debate day in and day out the issues that concern them. They are where democracy is heading and they are the seedbed of the citizen intellectual...A good email discussion list is the thinking person's talk-back radio – and there's no annoying, self-opinionated, over-paid shock-jock to filter your opinions through⁶¹ (though in some cases there is of course the list manager). ... (The function of the email discussion list is) to provide a forum where people can discuss their ideas, argue their case, hear what others have to say and circulate information – all this by people who normally would have no outlet for their opinions... It's no longer tune in, switch off, drop out; it's log on, download, and answer back⁶².

This may be your chance to "redefine democracy as something separate and distinct from the hyper-individualized market-based relations of capitalism and the retrograde appeal to jingoistic patriotism"⁶³ that Giroux believes is the scourge we are experiencing, especially post-September 11. I implore you to become citizens who "refuse to mind their own business"⁶⁴.

I realise not everyone has access to an online computer. This is, and will increasingly become, a social justice issue - like depriving people of food or shelter. We may even have

what Dunlop describes as “access-starved information ghettos”⁶⁵ or the “digital divide”⁶⁶, and, although I believe this is an important issue for Australian society, it is not one that I can pursue tonight. However, what I must emphasise is that the World Wide Web is here, and I believe we must explore creative ways of using it for democratic and liberating purposes.

Before I explore this further, let me to take a minute to recapitulate.

I have argued that democracy enables the voices of the entire population, including young people, to be heard by its leaders. I have established that there is evidence that young people lack political knowledge but are very interested in issues affecting them. I have looked at a model of participation and the benefits differing types of participation have to offer. I have also spoken about the importance of listening and the cyber-avenues at our disposal.

Now it is time to look at some examples of ways to have a voice, be critical listeners and engender civic mindedness⁶⁷. (Incidentally, this represents an important aspect of the term ‘social capital’?). While there are clearly many opportunities to participate in your school, community or locality, I am going to focus on new opportunities offered through the Internet.

Although the web transcends geographic and national boundaries, can I remind you that you can use it to participate democratically at a number of different political levels – local, state, national or international.

If you are interested in following up any of these avenues of opportunity, the web addresses of the examples cited will be available in the printed version of this lecture, which will be distributed in the near future.

At a local level, the **Future Leaders Forum**⁶⁸ held in Brisbane during April was designed to provide young people with inspiration and skill development for effective leadership. Why don't you visit their website at <http://www.futureleaders.com.au> to see what leadership skills you can acquire?

'Visible Ink' is an interactive space on the Brisbane City Council website (www.visible-ink.org) for young people aged 12 to 25 years to “get heard, get involved and get active. You can cast a vote, map your Brisbane, speak your mind or get the 'goss' on getting involved”⁶⁹. The website offers young people the opportunity to take part in on-line surveys, discussion groups, and noticeboards. Feedback from the site is used in conjunction with the Youth Advisory Group for Brisbane City Council's planning and decision-making.

If you would like to comment on community issues in Brisbane, or the city's future, the Brisbane City Council website, <http://ycys.brisbane.qld.gov.au/> provides opportunities at **'Your City, Your Say Online'**⁷⁰. You can discuss news, current affairs and issues, debate and share ideas and information, find out about current and upcoming chances to have your say - both in person and online, register to receive regular information and event updates, complete a survey, or check results from previous ones.

At the State level, the **Youth Participation Strategy**⁷¹ outlines how to increase young people's involvement in the social, cultural and economic life of their communities. It offers at least four ways for young people to have their voices heard at the state level.

The **Queensland State Youth Advisory Council** (QSYAC) is currently seeking nominations from young people interested in advising the Queensland Government on issues which are important to young Queenslanders⁷². 'QSYAC' consists of 15 young people from 15-25 years, five community organisational representatives, one local government representative and six government agency representatives. It provides feedback to the Minister for Employment, Training and Youth, Matt Foley. To be effective, young people must have input into developing mechanisms for their participation. The use of youth advisory committees is growing in impetus across Australia. This provides young people with the opportunity to make suggestions and comments on government and community decision-making processes. Visit the website at <http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/index.cfm?itemid=79>.

You can apply for membership on the Generate website, or call the toll free number for the Office of Youth Affairs, or email them at oya@det.qld.gov.au. Nominations for the Queensland State Youth Advisory Council close on 21 June 2002. You can also get Youth Participation Action Kits from the Office of Youth Affairs.

1. The **GENERATE youth website** (<http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/>) provides information and communication links between young people and the state government. **Ministers Online** allows young Queenslanders to chat with Queensland Ministers online. **The Generator** is a discussion board for young people across the state and the issues raised are reported to Cabinet. **Legislation On-line** allows young people to comment on proposed or amended legislation pertinent to their lives.
2. **The Office of Youth Affairs Grants** provides small grants for youth participation of up to \$500 to young people to allow opportunities to participate and express their views. Grants of up to \$15,000 are also available to community organisations and local governments for activities to enhance opportunities for young people to take part in community life. For more information visit <http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/index.cfm?itemid=57>.
3. The **'Get on Board' initiative** is a register enabling interested young people who want to be part of a Queensland Government board or committee to nominate themselves. All you need to do is complete a registration form at centralregister@premiers.qld.gov.au. To see what boards or committees exist and who is on them, visit the Register of Appointees to Queensland Government Bodies at <http://stateauth.premiers.qld.gov.au/stat/> or <http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/index.cfm?itemid=39>.

The **Queensland Youth Charter** was recently launched to complement the Youth Participation Strategy. *The Queensland Youth Charter: Queensland Government's Commitment to Engaging with Young People*, is the culmination of two years' work by young people, community and the State Government.

In particular, the Queensland State Youth Advisory Council provided leadership in developing this Charter.

The Youth Charter is a key part of the Government's youth participation strategy. It demonstrates the State Government's commitment to increasing young people's participation in government processes - influencing decisions that impact on their lives. The Charter outlines the principles to follow to ensure the views of young people are heard and included in decision-making processes (and) ... creates a

welcoming climate and real opportunities for young Queenslanders to play a positive role in the development of policies, programs and services that impact on their lives and the lives of their communities⁷³.

Why don't you go online and see what they came up with? You can download the Charter from the GENERATE website at <http://www.generate.qld.gov.au/index.cfm?itemid=118>.

As you can see, the minimum standard of participation accepted in the Youth Charter is Level 3 and a 'whole of government' approach will be taken to implement this Charter.

I know most of you have not yet reached voting age – almost though! I understand the frustration many of you feel, as I often hear young people say, "What's the point? The government isn't gonna take any notice of me". Well, I'm here to tell you they are, and in new and innovative ways!

The **2002 Queensland Youth Parliament**⁷⁴, now in its seventh year, is due to take place next month - June 17. Appointees have been selected from across the State to examine current legislation that affects the lives of young people and to provide comment to feed back to Cabinet. "The Queensland Youth Parliament aims to educate, equip and unite young people to bring about positive social change"⁷⁵. You can register your interest for QYP 2003 on the online form on their website, <http://www.youthparliament.ymca.org.au/>.

"The Queensland Government has established an e-democracy unit in the Community Engagement Division... "These initiatives explore and use the potential of Internet technologies to increase community access to decision-makers and participation in the policy debate"⁷⁶. The three initiatives are:

1. the live broadcasting of Parliament to improve public access to and understanding of the workings of Parliament. Internet broadcasting should start in late 2002;
2. e-petitions - a merger of petitions and electronic lodgement. This system should be in place by the middle of 2002; and
3. online community consultation – allowing government to engage with the community on selected issues and policy matters. This project will begin in mid-2002.

Visit their website at <http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/about/community/democracy.htm>.

Interstate, the Victorian Government is currently holding an inquiry into 'electronic democracy'. It is proposing a range of activities online, such as Internet-based voting, streaming of parliamentary debates, and 'electronic town hall' meetings between representatives and the public⁷⁷. The Victorian Government already has a number of online services for its state and local governments listed on *The Multi-Service Express* site, <http://www.me.vic.gov.au>. You can participate in community consultation through the '**Have Your Say**' site at <http://www.haveyoursay.vic.gov.au/discussion/>.

National issues are dealt with at a Federal level. Many of our parliamentarians are taking active steps to encourage input into policy from young people.

Young Australians can now get information on everything the Federal Government offers them through the '**Youth Portal**' site, <http://www.youth.gov.au/>, which was launched in April by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony⁷⁸. The Youth Portal will have:

- the latest youth news
- information on Commonwealth Government programs and services
- research focusing on young people

- a comprehensive calendar of youth events in Australia and overseas
- the Commonwealth Government Youth Discussion list called *Youth.Comm*, and
- all the new services the Commonwealth Government is providing for young people.

Senator Kate Lundy⁷⁹, the Shadow Minister for Information Technology and Sport federally has a section called “Your View” on her Internet site, which can be viewed at <http://www.katelundy.com.au/yourview.htm>, that encourages comment. Her homepage states: “I have designed my website to assist me to communicate with you”. Why not go online and tell her what you think?

The Australian Democrats are asking young people to participate in **Youth Poll 2002**. Young Australians are asked their views on a range of issues such as employment, education, sex, drugs and entertainment. This year, the Australian Democrats have updated a special section to address issues of concern to young people in each State and Territory⁸⁰. You can participate by filling in the survey online at <http://www.democrats.org.au/> or by receiving a hardcopy from most youth organisations. The results need to be returned by 31 July 2002.

There are even opportunities to talk to key players in Australian politics. The Triple J **Talkback Classroom** features a panel of three students in conversation with Australian politicians. Forums are recorded at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra and broadcast on the first Wednesday of each month on the Morning Show with Francis Leach after the 11.00 am news, or on the web (<http://www.abc.net.au/learn/talkback/>) at 11.00 am eastern time. Students from all states and territories can apply to be on the panel and fly to Canberra to take part⁸¹. Get involved and chat with the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward on 29 May 2002.

There are ways of getting your message across other than through politicians. Popular culture icons are becoming more and more involved in touching base with young people. During **National Youth Week** (NYW) this year, from 8 to 15 April, a virtual **Greenroom** brought together some of these icons and young people in a cyber-setting. You could chat online in the ‘Greenroom’ to a NYW celebrity ambassador, including Scandal’us, The Superjesus, Blair McDonough, Eskimo Joe, and Ricky Ponting to name just a few⁸². National Youth Week is held in early April each year, and offers a range of activities. Visit <http://www.abc.net.au/learn/talkback/>.

On the International front, Australia was privileged to host the **International Youth Parliament** (IYP)⁸³ in Sydney not long ago. It followed the Olympic Games and brought together more than 300 delegates aged from 15 to 28 years from 160 countries. The agenda focused on three significant areas:

- Breaking the Cycle of Poverty
- Youth in Conflict, and
- Cultural Activism.

On return to their own countries, delegates used the skills they had developed at the Youth Parliament, along with the outcomes from forums, to inform their own governments, organisations and networks. They also acted as catalysts to increase participation of young people and consideration of their issues in policy decisions. The power generated at this forum has had unprecedented repercussions for governments across the world. People like **you** generated this power!

You can get involved with International Youth Parliament in several ways. You can:

- become a **Friend of IYP** by joining the growing network of IYP supporters internationally, and receive either fortnightly or quarterly email updates
- you can submit your views to the **Globalisation Commission** - an inquiry into the impact of globalisation on young people. The Commission wants to hear how globalisation impacts on you. Is it the source of riches or poverty? Is it bringing you new opportunities or closing doors? Who do you think is really steering the global ship? The results will become part of the Commission findings to see where international decision makers, policy makers, multinationals have got it wrong. Let them hear what you think! or
- you can **Donate** to IYP - IYP gives young people an opportunity to harness their energy and passion to build a better tomorrow, visit <http://www.iyp.oxfam.org>.

I am proud to say that the Commission for Children and Young People is also currently identifying ways in which young people can take their views and concerns to our Queensland politicians. The bureaucracy of government is daunting even for those of us who work in its environs, and I'm sure it's even more frustrating for young people who have an issue to voice! Through the upcoming regional Parliament in Townsville, the Commission will enable young people to meet directly with Members of Parliament at a breakfast hosted by the Premier and the Commission.

I am continually challenged to look more creatively at enhancing children and young people's participation so they can get involved in serious issues affecting them. This was certainly the case last year when the Commission was drafting our submission to the **Cape York Justice Study** headed by Justice Tony Fitzgerald. This study was initiated to uncover measures to tackle Indigenous substance abuse, violence and dysfunction - particularly those with the support of Indigenous people⁸⁴. The Commission determined very early on that our submission should include the direct views of children and young people in the Cape - particularly as around 50% of people living in Indigenous communities in Queensland are under 18⁸⁵. It is important to note that the children and young people understood that their views were to be presented to parliament and politicians to inform and encourage decisions and actions.

Children and young people were asked:

- What things do you like about living in your community?
- What do you think are the biggest problems on your community?
- What could the Government do to solve these problems?
- What could adults on the community do?
- What could you do to help?
- What should be done to make your community safe and happy for children?

The students provided us with a wealth of practical solutions to some of the problems facing their communities. Their comments appeared in full in the report of the study, and their solutions were reflected in its recommendations. What was most interesting about this exercise was that it was the first time children and young people were involved in consultations about problems in remote Indigenous communities in Queensland. Subsequent articles by Tony Koch for *The Courier-Mail* and Kate Legge for *The Australian* noted and praised this development.

If you would like to read the study you can find it on the Queensland Government's Community Engagement website, <http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/about/community/capeyorkreport.htm>.

The Commission for Children and Young People hosted the Brisbane leg of the inaugural **Australian Youth Link Gatherings** last month. This provided young people with the opportunity to network with representatives from youth initiatives across a range of philanthropic, cultural, educational and scientific arenas. The theme was ‘Global in our mind (thinking global), in our voice (speaking out globally), and in our hands (acting globally)’⁸⁶. You can check out more details on their website at <http://www.youthgas.com/calendar/default.htm>.

Finally, on our web site (<http://www.chilcomm.qld.gov.au/>), you can express your own concerns, or those of other children or young people, by sending a message to the Commission. Drop us an email at <http://www.childcomm.qld.gov.au/commission/email.htm> - we would love to hear from you!

I would now like to draw your attention to an interesting development, which reflects official recognition of the importance of youth participation. We all like ‘**due credit**’ for what we do, and I know all the young people in the audience tonight are focussed on gaining qualifications. I would like to let you know about the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) project’s recommendations for providing formal recognition of skills achieved by young people who participate in youth development programs. ANTA have recommended⁸⁷:

- a ‘community-based youth participation certificate’ to be awarded to young people who meet required criteria
- development of a ‘portfolio’ which contains evidence of skills achieved
- mapping skills achieved in youth development programs (YDP) against school curricula
- school exit certificates to include notation provisions which capture the skills achieved in youth development programs, and
- mapping of VET qualifications that recognise youth leadership skills.

I believe, in the near future, you will be able to gain certified and accredited recognition for participation, though I’m sure this won’t be the only reason you might choose to devote your energies to such activities.

Tonight I have argued that “Listening to the views and values of young people is not just a ‘feel good’ exercise”⁸⁸. Young people want to be listened to and respected, to contribute ideas and helpful suggestions rather than just making demands⁸⁹. I believe our democracy is richer for your ideas and active participation.

I have shown there are many avenues that allow you to have your voices heard. I agree with Dave Phillips, from the National Youth Agency, that “true participation only comes when there is a shift in power and where ‘choice’ has meaning beyond deciding what brand of trainers you can buy”.⁹⁰

I very strongly support his assertion that “Young people have the insight, skills and the commitment to make informed and responsible decisions”⁹¹.

As a parent myself, and I am now talking to those of you in the audience who do not identify yourselves as “young people”. I am well aware of concerns felt by some adults when it is proposed that young people should have a say in decisions that are important to them. Are they really capable of doing this?

One of the wonderful aspects of being Commissioner for Children and Young People is the opportunity I have to meet and talk with young people in my working day. Indeed, I am required by legislation to do this. Whether I am talking with youngsters about how to solve bullying problems in their school or neighbourhood, or homeless youth about how to address the health issue of “chroming”, I am constantly impressed with the wisdom of their words.

There is now a small but growing body of research analysing children and young people’s participation in important decisions affecting them. Professor Carol Smart and Dr Bren Neale of the University of Leeds are leaders in this area. When they asked young people whose parents had separated who should decide where they (the children) should live, the results were illuminating. Consider the words Ralph, an eight-year-old boy: “Well, he [the son of the separating parents] should choose but he can discuss it with his mum and dad as well⁹²”. When prompted with, “Who should decide then?”, he answered that they should, “all discuss it together⁹³”. Similarly, Jake, an eleven year old, said:

I think there should be some kind of agreement between him and his parents as to what should happen, rather than him just deciding who he wants to live with... I think the people who are involved should get to decide, not by themselves, but by helping each other to reach some kind of agreement as to what would be best⁹⁴.

In other words, when offered the opportunity to have a genuine say in an important decision affecting their lives, these children and young people did not jump in feet first with a cavalier comment, but proposed that the views of everyone affected by the decision should be heard. Sometimes I think that adults have much to learn from children!

Tonight I hope I have persuaded the young people in the audience to take charge of your lives and participate as questioning and informed citizens in the democratic processes that affect you now and in the future. I have shown you some of the ways you can get involved, but there are many more in your own local area. I am sure you will be more resourceful than I am in finding ways of making a difference.

There are those who believe there are “subterranean streams of consciousness... in which young people are already taking the lead... and we will see more of them in the parliaments of the world⁹⁵”. Let us hope this is true and do our utmost to support the notion.

Can I conclude this lecture by imploring you to keep Trent Lang’s legacy alive by finding ways of expressing those streams of consciousness, exploiting the avenues available for your voices to be heard, listening critically, and campaigning for greater participation by young people in all avenues of our lives?

Above all, seek out opportunities and have **your** say! In this way, you will all be leaders.

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