DEMONCACY FOR MILLENNIALS

In our 160th anniversary year, as well as celebrating our past, the Victorian Parliament has also invested in our future. Like many legislatures around the world, we recognised the disconnect that exists between youth and parliament and decided we needed to do something about it.

Our approach was a fairly simple one: ask young people how they would like to engage with us. We partnered with a body called the Foundation for Young Australians, which had a good track record of bringing organisations together with young people to co-design new ways to undertake youth engagement. They had previously worked with businesses and local government groups, emphasising entrepreneurship and tapping into the enthusiasm of the young people who worked with them.

Their motto ‘Rethink the world, unleash the future’ threw down a challenge to us that we were willing to accept. Through their experimental unit called YLab, the foundation’s approach was to get a group of young people to lead a series of exploratory workshops.

The objectives of those five workshops, held across our State, were to help us understand what young people were thinking about parliament, and to co-design new ways for young people to interact with parliament into the future.

Co-design was the fundamental principle on which our ‘Democracy for Millennials’ project was based. Getting young people to be involved in finding the solutions and using their creative talents to develop the engagement mechanisms that would be most relevant to them.

The workshops were geared to be small group sessions, enabling all who participated to have ample opportunity to be heard. A total of 68 young Victorians took part, joined by one or two MPs and two senior parliamentary staff at each workshop.

The focus was on talking in small groups but thinking up big ideas. The ultimate aim was to come up with a few key suggestions for parliament to use in mapping out a more engaging youth strategy.

The sixth and final workshop was held at Parliament House with 28 young people involved, representing the diversity of youth who had participated in the exploratory workshops. At this final session, participants worked through the major ideas and came up with five ‘prototypes’ for parliament to consider in its future approach to youth engagement.

There were two clear messages from young people identified in the final report that we received at the end of the workshops. The first message was: ‘It’s not my world.’

Young people felt they were not sufficiently equipped with the foundational knowledge needed to understand how to navigate through the political system. Many stated it was a gap in their high school education. This added to their feeling that they didn’t have the knowledge and skills to be taken seriously.

They found the language used to discuss parliamentary matters either overly complex or just plain boring. With limited time as they balanced study, work and family commitments, they were not inspired to engage in parliament’s interaction with them was tokenistic and not genuine. They found the political system intimidating, with processes such as question time seen as outdated and hostile.

Young people often lacked the confidence to engage in parliamentary processes.

In addition, they said it was hard to see how the political system related to their lives. For many of them, parliamentary processes lacked a real connection to community. They also had difficulty understanding how the political system delivered real change.

The second message was: ‘It’s too hard, so I can’t be bothered.”

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Hon. Bruce Atkinson, MLC

is President of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Victoria in Australia, elected as the 20th President in 2010. First elected to Parliament in 1992 for Koonung Province, he held that seat at the 1996, 1999 and 2002 elections. Following boundary changes, he was re-elected for the Eastern Metropolitan Region in 2006, 2010 and 2014. He was Deputy President from 2006 to 2010. Prior to entering Parliament, he was a journalist, publisher and business consultant and held many local government positions including Mayor. He is married and has three adult children.

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Youth participants take part in workshops for the Democracy for Millennials project.
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For young people in regional areas, there was an additional concern that the parliamentary system did not feel inclusive as it had a capital city focus to it. Communication channels that parliament traditionally used did not take into account the way in which young people liked to communicate.

Listening to the young people at the workshops and reading the final report, it is evident that our parliament can and must do better if we are to be relevant to a generation that thrives on connectivity.

Our processes must enable young people to put forward their views to their elected representatives in ways that involve genuine listening and discussion. Young people have views on a variety of issues and it’s important that they have the chance to express those views, because ultimately the decisions we as Parliamentarians make today will be impacting on them tomorrow.

We need to create more opportunities for young people, particularly in regional areas, to gain a meaningful experience of parliament. If they can’t or won’t come to us, then we must reach out to them.

We also need to engage more through digital channels, and we should get young people to help us create the content that is meant for young people. By being more creative in where and how we reach out to youth, we can bridge the divide that currently exists.

Importantly, we also must work on building the confidence of young people in their interactions with parliament. This should be done by enhancing their knowledge of how the system works, and also by helping them better understand the outcomes that parliament delivers.

The five prototypes presented to us in the final report from the workshops focus on a number of key steps that can be taken to meet the expectations of youth. We are committed to implementing the proposals that have been made, through a series of pilot projects that will begin from 2017.

Our parliament will move to a new online communication approach that will see us working with young people to develop content for youth. Using the skills of young people in this way will help us to remain up to date with the latest trends in communication and design, which is critical if we are to be a forward-looking institution.

A youth network will be developed that can bring together young people of diverse backgrounds in a youth-led approach to engagement with parliament. Training and mentoring opportunities provided through this initiative will help in developing a youth leadership group for our parliament.

Youth project placements at parliament will be arranged to assist us with the development of multimedia material about parliament for young people and staging events that link youth to parliament. We have already started this process by engaging a group of young people to organise a music event on our parliament’s front steps as part of an annual music week held in our State’s capital, Melbourne.

Through this sort of initiative, tapping into their interests, we are helping young people connect with parliament and feel comfortable working with us. With the projects we have planned, we hope that information about parliament can be shared in the spaces and at the places that young people frequent.

One of the innovative suggestions made to us was to use interactive signage in key locations that young people visit so that they can connect with us in the places where they go about their daily business. We are aiming to use the intent of that idea to develop more engaging information sharing initiatives for young people.

The fifth area of focus will be on our parliamentary education programmes; to deliver learning experiences that engage young people and spark in them an enduring interest for participation in our democracy. Already we have appointed an education advisory panel, with a number of young educators and a student helping to guide the future development of those parliamentary learning programmes.

We are committed to co-designing our engagement strategy for youth with youth. The workshops were a first step in our new approach and the response we received from young people was extremely encouraging.

The next decade of our parliament’s history will be very different to our first 160 years. We have decided to work with the generation that will give us our future leaders because they will be critical to the success that we hope to achieve as a legislature and a State in the years ahead.