YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND

The ‘Holyrood Rocks’ project in Scotland aims to engage young people in elections.

Young people between the ages of 16 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world’s population. We have seen recently that this age group are often involved in informal, politically relevant actions, such as activism or civic engagement.

However, young people do not feel formally represented and listened to in national political institutions such as Parliaments and many of them do not participate in elections. This has a profound effect on the quality of democratic governance.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance published a report in 2013 which said that among those young people they had interviewed, there was a general sense that traditional political parties, political institutions and political structures, including elections, fail to appeal to this crucial segment of the population due to the lack of engaging political programmes, manifestos and content that target specifically, and effectively, the younger generation. Indeed, data on youth voter turnout from various countries suggests that young voters tend to participate less in elections compared to older citizens.1

In the United Kingdom, a recent report on political engagement, prepared by the Hansard Society, also revealed that only 24% of the 18-to-24-year-old age group are interested in politics. Beyond their lack of interest, the survey highlights a general lack of understanding among this age group about current politics and the work of Parliaments. An Australian Electoral Commission Youth Electoral Study Report also reports similar trends where disengagement is concerned. Some half a million (or one quarter) of 18-to-24-year-olds continue to abstain from enrolling to vote, even where this is legally compulsory in Australia.

Youth disengagement with politics is a widespread global issue. As a member of the Scottish Parliament, I have an obligation to make myself as accessible and as open as possible, in particular to those traditionally under-represented in our democracy, including young people. The Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, Tricia Marwick MSP is committed to bringing the Scottish Parliament closer to our citizens and is constantly looking for ways to involve the general public in Parliamentary life. This is where Holyrood Rocks comes in.

Holyrood Rocks is an initiative organised between the Scottish Political & Cultural Partnership (SPCP) and the Scottish Parliament. By showcasing young musical talent whilst relaying the importance of democratic rights and the significance of the right to vote, Holyrood Rocks hopes to encourage voter engagement in Scotland and beyond. It has a five point plan or ‘manifesto’ for its regional and national events, with the aim of increasing youth voter turnout in next year’s Scottish Parliament elections in 2016:

• To encourage every 16–25 year old to vote in the upcoming elections.
• To promote young people’s participation across the artistic spectrum.
• To raise awareness of the abundance of career opportunities available in Scotland across the creative industries.
• To emphasise the importance and value that the creative industries bring to Scotland’s economy.
• To promote active citizenship, respect and tolerance amongst young people, irrespective of social, ethnic or economic background.

These regional and national events will reach thousands of people across Scotland, taking the message across the breadth of the country, and will celebrate Scotland’s local communities, in addition to local spaces, hubs and venues, maximising use in those communities and encouraging local residents to take part in any way they can.

Holyrood Rocks has benefitted from support from all political parties in our Scottish Parliament including the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon MSP. Its premise

Anne McTaggart MSP was elected in May 2011 to the Scottish Parliament to represent the Glasgow region. Prior to election, Anne worked in the creative industries before becoming an Elected Member of Glasgow City Council. As Shadow Minister for Europe and International Development, member of the European and External Relations Committee (EEC) and of the Cross Party Groups for Tibet and Poland, Anne’s focus is on furthering partnerships with nations across the world to ensure Scotland is at the forefront of innovation in a globalised 21st century world.

180 | The Parliamentarian | 2015: Issue Three
is clear. For too long, politics has been fed to people by institutions, politicians and Parliaments. Holyrood Rocks aims to turn this idea upside down. It is the first project of its kind in Scotland to take Parliament directly to the Scottish people, and in a way that is engaging, entertaining and creatively stimulating.

For our young people, it is a way of getting involved in politics without having to participate in a party political fashion or listen to dry speeches or boring policy debates. It lets them know that Parliament is there for them, that they have a voice and that they should use it, to improve our democratic governance and to improve our country. It also lets our politicians know the strength and ability of our young people, something too often forgotten when it comes to election time when older people are far more likely to cast their vote.

But this isn’t a top-down, centralised project. For each of the regional events, local youth, community and racial equality groups are involved in delivering these events, in addition to those organisations who assist those who have additional support needs, but nonetheless have a passion for music. These are events organised by young people for young people, regardless of racial, social or economic background to encourage political engagement across the spectrum.

This is a project that could easily be replicated around the Commonwealth, but its origins were devised after our inspiring Independence Referendum in September 2015. For that referendum, 16 and 17 year olds were granted the right to vote, a first for our democracy, and their response was overwhelming.

In a matter of months, conversations in schools across the country were all about Scottish politics. Those who would have perhaps struggled to name their Member of the Scottish Parliament prior to the Referendum were suddenly engaged, informed and ready to debate the merits and the risks of Scottish Independence. It was a glimpse into a future where our young people use their voice to contribute to our Parliamentary democracy and it was inspiring to us all.

Holyrood Rocks seeks to create debate, not division. Irrespective of whether people voted yes or no, whether they will vote for the Scottish National Party (SNP) or Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats or the Green Party in the upcoming Scottish elections, one thing is more vital and more important. Using their vote.

Across the Commonwealth, we all have a long way to go to convince our young people that politics speaks for them. Holyrood Rocks is the first in a series of initiatives designed to rectify this. The reaction from our youngest voters has been overwhelmingly positive and all signs point to an increased youth voter turnout at the next election. But, this is just the beginning.

Not all Commonwealth countries have the momentum and energy gained from an Independence Referendum to assist them, but I would urge every Parliament across our nations to seriously consider projects of this kind. After all, who better to engage our young people than young people themselves?

More information can be found about Holyrood Rocks at www.scottish.parliament.uk/holyroodrocks or at www.holyroodrocks.com. You can also follow @holyroodrocks and visit www.facebook.com/holyroodrocks.

References
1 Enhancing Youth Political Participation, UNDP 2012.