



Statement by the Minister for Youth, the Hon Kate Ellis, MP

## Australian Youth Forum

16 October 2008

I would like to take the time today to outline to the House the recent launch of the new Australian Youth Forum and the renewed efforts by Government to work with young Australians on the issues important to them.

The AYF represents a new, dynamic and accessible approach to communicating with young Australians that will literally enable thousands of young people from all corners of the country to engage with Government on the issues that matter most to them.

It is clear to me that young Australians are increasingly grappling with emerging pressures unique to their generation. The AYF presents the opportunity for young people to highlight concerns and work in partnership with Government to identify solutions.

While some claim that today's young are facing the same pressures that have been dealt with by generations past – its clear that young Australians are facing new challenges not experienced by those who have gone before.

There is certainly nothing to gain from battling it out in a contest of which generation has done it toughest. But there is a real need to accept that different generations have done it differently and there are unique circumstances and pressures faced by each.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report, 'Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing 2007' paints a picture of a vastly different array of issues challenging young Australians today.

Issues like soaring rates of self harm bring home the magnitude of pressures today. The report identifies intentional self harm as one of the leading causes of death for teenagers. And also identifies that one in 10 Australians aged 15-19 reported a mental or behavioural problem.

Housing affordability, body image, drug and alcohol issues and climate change are all now high on the list of young people's concerns. Emerging technology alone has brought a host of new issues and opportunities - the internet and cyber bullying, text messaging and video phones, constant bombardment of messages through various mediums, to name just a few.

To respond effectively to emerging issues, we need to better engage with those who are actually facing these challenges - the young people of Australia. And first we need to accept that at times these issues may be unfamiliar or removed from our realities, but they are all too real for Australia's youth.

Our Government is committed to empowering Australia's youth and supporting them in the many challenges they face. It is of course in our nation's long-term interest for us to ensure that a group of confident, empowered and healthy Australians inherit the future.

The Australian Government stands ready to respond to the challenges facing our younger generations. Indeed, we are addressing many of these issues through a range of different programs and support systems put in place across Government portfolios. However, in better equipping ourselves to respond, we've also had to make some changes.

In recent weeks the Government made some of the most significant youth affairs announcements this country has heard in literally decades. As previously reported to the House, the establishment of the new Australian Government Office for Youth provides us with the capacity and infrastructure to work far more effectively and strategically across portfolios, to ensure the best outcomes in policy and programs for young Australians.

On October 2<sup>nd</sup> I was also delighted to announce the Government's \$8 million initiative to include, empower and give young Australians a seat at the table in public discussions.

The Australian Youth Forum will foster national dialogue between young Australians and their Government, but also between young Australians and each other. For too long, young people have been silenced and sidelined in public debate. The AYF is breaking new ground – important ground.

We have sought input far and wide. And we've done something outrageous- we've actually asked for input from Australia's youth on the way they want to engage with the government.

A public consultation was conducted right across the country earlier this year to determine the best model for the AYF. This process heard nearly 1,000 voices- many of these young people in addition to youth sector representatives.

The AYF sets Australia apart internationally. And with this we seek to lead the world in youth engagement and participation.

Participation by young people is also being transformed by the internet and new media. Importantly, the latest research suggests that young people value participation in democracy and decision-making which is culturally relevant, flexible, effective, makes a difference to them personally and can even be fun. Family background, gender and ethnicity also affect how young people tend to engage in the democratic process.

The AYF is structured to achieve two primary objectives: 1) Widespread youth engagement across the country and 2) Meaningful and ongoing engagement with the youth sector- those individuals and organisations that work with and for young people.

We will achieve these two objectives through a number of local public policy forums held at multiple sites around the nation. These forums will be open to all young Australians and link them in nationwide conversation and debate with the use of emerging technologies.

We are also committed to an outreach initiative to involve the disengaged and meet with young people on their own turf. And we have launched an AYF website so that wherever young people are they can connect with the Government online.

These proactive approaches will provide the government with regular, direct input on key issues of the day that impact directly on young people's lives.

We have also established a Steering Committee to provide advice on the future shape and activities of the Australian Youth Forum, and give young people the chance to be centrally involved in decision making processes about the AYF.

In addition to the Steering Committee, the Government has committed \$400,000 annually over the next four years to support the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition in its role as an independent voice and advocate of young people and the youth sector.

We expect the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition will have robust discussions with Government on the issues raised with them by young people themselves.

The Coalition will also provide the youth sector with new opportunities to work with Government to ensure young people have access to the support they need to achieve their full potential.

I want to stress that the AYF is about dialogue- a two way exchange between young people, the youth sector and the Government.

We are serious about genuine engagement and follow-through. And, of course, it will be my role as Minister to front up, follow up and provide that feedback.

The AYF will contribute to a vibrant and healthy democracy – generate lively public debates, serious discussion and cultivate a new generation of young people embracing the opportunity to get their voices heard and views known.

But this is just the beginning. The AYF will evolve over time, shaped by feedback, advice and input from the AYF Steering Committee and the national youth peak body. It will be responsive, dynamic, seek to embrace emerging technology and meet changing needs as we assess and evaluate along the way.

The AYF will provide young Australians with the opportunity to converse with Government on a level and in a way never made available before.

The Government is committed to governing for all Australians and this new Forum will enable us to continue to work with and represent the young more effectively.