

Australian Youth Forum

Developing a National Strategy for Young Australians

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This submission was prepared by Cameron Young, with the assistance of many concerned citizens, who share a dream to improve the lives of young Australians.

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Introduction

The Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, announced the Government's intention to develop a National Strategy for Young Australians on 3 September 2009.

A Roundtable discussion was arranged by the Minister for Early Childhood Education, Child Care and Youth, the Hon. Kate Ellis MP.

Participants were asked to share their ideas on a number of topics. Feedback from the Roundtable discussions is contributing to the development of a National Strategy for Young Australians, recently announced by the Prime Minister. The Roundtable discussion was held at Parliament House, in Canberra, on Thursday 22 October 2009.

I was one of twenty young Australians who attended this National Roundtable discussion, because I was nominated to attend the Forum by my Federal M.P. Mr Tony Windsor.

I decided to prepare for this Forum by discussing issues that affect young people across all of Australia.

I have talked to a very large range of people, to ask them about the sorts of things which they think are important, or relevant, or of particular concern, in relation to the youth of Australia.

All the ideas that I have been given, have come from the many people who I have talked to. I can't claim any credit at all for coming up with these ideas myself. I was able to collect as many ideas as I have, because of the generosity and more importantly the combined wisdom, of all the people that I have spoken with.

I'd like to thank all those people, who contributed their combined wisdom, which was acquired over a lifetime of dedicated service to the community and to the youth of Australia. Without their ideas, I'd be just another young person with very little insight into the issues which are of real importance to the youth of Australia.

A Cultural Change for the Youth of Australia

After thinking about all the ideas that were presented to me, I have come to some startling conclusions.

If you ask young people what issues concern them most, you end up with a 'wish list' of things that they would like for themselves. They might want things like less bullying, more entertainment options, less prejudice, or more career opportunities.

What is most striking about their concerns, is that they think in terms of what someone else can do for them.

If you ask adults about the issues, which are of most concern to them about Australian youth, you also get a massive list of issues. The issues can be divided into problems or complaints about young people, or aspirations for a better future for them.

What amazes me is that whether you are talking to young people or adults, there seems to be an expectation that someone else can fix things.

People seem to have lost the confidence in their ability to help themselves. This is largely because no individual person understands all the issues and no individual person has all the solutions.

No individual person can bring about the massive social change, which is required, to address all the issues that affect the youth of Australia.

I can already acknowledge that there are a huge number of programs and initiatives that the Australian Government has implemented that are beneficial for the youth of Australia.

I can also see, however, that the Governments can't wave a magic wand and solve every issue that affects all Australians.

I already think that the Australian Government has its hands full with; climate change, industrial relations, the health of the economy, national security, universal health care and education, just to name a few.

Australians need to be willing to begin a huge social change, where we become less dependent on the Government to solve all our issues. There are in excess of 20 million Australians.

Imagine the power of 20 million people all working with each other to bring about these changes.

I believe, that as Australians, we can start to think in terms of what we can do to help ourselves.

Better yet, I believe that as Australians we can shift our thinking away from what we can do to suit our self and maybe we can be just a little bit less self-interested and self-absorbed and we can begin to think in terms of what we can do to help each other.

Surely the whole concept of 'Community' needs to be reviewed. Our community is not just where we live and where we shop and where we play our sport.

Surely our community is the people with whom we share our living space – be that at the suburban level, or the metropolitan level, or the city, or the State, or indeed the whole country.

The time has arrived for us to cease our demands on the Government to provide for our every need, while keeping us entertained, occupied or satisfied. It's time for us, as a community of Australians, to strive to be a bit better than what we have let ourselves become. There are better things that we as Australians could aspire to.

At an individual level, there is nothing preventing us from at least deciding to be just a bit more; generous, caring, compassionate, resourceful and resilient. As a community of Australians, I believe that we have it in us, to be better than what we have been and a whole lot more determined to improve on where we are just now.

Recommendations for Cultural Change

The following recommendations will bring about massive social change, which will not only benefit the current youth of Australia, but also the future youth of Australia, and indeed, all Australians.

The absolute essence of how a community functions successfully is entirely dependant on how the members of that community are able to fit into the community.

The smallest element of any community is the family unit. This is also the level at which every member of the community can make the most effective changes, with the most positive outcomes.

At the family level, we should be instilling the following values;

1. Children should be taught Boundaries.
2. Children should be taught the benefit of Routines.
3. Children need to learn the meaning of discipline leading to the concept of Self Discipline.
4. Children need to develop a grasp of the concept of Consequences.
5. Children need to value Privileges.
6. Children need to be taught to accept Responsibilities.
7. Children need to develop Social Graces.
8. Reinforce the importance of the very great benefits of good nutrition, not just for young people but for the whole community
9. Reinforce the importance of adequate sleep for young people and for the rest of the community.

10. We need to develop policies for inclusion and not to give up on the marginalised.

These ten elements provide the very foundation for family life and community living. Without these elements providing a firm foundation, we begin to see family life and community life begin to suffer from unbelievable stresses.

The very fabric of our Australian society is beginning to fray. It is up to us as Australians to begin the task of repairing the fabric at a family level.

We can't expect the Government to legislate for change, we can't expect the Government to introduce more programs. We can't expect the Government to throw more money at the problems we are facing. We have to be able to accept the responsibility for how our community and our society will look in the future.

A retired Headmistress said, "It only takes one woman to bring a child into the world, but it takes a whole community to raise it."

For the sake of the current and future youth of Australia, we have to take up the challenge in front of us. I don't imagine that it is going to be easy. Nothing that is worthwhile is ever easy. The greater the challenge, the greater the satisfaction when we succeed.

I believe that we all have a role to play in sticking to the task ahead.

I believe that we can work together to achieve a measure of success that will be for the betterment for all Australians.

If we could ask the Government for help with just one thing, it would be to develop policies that support the values and attitudes that should be taught within the family unit, as it is these values which are carried through to the next generation of Australians and determine what kind of society we become.

Conclusion

Through the foresight of the Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, we have had the opportunity to begin a national discussion on formulating a national strategy for young Australians.

If we could ask the Government for help with just one thing, it would be to develop policies that support the values and attitudes that should be taught within the family unit, as it is these values which are carried through to the next generation of Australians and determine what kind of society we become.

We need bipartisan support for these changes.

We need policies that emphasise inclusion and especially the inclusion of all those who currently feel marginalised.

For these new policies to be implemented successfully we going to have to rely on more than 20 million Australians agreeing to take up the challenges that are in front of us.

If there is anyone in the world who can face a challenge and show tremendous courage, while working cheerfully together for a common purpose, it is Australians.

We will be doing this for our family now and for all our Australian families in the future.

Let's get started.

Attachments

People / organizations who have contributed ideas.

High School Principal

Issues:

1. People not staying until year 12
2. Some work is not relevant
3. HSC does not fit everyone
4. UNI too expensive to country youths as they have to pay for education, travel and accommodation.

Suggestions:

1. Let them achieve success.
2. Put in place visual learning, have lessons geared to their pace, more practical work (less theory) and adjust curriculum.
3. Have three different stands/types of HSC e.g. professional, industry and agriculture.
4. Free UNI education and/or subsidise accommodation

Member of NSW Parliament

Issues:

1. Addressing teen violence (including both at home and at school), particularly gangs, the impacts of domestic violence on youth, plus how young people and adults need to work together in order to combat this problem.
2. A lack of teen-oriented activities - the "nothing to do" syndrome - seems to be raised often in both cities plus rural and regional communities.

Suggestions:

1. More money should be spent on domestic issues and less on war and international issues.
2. Increased funding for education, university fees and the resulting debt burden on young graduates.
3. Increased funding for public health services.

Primary School Teacher- Behavioural Disorder Class

Issues:

1. Behavioural challenged students don't talk about their problems with the teacher so they can take action to help them.
2. Teachers with little knowledge or none at all expect a mentally ill or a youth with a behaviour problem to do too much.
3. Youths with mental illness are classed as a stupid individual whom can't behave.

Suggestions:

1. Youths with behavioural problems should communicate with their teacher.
2. Teachers shouldn't expect too much from a mental ill child.
3. Mental illness should be classed as a disability.

Young Leos

Issues:

1. Parents are having children too early.
2. Not a stable home (divorce).
3. When a teenager, parents can't cope with them and they let them loose on the streets.
4. They get involved with peer pressure and start taking alcohol and drugs.

Suggestions:

1. Educate adults about the risks to the child if the parent is too young.
2. Communication between youth and parent is one of the best ways.
3. Activities that run at night with lots of teenagers there to keep people off the street.
4. Increased awareness of drugs and alcohol through school and home and/or night patrol by police punishing youths do unsafe or bad things like underage drug use and underages drinking alcohol.

Mayor - Tamworth Regional Council - Retired

Issues:

1. Bad/destructive behaviour.

Suggestions:

1. Constantly drawing attention to how destructive this behaviour is.
2. Discipline.

Psychologist

Issues:

1. Confusion in drug use and alcohol use.

Suggestions:

1. Correct information.
2. Talking about what's safe and what's not e.g. showing that two glasses of alcohol in the first hour then one glass every hour after that is safe.
3. Ads showing what drugs and alcohol can do to damage your body.

Councillor - Tamworth Regional Council

Issues:

1. Vandalism (e.g. graffiti).
2. Vandalism - damage to public and private property, associated with excess alcohol consumption.

Suggestions:

1. People doing graffiti don't go out to ruin something, they go out to do art work for people to see, so we need graffiti walls in more public places.
2. Continue endeavouring to educate them.
3. Stop advertising of alcohol.
4. More ads showing alcohol is bad.
5. More police patrolling the streets.

Kids Help Line

Issues:

1. Family relationships.
2. Drugs.
3. Alcohol.

Suggestions:

1. Support them, by getting the family to go to a family counsellor.
2. Make drugs and alcohol less accessible by raising the price.
3. Punish people that give drugs or alcohol to underage youths.
4. Get the community on the look out for youths smoking, using drugs and drinking alcohol.

Beyond Blue -Youth Depression

Issues:

1. Depression.

Suggestions:

1. People to have an awareness of the symptoms.
2. More services.
3. Place signs around schools, so that the friends of people with depression are reminded to be helpful.

Look for symptoms.

Listen to friends' experience.

Talk about it.

Seek help with a professional.

Policeman (Retired)

Issues:

1. Youths are getting caught for doing things against the law but are getting off just with a warning.
2. Youths are learning that they can do bad things and have no consequences.

Suggestions:

1. Youths should get some sort of consequence when they have done a bad thing.
2. Teach them meaning of consequences at the early age and that if you do a wrong thing you get punished because it is not okay to do it.

Teacher

Issues:

1. Some youths go through school trouble free, and others get into trouble a lot.
2. Some young people seem to get into trouble and run off the rails.

Suggestions:

1. Kids need to be taught in their first five years of their life about boundaries.
2. Children need to learn about routines.
3. Children need to learn about discipline.
4. Children need to be taught about consequences.
5. Children need to learn social graces.

Headmistress (Retired)

Issues:

1. Coping with technology changes, being safe on the internet.
2. Parents not knowing what the youth is being shown on the internet.
3. Rapid change in society.

Suggestions:

1. More support from parents and schools about the usage of the internet.
2. Boundaries should be set on what youths are allowed to access via the computer. What children do on the computer should be discussed with the families, to ensure safe usage.
3. Getting kids ready for massive change and a future we can not foretell when they leave school, so they are able to cope with the stresses of new things.

High School Headmaster

Issues:

1. Getting access to University.
2. Coping with the cost of going to University - \$10,000.00 - \$15,000.00 just for accommodation if you have to live away from home.
3. Family break downs. Children's lives are ripped apart.

Suggestions:

1. Taxation concessions for University accommodation, University fees or even University text books for people in country or rural areas.
2. Offer more scholarship for country residents to go to University.
3. Counselling for people about to have children about what their roles are.

Minister of Religion

Issues:

1. Debt
2. Youth unemployment.
3. Accessing University

Suggestions:

1. Learning how to manage money and the risks of using credit cards, while at school but mostly through the parents.
2. Offer more employment, open up jobs for people with a range of skills.
3. Have a system where country students can access money for accommodation, have Uni courses online.

General Input

Reinforce the importance of the very great benefits of good nutrition, not just for young people but for the whole community.

It has generally been accepted that, as the community as a whole has become more prosperous since the end of WWII, there has been an increase in the incidence of nutrition based health problems – either from eating too much of some things, or not enough of other things.

As adults spend less time worrying about their own nutrition and the nutrition of their children, we see a great decline in the health of our communities – metropolitan, regional and rural.

Adults set poor role models for their children – it is common to see obese adults with obese children.

Children in their developing years need to be nourished with the right balance of all food groups. We can't expect them to grow up fit and healthy and then raise the next generation of our community, if they have developed poor eating habits from birth.

Reinforce the importance of adequate sleep for young people and for the rest of the community.

There seems to have been a gradual acceptance that we can manage with the minimal amount of sleep.

It is clear that many people of all ages aren't getting sufficient to enable them to either perform well at school or in their jobs or in their interpersonal relationships.

Lack of sufficient sleep can be linked with everything from inattentiveness in class, to irritability, to lack of cooperation, to forgetting your social graces, to inability to fight off minor infections and handle stress.

This is an issue that is relevant to young people and adults as well.

Young people have so many very tempting distractions of an evening - whether it be homework, or texting, or television, or DVD's, or computer gaming, or browsing the internet, or playing with their I-Pod.

Some national benchmarks should be established for each age group.....allowing for the fact that a little extra sleep in each age bracket, should be actively promoted, as being far more beneficial than trying to reduce the hours, which are spent asleep, within each age bracket.

It is generally accepted that Australians are working longer hours and are subjected to more stress in their life than previous generations.

It would be beneficial to all Australians, both young and old, to recognize the therapeutic and restorative value in getting adequate sleep, to equip them to face the rigors of modern living.

We need to develop policies for inclusion and not to give up on the marginalised.

I have discussed this idea with my other contributors and the following is the combined wisdom of a lot of people who have thought about this issue.

It is believed that Australians should adopt a National Philosophy that embraces 'Inclusion' as a corner stone of our national identity.

Kevin Rudd P.M. wants the Youth of Australia to be consulted on the issues that concern them, so that they will feel included.

Every child who has ever been able to join in a game of handball, or tip foot ball, or netball, has wanted to be included in the team.

Every child wants to feel included as part of their family.

Every person wants to feel included as part of their extended family group.

Every person wants to feel included as a member of their community.

Every immigrant wants to feel the welcome of a country that will include them and embrace them as one of their own.

The 'AUSTRALIAN TEST' for new immigrants, should be revised, so as to place far less emphasis on knowledge of past Australian history and give more emphasis to the high regard that we, as Australians, should be placing on the value of being included and inclusive of others – irrespective of our politics, or race, or religion.

It should be made plain, that as Australians, we aren't going to identify and categorise anyone on the basis of whether they revere a certain religious deity, nor a particular political philosophy, nor a particular sporting team.

We will not categorise people, or marginalize people, on the basis of whether they are intellectually, or physically, or emotionally outside of what we conveniently identify as the 'normal' range.

I would like to see a change in our culture, where we are no longer divided into groups, and then subdivided into smaller groups, and then the next step is to be identified as the leftovers of society – the marginalized.

Children feel the sting of rejection when they are the last to be picked on team, to play a game in the playground, at morning tea time.

I feel very strongly that we should get out the liquid paper and white out any references to minority groups and the marginalized and the disaffected.

From now on we should start thinking of whether we are Australians.

If we can say that we are Australians, then, by definition, we are accepting and inclusive of everybody no matter where they started life, or where they are up to