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## Youth Participation: A New Mode of Government

JUDITH BESSANT

In recent years the idea of youth participation has achieved an almost obligatory status in youth policy documents. An uncritical reading would leave many with the expectation that this approach will deliver increased democratic participation for young people. This impression is understandable given the way language used draws on the rhetoric of democratic participation.

A policy initiative that increases the democratic participation of young people is important and would mark a major shift in their citizenship status. Such a proposal would be important because the question of participation and citizenship matters for that part of the population (namely, young people) who by reason of explicit and implicit criteria are excluded from many political processes and denied many rights most adults take for granted.

Secondly, such a development would be significant in terms of our ability to legitimately claim to be democratic. This is because before such a claim can be made it needs to be generally accepted that a reasonable basis exists for excluding particular groups (namely young people) from what is an otherwise widely available set of political, civil rights and abilities. Indeed current practices of denying young people<sup>1</sup> their citizenship rights raises questions about the grounds on which such exclusion is legitimate.

A further reason why such a policy initiative would be significant is that increased opportunities for young peoples' democratic participation would help remedy the power imbalance which makes them easy targets for those who want to make a name for themselves in the political arena. In other words, affording young people opportunities to engage in the public sphere, to actively participate in public discourses provides opportunities to narrate themselves and to challenge the ways 'youth' are represented.

Yet, despite the implied promise of augmented democratic participation for young people, what recent policies actually offer are measures that have the effect of extending the governance of young people. I argue that the recent fascination with 'youth participation' is part of a reformist discourse that talks of democracy, increased autonomy and modern citizenship for young people as a solution to a range of problems, yet it overlooks the problem of young peoples' negligible political status. I argue here that the new discourse of 'youth at risk', in the context of emerging third way politics, offered governments, and the apparatus of specific administrations (i.e., education, justice, health, etc.) opportunities to revitalise older practices of government which took advantage of the resurgence of economic liberalism and individualism to promote new styles of youth policy. I draw on the work of Cruikshank (1999) and governmentality theory more generally to ask whether recent officially declared commitments to increased youth participation are directed towards enhancing young people's democratic participation, or whether other agendas dominate. I argue that

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official talk about democratic participation and citizenship for young people is less a solution to political problems than a strategy of government designed to extend management of them.

Youth participation is presented as a technology of citizenship that has the effect of increasing state sponsored regulation of young people. In other words it is a strategy for governing the very people whose problems the state seeks to address – youth at risk and related problem populations. This latest participatory schemes that specifically targets young people is what Cruikshank calls technologies of citizenship (1999)

This argument is developed by examining a arbitrary selection of state, national and Commonwealth government youth documents:

- Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Report (2002) *Youth For the Future*;
- Victoria Labor Government (2002) *Respect: The Government vision for young people*;
- Prime Minister's Report, Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001, *Footprints to the future*, Ausinfo, Canberra;
- Ausyouth (2001, 2002a,b,c);
- England's Children and Young People's Unit's (CYPU). *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People* (2001) and *Action Plan For Children and Young People's Participation* (2002–2003).

British Commonwealth, Australian and English documents were chosen because they share some important social and political similarities (i.e., Australian government is modeled on the Westminster system, both are Commonwealth member, etc.). Australia and England also face similar youth problems (i.e., high youth unemployment, youth poverty, homelessness, juvenile crime, etc.). Finally English and Australian were selected because of the similarities in the documents; all identify youth participation as a solution for a range of social problems and all use the idea of youth participation to extend the governance of young people.

Young people have long been identified in the popular western imagination as both the cause and victims of various social problems, ranging from 'spiraling' juvenile crime to economic crises, to 'epidemic of delinquency'. Paradoxically while being represented as a primary cause of social strife, 'youth' have also been identified as a key solution to an array of problems and have thus figured prominently in proposals for remedial action and reform policies (Hendrick, 1990).

Concomitant with the tendency to problematise 'youth' through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries we witnessed (in the last couple of decades) the emergence of a 'new' discourse about 'youth at risk'. This involved the development of multifactoral assessments of types, degrees and inventories of risk said to provide professionals with the means to predict and calibrate the likelihood of transgressive, risky or otherwise problem behaviour. The appearance of risk discourses over the past two decades added to the 'legitimacy' of concern about 'anti-social activity', social decline and criminal youth. The 'new discipline' of 'Youth at risk' saw the transformation of discourses about maladjusted or delinquent youth informed by a sociology of deviance to the new scientific representation of 'youth at risk' (Bessant, 2001; Rose, 1990). Youth at risk rhetoric focuses on factors said to predispose some young people rather to certain problem behaviours (i.e., substance abuse, leaving school 'early', unemployment, etc.). Risk-based research and assessments promoted all encompassing and a more intensive focus on the behaviours of 'known' potentially problematic groups. One important outcome of interventions informed by this 'new' 'youth at risk' approach is the way they are directed towards solving the problem by 'fixing' the individual via incursions into their daily lives.

Youth participation is part of a response which is invariably directed towards remedial or preventative action by encouraging young people to 're-connect' or become more 'integrated

into society'. In this way youth participation offers a governmental strategy to address certain youth and social problems or what in contemporary language is called 'youth at risk'.

This of course did not occur in a vacuum. Certain broad political changes played a significant role in the re-discovery of participation and more specifically youth participation. I refer to developments that took place in the later part of the twentieth century in most western countries, by both conservative and more progressive governments as they became immersed in the 'politics of economic necessity', forcing through wave after wave of economic reform on the basis that they had no choice (Edwards, 2003, p. 9).

These changes paralleled a sharpened widespread anxieties about declining standards, weakening community values, the loss of community, and 'death of the family' (Glassner, 1999). Historians like Pearson (1983) have pointed to the long tradition of popular fears and the way each generation believes itself uniquely threatened by a new forms of degeneration evident in the proclivities of young 'transgressives'. This raises the question: should we understand contemporary anxieties about youth (i.e., 'youth at risk') that have informed this renewed concern about the need to 'reconnect youth' as the latest expression of a long history punctured by regular moral panics about youth?

While cultural pessimism and moral panics may hold some explanatory value, I suggest that a more useful way of understanding recent the 'culture of fear', anxieties about youth and the popularity of the idea of youth participation as a solution to all that is wrong, relates to the ways in which public policy and public culture in countries like Australia, the UK and USA were reshaped by the resurgence of liberal individualism. This is not to suggest that the recent preoccupation with youth participation in policy making circles is a direct and simple expression of an affinity between the two.

The resurgence of economic liberalism takes its form variously in a dominant policy discourse embedded in neo-classical economics and preoccupied with ideas about individual choice, responsibility and freedom. Proponents of this discourse have been intent on renovating the public sector via market-based activities and metaphors such needed to make 'adjustments' to accommodate the 'new economic structures', or the need for 'flexibility', 'streamlining', 'adaptability' as opposed to 'rigidity', etc. Such metaphors functioned very well in both explaining and persuading others that certain areas of the public sector was 'overly-bureaucratized' and 'unresponsive to market needs'.

This was compounded by a powerful nostalgia for an imagined by-gone golden past where everybody new their proper place and social order was secure. Longing for a sense of community, security, safety, high moral and social standards, contrasted dramatically with the prevailing 'uncertainty', rapidly changing global markets, fast capitalism and widespread apprehension. The political version of this communitarianism inspired vision accompanied the development of third way politics in Australia, in UK politics, in the USA and indeed in many western European countries which emphasised the virtues of reciprocal obligation, community and participation.

Participation itself is an old idea central to the liberal democratic tradition (Pateman, 1980), while the current 'discovery' of youth participation is part of an emergent political orthodoxy. One reason for the successful 'discovery' of youth participation rests with the fact it emerged in a context receptive to communitarian inspired reformist language (community building, etc.) and the political desire to make individuals politically active and capable of self government.

It is a 'third way' politics entailing a blend of economic liberal fiscal policies with some regard for social equity. Indeed it was a politics that took its cue from attempts by writers like Sen (1992), and Itzoni (1993) to revise traditional social democratic concern about equality by emphasizing social capabilities. This mix, refined and adapted to local circumstances was particularly fashionable in the UK, USA and Europe through the 1990s and was promoted

by a new generation of 'social democratic parties and leaders like Blair's New Labour, Italy's Massimo D'Alema, Germany's Schroder and Clinton's New Democrats in the US. The eclecticism of this political style is suggested by the intellectual antecedents which drew together communitarians such as Etzioni (1993) and Putman (1993, 1993), conservatives like Coleman (1996) in the USA and Giddens (1998) in the UK. Today governments of all kinds find it convenient to blend a fiscal policy approach reliant on neo-liberal economics, while their social policy talks about participation, social solidarity, citizenship, regeneration, 'inclusion', neighbourhood renewal and 'building community'.

Third way policy makers helped make a range of concepts vogue, including individual and community competencies, capacity building, and social capital. The assumption was that solutions to prevailing social and youth problems rested with the individual and their local community. Thus, social problems could be effectively dealt with by developing policies that ensured increased youth participation, capacity building, increased education, etc.

In short, the new discourse of youth at risk and third way politics spurred on by popular anxieties, offered governments in general, and the apparatus of specific administrations opportunities to revitalise older practices of managing problem populations which took advantage of the resurgence of economic liberalism and individualism to promote new styles of youth policy. As mentioned earlier, I am applying governmentality theory to ask whether recent policy commitments to youth participation are directed towards their increased governance. Before I can address this question I need to clarify what this approach entails.

### **Clarifying Governmentality**

Since the late 1970s the ideas of Foucault (1991) began influencing the new ways of understanding the discovery of social problems, and in this instance, youth problems and the subsequent development of public policy. Rather than assuming such problems have a self evident quality, or indeed that their discovery is a response of 'society' to threats to its social control functions, or indeed that their discovery represents the ideological effect of a social structural interest (exercised by the bourgeois, patriarchy, etc.), Foucault argued that if we are interested in understanding social problems then consideration needs to be given to the constructive schemes of experts. In this way Foucault sponsored a new approach to understanding government and governmentality. For this inquiry into youth participation these terms have considerable heuristic value.

Most social science commentators agree that we have a long history of attempts to regulate significant sections of the population. As Rose pointed out (1990), young people have received special attention in this regard, being one of the most governed section of the population. The idea of government as developed by Foucault and those influenced by his ideas involves far more than what states do. As Dean and Hindess (1998) point out, government can refer to the activities of the Blair, Howard or Bush governments, it can also address a full range of other attempts to regulate the conduct of people. In this sense, government refers to the ways individuals, groups, or organisations manage their own behaviour as well as the behaviour of others. In this case it occurs through the idea of youth participation.

Government relates to what states do via their laws, police, schools, courts, armies, etc. Much of it concerns the every-day work of experts like teachers, parents, youth workers, religious, medicos, journalists. Government can refer to issues or problems such as law and order, health or even a declining economy. Much of the regulatory activity relates to books, journals, newspapers, professional advice all of which provide advice on what standards, rules, etc., use to guide life around activities such as being a good citizen, having babies, finding employment, or being healthy. In short, governmentality involves the use of knowledge, habits of thought to

facilitate and authorise some people to govern others (and themselves) (Minson, 1993). It entails a loose amalgam of objectives which typically targets specific groups like 'the poor', 'criminals' and 'youth'. In the case of 'youth', techniques of social investigation (i.e., empirical social scientific surveys) and an array of policies, institutions, and practices focus on young peoples 'need for' constant care, control and improvements. Youth participation as described in recent youth policy documents is a strategy for extending the management of young people rather than improving opportunities for their democratic participation.

Youth participation in its current policy form excludes democratic participation and is restricted to a narrow definition of participation as involvement in community, cultural, voluntary and educational activities. In policy documents like that produced by the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM), the concept of youth participation excludes political participation and there is no commitment to increasing young people's engagement in the public sphere. Youth participation is strictly confined to volunteering, mentoring, leadership education and enterprise schemes which are directed towards the increased governance of young people (GHOGM, 2002). 'Youth participation' is seen to have more general social benefits described in 'third way' language of 'social capital', 'capacity building', 'improving resilience'. This approach also reflects the paradoxical nature of the way 'youth' are imagined as both the cause and solution to social problems. This view is reflected in the CHOGM (2002) policy 'initiative': 'The challenge is to enlist the enthusiasm of youth for the Commonwealth in the new century. We recognise that youth can make a major contribution to the work of the Commonwealth and propose bringing together a range of separate strands into a coherent "Youth for the Future" initiative' (CHOGM 2002, 10).

From the perspective of CHOGM policy makers, youth participation eradicates potential youth problems as it strengthens and builds social capital. It was recommended by GHOGM that policies be developed, specifying how young people can help address the many social problems plaguing Commonwealth countries. Indeed the curative and productive capacity of young people of the Commonwealth was called on to address the 'many and varied challenges such as poverty, human deprivations, degradation of the environment, the AIDS pandemic and conflicts' (*ibid.*, pp. 3, 18).

The notion of 'youth' as 'our future promise' explains much in respect to the way youth participation is expected to achieve a range of outcomes from nation building, to restoring social and moral standards, to rejuvenating the economy. In this regard, youth participation can be understood as one style, amongst many, of response to a variety of social problems.

The latest way of understanding problem youth (that is, 'youth at risk') means 'they' are scientifically identifiable by reference to certain 'distinctive features' (i.e., disaffection, disconnection, detachment from mainstream services, and exclusion). Evident in such problem setting activities are stories (about urban degeneration, youth at risk, etc.) told by analysts, researchers and practitioners, which frame the problem by describing disconnected alienated, youth. Schon pointed out how the problem comes to be known will prescribe the solution. (Schon, 1980, p. 255). In other words, if passiveness and lack of involvement are identified as the reason for the problems (i.e., urban degeneration, juvenile crime, etc.), then the solution is obvious. It lies with strategies that encourage greater participation, 'support' and 'incentives' to become share-holders in society.

### Youth Participation and Governmentality

Understanding contemporary policy interest in youth participation requires an appreciation of the context in which it became so popular. The later part of the twentieth century was characterised by the almost complete collapse of the full-time youth labour, a restructuring of global and national labour markets and heightened public concern about a range of

problems. We also witnessed the emergence of a precarious labour market, general anxiety about income insecurity, a widening gap between the affluent and 'the poor', and the 'collapse' of institutions such as 'the family' and full-time secure work traditionally seen to support young people through those 'unsteady years of adolescence' to adult citizenship. Youth unemployment in particular was a key contributor in recurring popular fears about the spectre of 'the youth underclass', 'urban bandits', and widespread substance abuse, etc. (McDonald, 1997; Rutter *et al.*, 1998). In this context, youth participation began developing as a key strategy for preventing and remedying a range of youth and social problems. By the late 1990s early 2000s it featured in most youth policy documents.

#### *The Australian Federal Government*

In 2001, the Australian federal Government published a major report *Footprints to the Future* (Prime Minister's Report, Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001)<sup>2</sup> which focused on the problems associated with sole-parent families, 'jobless families', youth homelessness, unemployment, health and crime (*ibid.*, pp. 4–9). Social integration, including successful transition from school to independent adult life, were identified as core issues facing contemporary policy makers.

A stated objective of the *Pathways* document was to identify ways of securing the adolescent-school-child's passage to the adult-citizen-worker. The 'challenge' facing policy makers was said to be young peoples' precarious attachment to 'society'. This tendency was said to be evident in behaviours and trends like substance abuse and declining school retention rates. Such 'developments' implied a failure on the part of young people to negotiate 'the passage to responsible adulthood'. According to the Report the remedy requires building a 'secure pathway' for all young people that prevents their disconnection from mainstream services and society, while reconnecting those who have already detached themselves (Prime Minister's Report, Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001). In other words – increased youth participation.

Securing that pathway depended on there being greater involvement in education, training, and labour market activities. Indeed 'youth participation' in social, cultural, and leisure activities' were recognised as clear indicators of growth towards independence and evidence of social integration (*ibid.*). From this perspective participation became synonymous with returning to, or remaining in education or training, and/or voluntary work; or involvement in youth sports or church activities. Thus rather than youth participation understood in terms of increased political enfranchisement, what was encouraged was the prolongation of years that young people spend in education or some form of guidance-cum-preparation programs (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 2).

This *Report from the Prime Minister* (2001) reiterated the message that more opportunities for youth leadership and participation in decision-making will help 'meet the challenges' and offer 'a solid transition' for young people (*Report from the Prime Minister, ibid.*, a, p. 86). Moreover, the claim is made that 'young people need to have a voice in community decisions and particularly in those decisions which affect them and their future' (Prime Minister's Youth Participation Action Plan Taskforce, draft, 2001, p. 86), yet the practical question of how young people will be enfranchised so as to give effect to their voice is completely ignored in the document.

#### *The Victorian State Government*

A similar approach can be found in a report produced by the Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria. In 2002, the Bracks Labor Government released its framework

for policy and program development: *Respect: The Government vision for Young People*. The document 'articulates the government's intention to improve opportunities and the well-being of all Victorians aged twelve to twenty-five. This it was argued will be achieved by 'encouraging and enabling young people to *participate in the fullest possible range of activities and enhancing their interaction with Government*' (*ibid.*, p. iv) (my stress). Readers were informed about how government will maintain its lead role in pursuing such strategic directions across government by '*providing a strong voice for young people in government policy and program development and encouraging young people's input in this process*' (*ibid.*, p. iv). Moreover, we read how the Victorian state 'government recognises that the participation of a diverse range of young people encourages community connectedness and promotes the unique perspectives and needs of young people. The Government is reportedly committed to valuing the contribution of young people, listening to their views and providing them with genuine opportunities for involvement' (*ibid.*, p. 6).

'Youth Roundtables' also figure in this document as a 'key achievement' in creating opportunities for young people to 'communicate directly with government on issues of concern to them . . .' (*ibid.*, p. 6). Similarly the state government commends itself for encouraging young people to contribute the development of advice on youth policies, programs and services through increased resources for a state-wide network of 15 regional Youth Committees (*ibid.*, p. 8). However, like Federal government's (*Footprints to the Future*, 2001) commitment to youth Roundtable, this discussion gives the false impression that those forums are equivalent to having young people participate as equal players in policy-making processes. Unfortunately this is not what happens. Youth Roundtables give young people a very limited voice in policy-making. Moreover, there is no commitment or requirement on the part of government to give practical effect to their voices. The tenure of membership is extremely limited which means young participants have little opportunity to familiarise themselves with the processes or to develop a collective identity and solidarity that could present a credible challenge to policy-makers. Youth Roundtable participants do not have opportunities for agenda setting and the resources available to them to research issues thoroughly are minimal. Moreover, the inequalities that exists between youth roundtable participants and others in the policy making processes are not addressed.

Participation in this 'Respect' document is restricted to Roundtables, regional youth committees which like the Roundtables are consultative mechanisms. Like the COGM document, youth participation is confined to participation in physical activities through various sports programs (*ibid.*, p. 8), environmental projects via a variety of agricultural and natural resources initiatives and through remaining in or returning to school or some form of education or training (*ibid.*, pp. 10–11). This it is argued, can be achieved through 'Managed Individual Pathways Plans' (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Here we see how participation means greater management of young peoples 'transition to adulthood' rather than increased opportunities for democratic participation. The plan is to achieve that management objective through an increased involvement of young people in legitimate, adult organised and supervised institutions and activities. This, it is argued will help ensure the proper *integration* of young people into their community. In this way it can be seen how official participation rhetoric draws on traditional accounts of socialisation as a means of integrating and 'connecting' young people to 'society'. Littered through the document is the latest jargon articulating what is a very dated approach. 'Community building', 'resilience', 'connectedness', 'managed and tailored pathways' are the latest words used to talk about 'the need' to manage young people, paradoxically referred to as youth participation. Thus it can be seen how youth participation has the policy effect of increasing the governance of young people.

This official determination to extend the governance of young people reinforced



long-standing and popular ideas of young people as inherently troublesome and a threat-to-social-order. Given their 'natural rebellious and offensive tendencies' it is logical that if young people remain in school, join sports association or similar community clubs they will be prevented from causing strife and more likely to be responsible citizens.

Youth participation has become central to human service interventions and associated social science disciplines. So much so that today many practitioners and policy-makers spend much of their time trying to prevent or reduce social problems by engaging more young people in mainstream services (i.e., schools, training, health services, cultural and voluntary activities).

#### *Youth Development and Participation*

The idea of 'youth development' is an American-sponsored way governments, policy-makers and many youth experts talk about securing young people's participation and successful 'transition' to responsible adulthood (Pittman & Wright, 1991; Roehlkepartain, 1995). Youth development addresses a number of problems including the growing incidence of high profile violence and the 'unforgiving' nature of a global economy (no author, Youth Development, 2000).

In October 1999, the Australian government announced it would fund initiatives that drew on youth development literature and practice. The plan was to advance youth development to the point where it informs all youth policy in Australia. The proposal resulted in the founding of an organisation called Ausyouth, established to kick-start that process (Ausyouth, 2001, p. 1). The proposal was that the principles and preliminary work carried out by Ausyouth would be, and indeed was, incorporated into government policy at federal and state levels (Ausyouth, 2001, 2002a, b, c), and youth participation is fundamental to this process.

According to Ausyouth documents youth participation offers young people as many opportunities as possible to be involved in a range of activities. It is an approach heavily reliant on social capital arguments including the need to build specific 'competencies' (i.e., a positive relationship is said to exist between access to social capital a young person's capacity to manage problems they encounter).

Young people are encouraged to involve themselves however that participation once again is confined to activities like volunteer environmental work, membership of the cadets, the Red Cross, St John Ambulance, Life Saving bodies, the Young Policy Corp, Scouts, Guides, youth corporate enterprises, etc. Once more we can observe how young people identified as critical to problem solving processes, but that participation is confined to involvement in adult-initiated and -managed programs. Youth participation in 'community building' activities will allegedly help solve problems of violence involving young people; it will assist by building the 'capacities' of young people so they will be better able to negotiate the 'harsh environment' of 'the new global economy' (*ibid.*).

Like the documents mentioned earlier, policies informed by youth development imply the virtues of democratic participation, but stop-short of relinquishing any significant political power to young people. They also bracket any consideration of the need to anchor young people's right to engage in the public sphere in ways that have a legislative authority.

#### *The English Children and Young People's Unit*

The English Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) produced a series of papers related to problem solving and youth participation. *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People* (2001) and *Action Plan For Children and Young People's Participation* (2002–2003) are two documents that pay specific attention to involving young

people in policy making. The English material is far more specific than the Australian and CHOGM documents in their detail of what youth participation entails and how it will be accomplished.

While many of the proposals and activities being implemented are laudable because they provide for some degree of inclusion, they remain limited to consultation. They are restricted to proposals to educate young people about specific dangers (i.e., illicit drug use), and remain constrained to performing consumer-type focus group functions. Such consultative framework helps produce policies likely to be more effective because they are informed by 'users' of those policies. Input from youth consultation provides government with valuable information – like notice of possible future hiccups or more serious problems and insights into the effectiveness of current policies. Such consultations also give the misleading impression government is acting democratically because 'stakeholders have a say in formulating policy' when in fact they do not.

Youth participation rhetoric is writ-large by the Minister for Young People John Denham:

Ministers across departments are committed to giving children and young people a real say and real choices about government policies and services that affect them. . . . The principles in this document are designed to give all government departments a solid framework on which to base their plans to increase the involvement of children and young people in policy and service design. (CYPU, 2001, p. 1)

Youth participation is the '*involvement*' of young people in decision-making that relates to their care and education. It also includes consultation with young people at the beginning of policy developments and service delivery (*ibid.*, p. 4). Readers learn how government appreciates young people's contribution: 'At the heart [of this approach] is the belief that children and young people can make a valuable contribution to debate about public services' (*ibid.*, p. 5).

The UK papers, like the Australian material, stop short of yielding any substantive political power to young people. Young people are encouraged to 'have a say', but the right to be heard relates to relatively minor matters like the cost of bus fares (*ibid.*, 2001, p. 5) and whether new blinds and electric lights and picnic seats should be installed at a particular school. In addition we read how a website is used to gather young people's voices that are then fed into government submissions. Gathering the views of a specific section of the population and allowing young people to make decisions about these relatively insignificant may give the impression of being inclusive, it is however a very limited approach to facilitating young people's right to participate as citizens in the public sphere.

In a later document *Action for Children and Young People's Participation* (2002–2003), the C&YPU use the rhetoric of inclusion while articulating the 'Children's Voices Themes'. One may assume that giving effect to young people's voices implies the right to be heard and the right for their voice to have effect. What it does, however, is use the language of inclusion to extend the governance of young people. This rhetoric furthers the regulation young people by providing venues that inform young people about certain risky behaviours. The 'Children's Voices Theme', for example, is in fact a 'peer education program' that uses young people to educate other young people about the dangers associated with the misuse of legal and illegal substances. Thus, giving voice to young people does not mean their political involvement in the public sphere, it means more drama workshops to address problems like bullying and racism (*ibid.*, 2002–2003, p. 27). While not disputing the fact that countering bullying and racism are worthwhile initiatives, the documents are none-the-less misleading because they imply the intent is to actually give young people a say in decision-making processes, when in fact it is not.

**How Youth Participation can be Realised**

What a strong commitment to youth participation might look like is a large question deserving of a paper in itself. Given the critique offered here, I want at least to signal what is required if a policy commitment to youth participation is to match the policy rhetoric. In broad terms the process required is not dissimilar to that pursued by women and indigenous people when they successfully sought participation in democratic practices, including their enfranchisement.

One impediment is the conjoint effect of the prejudices used to identify young people and the refusal or unwillingness of those in policy communities to acknowledge those prejudices and move beyond them.

What is required if the reality of youth participation is to match the rhetoric is a clear and unambiguous recognition of the ways young peoples' rights are denied and how that creates obstacles to engagement in democratic practices.<sup>3</sup> It also entails a commitment to clarity of thinking and to honesty in the ways policy makers use the language of participation. If the policy intent is extend to governance of young people via 'participation' in 'legitimate' adult-sponsored institutions, then that needs to be clearly stated. In other words, policy-makers need to come clean rather than using a rhetoric of democratic participation to usher in policies with quite different agendas.

Aligning the youth participation rhetoric with policy activity also requires moving beyond popular assumptions that young people do not and cannot make the grade as full-citizen because they are not fully developed human beings. (It is also worth noting that the same case was made against Aboriginal people as 'natives' when denying them citizenship.)

This mind-set was developed as a normal idea through the pioneering work of child and youth experts like Jean Piaget, Eric Erickson and Laurence Kohlberg. It has had a major impact on how experts and adults generally came to understand the intellectual and emotional development of young people. It helped consolidate a knowledge that has been a long-standing obstacle to young peoples' participation in democratic practices. As Fernandez-Armestros observes, generations of children, were deprived of challenging tasks because child experts like Piaget said they were incapable them. (Fernandez-Armestros, 1997, p. 18).

Like many adults, Piaget believed children, were 'primitives', were capable only of what he called 'pre-logical, primitive thought', while adults 'naturally' practised higher forms of rationality which occupied the top rungs of the cognitive ladder. Indeed it was an adult, western scientific impertinence that failed to recognise different ways of perceiving the world, reading them as a lower form of being (Fernandez-Armestros, 1997). A mix of sentimentality and scientific knowledge constituted identities of 'children' and 'youth'.

While arguing a case for enhanced recognition of young peoples' actual competencies, it also needs to be acknowledged that by virtue of their age and relative inexperience, young people are frequently more vulnerable than experienced adults, and for this reason require some protection or guardianship. Care, however, is required if the positive benefits of guardianship are not to be negated by inventions that have the effect of inhibiting and preventing young people from realizing their entitlements and ability to exercise their democratic entitlements.

Recognising the role played by popular prejudice about young people and the associated practices that inhibit or prevent their democratic participation is not enough. There is also a role for public education initiatives directed at changing popular prejudices that inhibit the democratic participation of young people.

One strategy for challenging some of the prejudicial views about young people is to increase their involvement in the public sphere. As proponents of a deliberative democracy model from Arendt (1958), to Habermas (1989), and Fraser (1995) have argued, the public

sphere is a forum in which political participation takes place and where citizens deliberate about public matters. It is a space for discursive interaction, the reproduction and communication of discourses critical to the state and society. The public sphere is also a place from which young people have traditionally been excluded. Focusing on the public sphere is a useful place to start because it is there that hegemonic ideas and cultural common-sense about young people are constructed and perpetuated.

The modern liberal notion of public sphere has been largely irrelevant to young people. This is why I argue, along with Fraser (1995), that it needs to be supplanted by a revised post-liberal public sphere that can offer young people opportunities to engage in deliberation about matters affecting them. Challenging three assumptions that inform the prevailing modern liberal public sphere is one way of identifying what a revised public sphere that is inclusive of young people might look like.

Fraser's argues that we need to move beyond the idea that it is possible to *bracket status differentials* in the public sphere, and to deliberate as if all participant were social equals. This assumes that equality is not really required for democracy, that we can act 'as if' equality already exists (Fraser, 1995). Yet for young people, power disparities based on age, experience and access to resource are usually significant and do make a difference to their ability to engage in democratic practices on a relatively equal footing.

If we 'un-bracket inequalities', so that participants no longer involve themselves in the public sphere 'as if' they are equals when they are plainly not, then recognition of power disparities will be needed. This is not to suggest that everyone must be comprehensively equal, but that these disparities are both recognised and redressed. This is important for young people. If they are to enter the public sphere in its current form, they do so on an extremely unequal footing. The public sphere is not neutral in terms of age, race, socio-economic background or gender. Unequally powerful groups develop unequally valued styles of operating with the result that subordinate groups are marginalised or excluded. Acknowledging inequality rather than 'bracketing' it, is likely to increase the possibility of arrangements being made that reduce disparities between dominant and subordinate groups.

The second assumption requiring attention if young people are to participate effectively in democratic practices, is the traditional belief that a single, all-inclusive public sphere is preferable to a network of multiple competing publics.

Recognising that a single comprehensive public sphere is not closer to the democratic ideal than are multiple competing ones, can enhance young peoples' opportunities to effectively deliberate. There are good reasons why subordinate groups should have arenas for deliberation amongst themselves. Venues for communicating that are not under the control or management of dominant groups are necessary to begin articulating the right words, to express particular oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. In this way new options for describing states of affairs like 'the youth wage' as ageism, or certain 'disciplinary practices' like 'smacking' as assault become possible. This, in turn, can help recast policies in ways that are different to those shaped by adult groups. There are advantages for young people to constitute and be a part of alternate multiple public spheres. As Fraser argues, such a plurality of publics will better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single supposedly all-inclusive public sphere (*ibid.*).

The third assumption that needs to be challenged if young people are to participate democratically relates to claims that debates in the public sphere should be restricted to deliberations about public and not private issues (*ibid.*). A review of these assumptions in respect to 'youth' is necessary for reconceptualising the notion of a public sphere that is inclusive of young people.

There is need to consider carefully what is private and what is public in respect to young people. This entails recognising that many 'private' practices, such as hitting children to

establish obedience are properly public issues. Young peoples' entitlements are not private matters. Young peoples' lives are a private and public matter that can best be met by promoting their rights. Relations between an adult and young person is a subject of common concern and thus a legitimate topic of public deliberation.

The issue of rights and obligations are fundamental to young peoples' citizenship status and capacity to participate in democratic practices. This is a large topic and considering it fully is not possible here. There is after all a very long-tradition of youth rights work, some of which has recently been extended into discussions about youth participation discourses (Banks, 1999; Hart, 1992; Matthews *et al.*, 1998/9, p. 1631; Matthews *et al.*, 2000, pp. 135–144; Wierenga, 2003).

Critical to youth participation is the establishment of a clearly articulated set of rights, *anchored in legislation*, which reflect young peoples' diverse needs and capacity to think and act competently. In other words, the kinds of rights claimed for young people should vary according to the needs and interest of the particular groups of young people for whom rights claims are made.

On their own, however, an appeal to fundamental moral, natural, human rights is not enough. As O'Neill argues, the rights option is difficult to realise in isolation because, *by implication it obligates, yet does not specify who owes the obligation*. This is why rights talk often remains an empty political gesture. Given this, I argue that a fully articulated set of obligations in tandem with an index of young peoples' rights is required to help secure young peoples' citizenship entitlements and encourage their participation in democratic participation. Equally a theory of obligations is required because it acknowledges that obligations are owed by all adults to all young people and can help make clear where specific obligations lie (O'Neill, 1989).

This very concise outline of what is required to realise youth participation indicates that young peoples' democratic engagement in democratic participation is possible. There are also compelling arguments about why realising this objective is desirable for societies that pride themselves on being democratic, just and civilised. In the recent spate of youth policy documents heralding youth participation the requirements I have identified are missing.

## Conclusion

Despite a lot of official talk about participation that characterises recent policy documents, there is little evidence to suggest a real commitment to increasing the democratic participation of young people. On the contrary, the limits on how much decision-making young people can actually participate in are usually made quite clear. As demonstrated in this paper, participation is officially defined in terms of 'encouraging' or requiring young people to engage in legitimate social, cultural and educational activities such as school, youth clubs, voluntary community work. Youth participation is confined to specific issues that do not challenge the political power of policy makers on significant issues. *There is no legislative or other framework operating, or proposed, that ensures what young people want or don't want will not be overridden by adults who disagree with the views expressed.* The issue of young people's long-standing exclusion from the public sphere and the barriers they confront in respect to their political involvement are disregarded. Despite the reformist participatory language of recent youth policies their intent is to provide a strategy for increasing the governance of young people. Finally I considered what is required if the reality of youth participation is to match the official policy talk.

## Notes

1. Twelve to 25-year-olds.
2. The taskforce was established to examine young people's transition from school to work,

further education and active participation in community life. This involved the coming together of representatives of non-government agencies working young people, employers, researchers, the indigenous community, Commonwealth and state government departments (*ibid.*, p. 1).

3. I refer to practices that exclude young people from public spaces (i.e., youth curfews), various forms of legislation that discriminate against young people (youth wage, young offenders Acts, etc.), practices that curtail young peoples freedom of assembly, disproportionate levels of poverty amongst children and young people that severely restrict their inclusion in community life, the denial of under 18-year-olds' right to vote, cultural practices in institutions like those schools requiring immediate and unquestioned obedience to authority, denial of young people's right to privacy, exclusion from decision-making processes about matters that direct influence their lives, etc.

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