

# "THE ALIENATED GENERATION?"

*Paper presented on behalf of Senator Susan Ryan by Ms Anne McDermott, Office of Youth Affairs, Canberra, A.C.T.*

The Minister for Education and Youth Affairs was pleased to receive your invitation to speak to this Conference. She is very aware of the importance of the issues you are considering. As Minister responsible for youth affairs, she is closely concerned with the range of problems faced by disadvantaged young people in their transition to adult life.

Unfortunately, because of her Parliamentary commitments she is unable to be here today. I am delivering this paper on her behalf. My name is Anne McDermott and I am from the Office of Youth Affairs.

In announcing the 1984 education funding Guidelines, the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Senator Susan Ryan, announced that \$71.5 million would be made available for a new program, called the Participation and Equity Program.

It aims to encourage more young people over the school leaving age to participate in useful and fulfilling education and training activities in schools and colleges of Technical and Further Education. This will be achieved by stimulating changes in these educational institutions so that they more adequately meet the needs of young people and promote greater equity in education.

The Government considers that the aims of participation and equity are crucial in dealing with the problems faced by young people. We know that early school leaving, for many young people, can lead to disadvantages in seeking employment and in adult life generally, and that educational inequalities are rapidly extended into wider social inequalities.

The Government, in formulating policies to meet the needs of young people, also considers it important that it consult with them about their needs. The Youth Affairs Council of Australia (YACA) has recently completed a report arising from an extensive consultation process with young people, which was undertaken on behalf of the Government. Young people were consulted on a range of issues including education, employment and unemployment, accommodation, health, law, income security and youth identity. Further funds have been allocated for this process in the recent Budget.

The Commonwealth also takes account of other consultations with young people such as the recent Say-So project conducted by the South Australian Youth Forum, which gathered twelve hundred youth opinions on topics such as unemployment, housing, legal issues and drugs.

These and other consultations have indicated a high level of anger and frustration among young people about a range of matters including unemployment and education, as well as a feeling by many young people that society does not hold them in respect.

However, young people have also expressed the desire to be involved in finding their own solutions to the problems which confront them.

During the course of this paper I will be reading from comments made by young people in these consultations.

The period which we call "youth" is an extended and somewhat indeterminate period in our society, during which a person is neither clearly a child nor clearly an adult. The rights, responsibilities and roles of people during this phase are unclear, as is the age at which adulthood begins. Young people acquire rights and responsibilities such as eligibility for a driving licence, voting, entering into commercial agreements, paying adult fares, being legally able to leave home and completing compulsory schooling at various ages, rather than at a set point.

Further, there are wide variations in the ages at which young

people leave education, set up independent households and take on other responsibilities.

As well, there are a range of adult expectations on this subject. Some adults expect adulthood to occur while a young person is still at school, others when a young person leaves school and others not until a young person marries and starts their own family.

What is clear is that "youth" in our society is an extended and indistinct period between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood.

Young people are all too aware of their situation. For example, the recent Say-So project in South Australia elicited the following comments, and many others like them.

"The age for a child I feel should be universal. This is very apparent in matters like driving (16), transport fares (15), cinema (15), drinking (18) and licensed discos (18). I think that it is confusing as to what age you actually are an adult in this society."

"No, young people don't have a say. We are told to act like adults, but are treated like kids."

"Young people of the ages of 15 and over are treated as children when going to licensed places and adults when going to places like Expo. I'm 15 as you see and very mixed up and all my friends also as we are adults and children. What am I? Make an Adult age **18 or 15.**"

The fact that transition from childhood to adulthood is both extended and unclear can understandably in itself lead to a feeling of uncertainty among young people as to their role and responsibilities — and, among some young people, to a feeling of alienation.

Youth is an age of questioning, of assessing values, of forming views. This is a normal process which continues throughout life.

Youth is also an age of commencing adult activities such as employment, money-managing, voting, driving and finding independent accommodation.

However, the current economic situation has prevented a significant number of young people from finding employment and from commencing the adult activities which they expect and which society expects of them. The powerlessness to meet both their own and community expectations can compound and intensify feelings of uncertainty among the young, and, in the case of at least some young people, bring about feelings of failure, alienation and a loss of self-worth.

In 1982, the average number of teenagers in full-time employment fell by 7.5% on the 1981 level. In July 1983, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for 15-19 year olds looking for full time work was 28.1%. In some towns, and for some groups, the unemployment rate is much higher.

A significant proportion of unemployed young people experience increasingly long spells of unemployment. In June 1983, the average duration of unemployment for 15-19 year olds was 30.2 weeks, or about seven months.

Since the 1970s the incidence of youth homelessness has increased significantly. There is no satisfactory estimate available of the extent of youth homelessness in Australia. However, we do know from the recent report on the Evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme and the recent Youth Housing Policy Report by Dr Linda Hancock and Mr Terry Bourke of Swinburne Institute of Technology, that the three factors most associated with youth homelessness are unemployment, family conflict and lack of income.

We know, too, that disadvantages and difficulties are not equally spread among young people. Early school-leaving

tends to be concentrated among particular social groups: those of lower socio-economic status, Aboriginals, rural youth, and certain migrant groups; girls have a higher rate of unemployment than boys. And, as early school-leaving commonly gives rise to disadvantages and difficulties in the transition to adult life, the educational inequalities are rapidly extended into wider social inequalities.

We are also aware that many students want to escape from the education system as soon as possible and, even of those who do not leave early, many feel frustrated and resentful. Of the young people contacted by the processes of consultation mentioned earlier, many expressed anger that the education system did not meet their needs.

When we attempt to deal with these problems, then, we need to admit that education policy and practice, the expectations of employers, past government policy, or even the attitudes of society as a whole, have not given sufficient consideration to what young people themselves want. If we do not, the most idealistic policy will fail.

School curricula also need reform. The typical curriculum in a secondary school is designed for students who will proceed to higher education.

Those students less academically inclined have a right to a school curriculum which also meets their needs. They do not need the added discouragement of being obliged to cope with curricula which neither interest them nor offer them skills or information that are of any immediate use to them. We might all hope that later, in the light of experience and with renewed motivation, many of them might re-enter the education system, but secondary schools should not neglect the educational and human needs of the majority of young people who will increasingly be seeking to complete a full secondary education.

We also know from research that other groups apart from those who leave school early or who are less academically inclined are likely to be disadvantaged in seeking or retaining employment. These groups include: those without previous employment experience; those born outside Australia, northern Europe or North America; unskilled and low-skilled workers; those working in clerical and retail occupations and those in the textiles, building and, more recently, heavy manufacturing industry; those living in company or single industry cities such as Whyalla, Broken Hill, Wollongong or Newcastle; and those living in the traditional manufacturing States of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Further, in all instances of existing or potential labour market disadvantage, women are doubly disadvantaged by the sexual segmentation and division of labour. When these factors are combined the effect can be disastrous as, for example, it is for female early school leavers in Wollongong.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that, as disadvantages and difficulties are not equally spread among young people, neither are feelings of anger, frustration and alienation. However it would be surprising if, given current levels of unemployment among young people, the fear of unemployment and accompanying feelings of frustration did not affect the youth population generally. Young people are all too aware that maximising their job chances does not necessarily result in employment. As one young person in the Say-So project said:

"The Education system is made up by adults! Why don't they ask the students for their opinions or what they would like to see in their school? My sister just finished four years of study at Adelaide University — she is now a Bachelor of Arts and out of work. She has been out of work for six months. What is the point of studying for so long?"

As well as expressing frustration with the economic situation itself, young people have also expressed strong views on the effect which the economic situation and consequent

unemployment have had on their aspirations to undertake activities and achieve the respect given to adults. They felt strongly that not only were they caught in the double-bind situation of being unable to get a job without experience and being unable to get experience without a job, but that adults did not even value them or treat them with respect.

The following quotes are taken from the YACA consultation report and the Say-So report:

"What really cheeses me off is adults' attitude to the unemployed — this is a state produced by our western society and the adults **look down** on the unemployed."

"The discrimination against young unemployed individuals. That is, tag of 'dole-bludger' and reinforcing their negative feelings on these people."

"Young people want work experience, but no one will give any unless you have had experience before. Give us a chance!! Please."

"Stop hassling the unemployed — if they don't get experience ever, then how are they supposed to be experienced?"

"Leaving school and trying to find work when there are so few jobs. Expectations and pressures regarding this. Employers wanting young but experienced workers."

"The soul-destroying process of continued knockbacks (from employers)".

Young people also expressed a feeling that they were simply not respected by older people because of their age.

"... nobody's willing to listen. All (nearly all) people over the age of 30 think that teenagers are 'hooligans' and are always in trouble but most of us are fairly responsible, no matter what we look like or how we dress. It gives me the . . . . . Everybody looks down at you as if you have no rights but everybody has the same rights!"

"Young people — under 12 — get a lot of respect, old people get a fair amount of respect, middle-aged people, our parents, expect, want and get respect, what about us teenagers, we don't. A majority of us deserve some respect or recognition of our wants, needs and goals."

"Young people don't get their say. No one listens to your views."

The consultations also revealed that some young people feel that they are unfairly treated by the police because of their youth.

"I think that police pick on young kids because they are young."

"Police shouldn't treat youth as though they've already done something wrong without even talking to them. Before they start mistreating the youth they should find out about them."

Obviously, not all young people hold these views, but I think it is important that we are aware of the way that some young people feel about their interaction with the legal system. It is also significant that some young people expressed the feeling that there is a need for greater consultation with police, to develop better two-way communications.

Young people also sought greater understanding in instances where they are involved in court appearances. Some felt that the language used in court prevented them from understanding the proceedings. Others felt that the legal system simply did not address the reasons why some young people may appear in court.

This is particularly so in the case of those young people who are arrested on charges such as being in moral danger or in need of protection, where the arrest and court appearance arise through no fault of their own. However, young people also considered that there were difficulties with the current legal response even in cases where the court appearance did arise because of an action by a young person.

"What the Courts don't realise is that sometimes we break

the law to be noticed. All we really need is people to care about us."

There is a need for all levels of our community to recognise the nature of the problems facing young people today, and to develop appropriate responses to meet those needs.

A plea which has emerged consistently from young people in recent consultations with them, is the plea for greater participation and a greater say in those things which affect their lives: education, employment, their communities generally.

Those young people who have been disadvantaged because of the economic situation must not be made to feel that they are individually responsible or to blame for their predicament. All young people must be given the opportunity to contribute to their communities.

The Government wants to transform the circumstances affecting the lives of young people. We want to replace powerlessness, poverty, confusion and aimlessness with autonomy, economic independence and self-chosen constructive activity.

In order to achieve this, we also need to work towards equity. As we know, young people's chances in the transition to an autonomous constructive, adult life are far from equal. We can identify those groups who are more likely to lose out in the education system, in the employment market and in other aspects of life.

We know as well as you do that we are asking a lot: there are no simple solutions to the complex problems faced by disadvantaged young people. We will need the help of the whole community in order to achieve our aims. But it is in participation and equity, we believe, that the answer lies.

It is only to be expected that those who do not have an opportunity to participate in and contribute to the community will become frustrated and alienated. And it is only by allowing young people to take their place as valuable members of that community, members with a role, a future and an equal chance, that the problems spoken of by young people can be solved.

The Government is taking steps in this direction. In the area of education, the Government is aware of the wider social inequalities which can arise from early school leaving. In drawing up the 1984 education funding guidelines for the Commonwealth Education Commissions emphasis was placed on both introducing greater equity into Australia's education system as well as addressing youth unemployment and the low participation rate of young people in post-compulsory education.

The redistribution of resources announced in the Guidelines aims to achieve increased participation in education and training for young people, consistent with the Government's wish to achieve, by the end of this decade, a situation whereby most young people complete the equivalent of a full secondary education, either in school or in a T.A.F.E. institution or in some combination of work and education.

However, the Government recognises that, if more young people are to participate in education and training activities, these activities must meet their needs.

The Participation and Equity Program, mentioned earlier, will be a significant step towards this goal. The Program will make funds available to the States and non-government schools to stimulate changes in secondary schools and T.A.F.E. in areas including curriculum and courses so that they more adequately meet the needs of young people and promote greater equity in education.

The Government recognises that education and training alone are not sufficient to assist those who have suffered under the current economic crisis.

The Prime Minister and the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations have thus announced that the Commonwealth Government is making available an additional \$300 million for direct job creation under the Community Employment Program, or CEP, starting on 1 July. When it is fully operational, the Program is designed to create up to 70,000 new jobs in a year on worthwhile community projects.

As well, \$100 million representing the balance of the previous Government's Wage Pause Program is being distributed among the States and Territories for job creation projects, bringing Commonwealth Government expenditure on direct job creation in 1983/84 to \$400 million.

Projects funded under the CEP will be designed to lead to permanent jobs or provide service of permanent public and community value. They will also provide worthwhile work experience and/or training opportunities to enable those who have been unemployed for at least nine months or who have never worked to enter the normal workforce. It is expected that the Program will benefit many young people.

As you would know, the limitations imposed by the overall economic situation affect what the Government can do in the short term or in the context of any one Budget. The Government has already moved to deal with these issues in the longer term, however, by establishing a number of co-ordinating mechanisms to work on issues affecting young people. For example, the Government has decided that the Department of Education and Youth Affairs is to have responsibility for the co-ordination of all Commonwealth policies, programs and proposals to the extent that they affect youth.

You may also have heard that the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs has called a meeting of all State and Territory youth Ministers to discuss youth matters. The meeting will be held in November of this year.

The Government is committed to developing a comprehensive approach to youth policy development.

The complexity of modern society is such that government cannot hope to deal with its problems solely from within its own resources. We need and welcome ideas and positive action from all parts of the community. There are many things which individuals and local groups can do to meet the needs of young people in their own communities, to welcome and assist their participation as valuable members of society and to foster equity for all, regardless of economic or social background.

Young people are stating their needs clearly, and their wish to be involved in meeting those needs. The challenge has been issued. It is now up to all parts of society to respond to that challenge in a positive way.

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