Youth Participation and Social Inclusion: A New Policy Agenda?

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The election of the Rudd Labor Government has seen ‘social inclusion’ emerge on Australia’s Federal social policy agenda. Describing processes to create a society where all individuals are valued, where resources are distributed to meet the needs of all, and where all are able to contribute (Gillard 2007, Gillard & Wong 2007), this policy initiative has been greeted with some enthusiasm, and particularly by those who work with or research young people.

‘Social inclusion’ is a relatively new concept in Australia; ‘youth participation’ has a longer history. Here, young people’s purported low and declining participation in community and political life has been a concern. Commentaries frequently allude to young people’s declining interest in politics and lack of commitment to their communities, with diminishing democratic vitality and social cohesion as results (SSCEET 1989; JSCEM 2007).

The main official solution to this perceived deficit in young people’s participation has been education in the form of the Discovering Democracy Curriculum. In addition, the Howard Government instituted the ‘Youth Roundtable’, and youth consultative committees proliferate at state and local government levels, where they also have the goal of increasing young people’s community participation. The premise behind such initiatives is that more information and the creation of participatory structures will, or should, result in more young people choosing to participate.

There have been challenges to, and criticisms of, both perceived problems and solutions. Researchers have questioned the government’s definition of ‘participation’, seeing it conservatively limited to voting and party or community group membership (Vromen 2003; White 2007). They have contended that young people participate differently from older generations, in respect to different issues or in different ways. Some highlight young people’s participation in youth community or internet based groups (Collin 2007, Thomas 2007). Others have contended that young people do participate even in conventional ways, such as by voting, or in community organizations (Henn & Weinstein 2006). In addition ‘official’ mechanisms available for young people to participate in decision-making processes have been criticised as tokenistic and ineffective (Bessant 2004, Bridgland Sorenson 2007).

Stevens notes that ‘participation can be thought of as the opposite to the process of social exclusion’ (Stevens et al. 1999, p. 3). Thus participation and social inclusion are intrinsically linked. Most discussions of youth participation, as above, focus on its ‘how’, ‘whether’ and ‘effectiveness’. Clearly, young people comprise a disparate demographic. Many do participate, and in a variety of different ways. Some are also more socially excluded than others. In this brief I contend that participation should be seen as being more complex than an individual ‘choice’ assisted by education and participatory structures. I situate participation in a social policy framework, arguing that policies that result in social exclusion for young people create potential barriers to their participation.

HOUSING: A PLACE TO PARTICIPATE

Home-ownership has traditionally been an affordable ‘dream’ for most Australians. However in recent years the property market has changed significantly with property prices and rents rising across most of Australia. Australia has also had a history of providing public housing for those unable to realise this dream, or to secure privately rented accommodation. Successful cutbacks to welfare budgets, however, have seen a reduction in public housing stocks. In commentary on the housing policies of the Howard Government Shelter Australia (2004) note the tendency to direct monies away from public housing and to private rental subsidies and grants for property buyers.

The customary housing career of young people sees them experiencing periods of transience in the form of renting in shared households and alone before the ‘dream’ of homeownership is achieved. However in the current property market, young people leave home later, move between rental properties more frequently, and remain in the rental market for longer, before, or if, they are able to purchase property. As the recent release of Australia’s Homeless Youth demonstrates, those marginalised by poverty, unemployment, mental health issues, or similar, face an additional risk of transience and homelessness (NYC 2008). Young people are rarely considered ‘deserving’ of public housing in a climate where burgeoning waiting lists include those deemed more vulnerable, such as families with small children. Short-term accommodation options and emergency
For many young people the place they call home may not necessarily be the place they want to call home; others may not have any place to call home. This affects their ability to be participatory citizens. Youth research has explored young people’s association with ‘place’, noting both that young people do invest in place and also the vulnerability of many when they lack a place (Robinson 2004). Saunders (1990) explores the relationship between home ownership and participation, noting that those who invest in home ownership have an increased likelihood of devoting time and energy to their local communities, perceiving a physical and also emotional connection with these communities. By extension those who have prospects of a long term ‘investment’ in a place, even as tenants, are more likely to consider participation than those for whom the area is a temporary place only.

There are also procedural concerns. In our democracy the Australian Electoral Commission requires that ‘ordinary electors’ have an address to enrol at. Continuous Roll Updates monitor the accuracy of the electoral roll. In addition, as a result of recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee in Electoral Matters [JSCEM] following the 2004 Federal Election, the enrolment period following the calling of a Federal election has been reduced from one week for all electors to one day for new electors and three days for those who are re-enrolling. In effect this privileges those electors in stable accommodation: remaining on the electoral roll is more likely and less ‘costly’ for those with stability, and the ‘cost’ (in terms of time, energy and effort) increases with the mobility of an elector.

**MUTUAL OBLIGATION AND COMPULSORY PARTICIPATION**

Mutual Obligation crosses the policy domains of welfare and employment. Initially aimed entirely at young unemployed people its basic premise is that individual responsibility should replace state assistance. Mutual Obligation is also a participatory discourse. Under the ‘Work for the Dole’ scheme young people on unemployment benefits are compelled to ‘participate in extra activities like a program or training course’ (Centrelink 2007). Frequently, these activities include community-based projects. Those not meeting their requirements of Mutual Obligation may ‘have a participation failure applied’ (Centrelink 2007).

But this has inherent contradictions also. In particular those researching youth and work have noted that labour market transitions have produced a market where there is limited opportunity for many, particularly low skilled young people, to find sustainable employment (Bessant & Cook 1998). In this context defining a ‘participation success’ as an individual who participates where there is limited scope to do so creates participation failures. In addition coerced participation mediates against participatory

housing are also over-burdened and do not offer long-term stability.

For many young people participating in the labour market is crucially important for their participation in community and community life. In Australia, the welfare and employment policy that is the closest to mutual obligation is Mutual Obligation, introduced in 2004 as part of the New Deal for Young People. Mutual Obligation requires that ‘ordinary electors’ enrol and vote. Continuous Roll Updates monitor the accuracy of the electoral roll. In addition, as a result of recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee in Electoral Matters [JSCEM] following the 2004 Federal Election, the enrolment period following the calling of a Federal election has been reduced from one week for all electors to one day for new electors and three days for those who are re-enrolling. In effect this privileges those electors in stable accommodation: remaining on the electoral roll is more likely and less ‘costly’ for those with stability, and the ‘cost’ (in terms of time, energy and effort) increases with the mobility of an elector.

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behaviour in a range of other areas. For example, participation through Work for the Dole has been shown to engender feelings of powerlessness, negative attitudes toward governments and electoral participation (Edwards 2007). Warburton and Smith (2003) note that this extends to further involvement in community participation. Mutual obligation is thus an exclusionary policy that fails to meet its own objectives.

**SOCIAL INCLUSION: A NEW POLICY AGENDA?**

If social exclusion results in a compromised capacity to participate, is social inclusion the pathway to greater participation? Certainly policies aimed at increasing young people’s participation must move beyond an assumption that this is simply a matter of individual ‘choice’, influenced by education and structural opportunities. Access to affordable and stable housing and a welfare system that does not rely on compulsion have been highlighted as starting points towards both social inclusion and creating potential for young people to participate. Another simple mechanism would be to make it easier, rather than harder, for young people to enrol and vote.

‘Socially included’, as the opposite of ‘excluded’, an accepted negative, can appear an automatic positive. Yet as a policy goal social inclusion is open, contestable and belongs neither to the left nor right. In Britain Work for the Dole’s twin, the New Deal for Young People, was introduced as part of a social inclusion framework, with similar effects on youth participation as experienced in Australia (O’Toole 2003). In the new policy discourse in Australia social inclusion is becoming narrowly and largely connected with being ‘employed’ and ‘economically productive’. For example, Julia Gillard has noted that ‘in the future policies of economic and social inclusion will be vital because in an ageing society we cannot afford to have anyone who can work dropping off the edge’ (Gillard 2007, p. 11). Gillard and Wong (2007) note ‘workforce participation is a foundation of social inclusion; it creates opportunities for financial independence and personal fulfillment’. Certainly, access to the paid labour force decreases disadvantage and opens up opportunities, including for stable housing. However the danger for young people is that social inclusion will stop short at policies designed to increase potential for employment and that as a result ‘inclusion’ will be defined in limited and instrumentalist ways, individuals will be blamed for being ‘excluded’, and strategies for ‘inclusion’ will rely on coercion and compulsion.

In using ‘social inclusion’ as a lynchpin for social policy initiatives it is thus important not to assume that ‘social inclusion’ is incontestably a ‘good’. Indeed, scrutinising the meaning of inclusion and keeping this open to debate should be an important aspect of the policy formation process. A final lesson is that young people must be included in this debate and attention must be paid to how they define exclusion, and how they would like to be included.

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