

Will thousands of young people be prevented from voting in the next federal election?

By Simon Castles,
contributing editor of the Big Issue

There is only one thing surprising about the Federal Government's plan to close the electoral roll as soon as the poll is called, and thus prevent tens of thousands of young Australians from voting. And that is that someone in government actually remembered young people do vote in this country.

You certainly wouldn't know it from watching politics in action in 2004. Young people (those aged 18 to 24) are the great unwashed of the electorate - ignored, rarely spoken about, and never, ever spoken to. (I challenge you to recall an occasion.)

At the 2001 election, 83,000 first-time voters signed up in the first seven days of the campaign. Last week the Coalition, citing spurious concerns about electoral fraud, said they wanted to prevent the same situation occurring this election. (Read: want to stop some unlikely supporters from casting a vote.)

In all, about 2.5 million Australians are aged 15 to 24 - not an insignificant number. As a demographic, though, they are increasingly crushed and buried beneath an aging population - beneath 12.5 million voters, all of us shouting ourselves silly about real estate, retirement, superannuation plans and other issues as grey and lifeless as a politician's suit.

I mean, c'mon, did you care about superannuation when you were 18? So how come we suddenly expect young people to care about it today?

But the young things had better get used to it. Politics has never exactly been a hip and funky arena, but it's only going to get greyer in the years ahead. For all the talk of generational change (welcome Messrs Latham and, er, Costello), politics is growing old with the population. The elections of the future are going to have all the youth appeal of seeing Johnny Farnham play the RSL.

In 1971 - not long after Farnsey released *Sadie* (*The Cleaning Lady* - the median age in Australia was 27 years old. That was the rough age of the person political leaders had in mind when they made their pitch to Australian voters. Today, the median age is 36. And rising. By 2031, according to the Bureau of Statistics, it will be 43 years old.



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In the May/June edition of Yikes! Simon Castles will be asking the question '**Will thousands of young people be prevented from voting in the next federal election?**'. We will also be providing a few handy hints on **how to enrol to vote** in the yet to be announced Federal election. Our Policy Officer gives a **run-down on both the Victorian and Federal 2004-05 budgets**. We have several **news items from the Victorian State government**, as well as our usual updates. YACVic's Executive Officer Georgie Ferrari asks '**The youth sector - ideas rich, time poor?**'. We also have our second opinion piece '**The Loch Ness Monster: Professionalism and Youth-Work**'. We are happy to be able to publish an **update on the volatile substances laws from Youthlaw**, and some news on YACVic's conference in October this year - **Fringe Benefits - young people on the edge of policy and place**. YACVic has recently employed an **Information & Participation Officer** - you can meet our newest staff member inside this edition of Yikes!

The youth sector - ideas rich, time poor?



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ABOUT YACVIC

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria.

The main function of YACVic is to make representations to government and serve as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic's resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development through consultation with its constituency. YACVic also resources the information needs of its members through regular updates and by facilitating networking within and beyond the Victorian youth sector.

YACVic is governed by a volunteer Board and managed by a paid secretariat. The Council's core funding comes from the Victorian Government's Office for Youth.

YIKES!

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to Yikes! are welcome. The deadline for the next edition of Yikes! is 22 June.

INSERTS & ADVERTISING

If you wish to include an insert or advert in Yikes please contact the YACVic Communications Officer on (03) 9612 8999 or email info@yacvic.org.au.

You're a funny lot. In our consultations around our strategic plan and in other discussions we have had, you've indicated that you want more interaction with each other and us. One strategic plan respondent summed it up well by saying 'as a sector we don't critique our practice, there are very few opportunities to do so, we hardly even come together to discuss issues'.

So in a small attempt to provoke some debate and get some discussion going in our last issue of YIKES! we introduced a new feature, 'Yikes! An opinion'. We invited your letters, your comments and even your own contributions to the next issue. What did we get? Zip.

Similarly we distributed a copy of 'That Old Chestnut' a discussion paper on professionalisation and the youth sector. Again we invited your feedback and comments. What did we get? A handful of responses.

It was more heartening to see over 100 people turn up to the forum on the subject on Friday April 30 and to witness some lively debate.

We understand that you are busy workers and while you might be 'ideas rich', you are time poor. We don't want to berate you for being busy, but we do want to encourage your involvement and participation in these discussions, debates and exchanges of ideas. As a member driven organisation, YACVic relies on your input and involvement.

Recently, YACVic's Information and Participation Officer started (see page 10). This is a new role that has a specific focus of involving you more in YACVic. The impetus for this position came directly from consultations we

had with people like you. You told us you wanted more ways to get involved. Over the next few weeks the I and P Officer, Rys will be looking at ways to get our members more involved and more informed. She will happily come out to your organisation to update you on what we are up to and is busy dreaming up ways to entice you to become involved.

In the meantime, thanks to those who did give us some feedback on the new look YIKES! We think it looks good too. We are always happy to hear from you and would love to get an opinion piece from you, here are few ideas to get you going.

- Will police checks on workers really make kids safe?
- Should workers with young people who haven't got qualifications be allowed to join a professional association?
- Is the proposed Federal legislation to close the electoral role three days after the election date announced deliberately focused on excluding the youth vote?
- Is it getting harder for young people to use public space?
- Why does the Victorian Government not want a Commission for Children and Young people?

If these questions don't get you going I don't know what will!

Georgie Ferrari
Executive Officer

Government news

Office for Youth: In the Community - public forum series

The Office for Youth is pleased to be able to announce a series of meetings being coordinated by the Department for Victorian Communities that will assist the Victorian Government to hear from local groups and organisations.

The 'In the Community' series of meetings are being held between April - June and will provide an opportunity for State Government representatives to hear your thoughts on how we can work together to make your community a better place to live and work in.

All interested community members are encouraged to attend one of the meetings. You can register your interest in attending one of the meetings, and find out more information about the meetings, by calling the number on the flyer, or visiting the DVC website

<http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au/ministers/inthecommunity.htm>.

Information on Youth Services Program 2004-05

As you may be aware, current Funding and Service Agreements for the Office for Youth's Youth Services Program are due to expire on 30 June 2004.

The Office for Youth is offering to extend current Funding and Service Agreements for the Youth Services Program for one year to 30 June 2005. Current funding levels and performance targets will be extended under this arrangement.

The Department for Victorian Communities was created in December 2002 to give effect to the Government's objective of strengthening communities through a more integrated approach to planning, funding and delivering services at a local level. The Department is currently working on aligning its grants programs and processes to ensure that they give effect to its goals and objectives. The extension of current Funding and Service Agreements for the Youth Services Program will enable the Office for Youth to align the program with the Department's community strengthening agenda.

All current providers have been notified in writing of this development.

Information on the next funding round for the Youth Services Program will be available later in the year. All current providers will be notified directly.

You may also be aware, the first round of the Youth Services Program Workshops was conducted in June 2003 as part of Youth Services Program Action Learning project. The workshops brought service providers together in service clusters to facilitate networking and shared learning between providers.

The Office for Youth will be advising existing Youth Services Program providers shortly regarding the next round of workshops. These workshops will continue to build on the Department for Victorian Communities objective of strengthening communities by building collaborative relationships between individuals and groups. The next round of workshops will also provide an opportunity to provide feedback on the Youth Services Program Action Learning project.

If you have any queries regarding the Youth Services Program please contact Paul Robertson, Manager, Youth Programs, (03) 9208 3200

The Department of Family and Community Services supports at risk young people in Victoria.

On 14 April 2004 the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services publicly announced, via the FaCS website (www.facs.gov.au/jpetselection), the outcomes of the 2004 JPET Selection Process.

The objective of JPET is to assist disadvantaged and disconnected young people, particularly those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to overcome personal and social barriers to participation and achieve greater social and economic participation in the life of their communities. JPET targets young people from 15 to 21 years of age (with a focus on 15 to 19 year olds) who face multiple personal and social barriers that severely limit their capacity to participate socially in the life of their communities, participate in economic focused activity such as education employment or vocational training and benefit from employment assistance. Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are the primary focus for JPET.

The 2004 JPET selection process was the culmination of extensive consultations with the Youth Services Sector and other stakeholders regarding the selection documentation and needs analysis in 2003 to ensure that the selection process was open and transparent to get the best possible outcomes across Australia.

Victoria will have a total of 34 JPET services, an increase of 3 services and an additional \$143,000 to be spent in Victoria per annum. As part of the 2004 JPET selection process the Government will also fund a number of special needs services in Victoria including young indigenous, young migrant, young womens and young mens specific services.

There has been some turnover in the organisations providing JPET services and FaCS is working closely with affected organisations to assist with any transition processes.

More information on the outcomes of the 2004 JPET selection process can be found at www.facs.gov.au/jpetselection, or by contacting Jane Baldock on 03 8626 1172. ■

Will young people be prevented from voting in the next federal election?

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Yes, the voters of the future will be older and more staid, and politicians are already chasing them with the vigour and slick determination of door-to-door Mormons.

Our leaders talk about the so-called 'barbecue stopper' issues - real estate, interest rates, superannuation, balancing work and family etc. - with little or no concern that young voters are either not particularly interested or aren't even at the barbecue to begin with. (Who wants to discuss negative gearing with pissed Uncle Ted anyway?)

Okay, I'm being cynical. Of course political leaders can't please - or address - all of the people all of the time. But can't they at least try to please some of the young people some of the time? And sorry, but this means more than appearing on FM breakfast radio or *Rove Live* and joking about pop culture ephemera.

It means attempting to engage with young people about issues they face right now. It means having the courage to put yourself in their shoes. It means having the imagination to picture the world through an 18-year-old's eyes.

- What's it like to know that no amount of education will guarantee you stable employment?
- What's it like to hear everyone talking about security, and yet feel so insecure?
- What's it like to have elders talk about the benefits of work for the dole - for you, not for them?
- What's it like to have a mobile phone bill you can't possibly pay?
- What's it like to begin adulthood in debt?
- What's it like to be gay, knowing your prime minister

Last election there were 86,224 new voters enrolled to vote, but the Electoral Commission took 155,446 calls and 2000 emails in the week before the close of roles from people inquiring about their status as voters.



would be 'disappointed' if his child was the same?

- What's it like to have a million options, and yet feel you have none?
- What's it like to feel priced out of higher education because you lucked out in a generational lottery?
- What's it like to know you will pay rent forever?
- What's it like to know your generation is exhibiting signs of depression up to 10 times that of previous generations?
- And what's it like to know that the current government would rather you off the electoral roll than on it?

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This article first appeared in The Age, 21 April 2004 ■

This year, based on 2001 census data, there will be 89,110 18 year olds who need to enrol in order to vote. Overall this bill could affect 2.01 million young voters aged between 18 and 25.

Details of the proposed electoral role amendment bill and what will happen to it

The Bill Simon Castles is referring to in the lead article in this edition of Yikes! is the *Electoral and Referendum Admendment (Enrolment Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2004*. The two passages from the bill that refer to the closing of the electoral role are:

'[to] allow for the close of rolls for new electors to be 6 p.m. on the day on which the writ for an election is issued, and for the close of rolls for those amending their enrolment details to be 8 p.m. three working days after the issue of the writ;'

'As a further measure to preserve the integrity of the electoral roll, amend-

ments to allow for the close of rolls for new electors to be 6 p.m. on the day on which the writ is issued, and for the close of rolls for those amending their enrolment to be 8 p.m. three working days after the issue of the writ will ensure that the Australian Electoral Commission has sufficient time to verify details provided by applicants for enrolment. The government remains committed to the introduction of the early close of the roll.'

Currently the bill is still being debated in the House of Representatives. It was introduced on 1 April, then debated on 13 May. Time for the debate ran out

and is due to be discussed again on 24 May. It is likely that the Bill will pass the House of Representatives, but be blocked in the Senate as both the Labor Party and the Greens have said they will oppose the Bill. ■

Update on new volatile substance laws

By Sarah Nicholson,
Director - Youthlaw

As of 1st July 2004, new laws come into effect giving police powers to intervene with young people using volatile substances. The new laws have a 'sunset' clause, which means that the legislation will be monitored and reviewed for 2 years, after which time the legislation will need to pass through parliament again to remain in effect. These new laws do not make it an offence to possess or inhale volatile substances, nor are young people required to provide their name and address to police using these powers.

Prior to this legislation coming into effect, police have no power to take action with young people using volatile substances, if the young person does not agree. The new laws give police the power, without a warrant, and subject to certain safeguards:

- To search young people under the age of 18 years who are inhaling or will inhale a volatile substance
- To seize a volatile substance or an item used to inhale a volatile substance; and
- To apprehend and detain young people under 18 years of age who are inhaling or have recently inhaled a volatile substance and are likely by act or neglect to cause immediate serious bodily harm to himself or herself or some other person.

The 'safeguards' include that when using the powers, police must:

- Inform the person of the officer's name, rank and place of duty, and if requested, in writing
- Produce the officer's identification, unless the officer is in uniform
- Inform the person that it is not an offence to possess or inhale a volatile substance but that the officer has the power to search for and seize volatile substances and items used to inhale them and may use reasonable force to do so
- Make a record of every search, seizure and/ or detention conducted, regardless of whether any volatile substance or item is located; and
- Provide a copy of the record of the



search, seizure or detention to the young person if the young person requests a copy, within 12 months of the search

These safeguards are different to those provided in other legislation. For example, police are not required to make records of searches for illegal drugs, unless evidence is found. Only recently have police been required to make records of searches for weapons where nothing is found. Police have said that they usually will not complete the record until returning to the police station. Nevertheless, young people should be encouraged to request a copy of search records so that police can be scrutinised for their use of these new powers.

The new laws can be found in the Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 on www.dms.dpc.vic.gov.au.

Since August 2003, a Reference Group comprising representatives from youth drug and alcohol, legal, and Aboriginal services, the Departments of Justice, Human Services and Victorian Communities and the Victoria Police, have been developing appropriate operational protocols to provide guidance to police, and other relevant agencies in carrying out their responsibilities under the provisions of the Act. YACVic, Youthlaw and Victorian

Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) have been represented on this Reference Group, seeking to minimise the potential for negative interactions between police and young people, including the potential for criminal charges to arise.

As a result of this representation, police have agreed that they will notify VALS as soon as possible when detaining a Koori young person who cannot be taken home or refuses to talk to police. This is in line with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendations, that emphasise the need to minimise contact between the Koori community and the criminal justice system wherever possible.

Whilst the stated intention of the legislation is 'to allow for an integrated police and health response, that takes into consideration the best interests of the young person,' questions remain about police capacity to address these complex health and welfare issues. Services should be encouraging young people to share their experiences and recording details of the police intervention under this legislation, to feed into the monitoring process. If young people are unsure whether what the police did was lawful, they should seek legal advice as soon as possible. ■

2004-05 State & Federal Budgets:

YACVic presents a summary of both the Victorian State Budget and the Federal Budget for 2004-2005.

2004-2005 State Budget

This information provides a summary of the key elements of the 2004-2005 Victorian State Budget which affect young people. For more detailed information see <http://www.budget.vic.gov.au>

Public Transport

Concession cards

- \$15 million over 4 years to reduce the cost of the Tertiary Student Concession Card (available to all full-time undergraduate university and TAFE students) from \$87 to \$8. This brings the cost into line with that of the Primary and Secondary Student Concession Cards. This will come into effect at the start of the education year in 2005
- From 1 January 2005, the Country Tertiary Concession Card will be withdrawn and all tertiary students will use the Victorian Tertiary Student Concession Card. This will be valid for use on country and metropolitan networks
- \$78 million over 4 years to expand concession card eligibility so that all Health Care Card Holders will be eligible for concession fares on public transport

YACVic welcomes the reduction in the cost of the tertiary student concession card for students in both metro and rural areas. YACVic, along with many other organisations, has advocated for this reduction since the Government made it a pre-election promise in 1999. It may have taken a few years to implement but it's a very welcome step. Given recent increases to higher education fees and costs, the economic pressures on young people are reaching crisis point. A reduction in the cost of public transport will ease some of these pressures.

The decision to make all Health Care Card Holders eligible for concession

fares on public transport is also a positive step. This will provide young people on low incomes greater access to health, education, employment and recreation opportunities.

There were no major budget commitments regarding improvements to public transport services. While some funding has been allocated to outer metropolitan road programs, there has been no investment in better public transport in these areas.

Education and Training

Education Maintenance Allowance

\$78.1 million over 4 years to increase the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA):

- The EMA payment for primary students will increase from \$127 a year to \$200 a year
- The EMA payment for secondary school students will be increased from \$254 per year to \$400 per year
- EMA to be indexed

YACVic welcomes the increase to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for primary and secondary students. This increase is well overdue as the EMA payment hasn't changed since 1988. We believe this boost will assist families to better meet the costs of their children's education and will allow more young people to access educational opportunities. The indexing of the EMA is particularly welcome as this will help families keep up with inflation.

Schools and TAFE

- \$62 million over four years for 250 additional teachers
- \$30 million for a range of new specialist facilities in specialist schools in specialist program areas as science and technology
- \$174 million to build new and

replacement schools, modernise existing schools and TAFE facilities

- \$60 over two years for additional school maintenance programs
- \$90 over four years towards vocational education and training programs
- An extra \$2.8 million over four years towards ACE

YACVic welcomes funding for additional teachers, maintenance of schools and improved facilities. These resources will have a direct impact on young people's quality of education.

While additional funding for ACE is welcome, we are concerned that \$2.8 over four years cannot address the immediate needs of the ACE sector. Details about this funding will be outlined in the Ministerial Statement on ACE due shortly.

Child and family support

- \$19 million over four years to extend the Innovation Projects to a further 13 local government areas
- \$3.3 million over four years to expand an adolescent mediation and diversion program to an additional four regions to prevent adolescents entering out of home care
- \$2.1 million over 4 years to provide intensive therapeutic treatment to 80 children and adolescents each year who exhibit sexually abusive behaviors
- \$6.1 million over 4 years to extend the Aboriginal family decision making pilot project to a further 6 regions
- \$20.7 million over 4 years to help foster careers cover the costs of school books, equipment, clothes, shoes, medical and dental expenses. This will provide on average \$800 per child per year based on 6000 children
- \$10 million to continue the refurbishment and upgrade of residential care facilities for children in care

What's in it for young people?

2004-2005 Federal Budget

Additional funding for foster care brings Victoria's spending closer to the national average rate of reimbursement to foster carers. While we welcome the Government recognising the high costs of caring for foster children, many foster families will still be out of pocket due to unforeseen expenses.

An expansion of the Innovation Projects is also welcome but this will give coverage to only 50% of the high-notification areas.

We'll be watching the Government's response to the Protecting Children review to get a better understanding of how the Governments will address child protection issues in a more holistic way.

Housing/homelessness

We are disappointed to see no significant investment for young homelessness people in this budget. Young people are the largest age group in the homeless population with 26% aged between 12 and 18 years and 46% aged under the age of 24. We are still awaiting the release of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan but it seems as though there will be little resource allocation to address the needs of young people who are homeless.

Mental health

New funding on 2004-5 for the targeted growth of child and adolescent services in the outer East.

Juvenile Justice

An increase of \$7 million but this largely reflects Community Support Fund drug program funding being transferred into the Juvenile Justice budget. We are disappointed that there is no investment in new programs not any budget allocation for the increase in the age of the jurisdiction of the Children's Court.

This information sheet provides a summary of the key elements of the 2004-2005 Federal Budget which affect young people. For more detailed information see www.budget.gov.au

There's not much to get excited about in this Federal budget. Tax cuts only apply to those in the top tax brackets. An increase in the superannuation co-contribution scheme for low-income earners is welcome but very few young people have much extra money to contribute to super because it's going into general living expenses. The Higher Education reforms come into force with students having to deal with HECS fees rising by up to 25 percent. There is also no funding for a national youth peak.

Respite and information services for younger carers

\$26.6 million over four years to fund respite and information services for young carers aged under 25 years. Young carers will be assisted through:

- Access to up to five hours in-home respite per week during the school term to help them complete secondary or vocational equivalent education. Unused hours of respite may be stored for later use (up to a maximum of 20 hours)
- Access to one fortnight of respite care each year to undertake activities such as study for exams, training or recreation. The respite care blocks can be used flexibly in a single two week block or in single 24 hour periods to support young carers through stressful periods associated with full time care and study; and
- Provision of age-appropriate information, advice and referral services including a telephone hotline, on line advice and an information package

Values for Life Initiative

\$34.7 million over four years for values, civics and citizenship education initiatives. As part of this funding, every school in Australia will receive an average of \$1,600 to conduct forums on values and drug education.

Youth Allowance - waiver of certain debts

An allocation of \$9.2 million over two years (including \$2 million in 2003-04)

to waive certain Youth Allowance debts. Debts waived will be those created as a result of overpayments associated with manual reviews undertaken as part of the Parental Income Test linking initiative, in cases where:

- The person was receiving Youth Allowance at any time between 1 July 2002 and 26 April 2003, and was identified as incorrectly receiving a Parental Income Test exemption; and
- The parent/parents of the Youth Allowee actively notified Centrelink of a change in their own financial circumstances; and
- The debt arose because the Youth Allowee continued to receive a Parental Income Test exemption when, on the basis of the parent's notified change in circumstances, the exemption should not have applied; and
- The debt was raised in respect to any period between the dates of 1 July 1998 and 26 April 2003

The waiver will apply from the date that the parent notified Centrelink of a change to their financial circumstances, and will cover the part of the debt that was accumulated when the Youth Allowance recipient was incorrectly receiving a Parental Income Test exemption.

Settlement Services for Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants - increased tuition

\$36.8 million over four years to increase the hours available to humanitarian entrants under the Special Preparatory Programme. This funding will offer up to 400 hours of preparatory tuition to clients in the 16-24 year age bracket.

Job Placement, Employment and Training and Reconnect services

The Government will expand the existing Reconnect and Job Placement,

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The Victorian Government's response to YACVic's proposal

The Coalition's opinion piece

Following the publication of 'Are You Listening To Us?' in June 2001, we asked the Government to respond to our proposal for a Children and Young People's Commission. We received the following letter in January this year from the Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs, Ms Jacinta Allan, MP. The letter outlines why the Victorian Government does not consider it appropriate to establish a Victorian Children and Young people's Commission as proposed by YACVic.

While a Commission is not on the Government's agenda right now, the campaign for a Commission continues. As you know, YACVic, VCOSS, Youthlaw, CWAV, Defence for Children International - Australia and the Law Institute Victoria have established a coalition of supporters of the model presented in 'Are You Listening To Us?'. There are now 71 members of this coalition and new members are joining regularly. We will continue to advocate for the establishment of a Victorian Commission with the support of the broader community.

Letter from the Minister

I refer to the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's (YACVic) proposal for a Children and Young People's Commission as outlined in the discussion paper *Are You Listening To Us?: The Case for a Children and Young People's Commission*.

Careful consideration has been given to the proposal and to the potential outcomes for children and young people that could arise from establishing such a commission.

A number of government, community sector and independent statutory bodies both federal and state currently undertake many of the functions that YACVic proposes to be delivered to a Commission. These organisations include the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the National Children's and Youth Law Centre, the Ombudsman, the Auditor General, and the Office for Youth.

The Government also funds a range of peak or specialist non-government organisations which advocate in the interests of children and young people. The work of these organisations, and of others not funded directly by the Government, is directed towards some of the most vulnerable children and young people.

The promotion of young people's rights to participate in decision-making is a key responsibility of the Office for Youth. The Government intends that this responsibility will be pursued strongly reflecting the importance which we attach to young people having a real voice and influence on the decisions which affect them.

The Government's commitment to the interests of children and young people and its recognition of the important role which the community sector can play is also reflected in the Government's support for your organisation.

Other actions taken by the government to advance the rights of children and young people include:

- The release of a comprehensive whole-of-government framework for youth policy and program development in *Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People*
- The establishment of a new position of 'Advocate for Children in Care' to ensure the highest standards of care within the child protection system; and
- Reform of the Children and Young Persons Act.

For all of these reasons, the Government does not consider that it would be appropriate to establish a Children and Young People's Commission as proposed by YACVic. However, the paper prepared by YACVic is a thoughtful contribution to thinking about the kinds of policies and frameworks which may best advance the interests of children and young people in Victoria.

I look forward to continuing dialogue with YACVic on these issues as we strive to ensure that the interests of children and young people are fully recognised and protected and that their voice is heard clearly within government and throughout our society.

Yours Sincerely
Jacinta Allan, MP
Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs

Following the appointment of an Advocate for Children in Care, *The Age* ran an editorial, 'Half measure fail voiceless Children', (1 April 2004) which called for a 'truly independent officer dedicated exclusively to acting as an advocate for all children to the whole of government'. The Children and Young People's Commission Coalition wrote the following article in response to the is editorial. This article was not published at the time but we will continue to respond to and provoke media debate to ensure this proposal remains on the agenda.

Time for the Victorian Government to Listen and Act

The Victorian Government must be feeling increasingly isolated in its resistance to establishing a Victorian Children and Young People's Commission. Community support for a Commission is increasing and *The Age* has joined in the call (Editorial 1/4). So why is the Government resisting the ground swell?

The Government's recent appointment of the Advocate for Children in Care, based in the Department of Human Services, clearly falls short of what is needed - a strong, independent voice for all Victorian children and young people.

The Advocate is a departmental employee with a role that is too narrow. Victoria's out of home care system is in need of an overhaul, and the Minister's commitment to review law and practice in this area is a welcome start. But if the Government's objective is to address the causes of child abuse and neglect then we need to look beyond the out of home care system and address wider social concerns. Sharp-end problems are typically symptoms of more widespread and intrinsic community concerns that require a preventative and early intervention approach.

What Victoria urgently needs is an independent Commission that is accountable to Parliament rather than to the government of the day. It must not have a sole focus on child protec-

Children and Young People's Commission update

tion, but have the unique responsibility of advancing and promoting the rights, interests and well-being of all children and young people in the State. By doing so, a Commission will become a force for the prevention of abuse and neglect.

A Commission should also have a broad overview of the issues affecting children and young people in government, community and business sectors, as all have an impact on the lives of children and young people. No one body currently has the responsibility to consider this whole gamut of issues.

In 2001, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) published *Are You Listening To Us?* which outlines a model for a Victorian Commission. The proposal considers what has and hasn't worked in other Australian and international jurisdictions and provides a concrete proposal that is tailor-made for Victoria.

This model has received overwhelming support from the wider community. Building on this support, a Children and Young People's Commission Coalition of over 60 organisations has been set up by YACVic, the Victorian Council of Social Service, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Law Institute of Victoria, Youthlaw and Defence for Children International - Australia, to support the establishment of a Commission. Membership of this Coalition is steadily increasing, indicating that there is growing recognition that Victorian children and young people deserve more than what's currently on offer.

Six principles are fundamental to this model.

Firstly, it must be an independent statutory body able to make fearless assessments of government and other institutions in our community, and promote change without being subject to political influence or intervention.

Secondly, the Commission must be established by legislation and given the necessary authority to carry out its functions independently. There must be reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) in the enabling legislation.

Thirdly, the Commission must have a focus on children and young people up to the age of 18. It would be a key source of planning advice in improving the many systems that affect young Victorians.

Fourthly, the Commission must have adequate resources to do its job well. Funding should not be determined by differing government's priorities.

Fifthly, the Commission must have a broad jurisdiction that takes into account all levels of government, community and business organisations that impact on children and young people.

Finally, the Commission should be required to recognise the diversity of children and young people, and to be accessible to all children and young people. The Commission should be first and foremost a place where children and young people can expect to be heard.

The Victorian Government has voiced two key objections to establishing a Commission in Victoria.

Firstly, the Government argues that the role of a Commission is already covered by various government bodies such as the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Equal Opportunity Commission.

However, none of these agencies have the sole mandate to champion the rights and wellbeing of children and young people in Victoria. They have limited ability to address systemic issues impacting on the rights of children and young people. A Commission would complement and strengthen, not duplicate, the work of these existing bodies. It would help children and their families use existing complaint mechanisms more effectively. Knowledge of systematic failings is essential for improving systems

Secondly, the Government estimates that a Commission would cost approximately \$7 million per year based on the NSW model. The proposed Victorian model is not identical to the NSW and Queensland models. For example, it does not include employment checks for people working with

children and young people. Our Coalition believes that if the Victorian Government is serious about its commitment to the wellbeing of children and young people in this state, cost should not be the primary consideration.

There is also a concern held by some members of the community. Unfortunately children's rights can be wrongly understood as undermining the role of families. A Commission that espouses the principles of CROC places a high value on the importance of the family. CROC calls on governments to 'respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents' (article 5), and to recognise that 'parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child' (article 18.1). There is evidence that other Commissions have developed strong partnership with parents. Families are forceful allies, not antagonists, in the pursuit of a just society for children and young people.

The establishment of a Children and Young People's Commission will provide a clear signal that the Victorian Government is serious about its commitment to promoting and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people. The recognition that children and young people require specialist advocacy should be a source of pride for Victoria. Other Australian and international jurisdictions have acted. Why is it taking so long for the Victorian Government to Listen and Act?

Further information about the proposed Victorian Children and Young People's Commission model can be found at www.yacvic.org.au/coalition

Signed
Children and Young People's
Commission Coalition ■

2004-05 State & Federal Budgets: Whats in it for young people?

MINDing NEMO

(New Education and Mental Health Opportunities in Schools)

A one day conference showcasing health promotion projects in schools.

Brought to you by:

- The School Focused Youth Service Coordinators Network
- The Mental Health Promotion Officers Statewide Network
- MindMatters
- DE&T

When:

Friday 8th October

Where:

Plenty Valley Convention Centre, Whittlesea

Who Should Attend?

Anybody working in or with schools in Victoria.

Put the date in your diary now.

More details later.

Contact:

John Mullane
Mental Health Promotion Officer
ORYGEN Youth Health/
RCH Mental Health Service
Ph: 0418 321 403
Fax: 9347 9099
Email: jmullane@unimelb.edu.au ■

continued from page 7...

Employment and Training (JPET) programs to specifically help young newly arrived migrants. The Government will provide additional funding of \$8.0 million over four years for ten combined Job Placement, Employment and Training and Reconnect 'multi-function' service outlets. The new services will specifically target young people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are newly arrived to Australia. These services will provide early intervention assistance for young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness and those attempting to enter the workforce or gain new skills.

Exempt Fee-Waiver and Fee-Pay Scholarships from Social Security Income Tests

All scholarships that pay tuition fees on a student's behalf, or waive all or part of a student's tuition fee, will no longer be included as income under the social security income test. This measure applies to scholarships offered in the secondary, vocational education and training and higher education sectors.

Increased Funding to Centrelink Call Centres

An additional \$52 million over two years for Centrelink's Call Centres to keep up with the demand.

HECS Threshold

In July 2004, the HECS threshold will be increased from the current level of \$25,348 to \$35,000. The threshold will increase to \$36,184 in 2005-06. ■

Introducing Rys Farthing, Information & Participation Officer

As my first move into the youth sector, I am very excited to taking up the role of Information and Participation Officer here at YACVic. Coming from a health sector background (especially aged care), where I have been working for over 5 years, it's an exciting new field to find myself in. As the Information and Participation Officer at YACVic I have a role in both admin support for the YACVic team, as well as working closely with the membership, particularly young people to encourage their participation in the organisation. I look forward to the opportunity to work with you all soon! ■



The Loch Ness Monster: Professionalism and Youth Work

Dr Judith Bessant, Australian Catholic University

This is an edited version of a speech given by Judith Bessant at the Development of a Professional Association for Youth Workers forum on April 30 2004.

The idea of Australian youth-workers' pursuit of professional identity is a bit like Scotland's Loch Ness monster. Like 'Nessie', the issue of youth work professionalisation is sighted from time to time as it pops its head up from the deep recesses. When sighted, excitement and animated talk follow. Typically the commotion then subsides, as the mythical object disappears and is seemingly forgotten for a while only to come back some time down the track after being re-discovered one more time in slightly altered form by new groups of enthusiastic sightseers.

Whether youth workers ought to professionalise or not is hardly a new question for the sector. It is an issue youth workers have struggled with for decades, and each time the question gets raised we tend to get the same old arguments. I suggest that one way of moving forward on the issue involves going back a step or two to consider and address several basic ethical questions.

The question of identifying an ethical rationale is a first step. If there is relative consensus on the decision to go ahead with professionalisation, then a second step is to ask what are the best governance techniques for helping to ensure ethical rationales inform activities of the professional association as well as workers' practice with young people?

This initial stage of deliberation can be positive and creative as it offers a chance to bring into existence new forms of self-government. It is a chance to find novel spaces and new ways of supporting young people and youth workers.

Before youth work can be amenable to governance, the activities, processes, identities of youth work need to be conceptualised. This entails delineating

youth work practice as a specific milieu of activity or field of action and thinking about basics like: What makes youth work practice distinctive? How are youth workers different from others professionals (i.e., school teachers, child psychologists, social workers etc)? Are there any shared assumptions amongst youth workers that cause certain matters to be seen as problems and that give rise to particular solutions? Through such deliberations, concepts and identities can be recognised, created and new governable domains produced.

This line of questioning also highlights the importance of education as a particularly valuable mechanism for fashioning youth workers as moral agents and youth work profession as a moral realm. Quality pre-service and in-service education can help instill deliberate self-control strategies. It can be used to clarify what values inform a worker's professional judgment. Education can also go some way towards ensuring youth workers have the requisite knowledge and skills to required to practice competently.

It is fair to say that youth work education is generally in a state of crisis, and this unfortunate situation highlights the need for a national association. Such a body can play a major role in helping to produce quality education programs. Education programs can instill and clarify values, provide the knowledge and skill base essential for competent youth work practice. Education goes some ways towards ensuring that the daily practices of youth workers are directed towards defensible ethical goals.

Accreditation for example is a powerful governing technique available to an association. Through accreditation, a professional body can exercise considerable political clout in education institutions and in doing so contribute to the development of youth work undergraduate and post-graduate education.

At the moment education institutions like universities can virtually do as they please in respect to establishing youth work or youth studies programs, in developing the curriculum, in

specifying the qualifications and other credentials teaching staff and in determining staff-student ratios. In a context where managers in many institutions are constantly looking for ways to economise, it is the smaller, or what are euphemistically called 'boutique programs' that are unprotected by a professional association that are cut, or identified for closure.

Budgetary cuts are made by 'rationalising' subjects which can result in the disappearance of youth specific subjects in favour of more generic studies. The imperative to economise can also result in unqualified staff being teaching youth work subjects either to 'fill-up their teaching loads' rather than employing specialist teachers. It means for example that we can have social workers, psychologists, or even nurses teaching youth work subjects, or staff with no youth work /studies qualification/knowledge teaching other core units or co-ordinating programs.

Accreditation can also influence important decisions about matters like staff/student ratios, the development of relevant and up to date curriculum as well as the establishment of active higher degree and research programs. When youth work programs are under threat, a professional association can be called on to exercise its authority in ways that secure the program.

Decent education programs are critical for competent and ethical practice. This makes the prevailing state of youth work education a compelling reason for the development of an association. Without quality training and education, youth work does not have the promising prospects it otherwise could. ■

Up Coming Events

Is getting pissed getting pathetic?

Presented by the Victorian Alcohol & Drug Association and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Monday 21 June 2004

To start at 9.30am

Welcome and launch of forum by Mr Daniel Andrews, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health

Registration costs:

\$70 per person

\$50 for VAADA & YACVic members

RSVP by Monday 14 June to Litsa at VAADA on 03 9416 0899

Where:

Supper Room

Level 3 Melbourne Town Hall

(corner of Collins and Swanston st)

Sponsored by City of Melbourne

Forum presenters

- Ms Carol Bennett, VAADA Executive Officer

- Ms Paula Grogan, YACVic Policy Officer
- Dr John Howard, Ted Noffs Foundation
- Prof. Margaret Hamilton, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre
- Mr David Crosbie, Odyssey House Victoria
- Dr Yvonne Bonomo, Youth Substance Abuse Service (YSAS)
- Dr Lina Ricciardelli, School of Psychology, Deakin University
- Dr Roger Brough, Western Region Alcohol and Drug Centre
- Ms Lill Healy, Office for Youth, Department of Victorian Communities
- Mr Paul McDonald, Drugs Policy and Services, Department of Human Services
- Mr Bruce Clark, Parent Representative
- Mr Robert Johnston, Indigenous Representative
- Mr Brad Rosewell, Mr Lindsay Patchwell & Ms Donna Cross, Youth Perspective
- Assoc Prof. Terry Laidler, Forum Facilitator

Victoria Indigenous Mentor Training May

Dulin Incorporated is an Indigenous young peoples mentoring service. Dulin is recruiting prospective mentors for training being delivered on the 6 & 7 May and the 28 & 29 May in Melbourne.

Dulin Incorporated delivers a Schools Mentoring Program for Indigenous young people between the ages of 12 and 18 year of age. The mentoring is industry based and is conducted depending on the availability and needs of the mentor and young person participating.

Please contact me for the Course overview and an Application Form or to have a chat about being a Dulin Mentor.

Check out our website at www.dulin.com.au

"The Youth of Today"

School pizza stoush

Cheesed-off students are calling it the great pizza heist.

But their teachers deny stealing and scoffing six family-sized double-cheese Hawaiian pizzas students had ordered for lunch. The pizzas, they say, were confiscated, and are sitting untouched in the staff-room fridge.

On Monday, hungry students at Bentleigh Secondary Collage ordered the pizzas by mobile phone and had them delivered to their Hawaiian-theme swimming sports. The students said they paid \$90, but before they

took a bite the vice-principle swept the pizzas away to the staff room.

Parents said some students were disciplined. "Of course, it looks like the teachers have eaten the pizzas" one said.

Not so, principle William Leaf said. "There are six pizzas and they are sitting in the staff fridge untouched" Mr Leaf insisted. Asked whether the Herald Sun could see the pizzas, he said "It is not possible at all."

He admitted there was no specific rule preventing students from ordering pizzas. "This is a very traditional school that has a very traditional attitude. They went outside of what is considered reasonable."

Source: *Herald Sun 4 March 2004*

Send us your contributions for 'The Youth of Today' email info@yacvic.org.au or post your clippings to 6/1 Elizabeth St, Melbourne 3000.

Snapped at YACVic



Date: 29.04.04 - **Time:** 12.30 pm

Who are you? Deborah

What are you doing here? Having a team meeting for the new YRIPP

Is it your first time here? Yes

Are you a YACVic member? Not yet

Complete this sentence:
YACVic is... essentially here and doing it well!

Wanky Words

Words and phrases we'd be happy to never hear or see again.

- Value-add
- Blue-sky List
- Working in Silos
- Socially Infertile
- Plateau Downwards
- Interdigitate

Send us your contributions (or explanations!) for "Wanky Words". Email info@yacvic.org.au.