

Advancing Australia Fair

By Tim Martyn

In his 2005 Australia Day address, the Governor General identified a crisis currently threatening democracy in this country. No, it wasn't truth in Government; the interference of foreign powers didn't get a look in either. Rather, Australia must find new ways to get its young people engaged in the 'democratic process,' or else.

At first glance, the Governor General is right. One only has to look at the declining numbers of young Australians joining political parties, to discover that something is afoot. Yet this trend does not illustrate that younger generations are apathetic towards Australian democracy - far from it.

While I cannot profess to be 'the voice' of young Australia, I can identify one reason for their retreat from the major parties: as vehicles for change, the parties have lost sight of the big picture. The Australia project – who we are and where we are going – has been all but abandoned over the last decade and a half.

Australia's 'democratic process' has entered a political era in which the "aspirational" voter is king; where it pays to be acquisitive, not inquisitive. As a nation, we're debt laden but looking to own more, leaving the vast majority anxious about house prices and interest rates.

The youth voice, if it can be surmised, is one largely unburdened by mortgages and 2.4 kids. Rather than the next interest rate hike, younger Australians have their gaze fixed on bigger issues: what sort of country is Australia becoming; what is happening to our environment; will I ever own my own home; are we safe? Most importantly, young people are starting to ask, "How can something morally wrong be economically right?"

The commitment by both major parties to maintaining continuous budget surpluses has effectively rendered them incapable of nation building. The policy horizon, already firmly fixed within a three-year election timetable, has been constrained further by an aversion to public investment. Young people are starting to figure out that in such an environment, the only way to work towards a better Australia is from the outside.

Australia's mainstream political parties have become increasingly divorced from the very concerns that once defined them – and their membership. They have become amorphous, private institutions with private agendas. People with passionate positions and policy ideas no longer join them. Into this void has stepped a succession of 'representatives' motivated more by the possession of power than what to do once they possess it.

'Instant democracy' is at the heart of the problem. As the parties have become steadily more focussed on winning the next election, phone polling has

replaced considered debate or community consultation as the preferred method for taking the community's pulse. Marginal increases or decreases in popularity as expressed by a phone poll, set the policy course on which a Government heads. Thus, policy development becomes something conducted with the needs of the party, rather than the nation in mind.

It is therefore no surprise that when young people get politically active these days, they are more likely to join a social organisation or environmental group - for it is there that they are able to engage with the big issues; it is here they can sidestep factional infighting, cynical politicking and deal making and get straight to the point: imagining Australia.

Politics is about communicating with voters. At election time, communication is most important. The Coalition spent a whopping \$123 million on disseminating 'political information' in its 2004 campaign – a 175 percent increase on their advertising budget for the 2001 campaign. Yet despite the increase, did we really learn more about their ideas for the nation?

Young people have grown up with aggressive marketing campaigns. They know advertising when they see it and have become increasingly wary of the hard sell. We're suspicious of the tricks, and alert to the fine print.

Advertising may be an effective method of selling a brand image, but at what cost to the product itself? What does the Coalition represent to Australia beyond 'keeping interest rates low (though they've been subsequently raised)?' What does the Labor Party represent to voters now that we've entered the Beazley era (again)?

Shaped by their public relations consultants, the two major parties seem to offer voters little more than a choice between Fruit Loops and Coco Pops - both saccharine, hollow in the middle and of dubious nutritional value. You wouldn't want to eat them every day if you expected to "grow up big and strong," and neither will Australia.

If only more Australians would become more engaged with what sort of country they would like their children and grandchildren to live in, instead of the houses they would like to live in. Perhaps then we would get the democracy we want, not deserve.

Being an Australian citizen, young or old, demands more than merely barracking for a particular political party. Citizenship demands that we imagine what sort of Australia we want to create today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, next century and on into the future. It involves giving voice to matters of community concern, of working for change at the local level. In short, fitful engagement in Australia's 'democratic process' demands that we think of ourselves as citizens before shareholders, mortgage owners, employees or members of a party. That's our challenge as Australians.