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Are Australians disenchanted with democracy?

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This week is an interesting week to be talking about democracy. There are popular uprisings in the Ukraine and Russia's dramatic incursions into Crimea. Anti-government protests in Thailand continue. Turkey's democratization process falters, with a deepening corruption scandal engulfing its prime minister. Cambodia's post-election strife still simmers, with protests suppressed and human rights trampled. Egypt's early attempts at democracy have proved an abject failure.

This all sounds far removed from Australia. Geographically, of course, they are. But they are examples of democracy under fire and faltering, and that's where Australia, incredibly, comes in. Over the next few minutes, I'm going to attempt to explain why.

The Lowy Institute has been conducting public opinion polls on foreign policy issues for a decade, and this year we will publish our tenth annual Lowy Institute Poll. Over the years, I and former poll directors have asked hundreds of questions of Australians of all ages, from all states, and all walks of life.

We've asked questions about the international economy, climate change, important bilateral relationships with nations like Indonesia, China, and the US, and attitudes to the rise of Asia. We've asked about the sorts of issues which Australians see as threats to this nation, from climate change to terrorism. Controversially, at the height of the Bush presidency in 2005, Australians ranked US foreign policy equally with Islamic fundamentalism as a threat to Australia.

We've asked questions about Australians' use of media in a rapidly changing media landscape, and about hotly debated issues like asylum seekers and foreign investment.

But one of the most thought provoking findings from all of our decade-long polling has been on Australians' attitudes towards democracy.

These findings came almost by accident. We had been conducting opinion polls in some of the other nations in our region such as Indonesia, Fiji and most recently, India.

In each of those countries, we asked a different range of questions, depending on the particular national and bilateral context. One common question, however, was one which has been asked in other countries by respected US non-profit global polling organisation, Pew Research Center, which has been conducting multi-nation opinion polls since the early 1990s.

The Pew 'democracy question' asked people to choose which statement most closely matched their own opinion:

- The first option was: 'Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government'
- The second was: 'In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable'
- And the final option was: 'For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have'.

Fergus Hanson included this democracy question in three separate Lowy Institute polls in 2011 and 2012, in Fiji, Indonesia and India.

[Slide 2] The results were markedly different across the three countries. Support for democracy in Fiji, under the un-democratic Bainimarama regime, was surprisingly slim. In India, with an older and more robust democracy, it was significantly stronger.

Fergus found these results intriguing and decided to include the democracy question in the 2012 Australian poll. My guess is that he assumed the results in Australia would be considerably different in a nation whose western democratic traditions went back to the beginning of the last century.

The results were surprising and confronting.

[Slide 3] As it turns out, our 2012 poll showed that Australians were less supportive of democracy than people in India (a newer democracy than ours) and Indonesia (an emerging democracy), and ahead of only Fiji (not a democracy at all).

Only 60% of Australians of voting age said that 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government'. Nearly a quarter said that in some circumstances, a non-democratic government could be preferable. 15% said it didn't matter what kind of government we have.

Even more challenging was the response of the younger age group – the 18-29 year olds. Only 39% of them felt that democracy was the most preferable form of government. More than half either didn't care, or thought a non-democratic system might work better in some circumstances.

Of course, these results were controversial. They generated a good deal of discussion among the commentariat. Some thought our results couldn't possibly be right, that there must be some statistical skew in our survey sample of 1000-plus adults, that we were asking the wrong question, or that the context of the poll caused people to misunderstand the question.

[Slide 4] So, just to be sure, we asked exactly the same question in our 2013 Poll. This time, only 59% of all adults said that democracy was preferable to any other kind of government. And for the younger age group (the 18-29s whose responses were so surprising the year before):

[Slide 5] Less than half of these Gen Ys thought that democracy was preferable, and almost half (adding the orange and turquoise boxes on the right hand column) thought that it either didn't matter, or that a non-democratic system might work better. Australians under 30 and over 30 put very different values on democracy.

Our findings (if you'll permit me to use a label which roughly aligns with the 18-29 year olds in our polling) were that Gen Y in Australia were significantly less committed to democracy than their peers in India and Indonesia, and around as enthusiastic as Fijian young people about democracy.

In India, for example, 71% of young people thought democracy was the preferable form of government. Compared with 48% of young Australians. That's a dramatic statistical difference. In Indonesia, the comparison was almost as striking, with two thirds of young people saying democracy was very important, compared with less than half of young Australians.

These democracy findings do not stand as isolated results in our polls. In our 2011 and 2012 polls we also asked in all four countries (Australia, Indonesia, India and Fiji) about the attractiveness of other

western liberal values: the right to a media free from censorship, the right to freely express oneself, the right to a fair trial and the right to vote in national elections.

All of these rights were highly valued in all four countries. 90% of Australians strongly agreed with the importance of the right to vote in elections.

Which led us to wonder: do Australians not equate the right to vote with the principles of democracy?

The results posed other big questions: why do such a large proportion of Australians – whether young or old – not seem to value democracy as the most preferable form of government? Is this a phenomenon just for Australia, or are there democracies in other countries facing similarly existential questions with the waning of interest in the democratic ideal? And if so, why, and what could be done?

[Slide 6] As luck would have it, I am backed up this week by no less than The Economist in a six-page cover article on what afflicts democracy worldwide. I'll get back to its excellent argument later. In the meantime, it's a little short on the detailed evidence behind the theory, and there's quite a bit of that to be found.

Starting with research in other countries on support for democracy. A large study in Canada in 2012 surveyed 1500 Canadians on democracy and governance, as part of a very significant survey of 26 nations and nearly 41,000 people in the Americas.

In a format very similar to our own question on democracy, Canadians were given the statement 'democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government'. In 2012, only 61% agreed or strongly agreed – almost exactly the number who chose the very similar statement posed in our Australian poll (60%).

Interestingly, less than 50% of young Canadians under 30 agreed that democracy was better than any other form of government – again, a result very similar to our own in Australia.

And in another very nice piece of timing for me, the United Nations last week released the results of what is thought to be the largest global survey ever, conducted by the UN Millennium campaign, the UNDP and the Overseas Development Institute among others.

The survey asked people to choose six factors out of a possible 16 which would improve their lives and those of their families. 1.4 million people have already responded.

Overwhelmingly, the results show that people want a good education. They also prioritise better healthcare and better job opportunities. The fourth highest response was for 'an honest and responsive government'. However, 'political freedoms' came third last of the 16 factors which people felt would improve their lives.

This suggests the same sort of disconnect between freedoms and democratic government which we have seen in our Australian polling work. The link seems to be missing between the concepts of good government, democracy and political freedoms. The proposition that it is difficult to have one of these without the others seems to have escaped not only Australians but their counterparts around the world.

[Slide 7] What's behind this perplexingly low level of support for democracy?

When we released our results in 2012, there was considerable conjecture about the possible reasons.

Some of the theories advanced were these: firstly, that democracy has become the victim of its own success: it is taken for granted by a post-Cold War generation which has never witnessed any real ideological competitor to democracy. The second hypothesis was that political freedoms are shunted behind other priorities in a capitalist and consumerist society. Thirdly, that nations with different political systems, particularly in our region, are seen as successful despite being non-democratic, and present a somewhat viable, even attractive, alternative to our imperfect democratic system. Next, that Australians, and particularly young Australians, were increasingly being turned off by the tone of political discourse in Australia. And finally, that civics education was lacking in our schools today, or that it fails to engage younger generations in conversations about the democratic system in all its glorious imperfection.

I'd like to take each of these hypotheses and examine them one by one, though I'll deal with a few quickly before getting to the thorny ones at the end.

[Slide 8] Firstly, the idea posed by a policy analyst at the Centre for Independent Studies, Benjamin Herscovitch, responding to our first poll results on the democracy question in 2012. He advanced the intriguing theory that “democracy may actually be a victim of its own success.” That it is undervalued precisely because it is flourishing worldwide and has effectively prevailed over its ideological adversaries.

This is worth looking at: is democracy such a standard model for development, so much the norm, that it is being taken for granted? Has it lost its gloss and become, as Herscovitch argues, “an almost mundane and commonplace political institution”?

[Slide 9] The work of Freedom House suggests that democracy is indeed becoming the norm, worldwide.

Freedom House's annual 'Freedom in the World index' has charted the spread of democracy since 1972. In the 40 years between 1972 and 2012, the number of 'free countries' in the world more than doubled, so that now 90 of the 200 odd nations of the world are genuinely free – with broad scope for open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and an independent media.

As a proportion of world's nations, free countries have increased significantly.

On this map:

- Green nations are ranked as free
- Yellow as partly free
- And purple as not free

In 2012, the number of electoral democracies stood at 118 of 195 countries surveyed, or more than half the world's nations.

Herscovitch argues that this thriving democracy is a more valid explanation than other simplistic arguments such as capitalism, increasing consumerism or GenY flippancy. Much of the world's adult

population has not experienced world wars or the Cold War. What they did see was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of democracy over Marxism and authoritarianism there.

For these younger generations, says Herscovitch, democracy is seen as a given.

[Slide 10] To the second possible reason.

It may seem overly simplistic, but it has been raised by academics, commentators and politicians around the western world. The argument for this theory is that our materialistic society – thriving on capitalism and consumerism – has raised generations in unprecedented prosperity, generations which see themselves primarily as investors and consumers.

It's easy to imagine Gen Y, growing up with myriad gadgets, from iphones to Xbox, Gameboys and Wii, distracted from a focus on civil and political freedoms.

In 2012, a gender-bending model named Jeffree Starr posted a status update on his facebook page, which read: "we live in a world where losing your phone is more dramatic than losing your virginity", and generated more than a million facebook "likes". I'm being facetious, of course, but one wonders where 'losing your vote' might fall within this hierarchy of disasters for the facebook generation.

[Slide 11] Here is a third possible reason for these ambiguous feelings about democracy.

After our Poll was released in 2012, a journalist interviewed students at Melbourne University about why their generation seemed dismissive of democracy. One of them suggested that:

"China is a society and a state that functions without democracy, so is it bad? You can't just judge it (because it's non democratic). It's whatever works for that culture."

This was thought-provoking for me. In our region, we have examples of what appear to be successful non-democracies – such as Singapore and China. Both are economic powerhouses which have transformed themselves within the space of a generation.

Is it possible that we are witnessing a generation who are aware of these different political systems and their successes, and who are consequently less wedded to the ideal of democracy as the only

viable form of government for a successful nation? And how do they define that success? Is it primarily in economic terms? (and so I refer you back to hypothesis 2).

[Slide 12] The next possible factor, raised directly in response to our poll results by seasoned stalwarts like Laurie Oakes, was that the tone of today's political discourse has significantly worsened, and turned people off politics completely. Senator John Faulkner has spoken of the "corrosive effect on our democracy of the increasing distrust of politicians and the increasing cynicism about politicians". He refers to cases from his own side of politics like that of Peter Slipper and Craig Thomson.

[Slide 13] Two examples of events in the last couple of years illustrate the extremes of current modes of political discourse: the first – the Prime Minister's Misogyny speech in 2012 which was viewed over 2 ½ million times on YouTube and went 'viral' around the world – was made possible via the internet. The second example to hit the headlines was an extremely crude mock menu, created on a prehistoric-era piece of paper and photocopied at a restaurant.

The first episode – the 'misogyny' speech – suggests quite a high level of political engagement, at least with the issue of gender and politics which it raised. But both examples expose the political process to accusations that it is too aggressively adversarial, tawdry, brutal. Because of those deep flaws, the argument goes, Australians of voting age may tune out of political discussion and be discouraged from engaging in the democratic process. Perhaps this is the exception to the rule that all publicity is good publicity.

Just examining this possibility – that it might be the tone of political conversation that seem to be turning the nation's voters off democracy – I searched for data on this point. It turns out there is a great deal of data on political engagement not only in Australia but in other places around the world, where there are similar currents of concern about the durability of democracy when support is waning for the institutions which uphold it.

[Slide 14] Starting here in Australia. The ANU has been conducting a study on Australian elections since 1987, collating data going back to 1967. This chart shows the extent to which a large sample of Australians on the electoral roll have followed Australian elections in the mass media since 1967.

So while interest in elections fluctuates widely, there has been something of a trend downwards since the late 60s, followed by a slight uptick in the last decade – with a significant contribution from news found via the internet.

Many of the other markers – ‘watched the leaders’ debates’, ‘interest in the election’, ‘care who wins the election’, ‘discussed the election campaign with others’, all show a similar overall downward trend since the mid 1990s, although some of the markers were low in the 60s and early 70s as well.

[Slide 15] A different survey last year, the “Citizens Agenda” from the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Advancing Journalism, found that Australians in 2013 felt that the tone of the political debate has indeed become noticeably worse than it was in the past.

The question they were asked was:

“Thinking now about the tone of political debate in Australia at the present time: would you say it is noticeably better now than it has usually been in the past; not much different now from how it has usually been in the past, or it is noticeably worse now than it has usually been in the past?”

As you can see from the size of the orange slice of pie, a majority of Australians think the tone of the debate has deteriorated.

In the same study, researchers probed the level of confidence of the Australian public in various civil society institutions: the Federal government, the legal system, the print press, television, and universities. They asked Australians what sort of confidence they had in those institutions.

[Slide 16] In results which may vex those who work in this place, the ‘Federal government’ scored only equally with ‘television’, and only marginally ahead of the ‘(print) press’.

Confidence in government lagged significantly behind confidence in the legal system, and universities scored most highly in levels of confidence, with nearly four in five saying they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in them.

Less than a third of Australians of voting age expressed confidence in the federal government.

This prompted me investigate whether this is just a phenomenon exclusive to Australians jaded from years of exposure to our particular brand of domestic politics, or whether it is replicated in other countries. The findings about support for democracy in other western nations such as Canada suggest that diminishing levels of confidence in its institutions may be one of the key drivers in the erosion of support for democracy.

The Americas survey from which I quoted earlier asked questions about trust in democratic and civil society institutions, ranging from the Church, the armed forces, the police, justice system, parliament, right down to politicians. While the categories and questions were of course different, it was striking to see that trust in national parliaments and political parties languished at 30 and 40 percentage levels, right at the bottom of the list of 12 institutions. In Canada, trust in political parties was at the bottom of a list of nine institutions, behind even the media.

In the US, when Americans were asked various questions about respect for political institutions, pride in their political system, and whether their political institutions protected basic human rights, the US registered only very bare averages on those issues in comparison with other countries in the Americas.

So there are echoes of the Australian phenomenon in other western nations. There is a sense of declining levels of trust in the institutions of our democracies.

[Slide 17] The other important question raised by our findings was about the attitudes of youth. What was driving the even lower levels of support for democracy amongst young Australians?

Looking for studies on youth and their trust in political and civil society institutions to complement the data I've on adults in both Australia and other western democracies, I found a significant study conducted with school age children by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority in 2010.

It surveyed around 13,000 school children in Year 6 and 10 to assess the impact of civics and citizenships educational programs in Australian schools.

The results from 7,000 year 6 students and over 6,400 year 10 students give an interesting picture.

At year 6, the younger group, more than half the 7,000 students assessed expressed either quite a lot or complete trust in political parties, Federal Parliament and State/Territory parliaments. There were strong levels of trust in law courts and the police. Only the media engendered little trust in a majority of Year 6 students.

[Slide 18] However, by the time they got to year 10, the levels of trust in those civic institutions had eroded considerably. The only institutions which registered significant levels of trust were law courts and the Police. Australian political parties were trusted very little, and Parliaments at both levels recorded only marginally positive levels of trust.

And those levels of trust are consistent with the lack of confidence that adult Australians, and indeed adults in other western nations, have in the political institutions in their own countries.

[Slide 19] And so to civics education. What's going on with it, and is it one of the answers?

Reacting to our 2012 Poll, an editorial in the Age newspaper in Melbourne argued that for democracy to be sustained, it is necessary to have a citizenry which cherishes democratic values and which comprehends what would be lost if representative institutions and the rule of law were to disappear.

The editorial pointed to the Poll's other findings that the western liberal values of a right to a fair trial, the right to vote and the right to freedom of expression seemed to be more highly valued than the democratic system of government itself. It expressed alarm that the connection between the possession and protection of those rights and a democratic system of government no longer seems clear to people. That those rights – to vote, to a fair trial, to freedom of speech – only have a secure foundation when governments are accountable to the people. For that accountability, citizens need to participate in the political process. To sustain the democracy that permits that, civics education is fundamental.

Amanda Lohrey, in an article in The Monthly magazine in 2012, argued that Australians, and particularly young Australians, hold naïve and simplistic views about politics. She pointed out that the reality, and the virtue, of our Westminster system is that it is “adversarial”; it is “institutionalised squabble” and we are the beneficiaries of this. “The genius of our political system”, she says, “is that it has evolved a civilised machinery for keeping blood off the streets. It's called Parliament, and political leaders are warlords in harness”. We should not be surprised if some of the individuals in

the system, like Slipper or Thomson, behave badly. Nor is that bad behaviour of untrustworthy characters any sort of inherent flaw in the system or harbinger of its decline. Amanda wonders “about those people who routinely disparage politics and politicians. Have they never sat on a company board, or the committee of a sporting club, or a school’s parents and friends executive? What lotus land are they living in, and when can I move there?”

Senator John Faulkner pointed out in a speech in 2012 that “the politics of distrust are easy.” He narrated an amusing story about the so-called “Birthers” in the United States whose reaction to the election of Barack Obama was not to question his politics or policies, but to undermine the very legitimacy of his election as President. In their fantasy, Barack Obama was born outside the United States, by virtue of an incredibly complicated and extensive conspiracy between the Hawaiian department of health, his parents and grandparents, American Customs and Immigration, and Hawaiian state officials, all of whom contrived to conceal that he was actually born in Hawaii. This fantasy has taken such hold in the United States that 13% of all adults and 23% of Republican voters believe that it’s true.

Faulkner is concerned at this growing trend in western democracies for political parties to respond to defeat by denying the legitimacy of the system itself and the integrity of the democratic process, as a way of deflecting their own failure and the failure of their policies to gain support in democratic elections. What is needed is for a better informed population about the realities of living the democratic ideal – that governing means compromise, and that it is never possible to achieve perfection.

In November 1947, Winston Churchill as leader of the conservative Opposition, uttered these famous words in Parliament:

“No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

It is precisely because of this inherent imperfection that civics education is important. If we are to build trust in our democratic system and the institutions which uphold it, then it is essential that we have a very realistic understanding of how politics works and why it is imperfect, frustrating, slow, and seemingly conducted by an unruly rabble of tremendously imperfect egotists.

Amanda Lohrey pointed out that Paul Keating must have understood this, because he inaugurated a program of civics education which was ultimately implemented by the Howard Government, but on an optional basis. This “Discovering Democracy” program was found by independent evaluations not to have been used by 70 per cent of teachers, because they were either not trained or did not feel confident to use it.

There has been some progress since then. Civics education is a component of the current curriculum, and is intended to be part of the new national curriculum. A 2008 national declaration on education goals for young Australians included references to democracy and participation in Australia’s civic life.

However, despite some civics education, the level of students’ knowledge is not translating to trust in government or political institutions. It is also not translating into a dedication to the democratic institutions which uphold our liberal democratic society, and is not translating into an interest in actually participating in the political process.

The implementation of civics programs in our educational system therefore needs to be done very carefully so that teachers not only understand the issues, but understand how engage students in the democratic process, and importantly, to manage their expectations. The evidence at the moment suggests we have a long way to go in this goal.

Does this lack of interest in the democratic system mean that young Australians are apathetic in general? Is there anything inherent in the nature of this younger generation that should lead us to general hand-wringing and despair?

It is the way of all older generations to wring their hands at the failings of the younger generation. But there are several studies which suggest that, contrary to popular conceptions, the younger generation are far from disengaged from their rapidly-evolving society.

Both Australian and international studies have observed young peoples’ increasing participation in community-based or internet action, on issues like the environment, human rights or ethical consumerism.

The Australian civics assessment study in 2010 asked students how important they felt it was to take part in various activities, from activities to protect the environment, promoting human rights, learning about political issues in the media, supporting a political party or even discussing politics.

[Slide 20]

In terms of political engagement, the results were pointing in the same direction as those from the international studies: Australian students are disengaged from the political process and not interested in participating, discussing or learning about politics:

- Only 18% thought that learning about political issues in the press was important
- Only 10% thought that supporting a political party was important and
- Discussing politics was right at the bottom of the list, at 6% who thought it very important.

However, the study found that more than a quarter of Year 10 students thought that taking part in activities to protect the environment, or to promote human rights, was 'very important'.

[Slide 21] These findings about Australian schoolchildren and their attitudes to social and civic engagement are reinforced by other research in other western societies.

A new study, commissioned by the National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom and conducted by respected social research institution and think tank, Demos, was published just a couple of weeks ago. It looked at the defining attitudes, characteristics and aspirations of teenagers aged 14-17 years old today, those who are at the tail end of the Y-Generation and therefore the link between Gen Y and the next generation.

Common stereotypes of teenagers and more broadly, Gen Y, abound, whether in the UK, the US, Europe, or here. They are not positive.

They have been described as "at best, feckless and at worst, feral", lazy, apathetic, selfish, entitled whiners, narcissistic, binge drinkers, the generation which wins trophies just for turning up at sport. Sound familiar?

This Demos report goes a long way towards debunking those stereotypes. It was a significant survey, not only of 1000 teenagers themselves, but of 500 of their teachers and deputy school heads.

Today's British teenagers, the report finds, *are* less engaged with traditional politics than previous generations. However, they are more likely to be engaged with social issues, both global and local, than previous generations of teenagers. They are either as likely or more likely to volunteer for good causes and organisations. They are more or as likely to express their political opinions creatively through art, film and music, to sign political petitions or set up their own socially motivated project.

These findings are reinforced by the Pew Research Center in its US survey in 2012 on Civic Engagement in the Digital Age.

[Slide 22] These American data suggest that young social media users actually have quite high participation levels in civic activities – the dark blue columns are the 18-29s, and they range from the 25% who might follow politicians on social media, to 33% who post links to political stories, or a high 42% who post thoughts on civic issues.

Another 2012 Pew study on civic engagement of Americans in the digital age found that younger Americans are just as likely as older Americans to engage in political activities, and are much more likely to be politically active on social networking sites than in other ways (such as face to face).

It will not surprise you that this generation's social activism is expressed in different ways and through different channels than in the past.

I refer, of course, to the ubiquitous social media.

[Slide 23] Just to take a quick look at the sheer numbers involved here. Half the Australian population – 12.8 million people - are on Facebook. Half are on YouTube. Blog sites like WordPress and Blogspot are communication vehicles for significant numbers of Australians. Twitter is growing. Photo-sharing sites like Tumblr and Instagram are building their user-bases.

Many of our children are on one or all of these.

[Slide 24] The Demos study found that substantial numbers of young people use social media to become engaged with social issues. Nearly 40 per cent had signed petitions online, almost 30 per cent had used social media to raise awareness for a cause, and one in five had donated money online.

But what is clear from the evidence is that the political conversation has failed to make an impression on this generation.

Many of you may be aware of this next sobering statistic.

Just before the last Federal election, there were approximately half a million 18-24 year olds not on the electoral roll. There are only around 2 million Australians in that age bracket. That is, one in four 18-24 year olds are not even enrolled to vote.

And they make up a third of all voters of any age missing from the electoral roll.

Some commentators, like Ron Fournier in *The Atlantic*, have warned of a 'brain drain' in politics and the civil service as Baby boomers retire, and GenY look elsewhere to make their mark.

Party membership is on the decline, both here and in other established western democracies. As journalist Jacqueline Maley presaged before the Labor party conference in 2011: "Mega-litres of bad coffee will be consumed, important decisions about party policy will be mostly pre-determined, and Australians under the age of 30 won't care about any of it."

[Slide 25] So what are we to make of all of this? And when we have made something of it, what is to be done?

Is democracy losing supporters because it is being taken for granted after decades of prosperity and a lack of serious ideological competition?

Are other, more authoritarian, forms of government seen as viable options, given their economic successes?

Is it the tone of the debate which has turned Australians, particularly young Australians, off democracy?

Or is it a failing of our education system or the content of the conversation and debate about democracy in our modern society?

It is, perhaps, a combination of all of these. However, looking at the list, there are only a couple over which we have any effective prospects of control.

Firstly, to disillusionment with the current level of political discourse.

[Slide 26] All the evidence suggests that there is some degree of switching off from the political discussion because the tone of the debate has deteriorated.

I'm not suggesting the tone of debate couldn't be improved, or at least, its wit.

But is it really so different from the politics of the past?

Andrew Leigh, Labor MP and currently Shadow Assistant Treasurer, in a speech here on civility and democracy last year, conducted an interesting analysis of uncivil language in Parliament, by trawling through Hansard over the decades for the number of times the particular words "liar/liars" or "unparliamentary" were used, as common and most basic indicators of incivility in the House. He found that the most uncivil years in Parliament, on this basis, were in the early 1950s, the late 1970s and the early 1990s. Today's parliament did not rate.

Mr Leigh also pointed out that Australians have never held their politicians in terribly high regard. He referred to this speech drawn from Hansard parliamentary transcripts:

"The standard of debate and discussion is appallingly low. The intelligence and purposefulness of those taking part is less than evident. No country deserves politicians as bad as these."

That was said by one Craig McGregor, MP, in 1966. There's nothing new in our lack of respect for our modern elected representatives.

Mr Leigh also referred to some of the famous political insults in the 90s. I've done a bit of my own research:

Keating likened John Hewson's performance to being "flogged with a warm lettuce". When Hewson asked Keating why he wouldn't call an early election, Keating replied, "The answer is, mate, because I want to do you slowly."

Of John Howard, dubbed “That old desiccated coconut”, Keating said: “he is the greatest job and investment destroyer since the bubonic plague.”

Of course neither the insults nor the wit are confined to one side of politics.

Peter Costello parried with the Labor government about the thought of Labor taking power: “That is enough to put me into a cold sweat. If I look tired it is because I have thought of that in the middle of the night.”

John Howard made a few mild-mannered insults of his own: this one on Kevin Rudd during a debate on sending military trainers to Iraq: “I think he's getting a bit full of himself, I mean this is Mr Rudd walking both sides of the street – ‘each way bet Kevin”.

Wilson Tuckey called Kim Beazley a “fat so-and-so”. Kim Beazley told Wilson Tuckey to “take [his] tablets”.

Politicians have always insulted each other. Some insults, like calling someone a ‘fat so-and-so”, are below the belt. But I don’t think it is this sort of behaviour that undermines our democracy.

[Slide 27] I think Senator Faulkner is close to the mark when he cites the sometimes hyperbolic criticisms of the former Labor minority government as being an illegitimate government simply by virtue of that minority, despite the fact that Australia had 13 previous minority governments since Federation, under Barton, Deakin, Watson, Reid, Fisher, Hughes, Scullin, Menzies, Fadden and Curtin. The Gillard government was simply the 14th.

What this points to is a need for a better civics education. A way to explain to younger generations about the democratic system we value, how it works, and why, by working perfectly, it will always be imperfect. About the Westminster System, separation of powers and independent judiciary. About why the other civil liberties we value – our free press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association, right to a fair trial – are at risk if we do not have a democratic system which makes our governments accountable. The Economist article this week neatly précis-ed the 19th century political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, saying “democracies always look weaker than they really are: they are all confusion on the surface but have lots of hidden strengths”. But it also argued that if we

are to keep our democracies alive, they must be assiduously nurtured when young, and carefully maintained when they are mature.

[Slide 28] The hardest part of this will be finding ways to engage younger generations in this discussion in ways they can relate to. It will mean talking to them in ways they can understand, and in places they can be found. That means, among other things, through the new media.

The Australian Electoral Commission has finally taken the bold step of allowing online enrolment. In the five weeks before closing off enrolments before the 2013 election, 830,000 online enrolment applications were received by the AEC. Online enrolment has been a huge step forward in improving the electoral engagement of youth. One thing that hasn't improved, though, is the informal vote, which this year at 6% was the highest it's been in 30 years. The number of 'blank' ballot papers doubled ~~twice~~ between the 2007 and ~~2013~~2010 elections.* *[Erratum: this should have read 'doubled between the 2007 and 2010 elections']*.

This is a small indication of the much bigger task ahead for government and educators, and that is to find ways to speak to young people about the issues they care about, and finding ways to link that conversation with democracy and political engagement. The first part is not that hard; young people can be found online, in volunteer groups, in social media campaigns. The hard part is bridging the gap between their preferred fora of engagement with social issues, and the traditional civil and political arenas.

One such bridge might be Youth Parliaments. While the YMCA runs youth parliaments in every state in Australia, and an Indigenous one, there is no federal government initiative that I know of engaging Australian students in federal politics. The Greens ran a pretty good policy in the last election which proposed opening up Federal Parliament for a sitting day for a special youth question time, and partnering selected youth participants with MPs and Senators as mentors.

That's one idea.

The Economist put up another, using the example of the Finnish government which has mandated that if citizens are able to garner 50,000 electronic signatures for any initiative, it must come before Parliament for review. They call it E-democracy.

Another step might be to stop lamenting and berating the disengagement of this generation, and start working with the good things we know about them. It might give us more traction.

In 2007 the New York Times ran the winning essay from its College Essay contest. It was entitled “Coming of Age in Cyberspace”, written by a senior at an Ivy League university on the East Coast of America. The young student wrote of her parents’ incomprehension at her cohort’s lack of rebelliousness and the absence of their counterculture, seeing these as signs of their apathy.

She argued that just because her generation of students isn’t engaged in traditional modes of counterculture doesn’t mean they aren’t driving change.

She points out that the driving force for cultural change today is the future of technology. The Y Generation is the one driving that change, using new technologies to reshape the world. Her generation is not given credit for that change, though: it is seen as the ‘impact of technology’ rather than the ‘impact of her generation’.

[Slide 29] So let’s give them some credit. When you think about it, it is because Gen Y uses social media that politicians, businesses, civil society organisations, even crusty old diplomats, are getting on facebook and twitter. Hillary Clinton even had a famous chat on Tumblr. Like it or not, the picket line has been replaced with an online petition, captioned photographs and facebook likes.

The new media expert Clay Shirky wrote in the journal Foreign Affairs about harnessing the power of these tools to build civil society and the public sphere, in the same way that the printing press helped the reforms of Martin Luther and pushed along the enlightenment and the scientific revolution.

I don’t have the answers, but want to leave you with this thought. Rather than fight these changes, we need to go with them. And not with a sigh of resignation or resistance, but with enthusiasm. Admire the new media as the digital town hall, a place of free assembly, community coordination and open conversations.

Embracing this generation and engaging in conversations on their terms may be the only way to preserve democracy for future generations.

[Slide 30]

