

STORY: PHOEBE SMITH AND
GEORGIE OAKESHOTT

Connecting young people with the political process is easier said than done, but at least some MPs are trying.

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WELCOME

Not everyone was surprised when the results of a recent nationwide survey showed the top concern of young Australians was body image—not drugs, alcohol or the environment.

For several years, Anna Burke (Member for Chisholm, Vic) has been calling for a national summit on body image, to bring together representatives of the media, the fashion and advertising industries, medical professionals, as well as school and community groups to discuss ways to curb what she calls “the body image crisis”.

She has been highly critical of the media’s role in eroding women’s body confidence, arguing that the heavy bombardment of images of thin models has resulted in young girls growing up hating the way they look.

“They are being conditioned to despise themselves,” Ms Burke said, noting that girls as young as eight are now being treated for eating disorders.

As well as the summit, she has called for the development of a media code of conduct on body image, as well as a body mass index for fashion models, “so that ultra-thin models are no longer used in fashion shows and photo shoots”.

“Thin is portrayed as beautiful, hip and cool. Dangerously thin celebrities are portrayed as fashion icons. We need national leadership to curb this trend or I believe there will be dangerous consequences,” Ms Burke said.

She has also called for a ban on ‘pro-ana’ websites, which she has described as dangerous and addictive.

“They feature extremely disturbing content, including tips on how to suppress appetite, hide the symptoms of eating disorders and so-called ‘thinspirational’ pictures of skeletal celebrities and models. Australian girls and women should

not be subjected to such dangerous material on the internet,” Ms Burke said.

Her concerns about body image are shared by many young people, according to the sixth annual survey of young Australians conducted by community service organisation Mission Australia. The 2007 survey captured the views of 29,000 young Australians aged between 11 and 24.

The 2006 survey ranked body image as the third most important concern of young Australians. One year on body image had jumped to the top of the list, with 32 per cent saying it was a concern, followed by family conflict, coping with stress and school problems.

“I am happy with my life but always concerned about the way I look,” one 15 year old responded.

“Something really needs to be done about the image of models. I hate it how they’re so skinny. They need to use some real girls and women, not sticks,” a 13 year old girl said.

The survey results were raised in the House of Representatives by Sid Sidebottom (Member for Braddon, Tas) who said it was edifying to read the comments of young people on body image—“pretty scary actually”.

“It may be a reflection of modern society, and I’m sure that some will be quick to point the finger at certain sections of the media, but surely we all have a role to play when one in three young people is unhappy with their own body,” he said.

“Ultimately it is a community responsibility and we all must play our part in making it a better environment for our young people.”

He believes MPs should do more to raise awareness of youth issues among the general public. Although recognising they cannot replace the role strong families and communities play in supporting young people, he insists MPs can promote



OPEN DOOR:
*Engaging with people
 face-to-face is important.*
 Photo: photolibrary

The most effective means of connecting with young people is by creating opportunities to meet them in their community and listen to the issues they raise.

their concerns, as well as recognise the invaluable work of grassroots organisations.

Mr Sidebottom has seen the benefit of gradually building rapport with young people in his own electorate, particularly through his involvement as a director with a community theatre.

He has discovered over time young people find him more approachable and raise their concerns with him. The informal setting also makes it easier for a broader range of young people to engage with him.

Also interested in educating young people to “get your politician working for you” is former teacher, Brett Raguse (Member for Forde, Qld).

He believes it’s important to engage with young people in schools and put democracy in context.

“What we do in Canberra is part of the formal democratic process. This is what this House is about. Young people need to know that they can make change, and that they can have an influence, simply by understanding the processes of democracy,” he said.

As the local member, he visits schools in his Queensland electorate to talk about democracy with students in Grades 6 and 7 when the curriculum introduces them to fundamental concepts.

Mr Raguse said these students are already interested in and engaged with the material and enjoy the opportunity to meet a “real, live politician”.

High school students in Grades 10 and 11, who are approaching voting age, do not tend to study political processes as part of their curriculum, he said. So he focuses on promoting strong leadership and democratic processes for electing leaders within the community, and encourages students to become actively involved in exercising their right to express their preference for leadership.

By awarding certificates to sports captains, school captains and other students who fulfil a leadership role in the school, he can discuss the political processes that exist in the school community and how they broadly reflect processes at play in federal politics.

As part of his commitment to empowering young people, Mr Raguse has initiated a youth ambassador scheme. He has asked the recipient of this year’s Young Queenslander of the Year Award to be his first youth representative at, for example, community meetings and other events he attends.

His goal is to develop a network of youth representatives, the core of which would be made up of recipients of the Young

Australian of the Year Award and the Young Queenslander of the Year Award.

He hopes this network will become strong enough so that “at some stage, I can hand over to the young people and just be there as a resource for whatever activities they want to get involved in”.

“It will also give me feedback too, on what their issues and their priorities are.”

Mr Raguse is also interested in giving disenfranchised youth a voice.

“I would make the correlation between some of the bad things that happen with youth and their concern about their future—almost a sense of hopelessness. That’s when I think it’s important that they engage with politicians, people who can offer them counselling support and who know the options that are available to them. Young people who have the right network of family or friends tend to support themselves.”

Michael Keenan (Member for Stirling, WA) said engaging with young people usually involves demystifying yourself first.

“People often meet you and they’ll say ‘Oh, you’re quite a normal person’ and you sort of wonder what they expected! I think it is important to go out and actually engage with people face-to-face. There’s nothing better,” he said.

He has found that, as well as taking advantage of email, social networking sites and text messaging, the most effective means of connecting with young people is by creating opportunities to meet them in their community and listen to the issues they raise.

He believes the disconnection between young people and the political process is a real problem, particularly because politics today impacts on young people tomorrow.

“It’s definitely about them,” Mr Keenan said. “The people with the longest futures ahead of them are the ones who need to be most concerned about whether they’re governed well or not.”

He said people tend to be very curious about how politics and the government work, and acknowledged the role MPs can play in educating young people more about becoming involved in those processes.

He encourages young people to become directly involved in the process of shaping issues by joining a political party.

“Political parties are very important community institutions and they should be recognised as such. For anyone, it’s very easy to get involved in a political party. I think political parties of all persuasions welcome young people’s involvement and young people who are actually prepared to contribute. I don’t think it’s necessarily that popular, but I think it is actually a very important form of social service.”

Sussan Ley (Member for Farrer, NSW) is another member encouraging young people to consider a career as a political representative.

“If we could make more young people understand what the real job of politics is, we would get better politicians. We would get people who were not interested just in the limelight, but who realise that, to make a big difference on a national stage, this is one of the better opportunities. The right sort of person might go into a completely different field, and it may never occur to them they could be a political representative.

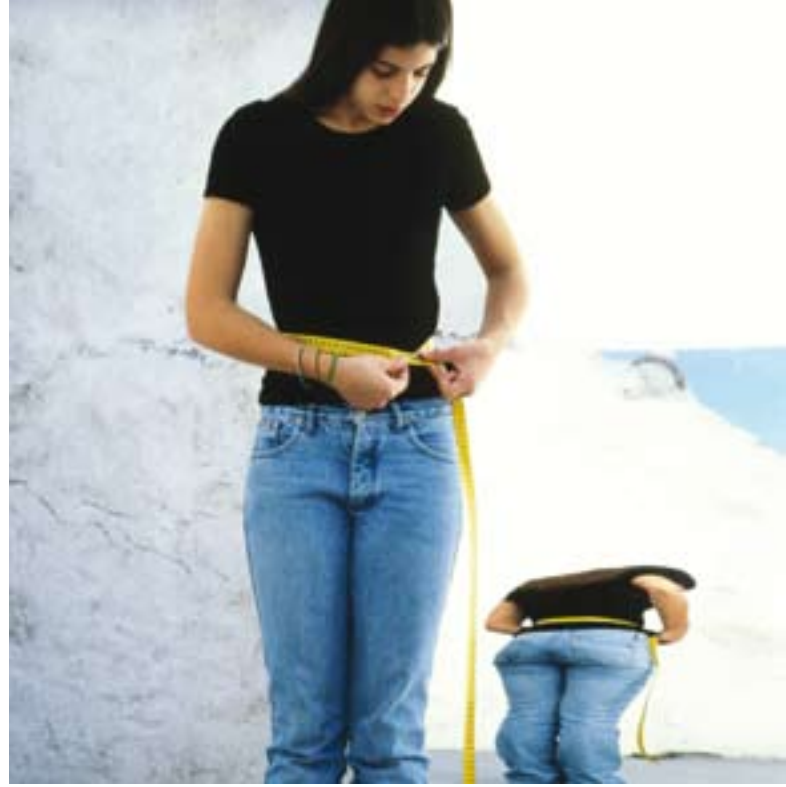


IMAGE PROBLEM: *Young girls are growing up hating the way they look. Photo: photolibrary*

“Surely we all have a role to play when one in three young people is unhappy with their own body.”

“Most members and senators would say that if they go to a youth forum, if they sit down and just listen to young people talking, they always come away amazed, inspired, surprised... the most challenging questions intellectually and personally are always from younger people because they’ve thought about them. So it’s very exciting to know that group with that passion is there and I hope we can encourage as many as possible to get into parliament.”

But on average, only two young people a year will make an appointment to speak with her, whereas older generations make appointments far more regularly.

“Although our doors are open to everyone, young people don’t often walk through the doors with questions,” she said.

This in her view certainly points to a disconnection between young people and the political process, and she suggests that it is due to their limited understanding of how it actually operates.

“The message that I’m trying to get through is that contacting their local member of parliament and engaging with them is not a process they need to feel shut out of, that it doesn’t imply to them that they need some special ticket to get in there, that they need to be older, or that members of parliament will discount their views because they’re younger. All of those things are incorrect.”

She said as well as being more educated on how they can raise their concerns democratically, young people also need to feel a greater sense of rapport and trust with their MPs so that these avenues are more attractive to them.

As Mr Keenan puts it, “if people are not taking an interest in politics and think that it’s not their concern, that it doesn’t affect their lives... if people aren’t engaged, then they run the risk of getting bad governments. And that’s a real risk”. •