

THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF YOUTH

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The consequences of foreign policies have significant implications for Australian youths, even though they may not be as evident, or garner as much publicity, as those pertaining to alcohol or school funding.

While critics may raise questions about why young people should be involved in foreign policy, there are two main reasons why society in general, and policy makers in particular, should embrace and encourage young Australians' ideas on the international system. Firstly, young people are not immune to the impact of foreign affairs and should be able to voice their opinions accordingly. Secondly, young people are in a unique position to understand the world and have much to offer those who are willing to listen.

According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, more than 20,000 young Australians travel overseas each year to work, study, volunteer and holiday. Government policies in the form of (although not limited to) bilateral relationships, multilateral agreements and sanctions, can therefore restrict people's travel itineraries and, in some cases, actually jeopardise their safety abroad. Two more specific, and yet contrasting, examples of international relations affecting the lives of young Australians include the decision to deploy armed forces to Afghanistan in 2001 and the possible proscription of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) in 2008. Whereas the former had, and continues to have, the potential to directly endanger the lives of young people in the military, the latter indirectly threatens Australian Tamils' efforts to remain connected with the place of their ancestry.

Despite such severe ramifications, there are very few forums readily accessible to young people for the meaningful discussion of foreign and strategic affairs. The mediums which do exist tend to be either quite restrictive in terms of who can participate, or deal primarily with those areas of public policy traditionally associated with young people. As a result, seniority dominates international relations and young Australians are often excluded from decision making processes which affect their lives. This is especially the case for those under the age of 18, who are denied a voice at the ballot box as well. In order to challenge the bureaucratic oligarchy and fulfil one of the key tenets of liberal democracies, a platform from which young Australians can easily and effectively communicate their own interests to legislators on a full range of policy issues is needed.

However, young people are much more than just passive beings acted upon by policy makers. They are active agents of change, capable of generating their own innovative visions of foreign and strategic affairs. Today's young Australians are coming of age in radically different times to those of their parents, and as a consequence, they have been shaped by conflicting moods and events.

This upbringing, as the children of globalisation and the information age, has contributed to a much more fluid view of, and relationship with, the rest of the world. Hence, young people in this country are able to conceive of global actors, and their associations with one another, in dramatically different ways to traditional decision makers.

In the current climate of international uncertainty, this new school of thought needs to be more fully employed. For, while certain lobby groups and non government organisations have already drawn upon the ideas and enthusiasm of young Australians, their agendas are usually quite specific, leaving the majority of the foreign and strategic policy spectrum without effective youth participation. Not only does this omission prevent different notions of strategy from entering the current policy cycle, thereby hindering attempts to address both old and new dilemmas, it also has the potential to impede political growth. As the people most affected by long term national development, it seems logical that if young Australians are not involved in the formulation of these policies now, their future implementation and success may be compromised.

It is needless to say that young people are not the sole beneficiaries of foreign and strategic policy in Australia, nor are they capable of solving every conundrum churned out by the post Cold War world. However, neither does any other generation (or gender or race for that matter) possess a monopoly of ideas or experience. As a corollary of this, Australia must continually seek new perspectives and thoughts on foreign policy if it is to remain relevant on the world stage in the years to come. Young people, for all their ostensible 'Gen. Y' related flaws, should be integral to this process, as they represent an interesting, inventive and frankly overlooked site of knowledge.

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