

134<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union  
Lusaka, Zambia

**General Debate**

**Contribution by the Hon Bruce Scott MP**  
Leader of the Australian Delegation

***Rejuvenating democracy, giving voice to youth***

Mr Secretary-General, honoured colleagues

As the leader of the Australian delegation to the 134<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, it is an honour to address my esteemed colleagues on this important topic in the general debate.

Rejuvenating democracy to give a voice to young people is both a challenge and an opportunity for each of us here at this Assembly.

As we know, the last two decades have seen a number of countries – many of which are represented here today – aspire to and achieve more democratic systems of government. I know that many of my fellow parliamentarians here have important stories to tell about this journey and I have been listening with interest to other contributions in this debate. This exchange is one of the great benefits of attending the IPU Assembly.

I am sure that you will agree with me that whether they are old or new, democratic, political and parliamentary processes must continually be reinvented if the various systems we serve are to be relevant and effective.

To explore this I would like to discuss the situation in my own country.

I come from Australia, which is also considered to be one of the younger nation states following its federation in 1901. But it is actually one of the older democracies that – quite literally – voted itself into existence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To support this process, Australia has an established, competent and independent electoral administration body which maintains the national voter register and conducts elections. There is a strong parliamentary committee which has been reviewing the conduct of elections for more than three decades and has led to significant improvements in the electoral side of the democratic process.

At a political level, the transition of power from one side of politics to another has occurred periodically – and smoothly – in Australia and has been generally accepted by all participants.

Despite this generally positive picture, I should balance my account by sharing with you some areas where rejuvenation is needed – and occurring – in Australia.

I mentioned earlier that Australia has generally high levels of participation in, and acceptance of, the overall democratic processes.

Although this is true, I am concerned about the next generation of participants at the front line of the democratic process, namely parliamentarians: The average age of Australian members and senators is around the age of 52. There are currently only two federal parliamentarians under the age of 30. There are 34 parliamentarians aged between 30 and 40.

This profile is not unique to Australia and these figures are matched by some of the democracies with which we compare ourselves. In fact, the chronic under-representation of young people in the world's parliaments is a global concern, and I congratulate the IPU on the publication last week on an important report on *Youth Participation in National Parliaments*.

Of course, in every country, few people are called to sit in Parliament. A greater concern is the wider participation by citizens. We need to rejuvenate the most popular way that Australians exercise their franchise: by enrolling their names on the electoral register and voting.

Investigations by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) have consistently shown that while overall levels of democratic participation are high, a different picture emerges if the data is broken down into age groups. In particular, research conducted since the 1980s has shown that younger Australians are less likely to be enrolled on the electoral register and therefore unable to vote at elections.

Of course, statistics do not tell the whole story, but the Youth Electoral Study conducted jointly by the AEC, the University of Sydney and the Australian National University in 2007 showed that while the overall participation rate of eligible Australians is around 95%, this figure can drop to less than 80% in the 18–25 year old age group.

Various reasons have been advanced as to why young Australians are less likely to register to vote and therefore take their first steps in the democratic process. These reasons can include:

- Low levels of understanding of the political and democratic system;
- Feelings of distance or alienation from powerbrokers such as politicians, business leaders media commentators (many of whom are often middle aged and male);

- Little perceived relevance of politics to the realities of life for young people;
- Lifestyle barriers such as travel, study, intermittent work; and
- Challenges in following bureaucratic procedures such as complex forms.

However, while this is a problem, it is also an opportunity. You will understand that there are no simple answers to this important issue. But I would like to share with you how some of the ways that Australia is addressing this important matter.

I am pleased to report that organisations such as the AEC and the Australian Parliament use a variety of innovative means to encourage participation by young people so that they can take up their responsibilities as the next generation of democratic practitioners and exercise their voice.

Both the AEC and the Parliament conduct education centres which conduct interesting and innovative classes for students visiting the national capital in Canberra. More than 90,000 students visit each of these centres each year. These two centres also produce a range of curriculum materials to assist schools and teachers to raise awareness of the importance of the democratic process in schools and community groups across Australia.

The AEC has also conducted various targeted campaigns combined with initiatives such as the Federal Direct Enrolment and Update Program (FDEU) whereby people's details can be added to the electoral roll based on data obtained from other government agencies (such as drivers licence records).

Due to these efforts, enrolment rates for this demographic – the next generation of participants in Australia's democracy – have increased slowly but steadily since 2012. There is still much to do, but along term decline does seem to be changing direction.

Finally, there is another important and practical way that Australia's 226 members of the national parliament rejuvenate democracy in our daily role as members and senators.

In addition to our work in the parliament which is the public face of our role, my colleagues and I work tirelessly behind the scenes in our constituency work by visiting schools, community groups and other organisation to explain how the democratic process works. In age when so much information is distilled through the prism of the media, this is an effective form of role modelling to present to the next generation.