



# Let's give youth voice now for a better future

**I** RECENTLY announced that a priority of the new Commonwealth Office for Youth would be addressing body image issues and the incredible pressures being placed on young Australians.

It is interesting to me that some responded to this with a dismissive wave of the arm and a claim these are the same issues that have been dealt with by all generations of the past and are a natural part of being young.

The truth is that this response is symptom of a bigger issue – there are some who refuse to concede that younger Australians are grappling with emerging issues or increasing pressures that are quite unique to their generation.

While there is no gain in us battling it out for a contest of which generation has done it toughest, there is a real need to accept that generations have done it differently and that there is generational divide in the experiences, circumstances and pressures faced by each.

We must not discount the valid concerns and real issues of the emerging generation out of ignorance, resentment or disinterest because there are some very real issues.

Some key new research has illustrated a crisis that is engulfing the wellbeing of young Australians and must be responded too.

The Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing Report paints a picture of a vastly changed landscape which is challenging young Australians today.

Issues like soaring rates of self harm bring home the magnitude of pressures being faced by the young.

The report identifies intentional self harm as one of the leading causes of death for teenagers.

It also outlines that one in 10 Australians aged 15-19 years reported a mental or behavioural problem.

Housing affordability, body image, drug and alcohol issues and climate change are all now high on the list of young people's concerns.

Emerging technology alone has brought a host of new issues and opportunities – the internet and cyber bullying, text messaging and video

**Kate Ellis**



phones, constant bombardment of messages through various mediums, to name just a few.

When you combine these issues with changing family structures, it is clear this is an unfamiliar environment to many of us.

On the issue of body image we need to be clear. This is not about a few girls just wishing they had smaller thighs, it is not about taking aim at skinny models or particular industries. This is about the fact that body image is being constantly identified by young Australians themselves as being a major concern.

Mission Australia's Youth report, the Youthspeak survey and direct consultations all tell us that this is a growing concern of both young women and, increasingly, young men.

Teamed with rates of anorexia reaching one in 100 adolescent girls and

bulimia rates reaching 5 in 100, average ages of eating disorder sufferers falling, and hospital reports of young children now being admitted, this is about accepting we have a problem on our hands and striving to work co-operatively to boost the confidence, self esteem and health of a generation.

To respond effectively to emerging issues, we need to engage better with youth. And first we need to accept that these issues may be unfamiliar at times to us, but they are all too real.

This is not something we must do just to undertake a virtuous community service but because it is in all our interests and in this nation's long-term interest for us to ensure a confident, empowered and healthy group of Australians inherit the future.

Australia is in good shape to respond to these challenges among our younger generations. But in preparing ourselves to respond, we've had to make some changes.

In recent weeks we have made some of the biggest government announcements in youth affairs that this country has made for literally decades.

Following the announcement of a Commonwealth Office for Youth to ensure the infrastructure is in place to give consideration and policy response to the issues of younger Australians, last week I announced an \$8 million initiative to include young Australians, empower young Australians and give young Australians a seat at the table in public discussions.

The Australian Youth Forum will foster a national dialogue between young Australians and their Government, but also between young Australians and each other.

Incorporating co-ordinated forums right around the nation, an interactive website and an outreach program to engage with the disengaged, this is breaking new ground – important ground.

Every generation faces their challenges and needs to be heard. We will continue to work hard to be a Government for all Australians – and that includes the young.

**Kate Ellis is the federal MP (Labor) for Adelaide and Minister for Youth and Sport**



**ISSUES:** Body image is just one of the concerns facing today's youth