

Editorial

Children in Politics and Public Life

On March 14, 2014, Australian middle high school student Aria McCarthy-Lochner uploaded a video to YouTube from her smartphone that created an instant buzz in the nation's media and within days received upwards of half a million views. McCarthy-Lochner was part of a class from Newtown Performing Arts High School in Sydney who, on that day, were part of a school excursion to Canberra, the nation's capital. That afternoon the class was sitting on the lawns in front of Parliament House when Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott spotted the group from his car and spontaneously decided to take a moment from his ministerial duties to approach them. Offering to pose with the students in a photograph, he then asked the group of 14-year-olds if they had any questions for him. Without pausing, the students raised a series of hot-button issues that the Prime Minister had carefully avoided in interviews with the media: his party's inaction on climate change, their treatment of asylum seekers held in offshore detention, his staunch opposition to same-sex marriage, and the problem with appointing himself to the role of Minister for Women on a national cabinet composed of nineteen ministers that had only one female representative. Rather than engage the students in authentic political discourse, Prime Minister Abbott responded with what McCarthy-Lochner described to *The Guardian* as "avoids and waffles." Reflecting on the Prime Minister's performance before an audience of teens, playwright Saman Shad observes how "one student in the background remarks out of frustration "Why don't you answer the questions?", giving voice to a nation troubled by the silence and prevarications of its elected officials. The video, which has long since vanished from YouTube, showed a political leader who, thinking perhaps that a group of middle high school students would be wide-eyed with wonder at meeting the Prime Minister face to face, instead, in the words of *The Guardian*, "got more than he bargained for." But more than this, it demonstrates how children, who are otherwise routinely underestimated, when given the opportunity and a platform, demonstrate that they expect more from their leaders, are unafraid of debating complex issues, and can be highly engaged social agents.

Historically, political engagement rarely avails space for participation by the young, in large part due to their exclusion from voting rights that itself is a result of entrenched beliefs that children are too uninformed and immature to meaningfully participate in political discourse and the decisions that affect them. As John Hall puts it, children tend to be considered "too incompetent, irrational, or dependent to exercise the levers of power for themselves" (86). The myth of childhood innocence continues to play a critical role in excluding children from the political sphere. While the myth may be outmoded, it remains an important device for those institutions invested in disempowering children by confining them to positions of ignorance and vulnerability. Such attitudes underpin the established practice of adults purportedly advocating on behalf of children. In such scenarios children are used by the powerful to justify their own agendas, claiming to speak on behalf of a disenfranchised group that comprises a third of the population. Writing on how the figure of the innocent

child is used as a “human shield’ against criticism” in the public sphere, Henry Jenkins argues that the majority of our political battles tend to be “fought on the backs of our children” (2). At the political level it thus remains expedient—and safe—to maintain children as silent and impotent, signaling that children are in fact far more competent and capable than we commonly care to admit.

Children that make themselves heard above the din of political rhetoric may represent a threat to the established order because they have little investment in preserving the status quo. Comparing the political appetites of youth to their elders, Valentine Thomson writes that where the older generation is averse to change, “the younger generation has few if any of these ties with things as they are” (SM6). Fashioned to neutralize the potential threat the young represent to the established order, innocence becomes an effective weapon used against children to keep them in their place, prompting Robin Wood to observe how “children are the most oppressed section of the population” (75). When children prove to be assertive and articulate, such behavior is labelled “precocious”, allowing adults to marvel at their mature behavior while dismissing their words. The phrase “from the mouths of babes” is often invoked in response to truths spoken by a child, but there is commonly a level of bemusement attached to the child’s words, rendering their utterances adorable while effectively emptying them of significance. Alternatively, precocity can just as easily characterize children negatively when they do not conform to behaviors consistent with the myth of innocence. Youth activist Greta Thunberg is often framed as struggling to be taken seriously while politicians, most famously Donald Trump, assassinate her character based on negative precocity and dismiss her message on the grounds of her age and gender.

In this issue of *JOCPC*, we present the topic of children in politics and the public sphere. The four essays selected for publication approach the topic in substantially different ways, from focusing on how the figure of the child is politicized, to exploring the child as highly-engaged political activist: Megan Sibbett defends the innate queerness of childhood and its representation in contemporary animation; Sarah Mullen discusses the popular Australian children’s series *Bluey* and its fluid representations of gender; Haihong Li looks back at Maoist cinema and examines four films that laud the contributions of child soldiers; and Susan Driver explores the dynamic relationships within the highly organized global online network of young girls advocating for more action on social, economic and environmental issues.

Reporting on Prime Minister Abbott’s interaction with the teens from Newtown Performing Arts High School, Australian women’s media website *mamamia.com* attracted myriad comments either praising or condemning the behavior of the high schoolers. While left-leaning readers tended to applaud the students for what they saw as a justifiable attack on conservative policies, conservatives attacked the students by framing their challenging questions and retorts as disrespectful. Remarkable on the dismissive cacophony of opinions is a comment made by a teen reader named Daniel. His comment, which I include below, articulates the frustration and despair that youth feel at being overlooked and dismissed because of their age as they campaign for a better future than that being left for them by their elders. Daniel observes:

So yet again teenager's voices are dismissed because of their age ... I don't see what our age has to do with the fact that we raised a very valid question. You do realise that us teenagers will inherit the Earth you lot leave for us? Right now, that Earth is looking pretty bad, and we see that. We try and change this, but we're stomped down and dismissed because we're "young".

There is a reason us teenagers are so concerned with activism and changing the world. It is because we see that the world is terrible, and we're going to have to clean up the scraps you leave us with. Therefore, we try and change this by rallying, doing charitable events, trying to let adults see our perspective, and yet we're ignored. We're dismissed. We have just a valid opinion, even more perhaps, on the future of the Earth than adults do.

In my opinion, the reason teenage suicide numbers are increasing so rapidly ... is because we see the world for what it really is and what it will be in the future, and we're dismayed by this. We try and change it, but we're ignored, so we feel useless, insignificant, invalid. If you want to change this, listen to us.

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