

THE STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY PROJECT ESSAY (Poppy Tinsley)

1/ The hallmarks of New Zealand's liberal democracy are a free and fair representative, elected government, controlled by the Rule of Law through the separation of powers, to provide freedom of rights to individuals, and to control the power of government.

New Zealand adheres to these democratic standards by abiding to the principles of our singularly, unwritten constitution that is legislated and enacted from many statutes and conventions, including the Constitution Act (1986), and the Bill of Rights Act (1990); preceded from the English statutes, the Magna Carta (1297), and the Bill of Rights (1688), and more recently informed by the Tiriti o Waitangi (1840), considered New Zealand's founding document.

Compared to other countries, New Zealand has a more precise democratic process and structure, demonstrated by our placing as sixth most democratic country in the world (Varieties of Democracy, 2023). New Zealand reflects the second lowest level of corruption (Varieties of Democracy, 2022), and ranks ninth on The Rule of Law Index (2024), by providing protection of fundamental human rights. We have a socially liberal outlook, often on the global forefront of policy changes such as women's suffrage, and homosexual law reform, whilst maintaining a strong focus on human rights.

Since 5 BCE, democracy has prevailed as the leading form of government to protect human rights whilst controlling government powers. The process and structure of New Zealand's democracy is dynamic and constantly needs consideration and evolution to meet our country's changing demography, and the forces that impact our social and economic situation.

We are, as a nation, constantly bombarded with issues that challenge the pillars of our democratic process, such as the reduction of media that reports to the people, and laws that are passed under urgency with little public consultation. Other challenges to our democracy come from outside influences such as artificially generated fake news and misinformation, or propaganda from internal or external sources.

But I believe the biggest concern to the destabilisation of democracy in New Zealand is the lack of knowledge the public has as to their rights. If they do not understand the structure and process of democracy and the Rule of Law, how can it be claimed that every citizen is gaining strength from free and fair government voting? Surely this is consent without knowledge!

2/ An introduction to civics education should be taught in all schools, giving students the chance to learn about politics and democracy without needing to sign up for special courses, or wait for university. These classes need to include topics on equality, rights, and the Rule of Law. They need to discuss the importance of social cohesion and the threats democracy faces from Artificial Intelligence. Students need to be taught to discern for themselves the credibility and reliability of sources.

Another way to improve understanding and participation in the democratic process, is to have information readily available, so it is easier for students to engage with what is happening politically. This concept could be taken a step further by schools providing free access to Media Premium Subscriptions with the aim of enhancing democracy.

3/ I believe students can assist the process of democracy by reaching out to politicians from across the political aisle, to lobby them for civics education. I think students can talk to other young people about what is going on politically in New Zealand, and whether government decisions are democratically sound. Also having schools teach, and request assignments about democracy, would assist the process. The more students are taught, the more they talk. The key here is communication. To get young people discussing civics and democracy.

Consider a recent example of democracy that I have been personally involved in. By applying the information I have been taught at The Strengthening Democracy Project, I was able to become personally involved, and assist in the checking of our democratic process as a member of The Whanganui Youth Council.

The Youth Council exists within the social fabric of Whanganui. Most of the Youth Council are unable to vote in local body elections due to their age. However, the elected Whanganui District Council democratically chooses to listen to, and consider youth opinion. If there was to be a removal of the Youth Council it would be a challenge to the democratic process. By selecting not to consider the views of a minority group, especially one devoid of voting rights, it would create an imbalance to the pillars of democracy by limiting minority rights.

Democratic rights of minorities, such as youth, are protected by not only law, but by integrity because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of a diversity of citizens, including youth. This diversity of democracy, supports the groups and organisations that do not depend on government for their existence, legitimacy, nor authority.

So, when the local Whanganui District Council told us, and the media, they were closing the Youth Council as part of their streamlining process, to reduce spending, I wrote to our mayor to explain my thoughts on their undemocratic decisions to arbitrarily close the Youth Council. This caused the District Council to reconsider its position. They revoked the publicly stated closure, and placed the proposal forward for discussion and vote. At the end of the day, the Youth Council may, and probably should be closed, for numerous reasons, but I will not allow it to be closed without the democratic process being followed. The process of democracy that I have been taught, and have now applied. I consider this a win by assisting the democratic process.

This example shows how democracy can unintentionally stray, and how it can be realigned. It clearly demonstrates how we as a nation, adults, and even youth, can actively follow the democratic process, provided knowledge of democracy and civics has been taught and learnt.

4/ If you teach the students democracy, when they are adults, they will in turn teach their children. Intergenerational teaching has been successfully used in New Zealand in prior campaigns, where there were flow-on effects to the adults residing at the students' home, such as Our Smokefree School Campaign, He Kura Auahi Kore (1997). Educating students has a ripple effect of knowledge across the home, thereby improving the understanding and participation of the post school age population.

I think currently in New Zealand we have a civically, uneducated public, who do not fully understand how important it is that they comprehend the concept and process of civics and democracy. This could account for New Zealand's increasingly low voter turnout and shows apathy towards the democratic process.

Around voting time, adults are bombarded with individual candidate and party information, but not at any other times. They are expected to make decisions on electorate seats and parties with little understanding of democracy or the political workings of an election.

I believe that in the years between elections, all governments should have to educate the voting public, through all media channels, about civics. This would allow the public to learn about decisions that affect fundamental human rights and freedoms, and how this combines to create a better society. The public need to understand, or at least be given the opportunity to understand how democratic government can be achieved and used by the people.

"The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all."

- John F. Kennedy (1963).