

Political Knowledge and Political Attitudes:

a Study of Australian 14-year-olds

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The Australian Council for Educational Research

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
Australian Association for Research in Education
The University of Newcastle
November 1994

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Introduction

In 1988 the Senate of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia requested its Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training to conduct an inquiry into education for active citizenship in Australian schools and youth organisations. The inquiry was to consider:

*evidence regarding the level of understanding of
the political process by Australian youth;

- *current programs in primary and secondary schools and in youth organisations for education in active citizenship;

- *the adequacy of teacher education programs for this purpose; and

- *the availability and suitability of teaching resource materials.

The Committee released its report, Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations, in February 1989. A subsequent report, Active Citizenship Revisited, was released in 1991.

In defining the active citizenship, the Committee explained that knowledge of the political system was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for active citizenship (CA, 1989:7). In addition, active citizenship requires the motivation and capacity to apply that knowledge -- something the committee equates with an active commitment to democracy:

An active citizen in the Committee's view is someone who not only believes in the concept of a democratic society but who is willing and able to translate that belief into action. Active citizenship is a compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes: knowledge about how society works; the skills needed to participate effectively; and a conviction that active participation is the right of all citizens (CA, 1989: 7).

The first report found 'a crisis Australians cannot afford to ignore' (CA, 1989:6) and made a number of recommendations designed to improve the level of political knowledge and awareness of Australian youth. In summary, the recommendation involved:

- *the establishment of education programs: for active citizenship for the general public;

- *the designation of education for active citizenship as a priority area for improvements in primary and secondary schooling;

- *an emphasis on active citizenship for the pre-service and in-service training of teachers; and

- *the creation of appropriate curriculum materials.

This paper reviews aspects of Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations and presents some results from the Youth in Transition study which bear on the issue of the relationship between the political knowledge of young people and their attitudes to politics.

The Importance of Active Citizenship

The Committee argued that active citizenship -- or at the very least, political knowledge -- was important for a number of reasons: it was the foundation of democracy, the basis for participation in a wide range of community organisations, an important vocational study, and an essential life skill.

The foundation of democracy

The committee maintained that an active well-informed citizenry is the foundation of democracy. If voters are poorly informed about the political process and political issues, then they are unlikely to be able to make correct political decisions. It may, for instance, be difficult to give a great deal of credence to referenda for changes to the Australian Constitution when many voters do not know that the Constitution exists. It is in this space, the area of voter ignorance, that anti-democratic, authoritarian movements can find comfort. If democracy is based on the votes of the ignorant, what value can there be in its decisions?

Participation in community organisations

Active citizenship is not restricted to the formal political institutions of the Commonwealth, State and Territory, and local governments. Democracy and participation find their expression in a range of voluntary organisations: professional bodies, sporting clubs, trade unions and social and interest groups of all sorts. Knowledge of formal political processes might be only tenuously related to participation in such organisations. The Committee is referring more to a spirit of democracy -- people electing their own leaders who are ultimately answerable to the membership. There is also the idea of having a go, of taking responsibility for making changes and achieving results. Without these concepts, the quality of the lives we enjoy as Australians would be seriously undermined.

Vocational relevance

The Committee suggests that there are important vocational reasons for an increased emphasis on education for active citizenship in schools:

In many areas of employment, a knowledge of how politics and government work - at all levels - is now a useful, and sometimes indispensable, asset. Obvious examples are the public service, commerce and industry, the media and the social welfare sector. If young people entering fields such as these are not aware of how government operates, they will be at a disadvantage and will need to remedy the deficiency fairly

quickly. In a world in which the influence of government is ubiquitous - whether this be in terms of major national decisions, or the effects of local government by-laws - it is unrealistic to regard this area of knowledge as irrelevant to employment requirements (CA, 1989: 17).

A life-skill

The above description of the influence of government as ubiquitous has implications beyond the workplace. The decisions of governments and their agents intrude upon our personal lives. A great deal of legislative effort is directed towards creating checks and balances and mechanisms of appeal against the decisions of governments and their agents. Given that many people cannot even identify the areas of responsibility of the three levels of government, it is probable that

many people would not even know where to begin to make use of their legal rights. If social workers need to know about the working of governments, then their clients have an even more compelling need.

Democracy Under Threat

The report concentrates on active citizenship as the foundation of democracy and, to a lesser extent, the basis for community participation. It is in this context that the report employs the term crisis. For there to be a crisis, there must be a sense in which the situation is bad and getting worse. The report reviews a number of studies of political knowledge. These establish that the situation is bad. The report also provides some evidence that the level of knowledge of young people is less than that of older people and identifies four mechanisms which are working to make the situation worse -- the centralisation of the mass media, changing immigration patterns, a shift in emphasis in education, and increased youth unemployment and alienation.

Political ignorance

Active citizenship is not equated with political knowledge. The Committee, however, points to a direct relationship between political knowledge and political participation. On this basis, the report concludes that:

. . . political ignorance is a strong indicator of indifference and apathy towards political dimensions of experience. The citizen who knows little about community affairs, or about local, State and national government is frequently the citizen who has little interest in such matters - who has concluded that 'other people' will look after them. High levels of political ignorance in a community are therefore a danger sign. They point to a situation in which accountability is

weak and where power may be concentrating in the hands of a few. There are warnings that the quality of democracy may be under threat (CA, 1989: 9).

The following results cited in the report certainly indicate that many Australians know little about their political system and that young people know even less.

*A national survey conducted in 1987 found that only 54 per cent of Australians knew that Australia had a constitution and that only 30 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds knew that Australia had a constitution.

*A national survey conducted after the 1984 Federal election found that when asked to name the two houses of the Commonwealth Parliament, only 64 per cent could name the house of representatives and 60 per cent could name the Senate. After being provided with the names of the two houses of Parliament, nearly 40 per cent could not name the houses in which the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition sat -- a figure which rose to 56 per cent for the 18 to 19 year-old-group.

The ignorance of the young

That younger people seem to know less about the Australian political system than older people is open to at least two interpretations. First, it may indicate a shift in the level of knowledge for the entire cohort. When today's young people are 40 years old, they will know

less about politics than today's secondary 40-year-olds. Such a view is consistent with the idea that things are getting worse - there has been (or will be) a decline in the level of knowledge of the Australian political system. Second, it may indicate that learning about the Australian political system does not cease at age 18. As people grow older, they learn more about politics. Therefore, when today's school students are 40 years old they will have a level of knowledge similar to that of today's 40-year-olds. Under this interpretation, the situation today is little different from the situation 20 or more years ago. Democracy survives in spite of (or perhaps because of) the ignorance of the political system -- and the word crisis seems inappropriate.

It is not clear that there is evidence which would permit a choice between these two interpretations. It does seem reasonable, however, to expect some learning about the political system to continue after leaving school. Each election, and even each news broadcast, holds the possibility of learning something about politics. Whether this means that young people today will have the same level of knowledge when they are 40 years old as today's 40-year-olds is another matter. They may

have more, or less, or about the same. As a minimum, however, it does mean that the differences suggested by age-static comparisons may not imply changes as great as might otherwise be the case.

Centralised mass media

The concentration of the mass media, it is has been argued, reduces the diversity of opinions and knowledge to which people are exposed. Those who control the media wield enormous power to influence people. This is the same view that underlies the legislative restrictions on the extent of media ownership by particular individuals or legal entities. In the context of a review of citizenship, an education system which teaches a critical approach to the information carried by the media is proposed as a strong counter-weight to any tendency towards the manipulation of information.

It is not clear that teaching a critical attitude will in itself promote active citizenship. It is possible that it may engender a level of cynicism in young people. A critical attitude can be applied to the statements of politicians as readily as to the format in which information is presented or to the opinions expressed by commentators. There may be positive aspects for democracy in such an attitude, but it need not lead to a desire for greater involvement in politics.

The rise of the mass media -- especially the electronic media -- is also associated with a greater focus on personalities than on issues. This is usually attributed to the mass aspect of the mass media. The argument is that in order to be successful -- to have high ratings or a substantial circulation -- the mass media must appeal to the lowest common denominator. Personalities -- saviours or demons -- are more easily communicated than issues.

The danger to democracy presented by a focus on personalities is the possible rise of a demagogue. There are at least three concerns. The least is simply that democracy will function less well. Democracy is intended not only to express the will of the people, but in some sense their interests. Citizens may be persuaded to ignore their own interests in order to support a charismatic (or at least photogenic) leader. Second, the ability of democracy to deliver good government may be weakened. Leaders may be selected for their television presence rather than their ability to make wise decisions. Third, allegiance to a demagogue may be a direct challenge to the existence of the

democratic system. The political system is endangered when a leader speaks from personal authority rather than by virtue of their position within that system.

The suggestion that democracy may be endangered by processes which appeal to the majority of the people contains echoes of an argument

used against democracy itself -- that government responsible to the people will be at the whim of the ignorant and uneducated. There has always been an argument for raising the 'lowest common denominator' in political discourse. If it is the case that there is now a greater concentration on personalities than issues, that case may be more compelling.

Immigration

Immigration has featured strongly in the population growth of Australia since 1788. The proportion of recent migrants in the population has varied, as has the source of migrants. Over the last fifteen years, the proportion of migrants from South-East Asia and Central and South America has risen substantially. The fact that many recent migrants have little experience of democracy in their countries of origin may mean that they have less commitment to democracy -- and a policy of multi-culturalism may further exacerbate this problem.

Much of this, however, is speculation. Post-war migration included substantial numbers of migrants from Central and Southern Europe -- many from countries with only spotted histories of democracy. Some of the motivation for migration to Australia -- for migrants from all countries -- may be the attraction of a democratic political system.

Migrants have often been viewed with suspicion. They have been seen as dangers to the standard of living, as dangers to democracy, as dangers to public health, as dangers to public morals, and so on. If the source of the threat posed by recent migrants to Australia is simply a lack of interest in politics, this might be considered relatively benign. Continued openness to migration might be considered a sign of the strength of Australian democracy.

Educational focus on labour market requirements

If education is the major mechanism for conveying information about the Australian political system to young people, there are developments which may be reducing its efficacy in this regard. Recent government policy papers on higher education have highlighted the role of higher education in the labour market. This is echoed in policies proposals for secondary schooling. The implementation of broader curricula in postcompulsory secondary education may have also led to a reduced emphasis on the teaching of politics. The fear is that 'we will end up with a technologically trained, but politically illiterate, young citizenry' (p8).

An emphasis on the vocational aspects of education does not necessarily imply the expansion of courses devoid of political content. Business studies has been a major growth area in higher education during the past decade. Much of commercial practice requires a knowledge of various aspects of the Australian political system.

Any changes in curriculum emphasis must be viewed against the background of the substantial increase in educational participation by young Australians during the last decade. Retention to Year 12 has more than doubled. Progression rates from Year 12 to higher education have been maintained -- an achievement which implies a doubling of

participation in higher education by young people. If there are proportionately fewer students studying politics, it may only be because of the substantial increase in overall participation rates.

Youth alienation

There is no doubt that the last two decades have been difficult in many ways for Australian youth. Unemployment rates for young people have been comparatively high. The increase in unemployment rates, however, overstates the effect of unemployment on the current cohort of young people. Given the substantial increase in educational participation rates for young people during the last ten years, unemployment rates could have doubled without any increase in the number of unemployed young people -- simply because the proportion of young people in the labour force (working or unemployed) has declined substantially. This is not to deny that youth unemployment is a problem -- nor to deny that the proportion of the total cohort affected by unemployment has increased. It is important to note, however, that this problem exists within the context of a substantial increase in educational participation.

Divorce and crime rates and the incidence of drug abuse have also increased substantially during the past twenty years -- with the consequential disruption to the lives of many children.

Whether these changes have produced greater political apathy among young people is a moot point. This is certainly a claim made by the Commission for the Future's report *Casualties of Change: the Predicament of Youth in Australia*. It is, however, difficult to obtain reliable data for comparisons across time. It may also be the case that political interest among the young varies with the issues of the day. It could be argued, for instance, that young people in the 1950s were less politically interested and involved than the cohort whose youth coincided with the issues of conscription and the Vietnam war.

The Data

The results presented in this paper come from the Australian Council for Educational Research's Youth in Transition study. Youth in Transition is a program of longitudinal surveys. It began in 1978 with the survey of a single national sample of 17-year-olds, some 6000

persons born in 1961. By 1994 three further cohorts had been added to the program -- cohorts born in 1965, 1970, and 1975. Members of all four cohorts have been sent a questionnaire around Christmas almost every year since their mid-teens.

The structure of the samples is such that the data provide the opportunity to examine changes within samples associated with aging and between samples at a given age. The data focus on participation in education and the labour market, along with transitions between and within these states, over the period ranging from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. So, as well as being able to examine educational and occupational participation and transition within each of the samples, it is also possible, by looking at differences between samples, to examine the way in which participation has changed in the context of economic, educational and social changes over the last 15 years.

This paper is based on information collected from the youngest cohort in 1989 (the date of release of the Senate Committee's report) when sample members were aged 14. Most sample members were in Year 9 but some were in Years 8 or 10. The sample was stratified by State and

Territory and school system within State or Territory. Initial contact was made with 5653 students in their schools.

Sample members completed brief literacy and numeracy tests and a questionnaire. The questionnaire included a number of items which tested political knowledge and asked about political attitudes. Respondents from schools in the Australian Capital Territory were not asked these questions. The results reported in this paper are therefore for 5217 14-year-old students from all States and Territories of Australia except the Australian Capital Territory.

The Results

Political knowledge

Somewhere out in the dark shadows of the Australian continent there may be a student, fresh out of secondary school, who knows the difference between the Senate and the House of Representatives, can explain the meaning of proportional representation and is able to distinguish between a quango and a quorum. Somewhere, too, there could be a recent school leaver who can expound upon the intricacies of the local, State and Federal tiers of government, tell a mayor from a ratepayer, and knows that an alderman is something other than one of the greatest forces in international cricket. If that person exists, then he or she should be declared a threatened species and appropriate action taken (CA, 1991:41).

Table 1 Responses of 14-year-olds to political knowledge questions:
percentage correct

Percentage

Knowledge of political figures and their party membership

Correct

The Prime Minister

Name

96

Political Party

80

The Leader of the Federal Opposition

Name

43

Political Party

54

The Minister for Defence

Name

12

Political Party

19

The Minister for Foreign Affairs

Name

3

Political Party

16

The Federal Treasurer

Name

47

Political Party

42

The Premier or Chief Minister in your†

Name

51

State or Territory.

Political Party

47

Legal and constitutional knowledge

The House of Representatives

23

The Senate

19

The Constitution

14

Voting Age

92

Notes(a)These questions were not included for students in the ACT.

(b)Results are based on a sample size of 4421 respondents.

The results presented in this section lend some support to the Committee's view that there is a high level of ignorance of politics and political process among Australia's youth. They also justify in part the need to include in the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia goal number 7:

To develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which will enable students to participate as active and informed citizens in our democratic Australian society within an international context (AEC, 1992: viii)

Table 1 shows the percentages correct for a series of items requiring some knowledge of politics. The items are divided into two sets. For the first set, students were provided with the title of a politician (such as Prime Minister) and asked to name the politician and the party to which they belonged. The second set of items consisted of four questions about aspects of the political process or the political system.

The name of the Prime Minister and the political party to which he belonged were the items with the highest level of correct response in the first set of items. Ninety-six per cent of the students were able

to name the then Prime Minister as Bob Hawke and eighty per cent correctly identified the political party to which he belonged as the Australian Labour Party (ALP). Seventy-eight per cent of the students were able to correctly identify both.

Marginally more students knew that the Federal Treasurer was Paul Keating (47 per cent) than were able to correctly name Andrew Peacock as the then Leader of the Opposition (43 per cent). The Federal Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs had relatively low recognition rates of 12 and 3 per cent respectively.

Given some knowledge of the political process, the answers to some of these questions are not independent. If a student knew that the Prime Minister was a member of the ALP, then it followed that the various Ministers were also members of the ALP. (This approach is unlikely to hold if there is a coalition of parties in government). Of those students who knew that the Prime Minister belonged to the ALP (80 per cent) only 13 per cent correctly answered the questions on the political affiliation of the three Federal Ministers. In fact, 58 per cent of the students who knew that the Prime Minister belonged to the ALP did not identify the party affiliation of even one Federal Minister.

The Senate Committee's report expressed concern about the extent to which the media focused on only a few politicians and emphasised personalities and images rather than issues. These results may be taken

as some limited support for this view. Only a few key political personalities, Hawke, Keating and Peacock were recognised by most students. Their political affiliations were generally less well known than their positions -- although the Leader of the Federal Opposition was an exception in this regard. It may, however, not be too much of a surprise that those who occupy the more important positions in politics are better known.

Just over half of the students (51 per cent) were able to name their State Premier (or the Chief Minister in the case of the Northern Territory). Knowledge of party identification was only slightly lower at 47 per cent. Had the students been asked about Premiers in States other than their own, however, the results may have been less satisfactory. A 1987 survey of teacher education students at Mitchell College of Advanced Education (in New South Wales) found that the names of Premiers in States apart from New South Wales and Queensland ranged from 3 to 21 per cent.

The second set of items consisted of four questions which asked about matters more related to political process than to politicians. When asked What are the names of the two 'houses' of the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra? 23 per cent of students were able to name the

House of Representatives and 19 per cent named the Senate. Sixteen per cent were able to correctly name both houses. The remaining 74 per cent were unable to name either of the houses of parliament. A study undertaken for the Australian Electoral Commission soon after the December 1984 federal elections asked a similar question. In that study, which consisted of adults, sixty-four per cent of those surveyed were able to name the House of Representatives and 60 per cent named the Senate. Twenty per cent were unable to name either House. A survey of several schools in the Brisbane area in 1985 reported that nearly 60 per cent of the students could not name either of the houses of parliament. The somewhat lower level of knowledge reported in this here may be because the students in this study were only 14-years-old when they answered the question.

A 1987 study showed that only about 54 per cent of Australians knew that Australia has a constitution (quite apart from what it might contain). In the 18 to 24 age group, only 30 per cent were aware of the Constitution's existence. When the fourteen-year-olds in this study were asked 'There is a document that sets out the fundamental laws regarding the nature, functions and limits of the Commonwealth Government. What is it called?', only 14 per cent were able to nominate the Constitution. Nearly all the students (92 per cent) knew that in five years they would be eligible to vote.

Although the level of political knowledge shown by Australian 14-year-olds may appear rather low, there is some evidence that it is not too much worse than that of young people in the United States. The Civics Report Card, a report of a national study of the political knowledge of American school students, provides a few points of comparison.

American eighth graders have studied American politics or civics for several years. In the American study, 89 per cent of eighth graders could identify the name of their President (compared with the 96 per cent of Australian 14-year-olds who were able to name the Prime Minister). More of the American eighth graders were able to identify the names of the two houses of the US Congress -- 56 per cent compared with the 16 per cent for Australian 14-year-olds who could name the two houses of the Australian Parliament. The questions in the US study were, however, mainly multiple choice. The open-ended questions used

in this study were somewhat more difficult -- even if the content being tested was similar.

Attitudes towards Politicians

Table 2 shows the responses to a number of items relating to politicians. Students were required to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the items. A summary measure

has been calculated for each item by coding strong disagree as zero, disagree as 33.33, agree as 66.67, and strong agree as 100. The result is a measure of net agreement or disagreement. Means over 50 indicate agreement, and under 50 indicate disagreement.

The pattern of responses does not reflect a very positive attitude to politicians. The most positive results for politicians are the items which suggest some marginal net agreement with the statements that Politicians work hard at their job and Politician 'fight' for the people in their electorate. Perhaps some of the most negative results are the levels of agreement with the statements that Politicians only care about power and money, Politicians talk a lot without doing much, and Politicians waste a lot of the taxpayers' money. The traditional themes that Politicians should be paid more money and Politicians keep their promises are met with resounding disagreement. Overall it is fair to say that 14-year-olds have a fairly negative attitude to politicians. In this they may not differ very much from the adult population.

Table 2 Percentage Responses to Perceptions of Politicians.

Agree

Disagree

Mean

Strongly

Agree

Disagree

Strongly

Agree

Politicians. . .

%

%

%

%

Score

work hard at their job

8

58

28

7

56

always listen to people

2
13
66
18
34

only care about power and money

17
39
40
4
57

are influenced too much by big business

18
59
21
2
64

should be paid more money

2
4
47
47
20

'fight' for the people in their electorate

7
53
33
7

55

talk a lot without doing much

37
44
14
5
71

waste a lot of the taxpayers' money

43
41
11
5
73

keep their promises

3
8
51
38
26

represent some of the nation's top talent

3
28
46
23
38

Notes:(a)Results were not collected in the ACT for these questions in 1989.

(b)The Mean Agree Score was calculated by allocating 100 to a strongly agree score, 66.66 to an agree score, 33.33 to a disagree score and 0 to a strongly disagree score.

(c)Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Attitudes and Knowledge

In this section the measures of political knowledge and of attitudes to politicians are brought together. Summary measures of each are constructed to address the question Does a better knowledge of the political system affect students' attitudes towards politicians - and, by extension, to the democratic process?

A political knowledge scale.

An overall measure of political knowledge was constructed by scoring each of the sixteen political knowledge questions as either one or zero (correct or incorrect respectively) and summing the result. Table 3 shows the characteristics of this scale. A reliability of 0.86, as measured by Chronbach's alpha, is very satisfactory.

A measure of attitudes towards politicians.

The ten attitude items in Table two were coded from 1 to 4 so that a score of 1 represented strong agreement and 4 strong disagreement with the attitude presented. These items were then combined, using principal component analysis, to form a single measure of attitude to

politicians. This was standardised, then re-scaled around a mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10. The resulting distribution was

negatively skewed.

Table 3 Characteristics of the Political Knowledge and Attitude to Politicians Scales

Measure

Mean

Sd

No. Items

Reliability

Sample size

Political Knowledge

39

24

16

0.86

5154

Attitude to Politicians

50

10

10

0.79

4479

Notes:(a)The mean and standard deviation of the attitude to politicians were set at 50 and 10 respectively.

(b)Reliability is measured by Cronbach's alpha for the Political Knowledge Scale and by theta for the scale of Attitude to Politicians Scale.

Low scores correspond to a relatively positive attitude toward politicians while a high scores corresponds to a relatively negative attitude. Table 3 shows the characteristics of this scale. Again the level of reliability - a theta of 0.79 is quite satisfactory. The overall correlation of these two measures is 0.02 - a value which is neither substantial or significant. These measures show that there is no relationship between the amount of student's political knowledge and their attitude to politicians.

Conclusion

Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations, a report by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, asserts that there is a crisis in political education in Australia which threatens the future of democracy in this country. This basis for this crisis is twofold. First, there is a high level of political ignorance among the population (and especially among the young) and second, the identification of a number of societal changes which may further reduce the level of political knowledge and the commitment of Australians to democracy.

This paper has presented findings which confirm the results of other studies and support a claim central to the argument presented in the Report -- that the level of knowledge of Australian 14-year-olds about

political institutions is fairly low.

The Report decries political ignorance, apathy and cynicism. It recommends a series of measures to improve the level of political knowledge, particularly among young people. The Committee rightly recognises that knowledge of the democratic processes does not necessarily lead to a commitment to those processes. Although attitudes to politicians are not the same as attitudes to politics or democracy, a negative attitude to politicians might well be associated with a certain cynicism about politics (and, by extension, democracy). This paper presents results which support the view that knowledge of politics and attitudes to (at least an element of) the political process are not related.

The relationship between the teaching of civics or politics in schools and the effect on the attitudes of students to politics is problematic.

Torney-Purta, for instance, notes a result from re-analysis of data from an international study of civics education in ten countries:

. . . stress on rote learning and on patriotic ritual within the classroom tended to be negatively related to civic education outcomes, while the opportunity to express an opinion in class has a positive effect (1994: 4).

It is difficult to try to engineer changes in attitudes, especially of the young. The possibility of unintended consequences is high. We can perhaps be thankful that the results presented in this paper did not show that the more young people knew about politics, the more cynical they became. Possibly for many people in Australia this would not have been an unexpected outcome.

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Political Knowledge and Political Attitudes a Study of Australian 14-year-olds