Outside the Mortgage Belt: Homeless Youth, Voting and Citizenship

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Abstract:
In representative democracies such as Australia the universal right of suffrage gives citizens the right to elect representatives to parliament. Despite the claim of ‘universality’ some individuals are explicitly denied this right and others persistently fail to take it up. This latter group includes youth and homeless people. This paper explores the themes of ‘home’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘the right of franchise’ with emphasis on the meaning of home in a cultural and political context in Australia’s representative democracy. These themes are explored through the eyes of young people with compromised access to a home. I argue that the ‘citizen-subject’ of representative democracies is one who has a ‘home’ and that young homeless people ‘outside the mortgage belt’ are thus ‘outside’ of citizenship. I discuss the disenfranchisement of homeless young people in the contexts of the assumption of Australia’s representative democracy that citizens have a ‘home’ they can be represented ‘at’, their limited capacity to exercise the right of suffrage due to their lack of a home, and the invisibility of the homeless as citizen-subjects of political discourse.

Introduction
In liberal democratic societies citizenship is associated with the acquisition of particular rights. The ‘democracy’ component of the liberal democratic equation confers on citizens the right of franchise to elect representatives to govern on their behalf. In Australia the franchise is both a right and a duty. Ostensibly, Australia, like most liberal democratic nations, has a universal franchise. In its broadest sense this means that the right and duty of voting for elected representatives is extended to all citizens. In practice this actually means that all citizens (with some exclusions made on the basis of age, mental capacity,
incarceration and immigrant status) are granted the right of, and are expected to fulfil the duty of, voting. Some Australians are thus explicitly denied the right of suffrage. Others consistently and persistently do not take up this right, or fulfil the obligation to vote. Amongst these are some identifiable groups, two of which are young people and those who have compromised access to a home.

This paper investigates the interconnected themes of ‘home’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘the right of franchise’ with emphasis on the meaning of home in a cultural and political context in Australia’s representative democracy. This is explored through the eyes and voices of young Australians who lack a home. In this investigation I draw upon data obtained from the Youth Electoral Study (YES) that examines young people’s attitudes towards voting, democracy and participation. I argue in this paper that the ‘citizen subject’ at the heart of Australia’s representative democracy is conceptualised as one who has a home, and that young homeless people are thus in significant ways outside the realm of citizenship in Australia. Demonstrations of this include the assumption of Australia’s representative democracy that citizens have a ‘home’ they can be represented ‘at’, their limited capacity to exercise the right of suffrage due to their lack of a home, and the invisibility of the homeless as citizen-subjects of political discourse.

**Extending Rights or Extending Citizenship: Homelessness and the Franchise**

Relatively little has been written on the issue of the access of the homeless to the right of the franchise. However this paper draws from two bodies of literature that discuss elements of this issue.

The first are two studies of voting and homelessness amongst a range of age groups in Australia (PILCH 2005; AEC 2005). Noted in both is that few homeless people are enrolled to vote. Some indicate they do not wish to enrol or vote however, a significant number would like to, but do not feel able (AEC 2005: 9; PILCH 2005: 25). Lack of interest in voting is attributed to feelings variously of ‘futility’ and ‘apathy’ (AEC 2005: 11; PILCH 2005: 6). Lack of ability to enrol and vote is attributed in part to the difficulties inherent in enrolling to vote without a residential address. Here the centrality of ‘home’ to a construction of the ‘citizen subject’ who is granted the right of franchise in Australia’s representative democracy is apparent. In order to enrol as an ‘ordinary
elector’ in Australia, individuals must have resided at a fixed address for one month. It is possible to enrol as an ‘itinerant elector’, but this is bureaucratically complex and still requires that electors nominate a division to enrol in (PILCH 2005: 28). Due to the transience of the homeless this may pose problems when actually voting (if they are required to vote away from this division or interstate) and it may also mean that they are obliged to choose a division that, when voting, they may have no interest or investment in.

Remedies suggested in these reports for enfranchising the homeless include further opening up the ‘itinerant roll’ to homeless people, arranging for transport to polling booths and putting polling booths in more accessible places. These strategies will no doubt make it easier for some homeless people to vote. Kathleen Arnold argues, however, that the issue of ‘enfranchising the homeless’ is more complex than instituting reforms that leave unchallenged current cultural definitions of citizenship. For Arnold, citizenship is a culturally defined condition, as well as being associated with the conferral of rights. Put simply, Arnold makes the claim that that having a ‘home’ confers upon an individual attributes that define and constitute citizenship in both political and cultural contexts, and that the lack of a home puts an individual outside of the realm of citizenship. Central to citizenship the home is a pre-condition for political identity and activity (Arnold 2004: 58). Arnold describes homeless people as ‘politically disenfranchised’ and excluded from the modern nation-state (Arnold 2004: 3).

Arnold employs a broad definition for disenfranchisement as delineating the ‘outside’ of the realm of citizenship. Her claim is a bold one and based on an analysis of many aspects of homelessness and ‘remedies’ for homelessness in social policy and social work. The substance of her multifaceted argument will not be at issue here. What will be of concern is the relevance of her argument to a study of voting and the homeless. Indeed despite her frequent use of the term she rarely refers to voting, the central act of democratic citizenship. By contrast, the reports mentioned above do discuss voting, and they emphasise the importance of a right of access. But in concentrating on the structural barriers to voting they do not situate homelessness in a broader context or examine wider notions of citizenship. When considered together it is evident from these literatures that ‘having a home’ is central to both the cultural definition of citizenship and the place of
this cultural definition in the political discourse that frames the legislative right and duty of suffrage in Australia’s representative democracy. The question is raised, then, of the place of the homeless in this representative democracy.

**The Youth Electoral Study: Aims and Methodology**

The primary aim of YES is to discover why it is that many young Australians are reluctant to enrol and vote. In Australia it is estimated that approximately 95% of the eligible population overall are enrolled to vote, but that only around 80% of eligible youth between eighteen and twenty-five years are enrolled. Thus YES is exploring aspects of the meanings of voting, participation and democracy as well as barriers that may inhibit access with a broad range of young people in sixteen diverse Commonwealth Electoral Divisions across Australia. This paper focuses on young people (aged 17-25) who are identified as in some way marginalised through poverty, unemployment, homelessness or similar circumstances.

Youth participants were approached through a number of service organisations such as drop-in centres, accommodation agencies and counselling services in a small representative cross-section of our total sample of electoral divisions. We also interviewed key professionals in these organisations in order to provide us with further context regarding the organisation and the general issues faced by clients. To date, 34 young people and 12 youth workers have participated (research is on-going).

Interviews with youth professionals were semi-structured, audio-taped and conducted in small groups. With regard to youth participants we desired to enable young people with a full and free voice with which to discuss their attitudes and opinions. It was decided that the best way to achieve this aim was via a focus group methodology. This methodology assisted in overcoming power imbalances between researchers and subjects and it also enabled texture, that is, for a multiplicity of views within a group, and for researchers to observe peer interactions. Our chosen methodology was based on Kreuger (1988). Interviews were semi-structured and audio-taped.

In accessing marginalised young people we encountered constraints of client confidentiality and access. To overcome constraints, our focus group methodology was complemented in some instances with written surveys administered by researchers or
staff of centres. These written survey instruments were adapted from the original focus group instrument and kept as close as possible to allow for cross-comparison. Where staff administered the survey they were fully briefed as to the aims of the project and also in survey technique.

All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. To this end all individuals, organisations, and divisions have been given pseudonyms. Where quotes are used they are verbatim but may have been edited slightly to improve readability.

**The Voices of Homeless Youth: Home, Voting and the Meaning of the Franchise**

Before discussing the views of homeless youth regarding voting, it is necessary to define ‘homelessness’. Official definitions of homelessness in Australia differentiate between primary, (where the person is without a roof and is sleeping rough) secondary, (where they have shelter but where this is temporary and transitional only) and, tertiary, (where a person has some access to basic long term accommodation, but where they lack the security of a lease) homelessness³. It has been estimated that there are around 100,000 homeless Australians. Of these, 26% are between the ages of twelve and eighteen and 10% are between nineteen and twenty-five (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2003: 4).

Homelessness is multi-textured and complex and not easily reducible to categories or definitions. Youth professionals interviewed in YES described both the transience of their clients and the difficulties encountered in finding them accommodation. Giles, the manager of Docklands Youth Housing Agency, in the outer suburbs of a major capital city, described the inadequacy of crisis accommodation and public housing. Giles’ clients were frequently moved from residence to residence on short-term leases. Between leases clients used crisis accommodation if they were lucky and local parks if they were not. At the Seaside Youth Centre, in an inner suburb of a capital city, Morris described the prevalence of ‘couch-surfing’ (moving from living-room to living-room of friends and relatives) amongst his clients. The situation was frequently more acute in rural areas. Due to a nearby mining operation Palmville was experiencing a shortage of accommodation resulting in high property prices. Alice, from the Palmville Youth Drop-In Centre, reported that young people unable to afford high rents often slept in cars on local beaches.
Young people told similar stories. We asked them how many times they had moved in the last three years. At the Seaside Youth Centre Maya was unable to tell us how many times she had moved. She had lost count. Toby and Batya had moved eight or nine times. The least that anyone here had moved was three times. Participants at the Palmville Youth Drop-in Centre told a similar story. Alfie and Mia were constantly mobile. They had lived with relatives and friends and sometimes in rental accommodation. They had also lived in Alfie’s car for eight months due to an inability to afford accommodation elsewhere. When asked to estimate the number of times he had moved Alfie ‘lost count at 25’. Wally had moved around Australia looking for work, always returning to Palmville because of family and community connections. He was without accommodation when interviewed, but shortly travelling for work yet again. He expected to find accommodation in his place of work.

This reveals the complexity of housing for many young people. Some, like Maya, Alfie and Mia may be homeless by established definitions, others, like Wally, are transient. The essential issues are that few had security of housing and all were highly mobile. Changes of address and only limited time in each abode, crucially, were frequent. In many cases participants would not fulfil the criteria of one month’s residency in any abode to allow them to enrol and vote as ordinary electors. In others maintaining correct enrolment would require constant amendments to their address. Also crucial was that few described a place that they could really call ‘home’ in the sense that it was a place that they identified with, were resident at, or which could provide a locus for them to be represented ‘at’.

In examining the effect of homelessness on access to the franchise YES found a marked tendency for these youth not to be enrolled to vote. For example, of the group at Seaside Youth Centre, only one, Talcott, was enrolled to vote, and he had only voted once. This he attributed to his mobility. Since enrolling he had moved eight or nine times through three different states and had found voting difficult as a result. He said, ‘I’ve got a heap of fines built up. It is just that I move so much and you have to vote in the area that you live so I could not vote’. Of the group at the Palmville Youth Drop-in Centre only Alfie had enrolled. Alfie thought he was still on the electoral roll. However he also seemed confused, saying that he had updated his enrolment and also that he had found out he was
not enrolled when he went to vote. There was also some ambiguity about whether he had actually voted in the most previous federal election. Other interviewees also indicated they had enrolled to vote initially, but were unsure if they were still correctly enrolled due to changes of address.

Lack of access to a ‘home’ also impacted in other ways. Access to a home confers a stability on individuals that provides them the capacity to participate as citizens. Emotionally ‘home’ provides a place that individuals can identify with. Those who lack a home lack this stability and ‘place’. A common reason given by participants who were not enrolled to vote was that enrolling took time and energy, precious resources that in their daily struggle to acquire the basics of living they did not have. Where enrolling necessitated constant amendments, this task was made all the more arduous. Many thus told us they ‘had other things to worry about’ and that voting was ‘not important’. Dylan, from the Seaside Youth Centre, told us, ‘politics was pushed back at the furthest part of my brain, my safety was my issue’. Sandra had enrolled to vote, but she had since moved house, (six times in the last three years) and was unsure if she was still enrolled. She didn’t know how to re-enrol and was not interested in finding out, indicating that she had ‘other priorities’.

Clearly some of the reforms suggested in the reports discussed earlier would make it easier for these young people to enrol and vote. However it is also apparent that these reforms do not challenge the cultural definition of citizenship that colours the political discourse of voting in representative democracies, the assumption that a ‘citizen’ is an individual with access to a place they can call ‘home’. Demonstrated above is that the legislative context of voting assumes this cultural definition of an ‘ideal citizen subject’ with a stability of address and a place they can be represented ‘at’ and which they identify with as ‘home’.

Earlier ‘apathy’ and perceptions of ‘futility’ were mentioned as reasons for homeless people not voting (PILCH 2005; AEC 2005). Many youth participants in YES also indicated that politics and voting had no place in their lives. Themes of voting being ‘pointless’, and of ‘not caring’, were prevalent in the responses of many, as were indications that individuals felt excluded by politics, that it was irrelevant, or that they
were powerless to effect change. Cindy said that she ‘couldn’t care less’ about politics, and that it was ‘nothing to do with me’. Throughout her interview Kaya simply repeated the words ‘I don’t care’. Raelene repeated ‘it is not important’. In respect to voting Anja said ‘it has never made a difference’. Sandra said ‘no one listens anyway’. These participants considered themselves ‘outside’ of the realm of a meaningful participation in politics.

There may be many explanations for this. The lack of an emotional connection to a ‘home’, as discussed above, may be one. Another is that contemporary political discourse marginalises the homeless. Counterpoised against the categorisation of ‘homeless’ in Australia is the ‘ideal’ of homeownership. Indeed homeownership is the ‘great Australian dream’. The ‘ideal’ life-path is one that takes an individual on an ‘upward’ journey, including leaving the parental home, negotiating share-housing and the rental market, before finally owning their own home. One indication of the predication of citizenship in Australia on having a home is the prevalence of the ‘home owning’ or ‘aspiring to own’ citizen-subject political discourse. Homeless people do sometimes feature as a subject of this discourse, but they are not the ‘citizen subject’ that is its focus. This citizen owns, is buying, or has the capacity to aspire to buy a home.

‘The Mortgage Belt’ and interest rates featured prominently in the 2004 Federal election campaign. Indeed in announcing this election Prime Minister Howard asked voters ‘who do you trust to keep interest rates low (Howard 2004)?’ In their analysis of the 2004 pre-election budget Shelter Australia note the disparity in funding to crisis accommodation and accommodation support programs with the ‘first homebuyers allowance’ (Shelter 2004a). In their analysis of housing policies of parties contesting the 2004 Federal election, they note the concentration of most parties on tax cuts for homebuyers to the exclusion of assistance for those experiencing homelessness (Shelter 2004b).

Conclusion: Outside of the Mortgage Belt, Outside of Citizenship

In a representative democracy predicated on having a ‘home’ at which to enrol to vote homeless people are in significant ways ‘outside’ the norm of the ‘citizen subject’. In practical terms this means that it is harder for them to enrol and vote, either because they lack a home at which to do so, and thus be represented ‘at’ or because their lack of a
home means they have compromised access to the resources necessary for democratic participation. Homeless people are also outside the centre of contemporary political discourse that assumes an affinity with ‘the mortgage belt’. In order to truly enfranchise the homeless not only must structural barriers be overcome, but the issue of their citizenship must also be addressed.

Footnotes

1 This paper is based on research conducted as part of the Youth Electoral Study (YES). YES is principally funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) with Industry Partner funding and in-kind contributions from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Acknowledgements are due to the Chief Investigators for the project, Murray Print from the University of Sydney, Lawrence Saha from the Australian National University as well as to our Partner Investigator, Brien Hallet. In addition, Paul Brosche, David Heath, Kris McKraken and Kate O’Malley contributed to data collection and/or analysis for this project. This paper acknowledges the group effort of researchers by describing the YES research team as ‘we’. However opinions expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author. Views and opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent those of the AEC.

2 These data were obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and are the best that current methods of modelling of enrolment data can provide. Figures quoted, however, are approximate only and may be subject to future revision.

3 For a complete explication of these terms see (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2003: 1-2).

References


