

Letter to Australia

Dear reader,

*I am writing this on the lands and waterways of the Minang people of the Noongar Clans and pay my respects to all Aboriginal people and their Elders with the recognition that this is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.*

As a society, we are at a crossroads. What we choose to do now will determine human and natural history into the future. As a cohort, young people will not just be disproportionately impacted by almost every global issue we face today, we will also be the leaders on these issues for years to come. It is more important than ever that young people are not only central to discussions about these issues but active participants in all spaces where decisions are being made.

Right now we are not being heard. I, and I am sure so many others, still feel the need to quieten our voices at work, at family dinners and in community spaces and that's just the beginning of it. I still feel, and am told, I am 'too much' – too passionate, too opinionated, too political – and being spoken over or ignored by someone who believes they know better.

This experience isn't exclusive to young people, but it is too often our reality. This is why I take the responsibility of writing this letter incredibly seriously. Being given a platform to have my voice heard as a young person is a privilege and I recognise the privilege I have as an able-bodied, highly educated person. I am also someone who grew up in low-socio-economic communities, have an estranged parent who suffers from addiction and am a survivor of sexual violence. I wage an ongoing battle with mental health. Diversity is vast and varied. Simply, like all of us, I am complex and have a story to tell but so often feel left out of the conversation.

There are simple and tangible ways to begin to turn the tide, but it will take open conversations, recognition of privilege and a conscious transferral of power. Young people should be seen as an asset for overcoming some of the world's biggest issues. So what can be done?

Firstly, young people must always be among the frontline responders to youth issues. We have to be in the room. It is equally vital that the lived experience of young people should be included in conversations that address other issues not necessarily specific to youth but that still deeply impact us. As previously stated, young people are disproportionately impacted by many of the global issues we face today, from mental health and unemployment to the impacts of Covid19.

There must be meaningful opportunities for young people to have their voices heard, such as a peak body for youth at state and national levels.

In order for young people to participate in the conversation, we need equal and fair employment opportunities and adequate support to access these. This means looking at the

barriers to education and employment and addressing them proactively rather than hindering access to subsidies like youth allowance or increasing university fees.

Young people's lived experiences, diversity, passion, and commitment to cause should be seen as sought-after attributes for potential employers. The approach dominating our job markets which mostly prioritises years in the field and traditional qualifications misses the opportunities that young people bring to the modern workplace.

While quotas aren't always the answer, they can be a good place to start to ensure young people are heard, valued and included in spaces where they aren't usually invited.

Most importantly, the public narrative around youth needs to be addressed. Both media and government need to be highlighting and valuing the contributions of young people in our society, not perpetuating the stereotype that we are lazy, apathetic and selfish. Such stereotyping is not just harmful and reckless, it is also untrue. These labels disenfranchise and exclude us from making change in any meaningful way. This is the responsibility of those in power to amend and it can be done simply by giving young people the opportunities to speak and be heard.

**So this is my call to action:** If you are a leader or if you hold the ability to make decisions about our communities and our collective futures - ask yourself: *who isn't in the room?* Question if you are making space for all the voices that need to be heard, not just the ones you're used to listening to. This isn't us versus them, one without the other or the segregation of age groups. This is the recognition of a need for change. Without young voices in the conversation we are failing people and missing opportunities. Change is coming whether we like it or not. Young people can ensure it's the right kind of change.

Sincerely,  
Shani Cain