

# Democracy

By *Beate Matthies*, Chair, Auckland District Council of Social Services

We are heading towards June and towards our **ADCOSS AGM** (see below). Each of our paid-up members will have a vote and can nominate a person to come onto the Executive Committee. A Committee of volunteers who are dedicating many hours of free time every month to support the communities in the Auckland Isthmus. Becoming a Committee member is connected to being “committed”, working towards a just society where everybody has the chance to voice concerns, suggestions, and ideas.

During our **Strategic Planning Meeting** in January 2017 we identified ADCOSS as a network that creates spaces for participatory public (social, economic, educational) discussions, and that engages with communities and co-designs appropriate actions to meet emerging needs. ADCOSS is not an organisation that tells the communities what to do – it rather creates space, enables, engages, educates, and raises awareness for issues relevant in the Auckland Isthmus.

We are fortunate to live in a democratic country in which this kind of organisation is accepted and actively supported by Council and Local Boards. Democracy is precious and should never be taken for granted. Many countries have suffered from dictatorships which often led to conflicts and wars. We, here in New Zealand, are living in a country which prides itself for being the first nation in the world to give women the right to vote.

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When *Kate Shepherd* fought for this right, she was ridiculed and laughed at, but she believed in what she was fighting for. Today, 101 years later, we cannot even imagine women not being allowed to vote!

However, when I talked to some young people the other day, I realised that they didn't even know what the term "democracy" meant. These young people were 16 and 17 years old. Only one or two years to go and they would have been able to vote. Yet, it seemed like they were not interested in it and said that they were not taught about it at school. They were not aware of how hard people were fighting in history to secure this right. They were not aware that voting can have a huge impact in our daily lives.

Some people think that by not voting, they would show the politicians that they were not happy with them. I find this attitude very disappointing. We should always remember that **by not voting we are voting for every single party equally!**



Voting is not only a right, it is also a moral obligation and a responsibility. Non-voters should never complain about politics or politicians.

I think that we also have a responsibility towards the younger generation. The young people should know how

the voting system works, how governments work, and what impacts certain politics may have.

Democracy only works with informed voters. We might sometimes feel inundated with information, but we have to make an effort to read the information carefully and to look behind possible polemics. Participatory democracy advocates active citizens who follow politics closely and give input to governments before and after decisions are taken.

ADCOSS is one of the organisations that is connected to people who work at the grass roots. By listening to their concerns and creating spaces for discussions, their voices are heard. This is relevant for the Auckland Isthmus, but thanks to the umbrella organisation Community Networks Aotearoa (CNA) these voices reach Wellington and national politics.

ADCOSS and many other networks depend highly on volunteers. An unknown author once said:

“Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.”



Let's remember *National Volunteer Week* (see page 31) from 18-24 June, 2017 and the *General Elections* on 23 September!

