

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

13 August 2018

Dear Committee members,

RE: Submission to the Inquiry on the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018.

Our thanks to the committee for the opportunity to submit to the inquiry into the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018*. The Bill suggests significant changes to our political system, that have the potential to create a more inclusive and representative forum and thus the proposals deserve close attention. Young people have much to offer our political system, with many seeking active ways of making positive change for Australia. They are thoughtful, innovative and engaged actors whose political agency is often overlooked, in part, due to entrenched social beliefs about the “ideal” voting constituent. Indeed, the political and social capacity of young people is often dismissed and disregarded, and this weakens and limits opportunities for full and robust democratic practice. The engagement of young people in politics, through a lowering of the voting age and by allowing electoral enrolment from 14, as proposed in the bill, has the capacity to provide a more diverse political dialogue that will be beneficial for all Australians. As researchers who focus on the capacities of children and youth to contribute to peace, security and development in contexts affected by conflict, we are profoundly aware of the importance of including youth in the structures and institutions of a society in order to create durable and embedded political and social change. We believe that our expertise provides particular insights into the importance of allowing young people to participate fully in democratic processes here in Australia as well. In particular, allowing youth to actively participate in the political process has the potential to facilitate meaningful reform of the social systems and structures; which many Australians believe have become unresponsive to the evolving interests of everyday Australian citizens.

We write this submission in support of the key proposals of this Bill to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds and to allow electoral enrolment from 14. Such a move would recognise young people as having agency and the desire to participate in, and contribute to, their communities. It would recognise that young people already participate in and contribute to their communities. The reforms outlined in this proposal, would go some way toward hearing and acknowledging the voices of youth in our community, who today engage with the political dialogue from the margins of Australian society. Allowing youth the chance to participate in one of the most fundamental democratic practices, voting and/or registering to vote, would send a clear message that we as adults and leaders; take seriously the agency and interests of the young people in our community.

Sixteen and seventeen year olds work and pay taxes, attend higher education institutions, thus accumulating HELP debts, and plan for their futures that may involve families, and home or business ownership. In addition, they are one of the largest consumer demographics across Australian society; as not only do they purchase goods and dine in restaurants, they also consume health services (both physical and psychological), they drive cars that need registering and take public transport. Despite their contributions to the economy, to their communities, and their futures, they are not eligible to help decide how decisions are made about these systems and structures. Young people do not only contribute economically; they are a key part of our society and communities, volunteering, learning, leading in multiple ways. They have a strong sense of civic responsibility and are taught in school the value of active social engagement and the importance of being a part of a community. **Enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds is a clear recognition that these people matter to Australia's democracy and deserve a say in their futures.** It would demonstrate to the youth of Australia that we hear their voices and we trust that they have the passion and will to make decisions about the future direction of their communities.

Recognition that 16-17 year olds can and should be given the opportunity to "have a say" is a central theme of the international human rights dialogue with respect to children and youth. Australia has long been considered a leader in the development of children's rights, as one of the key parties to the establishment of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Article 12 of the *UNCRC*, of which Australia is a signatory, clearly states that young people should be given the right to participate in processes about issues that affect them:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.¹

The proposals in this Bill would allow Australia to remain a leader in the rights and engagement of young people and would continue Australia's commitment to ensuring that it fulfils its obligations under the UNCRC. In doing so, Australia would join several other countries around the world, which already allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote. 16-year-olds can vote in Scotland, Argentina, Austria, and Brazil amongst others. 17-year-olds can vote in Indonesia, East Timor and Sudan. A decade ago at the Australia 2020 Summit youth delegates recommended that young people should be enfranchised in Australia and this should occur at 16.² Australia should be encouraging its youth to participate in the democratic process, as this engagement will ensure that the future generation is politically socialised. Studies of youth voting in other countries have demonstrated that the process of political socialisation can lead to good voting habits and higher civic engagement in later life.³

It is clear that when young people are able to participate in democratic processes; evidence suggests they take the opportunity with both hands. Evidence from the Scottish Independence referendum, where 16 and 17 year olds were allowed to vote showed higher

¹ United Nations. 1989. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

² Australian Government. 2008. *Australia 2020 Summit: Final Report*.

³ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 1999. *Youth Voter Participation* [online] <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/youth-voter-participation.PDF>

turn-out than 18-25 year olds⁴, and that 16 and 17 year olds accessed more information from a wider range of sources than any other age group.⁵

Popular perceptions of youth as disengaged and uninterested in politics have profound implications, as it is assumed youth themselves are not invested. However, in recent years the Federal Government has removed many formal mechanisms for communicating with youth: there is no current Minister or Office for Youth, and no national peak body. Evidence suggests that while youth are less likely to join a political party than previous generations, they instead engage more commonly around issue-based politics and policies.⁶ Young people, like any demographic, have a wide range of desires, interests, interactions and engagements with politics. **Claims that youth are disengaged and apathetic need to be placed in the context of structures that limit young people's opportunities for participation**, and a political climate which repeatedly tells young people their issues and future are not of concern to politicians. Changes to higher education funding, lack of action on climate change, changes to penalty rate structures for hospitality workers, and housing affordability among many others indicate to youth that their priorities are not aligned with those in formal leadership positions. Additionally, inaction on these issues suggests that we are failing to hear the voices of youth.

Children and youth are a unique demographic, facing specific experiences and challenges. Democracy is strengthened by diversity and the inclusion of marginalised groups and a multiplicity of viewpoints. Enabling this demographic an opportunity to participate will strengthen civic participation, enhance political engagement, and bolster representativeness in our federal parliament.

With the above points in mind we suggest that the following be considered in relation to the proposed Bill:

- *Extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds.* Such a proposal will enable politically engaged youth to have a say in the present and future of our country. We recognise there are legal questions in relation to Australia's practice of compulsory voting, the proposal to make this voluntary for 16 and 17 year olds, and existing expert opinions on this topic. However, allowing the process to be voluntary enables young people to familiarise themselves with the process. Voluntary engagement would help create good voting habits, and more broadly politically socialise youth, which will ultimately have a positive long-term impact on the future of Australian democracy.
- *Permit 16 and 17 year olds to vote in referenda and plebiscites.* We suggest, even if the proposal for voluntary voting in elections is not pursued, that the Committee considers the proposal to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in significant public

⁴ Baxter, Graeme, Elizabeth Tait, Peter McLaverty, and Iain MacLeod. 2014. "The Scottish independence referendum shows that young people can be mobilized politically given the right circumstances" <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2015/11/07/the-scottish-independence-referendum-shows-that-young-people-can-be-mobilized-politically-given-the-right-circumstances/>

⁵ Eichhorn, J. 2014. 'How lowering the voting age to 16 can be an opportunity to improve youth political engagement: Lessons learned from the Scottish Independence Referendum, Dipart: Think Tank for Political Participation.

⁶ Chou, Mark, Jean-Paul Gagnon, Catherine Hartung, and Lesley J. Pruitt. 2017. *Young People, Citizenship and Political Participation: Combating Civic Deficit?* Rowman & Littlefield.

opportunities for input such as referenda and plebiscites as changes made through these mechanisms have enduring impacts on the nation. In addition, this proposal would complement/ respond to recent trends in Australia, which indicate that youth are enthusiastic and responsive to issue-based politics.

- *Allow those younger than 16 to enrol in preparation for voting once they reach legal age.* Such a proposal will enable young people to prepare and enrol while still supported by institutional and family structures. It provides an opportunity to enhance and build on existing civics education. In addition, this element of the proposed bill would facilitate and support young people's interest in the political process and the role of citizens in a democracy. In doing so, it would further facilitate the process of political socialisation amongst young people.

Together, these proposals allow meaningful space for engagement, and inclusion of young people's voice. They recognise the structural barriers to youth engagement currently, and by enfranchising this demographic enhance the strength and responsiveness of our democracy. Significantly, these proposals have the potential to improve relationships between the leaders of today and tomorrow, as they will go some way towards hearing and acknowledging the political interests of youth and thus help to establish greater bonds of trust.

Sincerely

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