THE YOUTH AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
PO Box 334, Leederville WA 6903

T: (08) 9227 5440
T: 1800 670 231 (Regional)
F: (08) 9328 7446
E: yacwa@yacwa.org.au

Facebook: www.facebook.com/yacwa
Twitter: www.twitter.com/yacwa
YouTube: www.youtube.com/yacwa

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

To the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL AMENDMENT (LOWERING VOTING AGE AND INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION) BILL 2018

I write to you on behalf of the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) to express my utmost support for the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018 (the Bill) currently before the Committee for review.

A population of politically engaged citizens, regardless of age, is a cornerstone of Australia's democracy and system of government. For this to be a reality, Australia must foster civics engagement at an early age, and provide young people with the education, tools and rights for lifelong participation in the political decisions that affect their lives so profoundly.

This Bill takes important and vital steps towards creating a national culture that fosters lifelong political engagement, and to reinvigorating Australia's democracy and starting a national conversation on how it must respond to the challenges of globalization.

By providing young people aged 16 and 17 with non-compulsory voting rights, the Bill sends a message to young people that they have value as citizens, their contributions to society are important, and their political opinions are being heard. It is a vital opportunity to strengthen, not erode, our systems of government and national identity.

International and national contexts support reform

As a party to the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Australia has an obligation to ensure the meaningful participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect them, either directly or through an appropriate representative body[i]. Since the defunding of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies in 2014, no meaningful or appropriate body for this participation has existed. Since 2013, there has been no federal minister representing youth affairs in Australian parliament.

Without robust accountability in our political processes and commitment to meaningful input, public trust wanes. However Australian public trust in government is at an all–time low according to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, with only 35 per cent of Australians reporting trust in their governments[ii]. This is despite initiatives such as the *2016–19 Open Government National Action*

Plan, and the Victorian Government's *Public Sector Reform Agenda*. It stands to reason that providing young people the right to non-compulsory voting would constitute a significant step towards Australia's progress in upholding this convention and re-establish government and politician accountability to young people.

It is important to note that the introduction of this Bill is not without precedent, with similar measures to lower the voting age being debated and implemented internationally. Countries including Austria, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Scotland, the Philippines, Argentina, Nicaragua, Brazil and Ecuador have all successfully implemented lowered voting ages in national elections.

Countries that have explored lowered voting ages have seen promising outcomes through increased political engagement, confidence engaging with electoral processes, and greater political discourse within schools[iii]. Within Austria & Norway, young people aged 16–17 had a higher turnout compared to 18–20-year-old first time voters and had a similar turnout rate compared to the general population[iv]. Within Scotland, 97 per cent of 16–17-year old young people permitted to vote for the first time indicated their intention to do so in future. These statistics paint a promising picture for fostering lifelong political engagement through a lowered voting age.

Young people possess the skills to meaningfully contribute to our democracy

It stands to reason that any measure to provide young people with voting rights must also consider their ability to engage with electoral processes. It is YACWA's strong opinion that young people aged 16–17 are highly politically engaged and possess the maturity necessary for meaningful decision-making around voting.

Youth Coalition's 2016 *Rate Canberra Survey* found that 61 per cent of respondents aged 16-17 years old and 62 per cent of all respondents aged 12-25 were in favour of lowering the non-compulsory voting age to 16. Findings from the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes also indicated that 71 per cent of respondents across all age groups supported the notion that young people aged 15-18 years old should be able to influence government decisions[v].

Despite this, young people in Australia are often the subject of a false narrative that they are apathetic, or otherwise lacking in the political maturity and life experience necessary to participate in democratic activities. This is in stark contrast to the plethora of youth-led social movements in recent history, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the 2018 March For Our Lives protest, and the ongoing national discourse on Australia's own refugee and asylum seeker policies[vi]. In each of these, young people have been key drivers and proponents of political movements. It cannot be argued that young people lack the interest in political processes required to vote.

Further, YACWA's own data has found in favour of young people's interest in politics. A 2017 survey of 327 young people by YACWA found that 67 per cent of respondents took an active interest in politics. Conversely, 74 per cent of respondents felt politicians did not understand issues affecting young people, and 67.5 per cent felt the electoral process did not effectively engage with young people. When considered in the context of traditionally lower voting ages among young people, these findings suggest that despite interest in politics, young people's participation in electoral processes are hampered by ineffective civics education and political engagement strategies by major parties and the Australian Electoral Commission.

Concerns surrounding young people's ability to navigate electoral processes and their decision-making abilities are easily addressed. Peer-reviewed studies have found young people's decision-making and judgement abilities are on par with those of adults, especially when supported by reasonable timeframes and the potential for consultation[vii]. The nature of non-compulsory voting further supports this, allowing those who feel prepared to exercise their right to participate, and young people whose interest does not lie in politics to abstain.

Final remarks

Young people are often characterised as 'becoming' rather than already 'being' citizens. Despite this characterisation, young people make significant contributions to our economy and our social and cultural national identity. Young people aged 16-17 can participate in many of the same activities and decisions as adults, including working full-time, living independently, and paying tax. Young people are active and contributing members of our national society, and should be afforded the opportunity to participate in shaping its future through our democracy.

Youth engagement and participation in political governance is at the core of what YACWA stands for and tries to achieve. In the 40 years of our existence as an organisation, we have seen the passion and integrity of young people inherent in our young people on a daily basis.

In the face of global increasing political divides, affording Australian young people non-compulsory voting rights provides the opportunity to strengthen their civic engagement on a lifelong basis, and to reinvent Australia's democracy in the 21st century.

Yours Faithfully,

Ross Wortham
Chief Executive Officer
9 August 2018

References

[i] Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from: https://www.humanrights.gov.au/convention-rights-child

[ii] Ries, T., Bersoff, D., Adkins, S., Armstrong, C. & Bruening, J. (2018). *2018 Edelman Trust Barometer*. Retrieved from: https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer.

[iii] Hill, M., Lockyer, A., Head, G. & McDonald, C. (2017). Voting at 16 – lessons for the future from the Scottish Referendum. *Scottish Affairs, 26*(1), 48-68.

[iv] Zeiglovits, E. & Zandonella, M. (2011). Political interest among young Austrians before and after lowering the voting age: the case of Austria. *Journal of Youth Studies, 16*(8), 1084-1104.

[v] Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Inc. (2016). *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes – 2016 – Role of Government*.

[vi] Relman, E. (2018, March 27). Meet the 6 impressive teenagers who are leading a massive gun-control movement after the Parkland massacre. *Business Insider Australia*. Retrieved from: https://www.businessinsider.com.au/who-are-young-people-leading-march-for-our-lives-gun-control-movement-2018-3?r=US&IR=T.

[vii] Johnson, S., Blum, R. & Giedd, J. (2009). Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 45*(3), 216-221.