

Submission to the inquiry on the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018

I write to you as a young person (25) with a family of younger siblings, who are all politically aware and engaged. I have lived for years in communities and social networks of young people variously interested in and appalled by politics.

I watched Senate proceedings, committee hearings, press conferences and studied party advertising and policy websites well before I turned 18. When I turned 16, I had participated eagerly in election campaigns, I had engaged in long conversations with my school friends about the political events of the time, and I had developed a strong knowledge of the various parties and ideologies represented in our system.

When I was younger, and this is still true of my siblings, there were times when we would have to explain civics concepts or political news to adults much older than ourselves.

Often this meant a non-voter explaining basic civics concepts to long-time voters.

There is a common myth that young people are disengaged from politics – but that’s not true. Young people are certainly disengaged from established political parties and norms, which reflects a systemic failure by our institutions to adapt to the aspirations and wishes of new generations. This generational gap is reflected across policy areas, across legislatures and is felt in the day to day lives of young people around the country.

Modern politics, the economy and the state have become increasingly alien to our lives.

Lowering the voting age to 16 is an important step in allowing young people to take a more direct approach in engaging with our political institutions and processes. This reform provides young people a meaningful option for affecting change, and would prevent the experience of helplessness and alienation which I and my younger siblings became so used to feeling at election time.

Including the voices of young people would also bring in talent better equipped to deal with technically complex new areas of policy like copyright claim abuse, privacy protections, consumer rights in the age of streaming, lootbox gambling, emerging media and the increasing importance of software to the ways we work, live and play. Subjects relevant to our daily lives which, quite frankly, continue to be ignored by the current crop of policymakers, as emerging issues will always be ignored while policy is decided by people three or more times our age.

Including more young people and encouraging involvement in the official processes at a younger age means new blood for all political stripes and parties. It simply means giving representation to an increasingly aware and savvy demographic who until now have been excluded from decisions which will shape our lives as much – or more – than the lives of older citizens.

I strongly endorse the proposal to lower the voting age.

- Robert O’Keefe
Private Citizen