

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

Paige Burton
2017 Australian Youth Representative to the UN

Dear Secretary,

Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018

I write to you as a young person, and as the 2017 Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations. During my time as the Australian Youth Representative, I wanted to try and answer the question ‘what would society look like if imagined young people in their complexity? What if we saw our young people as a product of their values, experiences, knowledge, creativity, and not just of their age?’ So, I asked tens of thousands of young Australians to tell me what they wish their representatives knew, and considered, about them when making policy. I ran thousands of consultations, surveyed tens of thousands of young Australians across every Federal Electorate in Australia.

The top ten issues raised in the consultation, in order, were: Gender equality, housing affordability, climate change, marriage equality, improving healthcare, cost of tertiary education, closing the gap, people seeking asylum, youth unemployment, and youth involvement in politics. For too long we have dehumanised young people by imagining them as merely young.

The “youth/ adult issues” construct is a false one. “Youth issues” don’t exist in silos. There’s a temptation to think that the issues that affect young people are exclusively found online, in schools, or involve peer pressure. All issues affect young people, and young people influence all issues. Young people face many of the same barriers as adults. And like adults, they experience inequalities as a result of negative stereotypes about gender, sexuality, disability, race and other aspects of their identity. Whilst a large majority of Australian young people I surveyed can name their local political representatives, most of them feel disconnected from the decisions they make. In this regard, youth disengagement is an enemy of progress and an ally of inequality.

Young people all over Australia spoke to me about issues relating to the cost of living, unemployment, and economic productivity. They shared the impact of education — both formal and informal on their lives. They articulated the importance of access to health services, programs, and quality public infrastructure. Young people expressed their harrowing experiences of environmental disaster, of unemployment, of forced migration, of family violence, and of abuse relating to their sexuality and gender identity. These issues aren’t important to young people because they will affect them in the future, but because they live with the consequences of decisions on these issues right now.

Young Australians deserve a formal say in deciding their futures. The challenges that we face as a society loom large before us, but so too does the untapped potential of young people, and it’s time for them to have the vote.

Regards,
Paige Burton
2017 Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations