



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

2 August, 2018

Dear Committee Members,

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

The Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response in relation to the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018.

YNOT is the peak body for young people and the non government youth sector in Tasmania. YNOT advocates for the needs and initiatives of young people and the youth sector, and aims to increase the participation and contribution of young people in Tasmania. We represent the interests of approximately 78,000 young people, 60 member organisations and 300 youth sector workers, through our regional networks, statewide.

As the peak body for youth affairs, YNOT supports the purpose of the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018 to lower the non compulsory voting age to 16 years.

YNOT understands that the potential consequences of lowering the voting age to 16 years have been publicly debated in Australia for many years. Whilst arguments against lowering the voting age include a perceived lack of maturity and political knowledge, apathy, disinterest in politics and lack of public support, YNOT's response seeks to outline the benefits of lowering the voting age and increasing voter participation.

YNOT firmly believes that all young people should be actively engaged in community life and have their voices heard on decisions that affect their lives.



Suite 4a, Mayfair Plaza, 236 Sandy Bay Road, Sandy Bay Tasmania 7005
p 03 6223 5511 f 03 6223 2255 m 0458 235 511
admin@ynot.org.au www.ynot.org.au abn 37 078 758 651

ynot is the peak body representing the voice of Tasmanian youth



Young people make significant and valuable contributions to the community are often enthusiastic and dedicated to participation in community activities and opportunities to be active citizens. In recent years, young people have demonstrated an overwhelming desire to contribute to decisions that affect them and their future and to have their voices heard. This could not be more evident than the recent plebiscite on same sex marriage that saw thousands of young people enrolling to vote.

‘Young people want to be involved in decision-making processes and should be afforded opportunities to do so within existing political structures.’¹

Federal policy debates and decisions relating to issues including penalty rates, income support, climate change, job security and employment have significant consequences for young people now and for future generations.

Lowering the voting age to 16 years will allow young people to have a say on policies that directly affect them and vote for candidates they believe best represent them. This view was held by young people who participated in the Australia 2020 Summit who recommended that young people should be enfranchised to have a say in policies that affect them, that the voting age should be lowered to 16 years and enrolling to vote should be optional.²

Currently, there are limited opportunities for young people to have their voices heard at a national level. Over the past five years, young Australians have watched the Federal Government systematically remove almost all of the mechanisms used to hear from and connect with the young people. There is no longer a Federal Minister for Youth, Office for Youth or a funded National Youth Peak body to represent the interests of young people.

Lowering the voting age to 16 years will provide a mechanism for young people to have a say on issues of importance to them, which YNOT believes is particularly important given the current absence of these other mechanisms. However it should be noted that this must be in addition to, not at the expense of, other youth consultative and participatory mechanisms.

YNOT acknowledges that there are other opportunities for young people to engage with political processes and national debates, such as joining political parties and political activity groups. However, research suggests that young people are becoming less inclined to align themselves with any one party³. Young people may not always support the policies and ideals of one particular party and opportunities to participate and engage with political parties are not always considered to be youth friendly.

In Australia, there are already a range of government regulated activities that recognise and support the right of young people under the age of 18 to make decisions regarding their own life. Young people aged 16 and 17 years of age can commence military service, obtain a

¹ ARVANITAKIS, J. MARREN, S. 2009 - PUTTING THE POLITICS BACK INTO POLITICS: YOUNG PEOPLE AND DEMOCRACY IN AUSTRALIA.

² COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA 2008. AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT; FINAL REPORT.

³ Collin, P., 2008. Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review.

provisional drivers license, make independent medical decisions, live independently, work full time, pay income tax and provide sexual consent⁴. In some instances, young people under the age of 16 can consent to independent medical treatment if they are deemed 'Gillick' Competent⁵.

YNOT believes that if a young person has the right to make decisions in relation to these activities, and is legally responsible for their actions, they should be empowered to have their say and take part in our democracy through enrolling and voting in elections.

Young people under the age of 18 years are capable of making decisions on important issues that impact their life. YNOT does not support the view that young people lack maturity to participate meaningfully in democratic processes and systems, as suggested by some critics. This view is inconsistent with the rights already extended to young Australians under the age of 18 years.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that young people have the right to participate in decision making processes 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 child⁶.'

YNOT acknowledges that young voter's aged 18-25 years have the lowest rate of election participation in Australia⁷. Many young people are currently disillusioned and distrustful of the electoral system which is demonstrated by low engagement levels. Lack of voter interest and motivation can largely be attributed to limited choices in candidates, lack of consultation and elected members of parliament not representing the interests of young people⁸. There is an apparent disconnect between government and young Australians.

McAllister's 2012 paper to the Australian Electoral Commission suggests that lowering the voting age would not increase political participation; however this argument is not supported by research undertaken overseas. Researchers in Austria, where the voting age was lowered to 16 years for national elections in 2007, have shown that in regional elections first time voters aged 16-17 years are more likely to vote than young people aged 18-20 years⁹. This can largely be attributed to awareness raising campaigns and increased civic and citizenship education in schools¹⁰.

⁴ Legal Aid Commission of Tasmania. Laws For The Under 18's Fact Sheet 2018

⁵ Allen, S. 2014-18. Minors (Children and Young People), Health Law Central.

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission. Convention on The Rights of The Child

⁷ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2009. The Case For Lowering The Voting Age to 16

⁸ Youth Network of Tasmania 2014. Y Your Vote Counts, Tasmanian Youth Forum Survey

⁹ Berry, R. Researcher, Democratic Audit, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014. How Young Is Too Young? The Case for Lowering the Voting Age.

¹⁰ Zeglövits, E. Aichholzer, J.2014. Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria, Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties.

YNOT supports the recommendation to keep the minimum age of compulsory voting, and eligibility to stand as a federal parliamentarian at 18 years of age. However, we do acknowledge that the transition from voluntary voting at 16 and 17 years of age, to compulsory voting at 18 years of age, does have the potential to cause confusion. The complexities of this particular recommendation require further consideration, however increased education through the Australian education system and awareness campaigns could mitigate the risk. YNOT believes this can be successfully overcome as there is already communication to young people about enrolling at the age of 16 but not being able to vote until the age of 18.

It is however imperative that young people under 18 years of age are provided with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the electoral process without being financially penalised. Young people in this cohort are generally low-income earners or receive no income at all. The benefits of engaging young people with democratic process and enhancing political participation far outweigh the benefits of enforcing a penalty notice.

YNOT also supports lowering the enrolment age from 16 to 14 years of age. YNOT believes this provides an opportunity to engage young people while they are at school to support their learning about civic responsibility and democracy. We understand that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has identified civics and citizenship education as a priority for all students in Australia¹¹ and that there is a range of classroom based teaching and learning packages available.

Investing in young people's understanding of civic responsibility and democracy at a young age and imbedding it in the Australian Curriculum will ultimately support young people to become fully engaged in Australia's democratic processes and systems, and encourage increased participation.

'teachers play a critical part in shaping young people's understanding of their role as citizens and future electors. In fact the work of the teaching profession help guides the work of our nation.'¹²

YNOT supports measures to reduce barriers to electoral participation however; we recognise that electoral day enrolment may present administrative and logistical challenges. We acknowledge that this proposed change may be resource intensive and potentially impact on the time it takes to finalise election results. YNOT believes that further debate on the merits of electoral day enrolment in reducing barriers to participation is required.

Furthermore, it is imperative that the needs of young people from all socio economic and cultural backgrounds are considered with regard to electoral participation. Targeted approaches are required for marginalised groups of young people including; Culturally and

¹¹ Australian Electoral Commission 2016. Democracy Rules: An Electoral Education Resource

¹² Australian Electoral Commission 2016. Democracy Rules: An Electoral Education Resource

Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities, young people with disabilities, transient young people, and those living in rural and remote areas. Highly vulnerable young people, including those experiencing homelessness, mental health or substance use issues, also require tailored strategies to minimise barriers to voter engagement.

In summary, YNOT believes young people are the experts in their life and should be involved in decision making processes that impact on them. Young people must be recognised and valued for the positive contributions they make to society and be given the opportunity to have their say on issues of importance to them.

Young people want to participate meaningfully in democratic processes and systems and should have the opportunity to do so. Lowering the vote to 16 years will increase young people's engagement with the political system and empower them to have a say on policy decisions that directly affect them now and in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response in relation to the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018. YNOT looks forward to the outcomes of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Tania Hunt
Chief Executive Officer
Youth Network of Tasmania