



Comment

on the

**Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee
on Education, Training
and Young People's**

Inquiry into Voting Age Eligibility

August 2006

INTRODUCTION

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra is built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered since European settlement. ACTCOSS celebrates the Ngunnawal's living culture and valuable contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage, and low-income citizens of the Territory. ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' objectives are representation of people living with disadvantage, the promotion of equitable social policy, and the development of a dynamic, collaborative and sustainable community sector.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

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ACTCOSS Comment on the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People's Inquiry into Voting Age Eligibility

Australians aged 16–25 are disproportionately affected by poor health, housing crisis, marginal employment and poor working conditions both in the ACT and at a national level. While all levels of parliament, to a certain extent, take into account the effect of policy on young people it is more often the case, as pointed out by Ariadne Vromen in her study of young people's political participation during the Howard decade, that policy is targeted toward voting-age citizens and therefore pays less attention to the issues and concerns of young people themselves. Excluding members of an age bracket experiencing disproportionate disadvantage arguably results in under-representation of the disadvantaged as a whole and leads to policy skewed toward residents in the older voting-age brackets where disadvantage is less prominent.

In Australia and the ACT young people experience a higher than average risk of living in poverty. This has been reinforced and intensified by the introduction of Work Choices IR legislation which negatively affects any worker with minimal skills and experience, little bargaining power or little confidence. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report into education and work which identifies young people at risk in the transition from education to work reported that in 2004 14 per cent of young people aged 15-19 years were not engaged in full-time education or full-time work, or in a combination of part-time education and part-time work.¹ There was considerable underemployment among young part-time workers. Of those who were engaged in full-time employment in 2005, the mean income was \$395 per-week.²

Housing problems are particularly severe for young people living in the ACT. The Ministerial Taskforce on Affordable Housing found a strong relationship between age and housing affordability. For those young people living in rented accommodation within the city with the highest rents in Australia,³ this poses a serious economic challenge not as frequently faced by ACT residents in the higher age brackets. As shown by the ACT Council of Social Service report on health inequalities in the ACT (2003) ACT residents in the voting-age bracket 18-25 regularly face many of the same economic, social and cultural challenges, but excluding 16-17 year old residents means that people facing these problems are under-represented.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Education and Work: Young People at Risk in the Transition from Education to Work', Australian Social Trends, 2005
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats>

² Dr Deb Foskey, *Legislative Assembly for the ACT Parliamentary Debates*, 29 March 2006, p.801.

³ Real Estate Institute of Australia, *Market Facts*, March quarter, 2006

Objections have been raised to the proposal that the franchise be extended to 16-17 year olds based on their lack of political engagement. Youth political engagement has been demonstrated to be present in many forms. The Youth Electoral Study (YES) carried out by Murray Print and Kathy Edwards of the University of Sydney and Lawrence Saha of the ANU indicated that of the survey respondents aged 16-17, 55 per cent had signed a petition, 21.2 per cent had collected signatures for a petition, 15 per cent had taken part in a rally or demonstration, 11.8 per cent had contacted media regarding a political issue and 9.9 per cent had written to or contacted a politician.⁴ Political engagement among 16-17 year olds reflects a wider trend in voting aged citizens, that is, the majority regarded 'politicians' and 'politics' as useless and of little concern to 'ordinary' people, but showed a high level of engagement where social movements and social issues such as refugees and asylum seekers, environmental issues, Indigenous land rights and the war in Iraq were concerned. This reflects the fact that youth are politically engaged but have, without option, refocused their political activity and engagement outside the arena of electoral politics. If given the option to engage with electoral politics and adequately informed via civics education, their political engagement could be refocused to incorporate an existing knowledge and identification with social and cultural issues into an electoral arena.

An objection has been raised to lowering the voting age in consideration of the fact that it may lead to 16 and 17 year olds being elected to parliament. Whatever issues may arise from this can be addressed by applying the model used in many comparator countries that have extended partial franchise to lower age groups. In Britain for example the age at which residents can vote is 18 but the age at which they are able to stand for general election is 23.⁵ There would be no reason why the ACT could not apply this principle in extending voting to residents aged 16 years and maintaining the age at which a person could stand as a candidate at 18 years.

The proposal in its current state extends the franchise on a 'voluntary' basis. Voluntary voting in comparator countries has invariably led to greater representation for more advantaged groups in society and as policy development has been more heavily skewed toward those who vote in elections,⁶ it has been shown to be a system that results in under-representation of marginalised groups. In order to ensure that the act of extending the franchise to 16-17 year olds results in further enfranchisement for disadvantaged residents of the ACT and results in a 'louder voice' for those experiencing the problems stated in the beginning of this comment, optimal results would be achieved by extending the franchise on a compulsory basis.

⁴ Lawrence Saha, Murray Print and Kathy Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study Report 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting*, December 2004. <http://www.aec.gov.au>

⁵ Philip Larkin for the Democratic Audit of Australia, Submission to Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People's Inquiry into Voting Age Eligibility, 16 July 2006.

⁶ Lisa Hill, 'Compulsory Voting', Democratic Audit of Australia website www.democraticaudit.anu.edu.au

This raises issues of whether it is legal and ethical to fine 16-17 year olds who do not fulfil their obligation to vote. There is no reason to assume that a greater portion of 16-17 year olds than older ACT residents enrolled to vote in ACT elections would fail to vote. For those that did enrol and then fail to vote a fine would need to be imposed, although the scope for imposing a lesser fine for 16-17 year olds could be explored. The danger of setting a precedent for non-compulsory voting in Australia is present in the current proposal, and while 70 per cent of Australians still support compulsory voting,⁷ and it still is the best voting method for closing representation gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged Australians, this is not a desirable precedent to set.

Current forms of representation for 16-17 year olds do not address the issue of under-representation for disadvantaged young people in Australia and the ACT. The youth wings of the two major parties are well integrated with their respective senior party. There is a one-way stream of influence between the youth wing and the senior party, so that the young Labor and young Liberal wings are more often training grounds for future politicians rather than a resource for young people's representation. The National Youth Roundtable established in 1999 to replace government funded youth advocacy organisations such as the Australian Youth Advocacy Organisation also offer very little scope for addressing the current skew of policy and representation toward age groups with lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage. These resources for young people's representation are often composed of 'young professionals' and topics for discussion are chosen by government departments.

Enfranchising 16-17 year olds would provide greater representation for those suffering economic disadvantage in the ACT. As discussed earlier, young people aged 18-25 are disproportionately affected by unemployment, under-employment, low wages and poor working conditions, high rental prices and health issues in Australia and the ACT. Extending the franchise to 16-17 year olds would therefore help to address the skew of representation and policy development toward older, more socially, economically and culturally advantaged residents.

⁷ Ibid.