



Ms Sandra Lilburn
Secretary to Standing Committee
on Education, Training and Young People
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cc. Katy Gallagher MLA, Minister for Children and Youth

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Re: MYC submission to the Inquiry into Lowering the Voting Age

Dear Ms Lilburn

The Minister's Youth Council (MYC) is a youth advisory council set up to provide young people an opportunity to influence policy by having a direct link to the ACT Government. It is part of Youth InterACT, the ACT Governments youth participation initiative, and is effectively a peak consultation body. MYC is responsible to the Minister for Children and Youth.

MYC is excited to have the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry, particularly because it is so relevant to young people and youth participation. Over the last couple of months we have had a number of discussions at our meetings, we have researched a little and we have conducted a small in depth survey to try to understand the issues more clearly. This letter is an outline of our work and conclusions.

MYC members had a number of different views. Some thought that the voting age should be lowered. Some thought that it should be voluntary for 16 and 17 year olds to vote, while others thought that it should be compulsory. Some were unsure if lowering the voting age was the best way to increase youth participation. Some were sure that no matter what they said the ACT Government would not lower the voting age. All MYC members were unanimous that every young person had a right to have a say and to be heard, and that generally as a priority youth participation should be improved.

We asked our counterparts in other states to have a similar discussion, and to give us a position. Northern Territory, Tasmania and South Australia all gave support saying that lowering the voting age had many merits, but that their discussions did not lead to a conclusive position. They thought that effective youth participation was very important.

We conducted a survey asking just over 50 people of varied demographic questions about some of the issues raised in our discussions, and discussions in the Legislative Assembly. The results are briefly shown below. Note that 'young people' were clearly defined as 12 to 25 year olds.

- 60% of respondents said that 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote
- 53% of respondents said that it should be voluntary for 16 and 17 year olds to vote (47% said that it should be compulsory)
- 69% of respondents said that they would vote if they were 16 or 17 and allowed to
- 20% of respondents said that it should be voluntary for everyone to vote
- 12% of respondents said that the voting age should be linked to military service and 17% of respondents said that the voting age should be linked to alcohol and tobacco regulation
- 40% of respondents said that the ACT should lower the voting age even if the other states and the Commonwealth doesn't, and 40% of respondents said that the ACT should lower the voting age even if it has to bear the cost of maintaining a separate electoral role
- 36% of respondents said that if the voting age is lowered, then 16 and 17 year olds should be eligible to be elected as MLAs or even Chief Minister
- 94% of respondents said that young people had the capacity to vote
- 30% of respondents said that young people were politically aware
- 29% of respondents said that electoral and civic education was adequate
- 94% of respondents said that more should be done to stimulate debate of current political issues amongst young people
- 87% of respondents said that more should be done to encourage young people to learn about political history
- 44% of respondents said that other than through voting, they thought the ACT Government listened to what young people have to say
- A number of means of communication between young people and the ACT Government, both initiated by young people and initiated by the Government, were identified as being effective – the best ways for the Government to initiate communication were face to face means, such as conferences and forums, youth advisory councils and young people on boards and committees, which were thought to be effective by 80%, 83% and 91% of respondents respectively
- 90% of respondents thought that young people need more support to be able to communicate effectively with the ACT Government
- 47% of respondents knew about Youth InterACT, and of these 95% thought that Youth InterACT should be improved
- 42% of respondents knew about the Youth Coalition of the ACT, the peak youth affairs body in the ACT

MYC acknowledges that a larger survey along these lines, and more in depth research, is necessary to inform decision-making. However we feel that these trends are reasonably accurate.

MYC concluded from its discussions on lowering the voting age, and broader work, that as a priority more needs to be done to improve political awareness and youth participation. MYC therefore recommends the following:

1. More research and consultation is done into lowering the voting age;
2. Youth participation is increased, by improving and expanding existing programs and implementing new programs; and
3. Political awareness and debate of topical issues amongst young people is encouraged. This should be done in number of ways, including by improving core electoral and civic education, and strengthening and making more accessible extra learning opportunities.

MYC is happy to discuss these recommendations, and our conclusions in general, as well as our thoughts for and against lowering the voting age. We are also happy to analyse the results of our survey in more detail, and to share some of the comments made in them.

MYC supports youth participation, and therefore is pleased to be part of this process. We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission. Thank you for taking the time to consider our position. We look forward to hearing back from you.

Yours sincerely

Patrick Stein
Chairperson
Minister's Youth Council

31 July 2006