



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Electoral Amendment Bill 2021

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Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety
ACT Legislative Assembly

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into Electoral Amendment Bill 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. I do so in a personal capacity.

My view is that the vote in ACT elections should be opened to 16 and 17-year-olds by way of a cautious, incremental path. Initially, the vote should extend to this age group on a voluntary basis.

Some nations have already made the shift, with voting in national or local elections occurring from age 16 in Austria, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, the Philippines, Argentina, Nicaragua, Brazil and Ecuador. Voting was extended to this age in the United Kingdom for the purposes of the recent referendum on Scottish independence. The *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015* now extends the vote to all persons aged 16 years and older for Scottish elections generally.

Within Australia, the Northern Territory passed a law providing for the election of a Constitutional Convention to debate a new constitution. That law permits 16 and 17-year-olds not only to vote, but also to stand for the Convention.

It is notoriously difficult to get 18-year-olds to enrol and vote, in part because this can be a time of great upheaval in their lives. Many are moving from school to university or into employment, often out of home, and are forming new relationships. Joining the electoral roll can be low on their list of priorities.

On the other hand, 16 and 17-year-olds tend to be in a more stable family environment, and still at school. One key advantage of allowing them to vote is that joining the electoral roll and voting for the first time can be combined with civics education. It is a better age for gaining the knowledge and forming the habits needed to be an engaged Australian citizen.

Voting at 16 would be consistent with other changes and opportunities at this age. People under 18 can leave school, get a job, drive a car and pay taxes. They can also enlist in the Australian defence forces, become a parent and, in exceptional circumstances, get permission to marry. If the law permits them to undertake these activities, it is hard to see why they cannot also vote.

It is often argued that 16-year-olds lack the knowledge about how government works to enable them to vote, and the political maturity needed to cast an informed vote. This can be true, but these problems are not limited to this age group. Australians of all ages typically have low levels of knowledge about government and can express disinterest about politics. Indeed, in my experience 16 and 17-year-olds tend to be more passionate about the future of our nation and their democratic rights than other sections of the community.

There should not be any rush to introduce the vote for 16-year-olds. At least initially, they should be given the option of voting, rather than it being made compulsory. The vote should only be extended to young people with the desire to take a direct part in our democracy.

Yours sincerely

Professor George Williams AO