



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY


SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2016 ACT ELECTION AND ELECTORAL ACT

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Submission 16

Name – ACT Young Labor

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About ACT Young Labor

ACT Young Labor is the youth wing of the Australian Labor Party (ACT Branch) focussing on advancing youth issues within the Australian Labor Party and the Canberra community.

ACT Young Labor holds regular public events for young people in Canberra to discuss public policy, campaigns for internal change within the Australian Labor Party and actively participates in elections supporting the Australian Labor Party.

We are the peak body for youth representation in the labour movement within the ACT.

We represent over 180 formal members, aged 15 to 26, in the ACT along with countless more involved with campus clubs and other non-formal youth bodies in the labour movement.

ACT Young Labor is managed by several executive position holders. The executive at 1 January 2017 consist of:

- Mr Riley Boughton, President
- Mr Thomas Nock, Secretary
- Ms Emma Henke, Treasurer
- Ms Kirrilly McKenzie, Senior Vice President
- Mr Martin Strangman, Junior Vice President

This organisation runs with the assistance of the ACT Labor Party offices based in Civic.

Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to select committee for the Inquiry into the 2016 ACT Election and the Electoral Act ('the Committee').
2. The Committee is examining a broad range of topics relating to the 2016 ACT Election and the Electoral Act. As a core function of our youth organisation is active participation in elections, ACT Young Labor is uniquely placed to contribute to item (i) in the terms of reference, namely, lowering the voting age. However, this submission will also make suggestions relating to item (iii), namely, increasing voter participation in elections and encouraging political activity.
3. Our unique position is emphasised by virtue of the fact that ACT Young Labor represents members aged 15 years old to 26 years old in the Australian Labor Party (ACT Branch) and, consequently, Canberrans who currently do not have voting rights.

Lowering the Voting Age

4. ACT Young Labor is of the firm view that the voting age should be lowered to 16 in order to increase political participation and entrench a culture of political activity.
5. Today, more than at any other time in Canberra's history, the policy challenges affecting our Territory's future will play out not over several years, but over generations.
6. These policy challenges include climate change and embracing renewable energy, demographic changes and an ageing population, the challenges and opportunities of digital disruption such as secure work, and greater inclusion arising from the march of women through the institutions of power.
7. Additionally, current policy debates - such as penalty rates, job security and the funding of education - disproportionately impact young Australians. Our voices should be heard on these issues.
8. Not only that, but all of these issues will require generational decision-making to resolve them that cannot be fully achieved without the voices of more young Canberrans.
9. 16 and 17 years old are more connected and engaged in our community than any generation before.
10. Per Australian Census and Taxation Statistics figures, in 2012-13 over 17,000 Australians aged under 18 paid over \$41 million in income tax alone.¹ This does not take into account indirect taxes paid by young Australians such as GST.
11. 16 and 17 year olds are already permitted to engage in a range of adult activities:
 - a. Military service: apply at 16 years 6 months and commence service at 17;
 - b. Drivers Licence: 15 years and 9 months;
 - c. Pilot Licence: 16 for balloons and gliders and 17 for other aircraft;
 - d. Minor's Firearms Licence: 12 years old;
 - e. Making independent decisions about medical matters: 16;
 - f. Leaving home: 16.
12. If 16 and 17 year olds can be trusted to join the military, drive on our roads and live independently, they should also be trusted to directly participate in our representative democracy by having their say at the ballot box.

¹ Australian Census and Taxation Statistics, 2012-13

13. Directly involving 16 and 17 year olds in our democracy is an opportunity to engage young people in an important conversation about civic responsibility, community values and expectations and help them to become productive members of society.
14. Statistics from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) relating to the 2010 and 2013 elections indicate that one-in-five Australians are not voting and of those aged 18-24, 400,000 people did not enrol in time. This leads to a "democratic deficit".
15. Lowering the voting age, however, would allow the entrenchment of a culture of political participation at an early age and help boost enrolment by involving Canberrans in the political process when they are still at school.
16. ACT Young Labor strongly believes that there should be consideration of whether integrated enrolment and registration systems can be put in place to align with young people's engagement in education through enrolments in school, TAFE and at Uni, the tax system in their annual returns and licensing.
17. Despite not having a voice themselves, already 16 and 17 year old members of ACT Young Labor contribute to political participation in the ACT. By expanding the franchise, we can ensure even more young Canberrans contribute to our vibrant democracy – whatever their political beliefs.
18. Many members in ACT Young Labor joined at the minimum age of 15 and have devoted a large amount of their free time to foster political discussion within our community. One member, Eben Leifer, noted to ACT Young Labor that:
 - a. "On my 15th birthday, I joined the NSW branch of the Australian Labor Party, the youngest age possible to do so. From that date, I attended local branch meetings, advanced policy ideas and campaigned in elections varying from council to state to federal. In the lead-up to the 2013 election, I spent numerous hours delivering letters, talking to voters and standing outside booths for man hours. However, despite my numerous hours being involved in the political process I was unable to undertake the most fundamental part of the democratic system. I could not cast a vote."
19. According to a report by Ian McAllister of the ANU School of Politics and International Relations,² by the end of the 20th Century, the mean voting age across established democracies had already dropped to 17 years old and there is a growing international trend towards extending the democratic franchise to 16 and 17 year olds:
 - a. 16 and 17 year olds were permitted to vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and are now permitted to vote in all Scottish national and local government elections;
 - b. In November 2012, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted to allow 16 and 17 year olds the vote;
 - c. In 2007, Austria implemented a minimum age of 16 for voting in all elections;
 - d. Germany and Switzerland allow voting at 16 for some State and municipal elections;
 - e. East Timor and Indonesia permit voting by 17 year olds; and
 - f. 16 and 17 year olds may vote in Brazil.
20. In 2007, the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People tabled a report on the Inquiry into the Eligible Voting Age. The Report noted that lowering the voting age to 16 would expand democratic participation:

² McAllister, I. (2003), 'The Politics of Lowering the Voting Age in Australia: Evaluating the Evidence'

- a. “If voting is about democratic participation, then lowering the voting age expands democracy by increasing the number of people involved in selecting the representatives to the Assembly. As a consequence, the case could be made that the views of the community will be better represented in decisions made by Members of the Legislative Assembly”
- 21. The Report also observed:
 - a. “At 16 and 17 years of age, some young people make decisions about whether to live independently, get married, have children, and gain full-time employment. They also make commitments to study and choose career paths, are expected to pay tax, learn to drive and are able to take responsibility for medical decisions affecting them including applying for a holding their own Medicare cards...young people under 18 years of age demonstrate a capacity to make decisions in many spheres of their everyday life”
- 22. This comes in addition to other jurisdictions such as the Commonwealth and Victoria endorsing lowering the voting age through similar inquiries.
- 23. The Victorian Electoral Commission discussion paper³ noted that:
 - a. “It is hard to think of an argument that would show that 16 and 17 year olds do not have a substantial stake in government decisions. Even if they have only a limited stake at 16/17, they can be expected to have a larger stake before the next election (ie when they are 19/20), and an argument could be made in favour of giving them a say based on their impending stake. Indeed, arguments cited for not giving 16/17 year olds the vote generally rely on reasons to exclude them rather than on denying their stake”
- 24. The Commonwealth Government also released a paper in 2009, Strengthening Australia’s Democracy, which examined lowering the voting age.
- 25. The paper also observed that arguments in support of empowering 16 and 17 year olds to vote include:
 - a. “that youth have a substantial enough stake in the nation’s governance to justify being given a voice in how the nation is governed, that 16 and 17 year olds are sufficiently mature and sufficiently educated to vote, and that a reduced voting age may improve the relevance and hence effectiveness of existing civic education programs and lead to more political engagement and participation”
- 26. ACT Young Labor has also spent many hours speaking to young Canberrans outside of our organisation about this issue. In 2016, ACT Young Labor held a stall in at the National Youth Festival in Civic and gained significant traction from young people in the community on this issue.
- 27. For young Canberrans, grappling with the policy challenges facing our Territory and our nation will be a centrepiece of our adult lives.
- 28. Lowering the voting age will encourage participation, encourage greater transparency and engagement, inspire community-centred action to improve longer term decision making processes and reinforce the importance of political participation for our society.
- 29. ACT Young Labor strongly endorses the lowering of the voting age and the increase in political participation that comes with such a move.

³ Victorian Electoral Commission (2004), ‘Lowering the Voting Age: A discussion of the issues from the Victorian Electoral Commission’s perspective’ <<https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/files/RP-LoweringtheVotingAge.pdf>>

Annexure 1: Letter from ACT Young Labor Member, Eben Leifer

To whom it may concern,

I write to provide a submission as to why the voting age in the ACT should be lowered to 16. On my 15th birthday I joined the NSW branch of the Australian Labor party, the youngest age possible to do so. From that date I attended local branch meetings, advanced policy ideas and campaign in elections varying from council to state to federal. In the lead up to the 2013 election I spent numerous hours delivering letters, talking to voters and standing outside booths for man hours. However despite my numerous hours being involved in the political process I was unable to undertake the most fundamental part of the democratic system. I could not cast a vote.

For me politics has been an incredibly important part of life simply because so many things in my life are influenced by it. The very ability of future generations to live happily and sustained on this planet is decided by the political decisions we make today and this is not something to be taken lightly. But young people and newer generations are those who will live with the impacts of modern choices and yet until they reach eighteen have no say in the political process. An example of such decisions being made for young people would be the policies made on items such as climate change or LGBTI Rights where young people are overwhelmingly in support of both green energy and marriage equality but those in the 16-18 age bracket are unable to express their support or have their views heard.

Moreover at 15 a young person can legally engage in employment and be liable for payment of taxes. That portion of their income is taken to maintain the facilities and structure of society that they enjoy, and yet until they reach 18 young taxpayers have no say as to where that money goes or how much they believe a government should levy. They are taxed without representation or ability to cast their approval or disapproval of spending plans at elections. Further to this point at 16 a youth can attain the first level of driving qualification, at 17 they are entrusted on their own to command a vehicle. A car can be incredibly dangerous and requires the payment of registration tax and continuous upkeep. But we trust those under 18 with their used. If we trust young people with cars and require them to pay taxes they should have the ability to help decide where those taxes go.

In lead up to the 2016 Federal and State election I worked with many young people below 18 who were interested in the political process. They were keen to build a better future and advance policies they saw as best for society. They were campaigns, policy developers and activists. All of which were involved in the political process as much as they could and all were ultimately denied the right to vote. Those currently under 18 are those which will see the results of today's decisions, they are the next generation who will have to grow up in a world dominated by today's choices. Those between 16 and 18 are entrusted to pay tax, drive cars and work to contribute to society but they are refused the ultimate democratic right to cast their ballot. I therefore submit that we should lower the voting age in the ACT to 16 so to allow those who contribute to society and will see today's decisions come to fruition may have a say on those option.

Kind Regards,
Eben Leifer