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

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

I would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to make the following submission to the inquiry on the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018*.

Throughout history the right to vote has been denied to some parts of the community under the pretense that they were too dumb, not educated enough or incapable of making an informed decision.

Young people are relentlessly talked down to by the political system. They are told they are too dumb to vote, too entitled, too lazy and too apathetic. It is no wonder many young people are disillusioned with our political leaders and electoral processes.

They are disillusioned because the political system has failed, and continues to fail, to address the greatest issues of our time, including tackling climate change, growing inequality and the right to safe, decent and affordable housing. It fails to listen to their voices when they say that things need to change.

This disillusionment is born of a lack of faith in political parties who pander to vested interests and fail to listen to their community. It is not to be confused with apathy or ignorance.

Young people, as the people who have the most to gain, and the most to lose, from the political decisions of today, should have the right to have a say in their futures.

That is why the right to vote should be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds who have voluntarily enrolled to vote. No significant changes to current arrangements are needed as it is already

possible apply and be listed on the electoral roll from age 16. Those 16 and 17-year-olds who have taken up the opportunity to get onto the electoral roll should be offered the chance to vote.

Australia would not be the first country to give the right to vote to those aged 16 and 17. The voting age has already been lowered to 16 for elections in Argentina, Austria, Brazil and many state government elections in Germany.

Notably, the voting age was lowered to 16 in time for the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. Scotland opted to give younger people the vote precisely because of the magnitude of the decision being put to voters, not in spite of it.

A review of that referendum conducted by the Scottish Electoral Commission found that the proportion of 16 and 17-year-olds turning out to vote was significantly higher than many older age demographics, and that 97 per cent of the younger voters said they would vote again in the future¹. There was by no means a lack of motivation amongst young voters to have their say.

In a submission into the Inquiry into the 2016 ACT Election and the Electoral Act², the Youth Coalition of the ACT provided insights into the views of Canberra's young people with regards to voting. It found in surveys conducted in 2012 and 2016, a healthy majority of young people supported granting 16 and 17-year-olds the right to voluntarily vote at elections.

In parallel with reducing the voting age, the Government should look to increasing support for the teaching of civics and citizenship responsibilities in schools. Such education would not only equip young people to make informed decisions at the ballot box, but will provide vital skills that will support them to engage in the electoral process right throughout their adulthood.

¹ ICM Research on behalf of The Electoral Commission, *Scottish Independence Referendum Research: post-polling day opinion research report*, November 2014, P. 16
https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/179807/Scottish-referendum-Public-Opinion-survey-ICM-Report-WEBSITE.pdf

² Youth Coalition of the ACT – Submission to the Inquiry into the 2016 ACT Election and Electoral Act, ACT Legislative Assembly https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1086210/Sub-11-Youth-Coalition-of-the-ACT.pdf

Young people are already making significant life decisions. From the age of 16, it is possible to apply to join the Australian Defence Force. You are also able to leave schooling, get a full-time job, pay taxes, sign a lease, operate a vehicle and legally consent to having sex.

There has never been a requirement for adults to prove their level of decision making competence, or of their political awareness and engagement before voting. Nor should there be, and it's grossly unfair to apply this test to young people.

Granting the right to vote to younger people would be a powerful way to build greater engagement in the political process. Suddenly, the voices that have been calling for action on climate change, housing affordability and university fees will catch the ears of politicians who'll realise there are votes to be won through listening to young people.

It's time to stop talking down to young people and to start listening to what they have to say. They have so much invested in the future of Australia and the country that they will inherit. They are going to be around longer than the political careers of those currently serving in the Parliament and it is time they have a say in who gets to lead our country.

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