

19 July 2018

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Dear Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the current inquiry on lowering the voting age. I attach a short submission, in my capacity as nothing special beyond being a dedicated democrat and avid scholar of politics, which I study and teach at Swinburne University of Technology.

I am not in favour of the measures proposed by the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Participation) Bill 2018. I do not believe there are any virtues in lowering the voting age and do not believe there are good grounds for doing so. I disagree even more so with the concept of granting 16- and 17-year-olds non-compulsory voting status. This, to my mind, presents a grave threat to the norms and performance of our democratic system.

I welcome any further opportunities to engage with the committee's work in this area.

Yours,

James C. Murphy

## **Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into Lowering the Voting Age**

### **Submission by James Murphy**

Since this inquiry was announced, I have seen various arguments put publicly in favour of lowering the voting age. A few of the common ones have been:

1. 18 is an arbitrary cut-off point – younger people can be just as mature and ‘adult’.
2. We allow younger people to work, and tax that work. There should be no taxation without representation.
3. We allow younger people to make their own decisions in other realms, such as leaving school or making decisions about their bodies.
4. Younger people are most affected by the decisions being made today – they will live with the consequences.

I argue none of these arguments translates to a need to lower the voting age.

1. Adulthood and maturity are emergent qualities. There is no age at which it occurs - some 30-year-olds are desperately immature, some 14-year-olds seem serious and mature beyond their years. Furthermore, it is a multifaceted quality - people can be mature in some spheres of their lives and not others. So maturity develops unevenly across and within people. It is a terrible standard for enfranchisement – it is too vague.
2. The taxation-representation nexus is not and should not become absolute. Corporations pay tax and, except for the Cities of Melbourne and Sydney, do not get votes, nor should they. Or, sticking to individuals, the working age in Victoria is 15. I am not aware of any advocates for lowering the voting age talking about giving votes to 15-year-olds. The fact of taxation alone is evidently not considered adequate for enfranchisement.
3. The fact that we empower 16-year-olds to make certain personal decisions, but not to vote, is simply a recognition that these decisions are based on different forms of consciousness. Many teenagers have adequate individual consciousness to make decisions for themselves but lack the social consciousness and sense of civic identity necessary to be good democratic citizens. The latter is a more sophisticated form of awareness that tends to develop later in life – indeed, I would argue most 18-year olds are not yet there. Many of the third-year students I teach at Swinburne are not there yet. Maybe raising the voting age to 25 or 30 would get us into the ballpark of most electors having a good, well-developed social awareness – but then, such a measure is somewhat outside the terms of reference for this inquiry.
4. The simple fact that young people are affected by some decisions does not mean they are in a good position to help select the legislature. My four-month-old son is even *more* affected by the decisions being made in Canberra than the 16-year-olds being enfranchised by the proposed Bill – but it would of course be absurd to give him a vote as he is just not ready to help our community make those decisions. There is no link between being affected by a decisions and being capable of assisting in the self-

governance of the nation and it should not be tied to enfranchisement.

On the other side of the ledger, there are things going for the status quo.

1. 18 is widely treated as a symbolic divider between childhood and adulthood. Tying enfranchisement to this age helps establish the seriousness and gravity of the right being bestowed by entwining it with other rituals, rights and expectations attached to the age.
2. Synching enfranchisement up with the end of secondary education sends a social signal that education is a vital precondition to being a good democratic citizen. If anything, it would be preferable to raise the voting age to 19, so that all electors were of an age where they could have completed secondary education.

If, despite the above, the Committee looks favourably upon lowering the voting age to 16, I urge them to totally reject the provision in the proposed Bill removing sanctions for non-voting from 16- and 17-year-olds.

Australia's compulsory voting system is widely accepted by citizens and produces good habits amongst the electorate. It helps Australia's democracy produce far more representative results than other democracies around the world, with outstanding participation rates.

Any watering down of that system would not only weaken the terrific participation rates produced by our regime but put a crack in the logic of it.

The logic of compulsory voting is that, in a democracy, it is both a right and a responsibility for citizens to participate in their own governance by voting.

If we create a class of voters for whom it is all right and no responsibility, we sever the right-responsibility link. We would also have a cohort of electors for whom voting starts out as an option, and then are rudely confronted with it suddenly and inexplicably becoming a duty when they turn 18 – so this could also damage the wide support compulsory voting currently has.

Voluntary voting for young voters must be rejected. Any extension of enfranchisement must be paired with compulsory voting and all the sanctions that come with it.