

Senator Linda Reynolds CSC
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

6th August 2018

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

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC), the national peak body for young people's issues, are writing in support of the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018, specifically the purpose of the bill to lower the minimum, non-compulsory voting age to 16. This letter is supported by a network of peak bodies that represent young people across Australia's states and territories; Youth Action NSW, Youth Affairs Council South Australia, Youth Affairs Council Western Australia, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, Youth Affairs Network Queensland, Youth Network of Tasmania, and Youth Coalition of the ACT.

Providing the opportunity for 16 and 17 year olds to vote recognises them as citizens and contributors to society, and gives them a formal platform to participate in and express their views about policy decisions in Australia. Young people are capable, valuable citizens, and many 16 and 17 years olds wish to take part in the democratic process of voting in federal, state, and local government elections. The option to vote at 16 will also encourage a discourse about politics earlier in young people's lives and will foster a greater sense of civic engagement and understanding of politics that can be further developed over time.

Support for introducing non-compulsory voting for young Australians aged 16 and 17 years has gained significant traction in recent years, as young people have become increasingly engaged in politics and have a desire to actively contribute to political discussion. Since the beginning of the decade, Austria, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Scotland, the Philippines, Argentina, Nicaragua, Brazil and Ecuador have lowered voting ages to 16 for the purposes of national elections, local elections and/or referendums, with positive results.

Young people aged 16 and 17 make significant contributions to Australia's economy, and social and cultural national identity. Once young people turn 16 years old, the scope of activities and decisions they can legally participate in widens. Young people aged 16 can leave school, live independently, become parents, make independent medical decisions and obtain a driver's license. At 17, young people can join the military. A large number of young people aged 16 and 17 contribute to our economy by engaging in employment and taking on legal responsibilities and tax obligations.

Lowering the minimum non-compulsory voting age to 16 will increase young people's engagement in political and policy processes and strengthen the mechanism of accountability that politicians and governments have towards young Australians. Due to their ineligibility to vote, young people aged 16 and 17 currently have no formal say in how our government shapes the policies that impact them, resulting in youth affairs rarely being a priority concern for governments. Consequently, the challenges that young people experience frequently go unaddressed. There has not been a Federal Minister for Youth Affairs in Australia, or a portfolio aimed at addressing issues facing young people since 2013. The removal of this ministerial position was followed by the termination of the Australian Youth Forum and the

defunding of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC), the national peak body for young people's issues.

Lowering the non-compulsory voting age to 16 legitimises the fundamental rights of young people as citizens who make significant contributions to Australian society. Providing the opportunity for this cohort to exercise their democratic right will strengthen youth political engagement and young people's participation in policy issues that affect them.

AYAC and the following youth peak bodies welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee or discuss these matters further.

Signed,

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