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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

10 August 2018

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

The ACL welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this enquiry.

ACL's vision is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With more than 100,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

Please feel free to contact me if I can be of further assistance in the consideration of this matter. I would be pleased to meet to discuss our submission or any other aspect in respect to this review.

Yours sincerely,

Martyn Iles
Managing Director

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

Democracy functions best when there is active participation of a large proportion of its citizens. Increasing voter participation should always be an objective of government. The means of achieving this cannot be obtained by simply lowering the voting age. Rather, efforts can be directed to forming citizens who understand the political system and equipping them to engage responsibly.

Participation through education

To effectively increase voter participation, voters need to have a clear understanding of the processes of government and their role in the democratic process. For many voters, the only memory of any teaching on the Australian political system is limited to a visit to Canberra in their final years of primary school. It is a reality that most secondary school students do not have an adequate understanding of the political process.

A more effective means of increasing voter participation would be to introduce a comprehensive civics program to be taught during the latter years of secondary education. Such a program ought to include:

- An understanding of the Australian political system;
- An appreciation of the history of democracy from ancient times and its development in the contemporary world;
- A critical evaluation of democracy and other systems of government.

The voting age is often compared to other 'rites of passage' such as obtaining a driver's license; or paying tax. The analogy of obtaining a driver's license may be useful here. Before obtaining a driver's license a person must first pass a test for a learner's permit, which is followed by a period of practical instruction in driving and then the driving test. This is reasonable because driving a car entails serious responsibilities regarding the safety of the driver and others on the road. Responsible citizenship, too, is about safeguarding oneself and others by ensuring the continuation of a civil society. Australia requires that migrants aspiring to citizenship acquire an understanding of Australian values, but this does not appear to be a requisite for those who acquire citizenship by birth. It is appropriate that all citizens, including those attaining voting age have a comprehensive understanding of the workings of Australian democracy and the values which inform it.

Lowering the voting age to 16 years without making voting compulsory for those under 18 will skew the current system of compulsory voting. The result will likely be that those who choose to vote will be a minority of highly informed young people and those who have been politicised through minority organisations. This would not be a healthy development.

Voting as a right of adult citizens

The current voting age of 18 presumes a degree of maturity and responsibility. Science informs us that young people are neurologically not full adults even at 18 years of age.¹ Maturity is not something

¹ John W Toumbourou, Kypros Kypri, Sandra C Jones and Ian B Hickie, 'Should the Legal age alcohol purchase be raised to 21?', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2014, vol.200(10), pp. 568–570. doi: 10.5694/mja13.10465

which happens for all individuals uniformly but is a process. There is already much concern about the many responsibilities that are conferred on young people when they attain the age of 18. They are legally able to purchase alcohol; obtain a driver's license, marry without parental consent and vote. There are some arguments for staggering the attainment of these milestones. It is sometimes suggested that the age limit for legal alcohol consumption be lifted to 21 years.² This would separate those activities and hopefully reduce the accidents caused by drink-driving.

Staggering the ages of these milestone events is not an argument for lowering the voting age. According to research carried out by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT):

"The brain isn't fully mature at 16, when we are allowed to drive, or at 18, when we are allowed to vote, or at 21, when we are allowed to drink, but closer to 25, when we are allowed to rent a car."³ (Age limits as apply to the USA)

It is ironic, that in the above scenario, it is the hire car companies, who have real commercial risk to manage, that maintain 25 years as the age at which a car may be rented. In Australia, drivers under 25 incur higher costs for car rental in recognition that cognitive immaturity increases the risks associated with drivers in this age bracket.⁴

If we take the responsibility of participating in the democratic process seriously, we must also accept that a voter must be capable of mature judgement. Lowering the voting age to 16 would not safeguard the integrity of the democratic process.

Conclusion

Lowering the voting age is unlikely to encourage informed voter participation. Any serious attempt at increasing voter participation needs to include an educative program which informs voters of the political process and encourages responsible engagement with democratic ideals.

Recommendations:

1. The voting age should be retained as 18 years
2. All students should participate in a comprehensive study of government and civics as part of their secondary education.

Published online: 2 June 2014 <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2014/200/10/should-legal-age-alcohol-purchase-be-raised-21> (Accessed 8 August 2018).

² ibid

³ MIT Young Adult Development Project; <http://hrweb.mit.edu/worklife/youngadult/brain.html> (Accessed 8 August 2018).

⁴ <http://www.autos.com/car-rentals/age-requirement-to-rent-a-car-in-australia> (Accessed 10 August 2018)