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S21.08

Submission to the Justice Committee on the Inquiry into the 2020 General Election and Referendums

Introduction

- 0.1. The National Council of Women of New Zealand, Te Kaunihera Wahine o Aotearoa (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing over 200 organisations affiliated at either national level or to one of our 15 branches. In addition, about 450 people are individual members. Collectively our reach is over 450,000 with many of our membership organisations representing all genders. NCWNZ's vision is a gender equal New Zealand and research shows we will be better off socially and economically if we are gender equal. Through research, discussion, and action, NCWNZ in partnership with others, seeks to realise its vision of gender equality because it is a basic human right.
- 0.2. Due to time constraints, this submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Justice Standing Committee using a streamlined online engagement process with NCWNZ members.

1. Suffrage - Who is Eligible to Vote in Elections in New Zealand

- 1.1. There was some support from NCWNZ members for lowering the voting age to 16 years. Members noted the discussion about this in the UK, with Scotland setting the agenda by broadening the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds to enable them to vote in the independence referenda in 2014, and subsequent general and local elections. This includes this year's elections.
- 1.2. In New Zealand, the voting age was last reduced in 1974 – establishing the legal minimum age as 18 years. The New Zealand Parliament article on this matter states that:

The post-war 'baby boom' had greatly increased the numbers of young people. The expansion of education and New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War focused attention on the political rights of youth. It was argued that if people were able to serve in the military and sacrifice their lives they should also be able to vote. At the same time, other countries such as the UK, Japan, Norway and Sweden were lowering the voting age.¹

¹ Voting age reduced to 18 years in 1974. 2014. <https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/features-pre-2016/document/00NZPHomeNews201408221/voting-age-reduced-to-18-years-in-1974>

- 1.3. A youth-led campaign “Make it 16” recently took a case to the High Court - the moral arguments for this legal change are well articulated in this opinion piece from Nick Munn²:
- The voting age limit of 18 is a procedural decision.
 - Young people don’t receive powers of political reasoning as a magical 18th-birthday gift. In reality, they develop the skills over time and 18 is merely when we recognise them.
 - Enfranchising very young voters improves their participation rates.
 - Importantly for the long-term health of our democracy, once very young voters have voted, they are more likely to continue voting than those who couldn’t until they were 18.
 - Lowering the voting age may, in fact, benefit turnout. Voting is a habit which, once formed, is harder to break. If 16-year-olds have the desire but not the opportunity to vote, by the time they can, some percentage of them has become disengaged.
 - A legitimate reason for young people not to care about politics is that they can’t participate in the first place. Being able to vote is an incentive for younger people to learn about politics in ways they otherwise might not.
- 1.4. Many 16-year-olds are still at school, and are often interested in discussing elections. This facilitates enrolling young people, by making it easy for them. When they leave school and it is their responsibility to seek out enrolment, the rates would be lower.
- 1.5. There are strong arguments for considering the voting age issue in Parliament through a separate Select Committee inquiry or Bill, with the opportunity for full public debate. It was a select committee that made the recommendation for the age to be lowered in 1974 and it could be again. Many of the issues that this Parliament [and future Parliaments] are making decisions about will have long-term impacts beyond the Parliamentary term, including responding to climate change, and choices in education, health care, the economy, and foreign relations.

2. Women’s Representation in Parliament

- 2.1. We were pleased to note that this Parliament is the most diverse in New Zealand’s history and particularly note the increase in female, LGBTQI+ and Māori MPs. A Parliament that represents New Zealand, and involves a broad range of views and perspectives, is better able to identify and respond to risks, to represent the views of the population / make changes for more than one group, and to provide an inclusive and participatory democracy. There are lessons to be learnt and ideas to be shared between political parties about the systems that were put in place, and were successful, at achieving these positive changes.

² Munn N. 2020. Election 2020: Lowering New Zealand’s voting age to 16 would be good for young people – and democracy. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/opinion/122565211/election-2020-lowering-new-zealands-voting-age-to-16-would-be-good-for-young-people--and-democracy>

- 2.2. Increasing women's participation in Parliament is one of the requirements for New Zealand under the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)³. There are a number of other areas where CEDAW requirements need to be met and we look forward to seeing a cross-party commitment to lifting New Zealand's compliance with these international obligations alongside the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals⁴.

3. Dangerous Disinformation and Foreign Interference

- 3.1. There continues to be risks with New Zealand's exposure to foreign interference, conspiracy theories and dangerous disinformation impacting on the credibility and outcomes of our elections. The attack on the Capitol on 6 January shows the extreme reaction of exposure to this harmful online content. There is an urgent need for a public strategy and a broad media review to help reduce the risks here, to ensure that our legislative settings are right, and that the appropriate interventions are in place, including public resilience and transparency requirements for the major platforms.

4. Referendums

- 4.1. We note the discussion about whether the provision of information on the referendums was sufficient, and whether the questions could have been more high level (rather than tied to specific legislative proposals). It may be that there needs to be clearer criteria around when referenda are used and indeed, if, they should be used.

Conclusions

NCWNZ appreciates the opportunity to have input into the long-term health of the electoral system.



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³ United Nations. 1979. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

⁴ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development. 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>