

Electoral Reform Secretariat
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

electoralreformsecretariat@pmc.gov.au

Friday, November 4, 2009

Dear Secretariat

Enfranchising young people in electoral reform

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body representing the youth sector in Victoria. YACVic provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them. YACVic works with and makes representations to government and serves as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people.

YACVic is a member of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) and endorses the submission made by AYAC in response to the Electoral Reform Green Paper – Strengthening Australia’s Democracy. Like AYAC, YACVic welcomes this opportunity to contribute to a national discussion focussed on strengthening democratic process in Australia and encouraging the consideration of lowering the voting age to enfranchise young people in the electoral system.

YACVic has long advocated for the lowering of the voting age to 16 years. As has been argued in AYAC’s submission:

- it is a myth that young people are politically apathetic. Examples of young people engaging enthusiastically and meaningfully in political debate and community action can be readily found across Australia. YACVic supports a number of youth participation and advocacy initiatives through which young people ranging in age from 12 to 25 engage readily and with gusto in policy advocacy and program development, details of which can be located on our web site or by contacting our office;
- the argument that young people aged 16 and 17 do not have the cognitive ability to vote is incongruent with other rights and responsibilities that are extended to them in Australia. For example, young people pay taxes on their income and at the age of 17 they are able to join the armed forces, are considered legally responsible for their actions and can be incarcerated in the adult prison systems. Given that young people are deemed able to participate in these realms, it logically follows that they have the capacity to have a say in determining the political leadership.

The importance and value of engaging with young people in political debate and policy development is readily acknowledged by both the Federal Government and by State Governments around Victoria. The Federal Government's *Australian Youth Forum* (AYF) initiative illustrates the value Government places on supporting young people's participation in public policy debate. The AYF website tells us that the AYF 'is about engaging young people and the youth sector in on-going public debate and getting their input on important issues' and that the forum 'brings young people, the youth sector and the Australian Government closer together, and gives them an opportunity to be heard.'¹ Lowering the voting age to 16 years would be a reflection of this commitment to hearing the voices of young Australians and would be in line with the growing appreciation and understanding of the value of young people's meaningful engagement in public and political debate.

The process of reforming the electoral system in Australia to enable young people aged 16 and 17 to vote would be best served by ensuring young people's participation in that reform process. Government mechanisms like the AYF provide an avenue through which young people could play a valuable role in the process of developing and rolling out electoral education and enrolment strategies, and peer education processes encouraging political literacy and engagement.

YACVic strongly encourages the Australian Government to make the electoral process a fairer, more inclusive one by lowering the voting age to 16 years. It is YACVic's firm belief that this reform would reflect the increasing value that both Government and the community recognise in young people's meaningful civic engagement.

Should you wish to discuss further with us the issues raised in this letter of endorsement, please contact Jen Rose, Manager of Policy and Projects on (03) 9267 3722.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Georgie Ferrari', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Georgie Ferrari
CEO

¹ Accessed from the Australian Youth Forum website <http://www.youth.gov.au/ayf/pages/about.htm> 4/12/09.