

# **Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**

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

**Children and Young People with Disability Australia  
Submission – August 2018**

## INTRODUCTION

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018* (the Bill). This submission confines comment to lowering the voting age to 16.

As one of Australia's most disadvantaged cohorts, young people with disability have a significant stake in the direction of political discourse and decision making. Young people with disability have consistently expressed and demonstrated to CYDA the desire to be heard and to participate in political discourse, particularly on matters of relevance to the lives of young people with disability. Young people with disability want the opportunity to participate in decision making and effect change.

It is the view of CYDA that lowering the voting age to 16 on a non-compulsory basis supports the desire expressed by young people with disability to contribute to political discourse. Further it is believed that lowering the voting age will also align voting rights with pre-existing rights and responsibilities afforded to 16 and 17 year olds and will likely improve voter participation.

CYDA undertook a short consultation with members regarding lowering the voting age, receiving only a small number of responses. Opinions on the proposal were varied with support for lowering the voting age being highest among younger respondents. For opponents of the proposal, the primary concerns related to the quality or maturity of a 16 or 17 year old's vote and concern that voting would be unwanted or burdensome.

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AUSTRALIA

CYDA is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability, aged 0 to 25 years. The organisation is primarily funded through the Department of Social Services and is a not for profit organisation. CYDA has a national membership of 5300 and a growing social media presence with 22 500 followers across the three major platforms of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

CYDA provides a link between the direct experiences of children and young people with disability to federal government and other key stakeholders. This link is essential for the creation of a true appreciation of the experiences and challenges faced by children and young people with disability.

CYDA's vision is that children and young people with disability living in Australia are afforded every opportunity to thrive, achieve their potential and that their rights and interests as individuals, members of a family and their community are met.

CYDA's purpose is to advocate systemically at the national level for the rights and interests of all children and young people with disability living in Australia and it undertakes the following to achieve its purpose:

- **Listen and respond** to the voices and experiences of children and young people with disability;
- **Advocate** for children and young people with disability for equal opportunities, participation and inclusion in the Australian community;
- **Educate** national public policy makers and the broader community about the experiences of children and young people with disability;

- **Inform** children and young people with disability, their families and care givers about their citizenship rights and entitlements; and
- **Celebrate** the successes and achievements of children and young people with disability.

## INCENTIVISING REFORM

Young Australians are not optimistic about their futures, or the prospect of being happier and better off than previous generations<sup>1</sup>. This is not surprising given the significant challenges and disadvantage faced by young people in almost all areas of life:

- Rates of unemployment for young people remain just over double the national average (11.6% compared to 5.4%)<sup>2</sup>;
- Underemployment is highest among young workers<sup>3</sup>;
- There is a trend towards casual, part time, temporary, or short-term contracts for young people who are employed<sup>4</sup>;
- Around a quarter of Australia's homeless population are aged between 12 and 24<sup>5</sup>; and
- Rates of poverty are highest among Australians under the age of 15 at 17% and 13% for 15-24 year olds<sup>6</sup>.

For children and young people with disability the rates and experience of disadvantage are even more substantial. Common experiences for children and young people with disability include: exclusion; low expectations; poor and discriminatory educational experiences and outcomes; limited social and recreational opportunities; poor employment outcomes; bullying and abuse.

The direct experiences of disadvantage faced by children and young people with disability is supported by statistics which demonstrate the lifelong consequences of a system in crisis.

- For people aged 20-24, 64% of people with disability had completed year 12 or equivalent, compared with 81% of people without disability<sup>7</sup>;
- International research suggests children and young people with disability are 3 times more vulnerable to abuse than their peers<sup>8</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte 2018, *2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey*, Deloitte Global, p 15

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *Labour Force Commentary June 2018*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, viewed 3 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Kp7w2G>

<sup>3</sup> Wilkins, Roger and Inga Lass (2018) *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 16*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne, p 63

<sup>4</sup> Foundation for Young Australians 2014, *Renewing Australia's promise: Will young Australians be better off than their parents?*, p. 12, Foundation for Young Australians 2015, *Report card 2015: How are young people faring in the transition from school to work?*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness*, 2016, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, viewed 3 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Me7e0k>

<sup>6</sup> Dorsch P, Phillips J and Crowe C 2016, *Poverty in Australia 2016*, Australian Council of Social Services, p 33.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015*, Cat. no. 4433.0, ABS, Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan et al. 2000, *Maltreatment and disabilities: A population-based epidemiological study*, p. 1257.

- Children and young people with high communication and behaviour support needs have higher vulnerability again to abuse<sup>9</sup>;
- 56% of students with disability report experiencing bullying at school<sup>10</sup>;
- 15% of children in out of home care are identified as children with disability<sup>11</sup>;
- Unemployment rates for people with disability are almost double that of people without disability (10% to 5.3%)<sup>12</sup>;
- People with disability are less likely to be in full-time employment than people without disability (27% to 53.8%)<sup>13</sup>;
- When it comes to employment, limited progress has been made for people with disability over the last 20 years<sup>14</sup>.
- 45% of people with disability in Australia live near or below the poverty line<sup>15</sup>.

The need for reform is urgent and the breadth of reform required is significant. While there have been some developments in recent years, there has been little evidence of progress in many of the complex policy areas impacting children and young people with disability in childhood and later in life. For example, employment outcomes for people with disability have not improved in 20 years<sup>16</sup>.

As a State Party to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), Australia has an obligation to uphold the right of all children to freely express their views in all matters that affect them<sup>17</sup>. In addition, the *2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* found that 71% of Australians support 15 to 18 year olds having the opportunity to influence government decisions<sup>18</sup>. As previously discussed, young people with disability have also expressed a strong desire to participate in political decision making.

Despite widespread support and a strong international human rights framework, in Australia there are few mechanisms to engage children and young people in political decision making and limited electoral incentives to address issues that affect the lives of children and young people.

Lowering the voting age to 16 on a non-compulsory basis will create a strong electoral incentive for Australian Governments to introduce and implement policies that address the shameful rates and degree of disadvantage experienced by children and young people with disability.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Children and Young People with Disability Australia 2017, *CYDA National Education Survey 2017*, Melbourne.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *Child Protection Collection 2017*, Table S41.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings*, 4430.0.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *Disability and Labour Force Participation*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, viewed 9 February 2015, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4433.0.55.006>.

<sup>14</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2016, *Willing to Work National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability*, p. 11

<sup>15</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers 2012, *Disability expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia*, Australia, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2016, *Willing to Work National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability*, p. 11

<sup>17</sup> United Nations General Assembly 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 12

<sup>18</sup> Phillips L, Perales F and Ritchie J 2017, Giving voice to the young: survey shows people want under-18s involved in politics, *The Conversation*, viewed 7 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2vYX6V9>

In addition, while broader work is required to ensure the voices of children and young people with disability are included in political decision making, lowering the voting age is one mechanism that will support Australia in meeting its obligations under the CRC.

A related issue is the concern raised in feedback received by CYDA relating to the ability of 16 and 17 year olds to exercise an informed vote. CYDA is of the view that the claim a vote made by a 16 or 17 year old will be less informed than a vote made by older electors due to a lack of motivation or political knowledge is misleading.

Domestically, research has found that Australians who currently have the right to vote (18 years and older) do not typically have a high degree of knowledge or interest in politics. Key findings from the *2016 Australian Electoral Study* include: record low levels of interest in the 2016 election with only 30% of Australians taking a 'good deal' of interest in the campaign; low levels of party affiliation; and levels of satisfaction with democracy that are the lowest since the 1970's<sup>19</sup>.

The comparative quality of voter choice between 16 and 17 year olds and other age groups has also been examined overseas, in countries that have already lowered the voting age to 16. For example, research undertaken in Austria found that the vote quality of people under 18 was comparable to older voters and that these younger electors voted in ways that enabled their interests to be represented equally as well as older voters<sup>20</sup>.

In addition, CYDA maintains that the higher support for lowering the voting age among young people<sup>21</sup> and the involvement of young people in non-electoral forms of political participation, such as online activism<sup>22</sup>, suggests that young Australians have the motivation and the interest in contemporary political issues to exercise an informed vote under a voluntary system.

## PARITY OF RESPONSIBILITY

In Australia, 16 and 17 year olds currently have the opportunity to exercise a number of civic responsibilities. While there are some jurisdictional differences and exceptions, this may include but is not limited to, military service, appearing as an adult in court, obtaining a drivers licence, holding a firearms licence, and the age of sexual consent<sup>23</sup>.

This view was reflected in feedback received by CYDA:

"I think that the responsibilities already given to 16 year olds show that they should be able to vote. If you are old enough to drive, then you should be able to vote. You clearly have the right mindset to give your opinion on these matters at the age of 16".

<sup>19</sup> Australian National University, *Voter interest hits record low in 2016 – ANU Election Study*, Australian National University, Canberra, viewed 7 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Ja5iUQ>

<sup>20</sup> Wagner M, Johann D and Kritzing S 2012, *Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of voter choice*, Electoral Studies, Issue 31, p 372-383

<sup>21</sup> McAllister A 2013, *The Politics of Lowering the Voting Age in Australia: Evaluating the Evidence*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p 7

<sup>22</sup> O'Neil M 2014, Young online activists more politically engaged than many older Australians, research shows, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, viewed 7 August 2018, <https://ab.co/1pH1Pj3>

<sup>23</sup> McAllister A 2013, *The Politics of Lowering the Voting Age in Australia: Evaluating the Evidence*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p 8-9.

Australian society already expects 16 and 17 year olds to demonstrate responsibility and maturity in a number of areas. Lowering the voting age on a voluntary basis would bring voting rights in line with pre-existing social responsibilities.

## **INCREASING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

As discussed above, Australian interest in politics and satisfaction with democratic processes is worryingly low. While overall enrolment and participation rates have improved from 2013 to 2016, low rates of enrolment and participation of young people (18-24) continues to raise concerns<sup>24</sup>. Overall participation rates were lower for young Australians (86.7% compared to 95%) and over 250,000 eligible young Australians were estimated as having not enrolled for the 2016 election.

Lowering the voting age may be one mechanism to address this gap in enrolment and participation by facilitating the development of positive voting habits from a younger age<sup>25</sup>.

Lowering the voting age also offers Australia the opportunity to encourage interest and engagement in democratic processes and politics from a younger age. This could be achieved through the Australian Electoral Commission engaging with the education system to ensure young people know how to vote and have the information needed to decide whether to vote. Feedback received by CYDA revealed that many young people currently receive limited information through school, family and the community regarding voting and democratic processes before turning 18 which can lead to feelings of disengagement and being overwhelmed by the process. Lowering the voting age on a voluntary basis, accompanied by education about voting, could help overcome these information barriers and encourage voter participation in the over 18 cohort.

Once again, CYDA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on this Bill and wishes to express its support for lowering the voting age to 16 on a voluntary basis.

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<sup>24</sup> Australian Electoral Commission, 2016 federal election key facts and figures, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, viewed 7 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2vnDkQV>

<sup>25</sup> Dinas, E., 2012. The formation of voting habits. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*, 22(4), pp.431-456.

**This submission is endorsed by the following organisations:**

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