



21 November 2005

Ref. No. 5: Rowley/Law reform/ voices and votes

Web www.yac.net.au
Email admin@yac.net.au
32 Inwood Street
Woolloowin Q 4030
Phone 07 3857 1155
Fax 07 3857 1803

The Research Director
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE Q 4000

RECEIVED

22 NOV 2005

LEGAL, CONSTITUTIONAL AND
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
COMMITTEE

Dear Sir /Madam

Voices and Votes: An Inquiry into young people's engagement in democracy in Queensland

Youth Advocacy Centre (YAC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Parliamentary Committee inquiry into young people engaging in democracy in Queensland. YAC is interested in ensuring the participation of young people in all aspects of their lives, including the democratic process. In particular YAC's submission addresses the issue of lowering the voting age and the support young people would require to fully participate in the electoral process.

Youth Advocacy Centre (YAC) is a community legal centre which offers legal and welfare assistance to young people between the ages of 10 and 17. The geographical area which the Centre services is largely the Brisbane area, with some occasional assistance to young people in other areas of the state. The nature of the Centre's work ranges from legal advice, representation, education, counselling, family mediation, and support for young people around issues such as accommodation, income. The Centre also participates in law and policy reform activities.

YAC's mission statement is:

To increase young people's access to justice both legal and social by speaking out for, and supporting, young people so that the community accepts collective responsibility for their importance, empowerment, rights, well being and humanity.

Any debate about young people's involvement in the democratic process should be prefaced by an assessment of young people's rights to participate in society more generally. Article 12 and 13 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CROC) recognises that children and young people who are capable of forming his or her own view has the right express those views and the right to be heard in matters that directly impact upon their lives. CROC also recognises that children and young people have the right to freedom of expression including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through a variety of mediums. YAC supports any initiative that increases the forums in which young people's issues and concerns can be raised. The formal electoral process is one mechanism by which young people can increase their participation in decisions affecting them.

YAC supports the lowering of the voting age to 16 years of age and supports the view that voting between the ages of 16 and 18 year of age should not be compulsory. Young people's issues are often ignored by the broader political agenda. This may be attributable to a lack of young people's voices in the political process. By including 16 to 18 year olds in the electoral system, young people's issues are more visible to governments and politicians. The right to vote is also an important mechanism by which society formally acknowledges citizenship. Extending the right to vote to the age of 16 sends an important message to young people that their experiences and perspectives are valued.

Whilst YAC supports young people's right to participate in all kinds of decision making we acknowledge that in practice young people's desire to participate is variable, depending upon individual circumstances. The young people YAC interact with often have experiences with the legal system that leave them feeling disempowered and therefore uninterested in participating in a system that is seemingly unconcerned with what young people think. This disillusionment with the legal system is transferable to the political system more generally.

Given young people's variable desire to participate it is critical that community legal education about participation in the electoral process is accessible to all young people in Queensland. Any educational campaign would need to highlight the impact of the right to vote on political decision making and the legal process more generally. Information on registering to vote must be age appropriate and accessible to young people.

Changing the law to reduce the voting age is an opportunity to be a more inclusive and participatory society. Young people should be involved in the decisions that impact upon them. Should you have any queries in relation to YAC's submission, please don't hesitate to contact this office.

Yours faithfully



Rosslyn Monro
Director