

Electoral Reform Green Paper – Strengthening Australia’s Democracy
Submission by DJ Selmes

My comments on this paper and its associated issues and questions relate primarily to eligibility to vote.

Regarding the specific question at 4(e), “Should the voting age and/or the enrolment age for Australian elections be lowered?”, I submit that either:

- (a) The voting age should be lowered to fifteen (the lowest age at which someone is likely to be contributing substantially to the taxation system out of their own earnings for personal labour), or
- (b) The mandatory voting age should remain eighteen, with opt-in voting available to any minor who has a tax file number and is, at the time of opting in, subject to PAYG withholding (as evidenced by payslips).

The basis of my submission is that I was a self-supporting teenager who was not particularly politically active, but I was aware of my own needs as a former carer transitioning to the workforce under difficult circumstances and that my interests were not represented. I was very aware that I was contributing many thousands of dollars into the taxation system and I deeply resented that I was given no say in the political landscape that determined how that money would be used.

I would not like to suggest that taxation contributions amount to “buying” a vote. However, there is a relationship between rights and responsibilities, and if a citizen is paying for the country’s upkeep they should have input regardless of age.

Regarding the specific question at 4(b), “Should any category of non-citizens have the right to vote in Australian elections?” I submit that non-citizens should not have the right to vote. This may appear to conflict with my submission regarding voting age and a relationship between voting and contribution to the taxation system, but there is a key difference that visitors have chosen to come to Australia as it was at the time they arrived. It is reasonable for them to accept the country as it is and as it responds to its citizens in any subsequent elections. If a person is deeply committed to Australia and wishes to influence its future, there is nothing to stop them from becoming citizens.

Regarding the specific question at 4(c), “To what extent should Australian citizens living overseas be permitted to vote in Australian elections?”, this question is particular interest to me because I consider it very likely that I will spend some of my retirement overseas. This is because the retirement income policy in Australia is in my view inadequate (particularly in the area of superannuation guarantee contributions) and I do not expect to have the funds for a comfortable standard of living here. However, we will continue to have investments here, pay substantial levels of taxation here, and receive our medical care here, as well as having children here.

Again, I would draw a relationship between voting and taxation. Australia does not have a territorial taxation system. This means that if you are a resident for taxation purposes (which does not necessarily exclude living overseas for extended periods),

you pay tax in Australia for income earned worldwide. If Australia is going to claim tax from citizens who live overseas for long periods, those citizens should be able to influence how those taxes are used.

As a practical way forward, I would submit that Australian citizens residing overseas who continue to meet definition of residency used for taxation purposes should have the right to vote.

Yours faithfully

DJ Selmes