



Victorian Student Representative Council

Victorian Student Representative Council Submission

regarding the

Electoral Reform Green Paper – Strengthening Australia’s Democracy

Introduction to the VicSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is a democratic network of SRCs working to represent the views of secondary students in Victoria. Student Representative Councils (SRCs or sometimes known by other names) are the bodies that exist within most secondary schools to represent the opinions of students. Our vision is to bring Student Representative Councils together across Victoria to make the voices of students heard at all levels and, through that process, enable students (and their organisations) to develop their vision and capacity for making a difference in their school and across the state. The VicSRC holds an annual congress for students across the state, where they come together to discuss the important issues concerning themselves and other secondary students and then meet in formal congress style proceedings to vote on which issues the VicSRC Executive should work on.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria which is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria. The Youth Affairs Council provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them.

As an organisation representing secondary students the content of this submission relates primarily to the ways in which the reform plans affect secondary schools. In addition, we have addressed only the points of the Paper where we had a relevant contribution to make.

Overview

At the 2009 VicSRC Congress, the students passed a motion **‘That the VicSRC advocate for the voting age to be lowered to a voluntary 16 with 18 remaining compulsory’**. Speaking on behalf of the thousands of secondary students represented at this congress, we feel that it is our duty to actively advocate for this and to submit on the Electoral Reform Green Paper in response to discussion point **4(d): Should the voting age and/or enrolment age for Australian elections be lowered?**

Tim Udorovic, from the Left-Right Think Tank makes valid points when he says the following:

In 2004, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) produced a research paper entitled “Lowering the Voting Age: A Discussion of the Issues from the Victorian Electoral Commission's Perspective.” This detailed most of the popular arguments against lowering the voting age and provided convincing responses. The VEC it seems is clearly in favour of lowering the voting age. To understand the issue more fully though, the political effects must also be considered.

The VEC paper states, broadly, that people are eligible to vote in Victoria if they answer two questions, the first in the positive and the second in the negative: do they have a substantial stake in the Governance of Victoria? (in the positive) And, are they excluded from voting? (in the negative). The author makes the claim that, “It is hard to think of an argument that would show that 16 and 17 year olds do not have a substantial stake in government decisions.” The exclusion of young people from voting tends to stem from one of the exclusion criteria, namely that they, “Are incapable of understanding the nature and significance of enrolment and voting”. Assuming a very liberal interpretation of these words, the excuse for many years has been that young people just don’t understand the importance of voting, and if they did, they wouldn’t vote properly.

The VicSRC knows that this simply is not true. An irony suggested is that most young people want to vote and for those that don’t, it’s because they don’t think they have enough life experience to make an informed decision. This attitude of valuing the vote and taking it seriously actually shows that young people have the maturity to vote.

I have no doubt that you have read the VEC paper when discussing whether or not to lower the voting age, so I will not seek to reiterate their points.

However, it needs to be realised that in a modern Australia, we cannot be truly democratic until we give young people who have the maturity and the information to vote and have a stake in their political future, the right to vote.

In conclusion, may I state that the Victorian Student Representative Council official policy position is that the Voting Age be lowered to a voluntary 16 with 18 remaining compulsory.

Yours Sincerely,
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On behalf of: The Victorian Student Representative Council.