

**SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ELECTORAL MATTERS  
*INQUIRY INTO CURRENT LEVELS OF  
VOTER ENROLMENT***

**JULY 2006**

**NSW Commission for Children and Young People  
Level 2, 407 Elizabeth Street  
Surry Hills NSW 2010**

**Contact: Anne Marie Dwyer, Manager, Policy  
Phone: (02) 9286 7205  
Fax: (02) 9286 7267  
Email: [kids@kids.nsw.gov.au](mailto:kids@kids.nsw.gov.au)**

**SUBMISSION BY THE  
NSW COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS  
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**1. THE COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

- 1.1 The NSW Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.
- 1.2 The Commission was established by the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* (NSW) ('the Act'). Section 10 of the Commission's Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:
- a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations
  - b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account, and
  - c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.
- 1.3 Section 12 of the Commission's Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.
- 1.4 Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

**2. GENERAL COMMENTS**

- 2.1 The Commission is pleased to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' *Inquiry into Voter Enrolment*.
- 2.2 In preparing this submission the Commission has sought the views of children and young people.

### **3. WHY YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN VOTING IS IMPORTANT**

- 3.1 Given the significant number of young people in our community, if young people don't participate in formal democratic processes, such as voting, the representativeness and effectiveness of our political system is reduced.

### **4. LOW LEVELS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ENROLLED TO VOTE**

- 4.1 In September 2004, approximately 13% of 17 year olds and 70% of 18 year olds in NSW were enrolled to vote.<sup>1</sup> The significant number of young people who were not enrolled is a concern.
- 4.2 There is very little Australian based research on young people's attitudes towards voting, politics and democratic participation more generally. The four year national Youth Electoral Study (YES) currently being conducted by researchers from the University of Sydney and Australian National University has so far provided valuable information on these issues. The Study is expected to continue to publish reports which may assist governments understand why a significant number of young people are not enrolled to vote.
- 4.3 It is often assumed that the reason for young people's low rate of enrolment is that young people are apathetic about politics. However, research indicates that rather than being apathetic, young people are interested and knowledgeable about politics.<sup>2</sup> Like many adults today, young people feel that the formal political institutions and politicians are not offering them enough influence over political decisions. Young people's trust in politicians is also low, providing a further disincentive to vote such people in as representatives.<sup>3</sup> As young people the Commission spoke with said:

*They say "well they're not going to do anything for me anyway", so why bother.*

*They just don't care enough.*

*You have to show young people what an impact politics has on them, 'cos I think that they don't realise how much it does affect them.*

- 4.4 Instead, young people are participating in other political activities such as campaigns, volunteer work and online blogging on issues that are of

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<sup>1</sup> CRU Implementation Steering Committee to the Electoral Council of Australia (2004) *Continuous Roll Update 2003-2004*, Electoral Council of Australia, p. 21

<sup>2</sup> Vromen A (2006) *Young people's participation and representation during the Howard decade*, conference paper, John Howard's Decade Conference, March 4, 2006, ANU, Canberra, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Print M et al (2004) *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 21

interest to them, including peace, the environment and Australia's policies on asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>4</sup>

- 4.5 For young people, the act of voting in itself is not the problem, as the numbers of young people who vote in TV shows such as Australian Idol or Big Brother demonstrate. The difference is motivation, an interest in the results, and the feeling that one person's vote can make a difference. Young people have told the Commission that if they don't believe their vote will make a difference and are not interested in the result, then they are less likely to be motivated to vote. Young people who participated in the Youth Electoral Study also considered voting in elections boring.<sup>5</sup> Often the issues debated during election campaigns fail to engage young people. For example, the 2004 Federal election campaign focussed on interest rates and economic policy, issues of little interest to many young people, and ignored young people's interests and life experiences.<sup>6</sup>

## **5. IMPACT OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL REFORMS**

- 5.1 In the Commission's view, the Australian Government's Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006 "the Bill" provides a further barrier to young people enrolling to vote.
- 5.2 At a time when other comparable democracies such as Canada and New Zealand are seeking to increase the electoral participation of young people, this Bill is likely to have the opposite effect on the Australian democracy. Under the Bill the electoral roll will now close a minimum of 33 days before an election, compared to New Zealand where the roll is open until the day before an election and Canada where voters can enrol at the polling booth on election day.

### **5.3 *Early closure of the electoral roll***

- 5.3.1 The aim of governments in a democratic society should be to make it as easy as possible for people to join the electoral roll. The Commission understands that the integrity of the electoral roll is important. However, as the Australian Electoral Commission has argued, the provisions in the Bill contribute little towards improving the roll's integrity.
- 5.3.2 By closing the electoral roll for most new enrollees on the day the writs are issued and only giving existing enrollees three days to correct their details, the Government will limit a crucial period for young people to

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<sup>4</sup> Print M et al (2005) *Youth Electoral Study Report 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 13

<sup>5</sup> Print M et al (2004) *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Vromen A (2006) *Young people's participation and representation during the Howard decade*, conference paper, John Howard's Decade Conference, March 4, 2006, ANU, Canberra, p. 7

enrol. Even the special provisions for young people are inadequate. They only give a young person who is 17 years of age and will turn 18 before polling day three days after the issuing of the writs to enrol.

- 5.3.3 The announcement of an election is typically a trigger for people to update their electoral details and make sure they are enrolled. For example, during the close of roll period of the 2004 federal election, approx. 13,000 young people aged 18 years enrolled to vote in NSW.<sup>7</sup> Young people who are not in touch with mainstream media or political discussions may not be prepared to enrol or update their details as soon as an election is called, particularly in regard to Federal elections where there are not fixed electoral terms.
- 5.3.4 Young people who have just turned 18 and are voting for the first time often are not aware of what they have to do to enrol to vote. They may be too busy with education, working, etc. to concern themselves with enrolling to vote as soon as they turn 18. Young people can also be more transient than other age groups, moving out of home or changing their residence for employment or education reasons. Therefore, they may neglect to correct their enrolment details prior to an election being announced.

#### **5.4 Greater identity requirements for enrolment**

- 5.4.1 Under the Bill all applicants for enrolment, re-enrolment or who wish to change their enrolment details, will be required to verify their identity with their driver's licence number, passport or birth certificate. This may be difficult for many young people who at 17 or 18 years of age may not yet have their driver's licence. If they do have such identification then their enrolment form must be signed by two electors who can confirm the applicant's name and who have known the applicant for at least one month. These requirements may also make it difficult for young people who live away from their family or in communities where they know very few people. As there are joint electoral roll arrangements in place between the Australian and NSW Governments, the changes resulting from the Bill will affect enrolment on the NSW electoral roll.

## **6. STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO ENROL TO VOTE**

### **6.1 Offence of not to enrolling to vote when eligible**

- 6.1.1 Young people may be encouraged to enrol because they know it is compulsory and they will be fined if they do not enrol when they turn 18. In the Youth Electoral Study, a number of young people spoke about not having a choice whether to enrol or not if they did not want to

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Electoral Commission (2005) *Second Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 12

be fined. For example, only 50 per cent of young people who participated in the study said they would vote when they reached 18 years if it was not compulsory.<sup>8</sup>

## **6.2 Extending close off period for NSW electoral rolls**

6.2.1 In NSW the electoral rolls close on the day writs are issued. It is often cited that because NSW has four year fixed term elections, people are provided with significant notice of an approaching election. However, in relation to young people similar issues that arise with the early closure of the federal roll arise with the state roll. The Commission suggests that consideration be given to increasing the period of enrolment to seven days after the writs are issued to provide people, including young people, with additional time to enrol.

## **6.3 Enrolment methods**

6.3.1 The method for enrolling to vote should be accessible to all groups in our community. The Commission is of the view that consideration should be given to making NSW enrolment methods more relevant and accessible to young people and other groups with special needs. Currently, people can only enrol by completing the enrolment form which they can get from a post office or downloading it from the State Electoral Office website and printing it out. These methods do not reflect technological advances or ways that young people commonly access information.

6.3.2 Consideration should be given to strategies adopted by other international jurisdictions to increase the electoral participation of young people. For example, the New Zealand Electoral Enrolment Centre introduced text messaging as a way of encouraging people to enrol to vote during 2005. Young people send a free text message to the Centre with their contact details and an enrolment form is sent out to them. People can also enrol to vote online, the form is then sent out to them to sign and they return it in a reply paid envelope.

## **6.4 Provisional enrolment at 17 years of age**

6.4.1 The Commission supports provisional enrolment at 17 years as a strategy to improve the level of voter enrolment amongst young people. Provisional enrolment provides a considerably longer period of time for electoral authorities to contact, and be contacted by, young people before they are required to vote at 18 years of years.

6.4.2 However, the Youth Electoral Study found there were low levels of awareness amongst young people under 17 years of age that they could register on the electoral roll.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that further work needs to be done to inform young people about their entitlement, and encourage them, to enrol.

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<sup>8</sup> Print M et al (2004) *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 11

<sup>9</sup> Print M et al (2004) *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 6

## **6.5 Continuous Roll Update program**

- 6.5.1 The Commission supports the maintenance of the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program undertaken by the Australian Electoral Commission, state and territory authorities. Evidence shows that in the absence of elections to stimulate enrolment, the CRU program has maintained consistent levels of young people's enrolment through monthly individual mail outs and targeted school programs.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the utilisation of data on Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) and Centrelink clients turning 17 and 18 years to send a letter to young people who have not enrolled or have moved address, is a useful way to directly target young people. It is suggested the direct mail out strategy could be extended to sending out enrolment information with year 10 or 12 school results or University and TAFE admission information.
- 6.5.2 However, the CRU program can not capture all young people and should be accompanied by other strategies that target the general youth population.

## **6.6 Targeted education and information campaigns**

- 6.6.1 The Commission considers that programs such as the joint Australian Electoral Commission and Triple J *Rock Enrol* conducted in 2004 are beneficial in raising awareness of enrolling and voting across the general youth population and should be repeated. Much of the success of the Rock Enrol program was that it went directly to where young people are, for example events like Big Day Out or local youth concerts, and was advertised on a radio station that many young people listen to, Triple J.

## **6.7 School and practical education programs**

- 6.7.1 Targeting young people in schools, as well as other educational institutions such as TAFE, is also a useful strategy for raising awareness of enrolling and voting. A number of young people the Commission spoke with said that political and electoral education was not taught within their school, particularly in rural and regional areas.
- 6.7.2 For example, in New Zealand there is a resource called "Active Voices" for students in years 7-10 which has received positive feedback from young people. Used as part of the Social Studies curriculum, this resource aims to encourage young people to become more politically aware so that by the time they are able to enrol they will already have some knowledge of the electoral system and want to engage with the voting process.
- 6.7.3 Young people have also suggested that electoral offices could recruit young people 18 years and over (who are not affiliated with a political

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<sup>10</sup> CRU Implementation Steering Committee to the Electoral Council of Australia (2004) *Continuous Roll Update 2003-2004*, Electoral Council of Australia

party) to visit schools and speak with other young people about why voting is important. Young people have said that it is more likely they will relate to people their own age.

- 6.7.4 Supporting school elections and demonstrating to young people how their votes work in practice can also be a useful way to raise awareness. Young people who experience being citizens of their classroom and school are more likely to continue to act as citizens when they leave school.<sup>11</sup>
- 6.7.5 As well as strategies to encourage young people to enrol to vote, the Commission considers that programs that provide young people under 18 years with specific reasons to engage with governments and the political process, such as mock elections are important. These programs are likely to engage young people in the political process, creating the desire amongst young people to want to enrol to vote.

*We had a mock vote in Commerce. Everyone had to put in their votes for who they thought was going to win the last Federal election. There were prizes if you guessed right.*

*That's a good idea because it teaches you to care about your opinion.*

*It doesn't just teach young people to vote, it also shows what young people are thinking about politics as well.*

- 6.7.6 The Commission also suggests that governments across Australia consider the findings of the Youth Electoral Study which provides information on appropriate strategies to encourage the electoral participation of young people. For example, the study discusses young people's views on incentives to encourage young people to enrol.
- 6.7.7 In addition, the Commission suggests that young people be involved in the development of any education programs that aim to encourage them to enrol to vote.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 The Commission is of the view that low levels of young people's enrolment on the electoral roll reflect broader problems with the Australian political system, as well as problems with their access to enrolment. Recent Australian Government electoral reforms contained in the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006 are likely to have the effect of further discouraging young people's participation in electoral processes.

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<sup>11</sup> Print M et al (2005) Youth Electoral Study Report 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra, p. 28



- 7.2 Specific strategies targeted at increasing young people's enrolment, such as more accessible enrolment methods or information campaigns may address some of the issues. However, young people will only truly be engaged in political systems if governments consider the broader issues contributing to young people's general lack of engagement with formal political and government processes.

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