



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND
YOUNG PEOPLE**

(Reference: Voting age eligibility)

Members:

**MS M PORTER (The Chair)
MR M GENTLEMAN (The Deputy Chair)
MRS V DUNNE**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

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**Secretary to the committee:
Ms S Lilburn (Ph: 6205 0490)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry which have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

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The committee met at 9.31 am.

COLEMAN, Mr Reece, Member, Minister's Youth Council

NI, Ms Diana, Member, Minister's Youth Council

STEIN, Mr Patrick, Chair, Minister's Youth Council

THE CHAIR: Welcome, everybody. I will read the card. The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attached to parliament, its members and others, necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing. Did you understand that?

Ms Ni: Yes.

Mr Coleman: Yes.

Mr Stein: Yes.

THE CHAIR: If any of you would like to make some opening remarks, that will be fine. We will then go to questions, when members of the committee will ask questions.

Mr Stein: I do not really have many opening remarks. I think we have made them in our letter. I assume you have read that and can ask questions on that.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we have. Thank you. We are expecting Daniel Higginbotham at some stage.

Mr Coleman: Yes. He should be here also.

THE CHAIR: We might go straight to members' questions, if you do not want to add anything from your submissions.

MR GENTLEMAN: Thanks for coming in to our committee. I am interested in the way you conducted the survey and also some of the people that you had involved in it. You said that you had just over 50 people and it was a varied demographic. Perhaps you could give us a bit more detail about some of the ages of the people and if they

were Canberrans—give us a bit more detail on the survey, if you could.

Mr Coleman: All of the participants in the survey were from Canberra. We had each member of the Minister’s Youth Council go out with surveys into the various parts of the community and involve people in their schools, workplaces and that sort of thing—and family members. We tried to get a very varied age demographic. One of the lowest ones was about 12 years old—the lowest for a young person category. The oldest was about 71 to 75. We tried to include a number of different people, ranging right across, so we had a broad spectrum of ideas. It was not just specifically focused around the opinions of young people; it was the opinions of the community. There were just ranges all the way through.

MR GENTLEMAN: Did you have a chance to have a look at the YES submission that the committee received?

Mr Coleman: No.

MR GENTLEMAN: It was a different style of survey; it was a national survey. We have that available, don’t we?

THE CHAIR: Yes. They are both available on the website.

Mr Coleman: Was that the one conducted in Queensland, or was it the national one?

MR GENTLEMAN: It was national, yes. It had some quite differing results. The one I pointed to with that group, in contrast to your results, was the respondents you had to your survey. That said that young people had the capacity to vote. There was quite a strong result there—94 per cent. Can you perhaps expand a bit on that? Were there many comments about the ages of people that these respondents felt would have the capacity to vote or to understand the issues, perhaps?

Mr Stein: Yes. I think there was a bit of a problem with the specifics of that question. If I had a chance to do the survey again, I would not ask it like that. We were defining, as we went through in the survey, young people aged 12 to 25. Straightaway asking whether young people have the capacity to vote is a pretty broad spectrum. “Capacity” is not necessarily defined very specifically either, and it could mean a lot of things. That is why in our survey we allowed the opportunity to have comments and qualifications on the things which are not reflected in these results—that we never sort of collated. As we went through, we read them so we could understand where they were coming from when we wrote the submission.

I think, generally, the feeling was that young people would have the ability to vote or have a say, but maybe they needed some support or education, or needed to think about and discuss these issues, rather than just jumping in there and going straight in and voting. Because it included 12 to 25-year-olds, maybe it is saying that there are a lot of people—I mean, you can go further and say this—across our whole community that do not really have the capacity to vote. So it is a bit of an open thing and maybe not a very good result.

Mr Coleman: Looking at the comments—you were asking if there were any

comments—a number of people wrote that, yes, young people have the capacity to vote, but over the age of 18. There were a few respondents like that.

MR GENTLEMAN: The other contrasting result was electoral and civic education, where your result was 29 per cent. It was in the same vein, I think, as the YES results, but a different percentage. Did respondents feel that they needed more civic education, or education on civics?

Mr Coleman: Yes, the majority of them did. That was right across the board, not just young people. I found that in the survey I took with the participants I had, all the way up. The oldest one I had was about 65. She said that, yes, she still needs some of this education, that it needs to be upgraded and that sort of thing, that it needs to be not just in schools and not just at primary school level but the whole way through, that it needs to be updated and changing as the parliament changes, and also in the community, so that that education does not just stop when you leave school but is continued through community involvement.

MR GENTLEMAN: So you got the impression they were very interested.

Mr Coleman: Yes.

MR GENTLEMAN: Do you think you sparked the interest with the survey?

Mr Coleman: I think so, yes, particularly with the young participants. They had never grasped the concept that we may be able to vote lower than the age of 18. It was always that mark that you hit and then you could vote. A number of people thought, “Okay, if they are suggesting that we might be able to vote younger, what other ways can we get involved in government before they pass this?” It sparked a lot of interest. A lot of people were very excited about it.

Mr Stein: I think it is very empowering to give someone a survey, but a survey that has the opportunity for them to write their own comments and whatever. We were there while they were doing it so they could ask us questions or discuss with them. We were giving them the ability to say, “We are going to take this straight to the ACT government and put it into the submission.” So what you are saying is completely relevant and meaningful. I think that is empowering. Everyone that did the survey was excited about that opportunity.

Ms Ni: The people I approached were mainly people who were around 20 to 23. Their main views were that they had some education in school about government and civics, but then they could not vote and they just thought, “Well, what is the point of learning all this?” It was only when they turned 18 that they thought, “Okay, I have to go and vote now.” They are like, “Well, what do I do? I feel really disconnected.”

Mr Stein: There were two kinds of things. What we are saying is that that was something we were feeling and discussing a lot—that when young people get to vote, they are 18 and all of a sudden they are like, “Okay, now I have to start thinking about these issues or how the system works and whatever.” Maybe they did not learn as much as they could have earlier.

When they are not in school anymore—a lot of them are in universities and a lot of them are out in the world—they do not have the same support networks or the same abilities to learn or access those kinds of systems. So having a lowered voting age, maybe a compulsory one, maybe a transition where it is voluntary, would offer an opportunity for people to transition to voting and have better support when they are in those school environments.

The other thing—you can jump back to asking questions about it later—was on this civic and electoral education thing. There was a federal inquiry going at about the same time we put in a submission to that. One of the things we are reflecting is that there are a lot of inconsistencies. Sometimes there are some really good programs, but they only happen in some schools and not in other schools. You might have some good programs in primary school, but then they are not followed up through high school. There are a lot of good things out there, but it could be a lot more effective still.

MRS DUNNE: You described the survey and how you administered it. Is it possible to provide the committee with a copy of the survey?

Mr Stein: I cannot remember if we have the questions or not. We can certainly provide you with a copy of the questions we asked. We can also provide you with a copy of all of the responses to the survey, with the handwritten comments and everything on there. I am sorry, but we have not collated those things.

MRS DUNNE: No. I was really more interested in the actual questions. I am a bit concerned about—and this would be for the council, or for you, to determine—providing the committee with identifying material, which we would not want to do.

THE CHAIR: No. We would not want anything like that.

MRS DUNNE: We have talked about the survey result that shows that 94 per cent of young people have the capacity to vote, and you have clarified that a little. We are talking about lowering the voting age in this context to 16—and this might be something you have to come back to us with.

From the results of that survey, how many people, or what proportion of people, would you be thinking of? I am sorry; let me go back a bit. Seeing that, for the purpose of this survey, a young person is aged between 12 and 25, did you get any indication from the survey as to where the survey respondents think the capacity to vote clicks in?

Presumably there is a reasonable expectation that people aged 18 to 25 have the capacity to vote and, as you get closer to 25, presumably you have a greater capacity than at the lower end. Seeing that we are talking about lowering the voting age, does your survey start to point to a point where you think that young people now have the capacity to vote? If we were looking at lowering it and if that is higher than, say, 16, how do we get to the stage of instilling that capacity to vote in people who are younger?

Mr Stein: I do not think we had any questions that specifically drew on that, other

than the one you have already looked at, which is: “Do young people have the capacity to vote?” That was the broad 12 to 25-year one. Other than the comments that were written specifically, there is not a lot we can say about that. Like Reece said, there were a lot of people, or a couple certainly, that said 18. There might have been one or two other comments. I can go back and look at those comments and pass on what they were saying, but I do not think it really drew out the exact age.

Mr Coleman: No. There was no clear result from it saying, “Right, at this age we have pinpointed exactly where a young person has the capacity to vote.” We did acknowledge the fact—and we wanted to bring this to the committee’s attention—that there needed to be an increase in civics and electoral education, not just in the context of lowering the voting age to make people, say, around the age of 16 have the capacity to vote, but to make all Australians—and particularly in the ACT, for example—have the capacity to vote.

A number of comments that I found written were that a younger person has more of a capacity to vote than someone older because fresh in their minds is the democratic process and things that they have learnt through school. They have a better knowledge and understanding of parliament than someone who is just over 18 and no longer in school who has not been exposed to those processes until it is time for them to vote and they get a letter in the mail. We did acknowledge that the electoral education had to increase, regardless of the outcomes and whether they are voting.

Mr Stein: Just to expand on that, while we did not get any specific results of a certain age, a lot of the feeling and a lot of our discussions at our council meetings were along the lines that there is no one specific age where young people, or all young people, have the capacity to vote. There is more of a grey area sort of thing. Some people that are probably eight years old might have the capacity to vote. Reece has a particular eight-year-old friend that has been really wanting to get on the council and would have a great ability to contribute.

I am sure that there are many 18-year-olds and many 20, 30 and 40-year-olds that maybe should not be part of voting because they do not have that capacity. Then you have to define what is capacity, and that becomes a difficult question. But maybe what we are wanting to highlight is that it is a grey sort of thing.

THE CHAIR: I was interested in what you were saying about the time between when they were receiving their civics education at school and when they actually voted.

MRS DUNNE: Perhaps I can pick up on the school education thing. I think this is one of the strong messages that have come through in the last couple of days of the inquiry. Reece, you made some comments that you thought civics education was good in schools, but at the same time you were saying the survey is saying that most of the people do not think they have sufficient capacity. From your own individual perspective, and now also as council members, what do you see as the point where civics education should be provided? I suppose what happens at the moment is that it is done often in primary school and maybe, if you are lucky and you are doing—you do not do history anymore do you?

Mr Coleman: Social science.

MRS DUNNE: In doing social science, you might do a unit in year 10. Do you think that there needs to be some sort of intervention closer to the end of school, when you are getting up to the stage where you can enroll—you can enrol when you are 17—coming close to when you vote? How do you as individuals, as well as members of the council, see that it should work in an ideal world?

Mr Coleman: I can answer that. At the moment, like you said, it is focused on the primary school. At the moment I have not received anything from year 6 onwards in regards to civics and electoral education.

MRS DUNNE: So they are not even in the SOCE courses at the end of the year?

Mr Coleman: Very little. The only thing was: who are the heads of parliament and that sort of thing? You did a background of the case study. I studied John Howard and just did his life, but that did not explain to me democratic processes or how to vote or how to be involved.

MRS DUNNE: Or why we are where we are?

Mr Coleman: Exactly. Not only should it be incorporated into your social curriculum in high school particularly but also through into colleges as well and continuing on and maybe having it as an elective if not just a thing in student development programs. You are coming up to the age of 18 when you can vote, after your two years of college. It should be right up to year 10 definitely, your compulsory age of schooling, but it also should be continued in college and give people that opportunity, if they really want, to get into that and find out more about how to vote and that sort of thing.

MRS DUNNE: Anyone else?

Ms Ni: Speaking for myself, I learned about civics and government when I was in primary school and throughout my education there. In high school, I did not learn anything more. There was just my knowledge from primary school. A lot of it is lost because you learn it in primary school. When I turned 18 and it was time to vote, I did not really have a broad understanding of the democratic process. In that respect, I found it quite hard. It did not really matter whom I chose because it was all the same. In that respect, there should be more education and more material than is being taught in high school or in college—just some sort of refresher.

MRS DUNNE: What things do you think that you are lacking? What do you think that you missed out on? It is a very hard question. Sometimes you do not know what you do not know.

Ms Ni: Maybe the system of government, the democratic process, the important fact that your vote does matter—and just the importance of it—and how government works. A lot of it is taught in primary school but that is when you are 11 or 12 years old.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for asking those questions for me. That is really where I wanted to go. I was wondering where you felt the engagement was more appropriate.

I do not know whether you have had a chance to look at this—and tell me if you do not know about this—but in Canada they have a mock election where they involve young people from grade 5 through to grade 12. I am not sure whether those grades fit comfortably with our grades or not, but they are probably quite similar to our grades. They had 450,000 students through those grades do a mock election at the same time as the election was happening.

MRS DUNNE: A parallel election.

THE CHAIR: In a parallel election. It was not real, obviously; it was a mock one. What do you think of that idea as a way of engaging young people in the process?

Mr Stein: Can I speak on the appropriateness of time first? I do not know whether you have heard about this program, but there is one in Tasmania where one of the schools—I think it was just one of the schools but maybe a couple of schools—did a similar kind of mock election thing and used that as a way of the SRC working within their school community. Maybe we can speak on that a little bit later as well.

The most appropriate time for civics and electoral education is when young people are first voting—yes, it is a transition; you are getting towards 16, 17 and 18 and are starting to be eligible to vote—in maybe the first election or the first two elections when they are voting. Because elections are every three years or something in the ACT, and for the federal government it is similar, they might not vote until they are 20 or 21 or something.

THE CHAIR: It is four years in the ACT.

Mr Stein: Then maybe, in the second election, they are 24 or 25 or something when they are voting. That is a reason we need to be having civics and electoral education support at those times.

Notice that the next questions go on to talk about stimulating debate on current political issues and learning about political history. I am not sure exactly what civic and electoral education is defined as. Obviously, things like the systems of government and so on are important, but some of those other things are also important in the broader empowering of people to make informed decisions and having that knowledge and whatever and that ability to contribute.

From my own experience, I was involved in some good programs in primary school, but through high school and college there was very little or nothing at all. There are some good individual programs that some students get involved in. There are things like debating, model United Nations assemblies and other things that you get involved in.

MRS DUNNE: But they are all voluntary?

Mr Stein: They are all voluntary or hit and miss. Some students get them; some do not. It is valid to say that not everyone learns in the same way and that maybe there are different programs that are best suited or more effective for individual students.

Some of the things are important to learn. Everyone vaguely understands that the system is democracy and is very representative of the community and whatever; parliament makes decisions on your behalf. Maybe there are some other important things that a lot of people do not understand—things like the preferences system, the finer details of how it works.

MRS DUNNE: How the prime minister is elected.

Mr Stein: Things like these committees and other ways that you can have a say in democracy other than just voting are important things that need to be part of that civic and electoral education. Again, all these things need to be reinforced; so it is good to introduce them to young people when they are in primary school. When you get to different ages, you have different perspectives on things or their contexts.

That brings me to that model in Tasmania. They set up their SRC so that it ran like a little mock parliament. They had their elections. I think the entire year 6 class became the house of representatives. The SRC were representing the rest of the school's enormous student population. They all had different roles that reflected what the roles might be in parliament, but they had different responsibilities around the school. Some students would be responsible for representing certain classes or years; others would be responsible for certain issues within the school.

They would have their discussions or whatever, put forward proposals or whatever, and pass it up to the senate, which was the staff or whatever. It was accountable that way. The staff would come back down and have their little processes with bills and whatever. But it was the way that the SRC worked and the way that they empowered the young people to be part of the community. It was not just going through the process where they learned about these things, but it was something that was really relevant because they were making a difference in participating in their school community.

Mr Coleman: To refer to your question specifically, it is a great model, it works really well and it engages people by sending them to parliament house and the legislative assembly, by getting them to sit in rooms like this and participate in mock elections or mock debates and that sort of thing. It is great but it is only done in years 5 and 6. That is a big issue at the moment. It needs to be continued in high school.

DR FOSKEY: I want to ask a supplementary to that. You are talking there of the SRC model and the Canadian model that Mary was referring to before which is very much based on the existing the existing parliamentary system—what we call democracy here—which is when you go out and vote; you have an elected body; you have voted; they make their decisions.

There are other ways of making decisions and doing politics. A school, it would seem to me, could be a place for looking at other ways of doing things. For instance, you are talking there of the SRC model. It sounds like an emulation of the big parliament, just like this one is an emulation of the big parliament. But there are only 17 people here. It could have been different.

It is important that young people learn how the system works, how to use it, how to

best express what they think and have the system representing them, but is there space for looking at other ways of making decisions, for instance in the school, that are democratic? Do you feel that in your education you came across other models—perhaps with a teacher in a particular classroom—for the way decisions were made?

Mr Coleman: I think this council is an example of what you are talking about. We are the Minister's Youth Council, so we advise Katy Gallagher on some issues regarding young people in the ACT. That was one of the first ways that I came across—I had previous involvement with SRCs and linking with government—actually being involved in decision making and trying to influence what is happening in regards to making submissions and that sort of thing. This council is a primary example of it.

It is not something that everyone can be involved with. That was the issue that we were having. There are options out there, like we were saying about the UN and that sort of thing, but a lot of them are voluntary and a lot of them are only limited. You are not giving the full population of young people in the ACT the chance to be involved in them. You can invite them to make submissions and that sort of thing, but not everyone can write a submission. We are saying that a number of people can vote.

There are many alternatives, but we are saying that at the moment they are not adequate and are not tying in with the level of education and the age that we are setting for voting. We are saying that a lot of these issues were happening too young. The mock elections, the mock parliament and that sort of thing are great but are happening too young or do not tie in with the circumstances.

DR FOSKEY: Do you think young people are interested in ACT politics? Are they interested in federal politics? How would you weigh up that interest?

Mr Stein: Sometimes they do not discriminate and do not realise exactly what is an issue that should be at the ACT level or at the federal level. Maybe they think more holistically about what is going on or more specifically about how things affect them. I can take that on a very different tangent later. Do you want to spend a moment?

Mr Coleman: I would say that a number of young people are really passionate and enthusiastic about politics and are involved and want to know more about looking at what is happening in their own electorate, their own state, as well as federally. You have looked at the *Towards 2020* proposal that went through and at the amount of young people involved in the consultation for that. They were trying to find out and look at the policy, the legislation and that sort of thing. That is a great example because it was showing an effect that it was having on young people.

DR FOSKEY: That was your consultation last week that you are talking about?

Mr Coleman: Our forum that we had on it, yes, but also through the government's ongoing consultation through other public forums that they have held, through workshops and things like that, and even in school visits from the minister and that sort of thing. It has highlighted the number of people who are quite passionate about politics, are involved in it and want to learn more about it. Also, a number of people are taking it to the next level, saying, "We're not happy with the result we're getting at the ACT level. Is this a federal matter that we look at the quality of our education?"

This is young people coming up with these things. It is not being guided by teachers or parents or that sort of thing. It is young people driving this force.

Mr Stein: Also, when you talk to the minister about it, he found those engaging with young people were really positive and worth while. It is a really good thing to be having these youth participation initiatives and getting, as much as possible, really good consultation process happening. Diana, do you have anything to say about this?

Ms Ni: Yes. I just wanted to add that I agree with what Patrick and Reece said. A lot of young people do not know when you have public hearings; they do not know how to put in a submission. Having forums is an outlet for them to express their views. It is done in a non-intimidating environment where they feel comfortable and are surrounded by young people.

MR GENTLEMAN: I wanted to touch on, if I could, the engagement that you had during your survey. Did you get a feel from your respondents that it was different for them to engage with you as the Minister's Youth Council rather than with either bureaucrats or academics—and we have received submissions that have been done by bureaucrats and academics—as it was their own group that were engaging with them to find out their needs rather than a group from academia, for example?

Mr Coleman: One of the actual functions and purposes of this council is that it is young people representing young people. That was the big thing. We are this bridge between young people of the ACT and the ACT government. We directly consult with young people, saying, "What are your ideas? What is happening? What is going on? What do you think about this?" That is when we write submissions and draw out results and that sort of thing.

We have found it very positive, particularly among not just the young people that we used in our survey but also some of the older demographic as well. They were saying, "Okay, this is young people driving this force. Okay, they want this to happen". They are interested in it. It really shows the power behind what we are doing and that level of youth participation. My parents made the comment, when I surveyed them, "Before we knew that you were involved in all this, we wouldn't have said that young people had the capacity to vote." Seeing that I was only 16 when I was doing this stuff, I would be able to vote and probably have more capacity to vote than they would. The reaction was interesting.

A lot of people were very happy and found it quite easy to engage with us because we are not intimidating and are not trying to pick apart what everyone is saying. We just want to know what they think and then have the ability to tell the government that.

Mr Stein: There are two things there. It's been really positive going out as young people and talking to other young people. It's not confrontational but it's empowering and inspiring, so that's really good. Maybe it doesn't have to be young people doing it—there are lots of people that can engage effectively with young people—but it is about the manners or the systems. Maybe some of the things from adult worlds, like big fat government policy documents or submissions, aren't the way young people work. Having it on young people's terms is the important thing to take out of that.

The other thing that is really important is to show that it's legitimate and meaningful and to let them know that what they're saying will be taken directly back here and will make a difference or be considered—like the 2020 forum last week, where we had young people and we invited the minister, so that it was really obvious that it was going to be taken on board. I think that's the other important part of what we've been doing.

MRS DUNNE: I think it was Patrick who made the point that young people didn't necessarily differentiate between the role of the ACT government and that of the commonwealth government. Do you see that as a problem?

Mr Stein: I think it could be seen as a problem for people that are trying to make decisions in their own systems and in their own worlds, so for you guys that could be a problem. But it could also be taken as something really positive, because it gives you the opportunity to look at things holistically or in a different way. Something really nice about young people is that they're coming in fresh and so can think of something creatively, abstractly or laterally that doesn't fit in with all the precedents or everything that has been going on in adult worlds or adult ways of doing things. I can't expand on that because that's way too abstract, but it could be a really positive thing

MRS DUNNE: That raises what I suppose in a way is possibly a threshold question. What you're saying is that young people approach things in a non-adult way. But could it be said that obtaining the right to vote is almost a rite of passage into adulthood? So, if we were thinking of lowering the voting age—this is not really a question that we've asked—are we putting an imposition on young people, who may approach things in a holistic, tangential sort of way? Are we putting an adult construct on a young person's approach to public policy?

Mr Stein: Maybe you could look at an entirely different system of democracy and way of voting and engaging people and, say, let young people rule the world and they'd come up with better solutions; I don't know. Young people can certainly be more idealistic. I study architecture, which is a creative thing, and what we find is that really young children—maybe between the ages of two and five—are really creative and uninhibited from everything. But as you go up from there you get less and less creative and sort of stuck on this rational way of thinking.

MRS DUNNE: Using architecture as an example, somewhere along the line your creativity gets mugged by reality; you may be able to envisage some fantastic castle in the sky but you may never be able to build it.

Mr Stein: It's an alternative reality.

Mr Coleman: In regard to what you asked beforehand, I don't think that lowering the voting age would force young people into a state of adulthood. You still have things like the legal drinking age and when you can join the armed services. These are all things that we considered in our survey as well, looking at if we dropped the voting age do we drop the drinking age, the age at which you can defend the country and that sort of thing. We said no; those things still remain and there's still that point at which you're an adult. But we're saying that people between the ages of 16 and 17 have the

capacity to vote, participate in the democratic process, while still maintaining their young status, so not forcing them into: “Okay, at 16 I’ve just become an adult and now I can vote.”

MRS DUNNE: What you’re saying, Reece, is that it isn’t necessarily that sort of important rite of passage that adults might see it to be?

Mr Coleman: No, I think it’s just more of giving an opportunity.

Mr Stein: While in our survey we might have had only 60 respondents approximately, which by no means can you take as hard, solid evidence for basing any decisions, we feel that it can give you an indication. It came out really clearly that the voting age shouldn’t be linked to other things that could be seen as adulthood things or rites of passage; that maybe they’re based on things other than adulthood things like military service or alcohol and tobacco regulation or whatever. Something like alcohol and tobacco regulation wouldn’t be an adult thing; it should be something based on health or a body’s capacity to have those things. But everyone MYC surveyed was unanimous in saying that every young person has a right to have a say and to be heard and that generally as a priority youth participation should be improved and that they should be part of the democratic process. Maybe lowering the voting age isn’t necessarily the only, or even the best or most effective, way that can be done. But young people certainly do have a capacity and probably a right to input to that democratic process.

THE CHAIR: You talked before about how not everyone wants to put in a submission or front up to a committee and that it can be quite daunting for adults to do this, let alone young people. So what other things can this committee do to engage young people in this process? In any process that we, in any committee, might have we would want to hear from time to time the views of young people on a particular subject, so how would you suggest we engage better?

Mr Coleman: School visits work well.

Mr Stein: Community meetings.

Mr Coleman: Yes, that sort of thing—having a forum where parents and students come along.

THE CHAIR: Together.

Mr Coleman: Yes, so that it’s not as daunting, so that you have support there or you can go as a group of friends; you’re not there as an individual. Some of my friends would find coming into this situation very overwhelming, although we’re all used to it.

THE CHAIR: And we don’t have two heads.

Mr Coleman: Going out there and seeking their views is the biggest thing. As Pat was saying, young people want to see an outcome and see that someone is genuinely interested in what they have to say. One of the things that a lot of people were worried about was whether this issue was just thrown up as a tokenistic thing.

DR FOSKEY: No.

Mr Coleman: I know that; that's why we're here. But that was a concern of some people.

THE CHAIR: Yes, of course.

Mr Coleman: Many young people have had that before: they've been asked to be on a school board yet, even though they've had equal voting rights, their voice wasn't heard. That's what we're saying: if you go out there and seek out what a young person thinks, you'll engage with them beautifully; particularly with this process, a lot of people were very excited about it. They think, "Wow! This is an opportunity." Even if this doesn't go through, it's a step in the right direction because it's making you look at the capacity of young people to be involved, to even make decisions—that sort of thing—regarding how our state's run.

Ms Ni: Also, the people I surveyed felt really empowered because it's something that really affected them. They thought the government was interested about young people's views and matters relating to young people. In terms of what Reece said about community centres, forums, I also think it'd be good to have a facilitator. You don't want things to get out of hand, so with a group of young people, their parents and committee members, I also think it's important to have a facilitator.

DR FOSKEY: I just want to ask about the role of the internet and whether young people that you know use the GetUp! site very much, the petition site. The media say that young people love the internet. There are some pretty amazing statistics about GetUp! and the numbers of people who get involved with things. The walk against warming, for instance, was doing more than signing petitions. What about the role of the internet? Is that overhyped?

Mr Coleman: It is vital, and we've found that on our council. We serve under Youth InterACT, which is the ACT government's youth participation initiative, and we have our own website and a consultation register on that. We posed the proposition of lowering the voting age and asked: what do you think? We allowed for comments and an online survey. I think we had about 500 people sign up to that register. It's something that we need to promote more. We have it on the back of our shirts—that sort of thing—and pens that we give away.

DR FOSKEY: Great idea.

Mr Coleman: The youth coalition uses it beautifully as well. We are coming to that age now where a lot of things are done over the internet; it's not seen as an impersonal way or as anonymous but more of an effective way for young people to communicate. Rather than us running around trying to talk to every young person, we post something up on the web and we get all these hits back saying what people think, and then we collate it and run from there. That way, you're more efficient, you're finding out a lot more things and you're allowing people who may be a bit shy, may not be able to be involved in a public forum or have access to it, to be involved and have their say.

Mr Stein: I think you have to do both, though. You have to have a range of different ways of engaging people. One of our survey results was that the most effective way of communicating was face to face. Maybe that's partly coming back to what's seen as legitimate and the ability to support and empower young people. Even the Minister's Youth Council have sometimes been sent an email and asked to just answer it on the spot when we have no idea how to answer or whatever. But, if someone came to a forum and had a discussion with us and gave us a little bit of context, some information, that kind of empowerment, they would see that we do have all these ideas and we can have a discussion backwards and forwards, bounce things off each other and then it can come out. There is a range of ways, but maybe that's why face to face comes out as a better way.

MR GENTLEMAN: I've got one quick question on the back of the question on the internet. You mentioned that you posed the voting age question on your web page. Have you any idea how many hits you got on that question?

Mr Stein: Our annual report is being put together slowly. It's my fault; I haven't looked at it yet. Eventually, it's a public document so it goes to our minister, Katy Gallagher. I know that from time to time MLAs ask what we're up to and whatever. The stats in there show that we get thousands and thousands of hits to that website and that they do go down levels and look at the various consultations and forums and things that are going on. It's the youth.act.gov.au website. It's a really good address and people know straightaway that it's legitimate.

There is a little bit of discussion going of people writing posts in regard to forum topics, but it's a very small percentage compared to the number of hits. Maybe one of the reasons is that things need to be approved before they can go on the website, so somebody will write a reply or a post that needs to be approved before it can go up there. We've had a few problems with the systems and whatever, so sometimes it might take a while to get up there, so it's a bit hard to get a discussion going, but certainly there's a lot of interest there and unlimited potential to be tapped.

Mr Coleman: Probably around 10 per cent.

MR GENTLEMAN: Of total hits?

Mr Coleman: Of total hits.

DR FOSKEY: Do you think that it's promoted in schools? I'm just wondering how young people know about this website, apart from "Googling" it or if people tell them about it. If you go to school, do you know about it?

Mr Coleman: The SRC curriculum said that if people wanted to find out more about what's happening in the ACT there's the youth coalition website, our website, GetUp! and that sort of thing. When we do school visits we have young people's plans and that sort of thing—our own little packs that we give out to students, with pens and that sort of stuff. Everything has the website on it and we plaster it everywhere.

Mr Stein: It features quite prominently on almost all of the documents coming out of

the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, which look after Youth InterACT, the Minister's Youth Council, the websites. I know that when it was set up a few years ago there was a much stronger kind of promotion push. There were posters in the buses everywhere, and I think some of them still exist because ACTION never get around to putting new posters up. That means it's good value for money. I know that for a while we had posters on those scrolling boards in Garema Place even, and certainly we have our little freebies like our pens with Youth InterACT on them. We get out there and run forums and conferences, so it does get out there.

But recently it has been more through the department's sort of policy documents and through word of mouth, when we go out and talk to SRCs or other school communities. So it's out there; it's not completely hidden. There are ways of engaging. Community meetings, forums, internet things and face to face are all great. It's a pretty good thing that the Minister's Youth Council and Youth InterACT exist. Coming here today and talking to you has been a really positive way of engaging and it hasn't been confrontational. You've asked really good questions. I don't know but I imagine sometimes that at hearings you can really grill people giving evidence.

MRS DUNNE: Only public servants.

Mr Stein: You've already got a reasonable approach to engaging young people here, so that's a really good thing. All this stuff gets streamed on the internet and that could become something that could allow access to a lot of people. I imagine not many people would go and look at it or even know that it happens, but that's a possibility, with other internet things, of having your say or whatever.

Mr Coleman: And we post follow-ups on our website as well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for both your submission and for this discussion today; it has been really helpful.

Mr Coleman: Can I also just table, for your information and so it's in the *Hansard* record, a copy of our submission for the civics and electoral education inquiry.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that.

Mr Stein: We will follow up by providing you with the survey questions, and if we can find some of those comments about the different—

THE CHAIR: Yes, as long as they are not identified with a particular person.

Mr Stein: No. It was an anonymous survey anyway, so all it will have is an age demographic and—

THE CHAIR: That's fine if you want to get that information to us. We'll send you a draft of the transcript so that you can have a look at it and see if there are any inaccuracies in what you said.

MRS DUNNE: It doesn't often happen.

THE CHAIR: No, it doesn't often happen.

Mr Stein: No, because Hansard have been recording what we've been saying, and that's reasonable.

THE CHAIR: We let you have a look at it and then you send it back to us.

The committee adjourned at 10.25 am.