



**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

THURSDAY, 26 JULY 2007

**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 that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

The committee met at 1.59 pm.

Appearances:

Canberra College

Dawson, Ms Lauren

Duggan, Mr Ben

Copland College

Brown, Miss Simone

Murakami, Miss Chika

Godfrey-Yik, Ms Mei Ying

Sharpe, Ms Elissa

Hawker College

Ehsmen, Mr David

Klein, Mr Simon

Benstead, Ms Morgyn

Lake Ginninderra College

Woodman, Mr James

Watts, Mr Gareth

Langdown, Mr Nathan

Marshall, Ms Emma

Lake Tuggeranong College

Chinn, Miss Emily

Bull, Miss Hannah

Prendergast, Mr Simon

Narrabundah College

Gnanasekaran, Ms Tharsiga

Boyd, Ms Tara

Javaid, Ms Lalarukh

THE CHAIR (Ms Porter): Good afternoon. Thank you very much for attending from all the different colleges. Unfortunately, we do not have representatives of Erindale and Dickson with us, but I believe every other college is represented. Because this is a public hearing, I need to read something to you which talks about your rights and responsibilities in relation to hearings.

The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting 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 for

the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution. It means that you have to speak the truth as far as you know it at all times. There are also other details about in-camera evidence, but we will not be taking such evidence today, so I will not read that out. Does everyone understand what I have read out? Thank you.

We are here this afternoon to take evidence for the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People into voting age eligibility, as to whether we should lower voting age eligibility to the age of 16. That is what we are going to be discussing here this afternoon, and we are going to hear your opinions, views, comments and ideas regarding that. We have a fairly tight time frame. I might need to hand over to Mr Gentleman to chair the hearing at some stage. I will now ask everyone at the table to make an opening comment.

Mr Woodman (Lake Ginninderra College): I am in year 11 at Lake Ginninderra College.

THE CHAIR: Is there something else you would like to say?

Mr Woodman: Yes. I think it is very nice of you to get the CRC involved in this decision and hear our views, and I thank you for that opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Is there a view that you would like to express at this stage, James?

Mr Woodman: I would prefer to wait for the discussion.

THE CHAIR: Okay.

Ms Gnanasekaran (Narrabundah College): I would also like to hear the discussion, but I do have a definite stance, in that I do not believe voting should be compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds. Whether it should be a choice is debatable, and I might disagree or agree with that, but I definitely feel that it should not be compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the ACT.

Ms Boyd (Narrabundah College): I am in year 12. My opinion is that having a portion of the voting population attending school is definitely a positive thing, since it keeps politicians accountable to students and I think it encourages them to have policies that suit education systems and the people attending these institutions. It is a positive thing that when you are 18 you are allowed to vote, but I definitely do not think it should be any lower than that age. I think that, as members of a democracy, we have a responsibility to be informed about what we are voting for, and I do not think that a lot of 16- and 17-year-olds are as informed as 18- and 19-year-olds when it comes to voting.

Ms Chinn (Lake Tuggeranong College): I am also open to a bit of discussion on my opinion, but I think it is important that 16- and 17-year-olds have a political voice, whether it is by way of a vote or not. Before that happens, there needs to be better political education in schools, but I do think that it can depend on the individual as to how much political knowledge they have.

Mr Ehsmen (Hawker College): I agree with Emily that while it is important to give political information to students so that they are aware of political goings-on in the community, voting on state and national matters does not seem as necessary. So I pretty much concur with the view that, yes, at the local level, lowering the voting age would be a great idea.

THE CHAIR: Could I clarify what you just said? Do you think the voting age should be lowered for people voting on local matters but not on state and national matters? Is that what you meant?

Mr Ehsmen: Yes.

Mr Klein (Hawker College): I am a year 12 student. Although I have formed an opinion, I am very open to having a discussion, particularly regarding the possibility of the opinions of permanent residents being represented. I believe that there is definitely room for the possibility of 16- and 17-year-olds being able to vote, with my preference going towards a non-compulsory system.

Ms Benstead (Hawker College): I think it is true that a lot of 16- and 17-year-olds are not very interested, and I also think that allowing them to vote would make them more interested and they would feel that they had a say, but I also think it should be non-compulsory.

Ms Dawson (Canberra College): I feel that it would be unwise to make voting compulsory for 16- and 17-year-olds. However, it may indeed be a positive thing for that option to be there. However, first there needs to be greater education regarding the role of the Legislative Assembly. I feel that young people often are largely focused simply on federal issues, despite the fact that it is largely their local government that is doing what affects them. They really need to have greater education about what the Legislative Assembly actually does and how their vote will in fact affect these issues. If we give 16- and 17-year-olds the vote now, they may not necessarily understand the consequences. Obviously, there are exceptions to that, but as a large demographic issue, there is a risk.

Mr Duggan (Canberra College): I believe that 16- and 17-year-olds should be given the option to vote because the ones who would choose the option, generally speaking, would be the ones who have an idea about what they are voting for, because they have chosen to step into the ballot box and cast their vote in a particular way. They are not going to go in there uninformed, just to have the experience of voting. That may not be true in all cases. So I do believe that 16- and 17-year-olds definitely need to be given more knowledge, as Lauren said, with regard to how the territory government operate and what they deal with, and also with particular respect to the policies of different parties. I believe that many young people, whether they are 19, 16 or 17, do not fully understand the policies of the different parties, and I think that is also important when thinking about giving 16- and 17-year-olds either the option of voting or making it compulsory to vote.

Ms Godfrey-Yik (Copland College): I am also in year 12. I think that it is important that people who are 16 and 17 have the option to vote because I believe that the state government does make a lot of changes within the ACT that young people are subject

to—for example, in education and health. I do not believe that it should be compulsory because, while 16- and 17-year-olds do have driving responsibilities, the fact that the legal age is 18 does reflect the maturity difference between the two years. Legally, at 16 and 17, you are not held as accountable for your actions as you are at 18, but I do not think it is fair to punish those who do not vote. If you make it mandatory, you are going to get a lot of votes that are not serious. A lot of teenagers do not believe that who is the head of each division matters. So I believe that it should be an option, but I do not think it should be mandatory.

Ms Sharpe (Copland College): I am also in year 12. I agree with a lot of what Ben and Mei said. I think it would be very beneficial for people aged 16 and 17 to vote, but I do not think that it should be compulsory for that age group. I agree with Ben: if 16- and 17-year-olds choose to vote, they would probably be the sort of people who are more informed and take their opinion and vote seriously. I do not think it should be compulsory because not everyone in that age group feels that it directly affects them. With respect to a lot of decisions and policies that are created by governments, whether they have a direct or indirect effect on people our age, they do directly affect us and I think it would be very beneficial if we had some sort of say in those matters.

THE CHAIR: Having listened, James, to everything that has been said around the table, did you want to add anything at this stage?

Mr Woodman: I agree with most of the comments. I quite agree with making it non-compulsory, but I would also go a little further. I think you should have to prove your need, worth or reason why you should be voting for any particular government. If it is simply a matter of going in, there is a greater chance of a group of people going in for a joke, especially the younger teenagers. So being on a list, signing up and having a separate electoral roll would be effective, in my opinion.

THE CHAIR: James, can you explain to me how you think someone could prove that they were serious?

Mr Woodman: There could be simple questions about the Legislative Assembly and how it works, just to make sure they understand the voting process correctly.

THE CHAIR: Right. So before they can enrol to vote, they would need to pass some kind of a question-and-answer session.

Mr Woodman: Yes, that was my idea.

THE CHAIR: There are more people who might want to come to the table, but before we have any more people come to the table, is there anything that anybody else wants to say, or do members have questions of those people who are sitting at the table at the moment?

MRS DUNNE: I am interested in James's suggestion about some sort of test of maturity, almost. Is that what you are suggesting?

Mr Woodman: Basically, yes.

MRS DUNNE: Do you think that the average person who is enrolled would pass that test? Do you think that that test would—

Mr Woodman: I don't know.

Mr Klein: I think that asking someone to prove their maturity would be a very difficult thing to do and almost any process set up in order to do that would have many flaws— probably unseen at first, but which would become apparent. Proving you are worthy of being in a democratic system and having a right to vote is wrong. It would probably be better to just leave it as a non-compulsory option for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote within the ACT, and probably also extend the level of political education that we receive. I, for one, have very little understanding of how the actual structure of the ACT government works, and the same goes for the Legislative Assembly. I would not mind having that as an option in my choices at school.

MRS DUNNE: That is the sort of area that I would like to explore. Many of you spoke about what might be loosely called “civics education”. Do you see value in generally having better, more or some civics education in the later years?

Ms Gnanasekaran: Yes. I believe that we need some. Having gone through high school, I really did not have very much civics learning at all. All the knowledge that I have is based upon what I have gone out and done in my own time, in extracurricular activities. Having done all that, I still believe that I do not have a very good foundation at all. I know nothing at all about how the system works, but compared to most of my friends—

MRS DUNNE: Extraordinarily well informed, yes.

Ms Gnanasekaran: I am an expert on the issue. I think there is such a range between what people do know, so it is probably best to have civics learning.

MRS DUNNE: Emily, you expressed a view about civics before?

Ms Chinn: Yes, I agree that in my school we have not had any. It would not be adding to what we already have because there is nothing to add to. Going back to what we were saying before about proving yourself in order to have a vote, I think that, although it would be nice to see that the people who are voting are well informed about how the process works, in a way it is good that they are not because in a democratic society we want to reflect everybody's opinion, whether it is the opinion of somebody who is really well informed, or the opinion of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and with different types of education. I think it is important that they all have a vote, whether they know what they are voting about or not.

THE CHAIR: Lauren, Mei and Elissa all want to say something. I know that someone in the back row is waiting to say something, and I think David also wants to say something. Lauren, would you like to go first?

Ms Dawson: I would like to agree with Emily and Simon. I really do feel that having to prove that you meet certain criteria in order to vote really undermines basic

democratic principles. The entire point of having elections is to represent the views of all demographics of society. I feel that setting certain criteria could narrow that and exclude certain demographics and would therefore be unwise.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: I think that making it non-compulsory increases the seriousness of the voter. As Ben was saying before, and Elissa agreed, if you actively seek to vote then the odds are that you want your vote to count. I do not think that age is a reflection of maturity. I think that there are a lot of voters who will vote this year who have no idea who the opposition leaders are and who is fighting for the big seat. I think that the best way to do it, rather than taking a test, is to make it a privilege that is available if you seek it. I think that is the best way of weeding out the people who do not care.

Ms Sharpe: Although it is important for anyone, regardless of whether you are voting or not, to understand the structure of how government works, with regard to voting it would be more beneficial to understand the policies of the parties at the present time as opposed to how the system works. Understanding how the structure of parliament works is not going to help you pick the best party for you. That is not necessarily something they can teach in classes. They can't really have a lesson on the most recent policies. If there is a gap in education, I think that is the most important thing that needs to be filled—understanding what the policies are as opposed to the structure of government. I think that is the biggest flaw.

Mr Ehsmen: With respect to the policy of educating more students, would this be compulsory, non-compulsory or for everyone? Instead of doing a test, would it be possible to have the information on offer to those who would be willing to vote? If you are teaching it to everyone, not everyone is going to be willing. A lot of people, as was said before, do not mature at the age of 18 and they do not know what they are voting for. So subjecting them to this at a younger age is not really going to change things for the majority of people who want to vote. But with respect to the people who want to vote, they should be given the choice of being subjected to the policies.

MRS DUNNE: So your view, David, is that you do not particularly need civics education as part of the curriculum or whatever?

Mr Ehsmen: Not exactly as part of the curriculum; just subject it to the people who actually want to pursue that information.

MRS DUNNE: An elective.

Mr Ehsmen: Yes, although not exactly an elective because, as a student, I know I have a heap on my plate, and that is only with 5½ subjects. If you do not understand English or if you do not have permanency, it makes it a little harder to pursue that kind of education, because you are doing a lot of things like ESL.

Ms Javaid (Narrabundah College): I know I have joined this discussion a bit late but I would like to say that I do think it is a good idea to let 16- or 17-year-olds vote. However, it should not be mandatory. If anything, it would introduce youth to voting. It would almost ease them into the process rather than being made to vote at 18 without having any background. In response to saying that there should be a test to

see our worth, isn't the initiative taken by a 16- or 17-year-old enough?

THE CHAIR: We have three more people who would like to say something. After that, we will let some other people get involved.

Ms Gnanasekaran: I think it is a really good idea to have something just to make sure that you do not have non-serious people trying to vote at 16 and 17. I also think it would be really easy for a strong-minded person to influence their friends into voting for someone that they want to vote for. They could say, "Look, it's not compulsory but why don't you just come along and vote for this person because I think they're awesome?" and their friends could come along and vote too. You do not necessarily need a test because maybe a test is not an accurate description of whether someone wants to vote or not, but I think you definitely need, if you want to vote at 16 or 17, to have some kind of statement of intent as to "why I want to vote". You would not have all these people just doing it for their friends if they had to write a 200- or 300-word statement of intent as to why they wanted to vote and what it was going to give them.

MRS DUNNE: What would you think about the notion that, if voting was optional, therefore the registration was optional and the mere effort of going and registering to vote was a statement of your intent? You would still have to be on the roll before you could vote but it would not be compulsory to be enrolled at 16 or 17. Do you think that would be an initiative? If you were being brow-beaten by your friend to go and vote but you actually had to go through the effort of signing up first, would that be a big enough barrier to dissuade those people who were not doing it for the right reasons?

Ms Gnanasekaran: I do not think it is really that difficult to vote. We got the enrolment forms at school and we just had to fill them in and send them off, so it is really not very difficult to enrol to vote. I was asked to enrol to vote at 17, so you are already being asked to enrol at a younger age. I do not think it is too difficult.

MRS DUNNE: That is a good point.

Ms Gnanasekaran: The process of enrolling to vote could involve actually writing a reason why you wanted to vote.

Ms Dawson: Returning to the question of civics education, as has been mentioned earlier, actually teaching large amounts of policy is going to be quite logistically difficult. Simply knowing the structure of the system may not necessarily be the key issue. It might simply be a case of making sure that young people know where they can go to find the information. It is one thing to say that if they have sought this information then that proves their intent. However, often it is simply the case that people do not know where they can easily access the information. So that may be an option.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: In terms of civics education, were you planning to include that as part of the curriculum? The year 12s, and also the year 11s, do not have a lot of room in the curriculum as it is, and to make it an R unit would be very difficult.

MRS DUNNE: Sorry, to make it—

Ms Godfrey-Yik: Were you planning to put civics education in the curriculum or as a sort of—

MRS DUNNE: There is certainly a lot of discussion about it.

THE CHAIR: We want to hear from you.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: I do not believe that it would work very well as a curriculum item. It is difficult to get all the students together more than, say, eight times. Each college needs to do AST practices for the Australian scaling test. Colleges have difficulty getting everyone together just for those. It would be better to have a state-wide day, maybe in a forum when everyone who is interested can come along to do it. Trying to get it into the curriculum would be extremely difficult.

Mr Klein: There are two issues there. With respect to having some way of proving yourself, I do not believe that you can fix a lot of the world's problems with education. If you want to try and persuade your friends to go and vote for you, if they have a better understanding of what they are about to do, what implications their actions will have and a better political understanding, I think there will be a higher chance of them not doing it. That also links to the people who are actually interested in civics, perhaps as a career or they may just be personally interested. It would be a lot easier to combine a civics subject with existing courses such as English or history. I know that anthropology and similar subjects, as well as sociology, have already been mixed with history subjects, and I can't see a problem with adding civics to that.

THE CHAIR: I am now going to be fairly arbitrary and say that all those people who have spoken more than once should leave the table and other people can come forward. So anyone who has spoken more than once, please swap places with somebody else.

MR GENTLEMAN: Chair, while our visitors are taking their seats, I make the observation that I thought that most people who have spoken have indicated that they think young people should be allowed to vote before the age of 18 but that it not be compulsory.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MR GENTLEMAN: Also, there was a lack of awareness of what happens in our Legislative Assembly in comparison to the federal government and perhaps federal politics. Lauren raised that, I think, in the first statement. I wondered whether that has occurred at the moment because there is a federal election coming up. Every night you see on the news the federal parties arguing about their particular policies.

THE CHAIR: You want to know whether people would normally know more about it but because it is being overwhelmed at the moment by federal information they do not.

MR GENTLEMAN: Yes, they are more aware of the campaign that is happening rather than of what occurs in the ACT. That is just a comment.

THE CHAIR: Who wants to go first? Emma?

Ms Marshall (Lake Ginninderra College): I pretty much agree with most of the things that have been said about lowering the voting age to 16-years-old. One thing that I disagree with that I would like to talk about is having to write about why you want to vote. If they had to write 300 words, with respect to however many 16- to 18-year-olds there are in the ACT, who is going to read that? Who is going to decide that it is appropriate that they vote? The amount of extra effort that would go into organising that sort of thing would be very large. I think it would not be worth the effort just so that people could write down why they want to vote.

A better possibility would be what Mei said before about having to go along on a particular day and find out about the systems and the policies. Maybe you could only vote once you had attended one of those days. So you would have to prove your intent by attending something like that, and you would be informed to that extent. There could be a certificate awarded after doing that course, such as with the RSA certificate.

Mr Watts (Lake Ginninderra College): I have nothing to add at the moment. I will listen to the discussion.

THE CHAIR: Who else is new? Simon?

Mr Prendergast (Lake Tuggeranong College): I agree with a lot of the stuff that is flying around the table right now. You say that we need to be educated more, that we need an RSA type of thing to vote. What I got from this discussion was that by lowering the voting age it would make our country, and I suppose our state, more democratic. But would it really be democratic if we only let a select number of people vote from this category? I am not sure if you know what I mean. I do not know if I would have the time to go on such a course, but I definitely would take my vote seriously. I will have to hear from the others, but I just do not believe that is necessarily as democratic as this whole plan was meant to be.

Ms Bull (Lake Tuggeranong College): I also agree that 16- and 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote. If they were allowed to vote then teachers would realise that and during subject time they would talk a little bit about politics and make sure their students were informed, because teachers are obviously going to care who their students are going to vote for and whether or not they are going to vote responsibly. With people living longer and longer, having younger people voting would help compensate for that as well.

Mr Langdown (Lake Ginninderra College): I am still a bit undecided about where I stand on this topic. I have opinions both for and against it. If we allow 16-year-olds to vote, a lot of them will be high school students, and some of these people may not have reached a level of maturity to be able to make these sorts of decisions. On the other hand, as we can see here, there are a lot of passionate young people who are under 18 and who have developed opinions about voting. I believe they have reached a level of maturity so that they can make that big decision.

Another thing I believe is that, even if we are given all of this information, getting out

of school and getting into the workforce or whatever you want to do after you leave school would also give you better experience. You would be able to make a better decision on voting for federal governments and things like that. We need experience; we need to get out there first before making a decision. I turn 18 this year and there is the possibility of having a federal election this year, which means I would have to vote. Personally, I really do not want to vote this year because I feel that I do not have enough information and I do not have enough experience to make that decision. I would prefer to wait until the next federal election so that I would feel more comfortable with and more experienced in making that decision.

Ms Brown (Copland College): At this point I have to say I am a fence-sitter on the issue. I believe that as an option, but not compulsorily, it would be beneficial. However, I also believe that parents are extremely influential over their children, and this could result in an influenced vote on the child's part at 16 or 17 years. It may also result in added pressure on children aged from 16 to 17. If they were able to vote at 16 or 17 I think people might expect them to vote, so there might be added pressure on them to try and make the right decision. They would feel that they have to vote now that they have been given the right.

Ms Javid: The government is meant to be representing the population. So far, because we have a barrier in that we can only vote once we are 18, there is a divided concept regarding the introduction of a non-compulsory voting age of 16. Those people who are interested would choose to take that privilege. If we look around this room, we see people who have chosen to come to this meeting today. Not everyone is here. So I am sure that the 16- or 17-year-olds who would choose to vote would be the ones who are quite interested.

In response to Nathan's comment about not knowing enough, I have to agree with that. I am not sure about the government or any of its policies. However, I do not think we can blame not receiving the information. Have we made the effort? The introduction of a non-compulsory voting age would help to bring people out of their shells and to go forth and make that effort.

Mr Duggan: It would be good if we could solve all the logistical problems by having an optional class in schools to educate people. Those who do not want to be educated may not come to the class, anyway. So it might be good to have an optional package, say from the Legislative Assembly, so that, at the start of year 11, or in year 10 when you reach the voting age, you could go and collect it from the front office. If you are interested, you would go to the front office and say, "Can I please have an information package from the Legislative Assembly," or you could advertise that you have this information package. You could even do it in partnership with the federal parliament. A package could be compiled that explains how you operate and what process you go through to enact legislation. There could even be one A4 sheet from all the different parties explaining what they believe they stand for. It would not have to involve different people; it could just be from each individual party saying, "This is what we believe we stand for." People could flick through the book and say, "Okay, that's what the Liberal Party stands for, that's what the Labor Party, Greens and Democrats stand for." You would then understand the concepts, the way it works and it would be your choice. You could go on the internet and find that out, if you really wanted to. If you wanted to know the policies of different parties, you could go to the websites and

find out, but in this way a neat little package could be sent to schools or colleges.

MR GENTLEMAN: Since you have brought that up, Ben, I have asked the secretary to see if we can organise info packs for this afternoon before you leave. We are contacting the education office now.

THE CHAIR: We will see if we can get some so that you can all take a pack away with you.

MR GENTLEMAN: It will only have information about the Assembly, though. It will not have party policy in it.

THE CHAIR: It will not have party policies. But a number of members have websites that you can look up.

Ms Sharpe: I wanted to agree with what Ben said. I think we need to have everything on the internet in one uniform structure from every party. In that way it is easy to access, you can easily compare one party to the other and make an informed decision. I think that is a fantastic idea. I also think with regard to lowering the voting age that it would be beneficial for students going the other way as well, in that if politicians were aware that all of a sudden they had to cater for and consider 16- to 17-year-olds they would also take that age group's needs into account. So it would benefit 16- and 17-year-olds before they have even voted. Knowing that they have to win our vote would make them take us into account in making those decisions. So I think it would be beneficial for us before we have even voted, because they would have to consider us in their policy making.

Mr Watts: Do you have any idea, statistically speaking, how many 16- to 17-year-old voters there would be? Alternatively, how many people would be interested? Are there plans to put forward a survey to see how many people would be interested? It could be apparent that the major population of 17-year-olds wanted to vote whereas 16-year-olds did not. In any case, I agree with the statement that there is a slight separation of the government from the population, in terms of people who might want to vote. I am not sure if it would be enough to swing an election and change the outcome regarding who was voted in, but I agree that a non-compulsory voting option for 16- and 17-year-olds is a good idea.

THE CHAIR: There are about 8,000.

Mr Watts: Who are interested in voting?

THE CHAIR: No, we do not know that. There are about 8,000 of them.

MRS DUNNE: Madam Chairman, it is not Gareth's job to ask us questions.

THE CHAIR: No, it is not. That is true.

MRS DUNNE: But you raise an interesting point about the level of interest. That is one of the things that I was thinking about. Do you have a view that you are more interested by virtue of the fact that you are on the college representative committee?

In a way, have you self-selected, by coming here today, to be a group who are substantially in favour of relaxing the rules? What do you think about that? Do you have a view about how much you represent the views of your peer group at school?

Ms Sharpe: I think so. I have spoken to a lot of my friends about this because I knew I was coming here. So I have spoken to a lot of people about their thoughts on this. I obviously have not addressed every single 16- and 17-year-old person in the state, but I have spoken to a number of people. I was actually surprised by the number of people who said that if they had the option they would like to vote. In recent times, there has been a big overhaul of the education system, and a vast number of my friends and peers would have liked to have felt they had some sort of input into that decision, which had a really large effect on their education.

Mr Duggan: I would agree. Because most of us here have stated that we would like it to be optional if it happened, we have taken an approach where we take both sides into consideration. If you do not want to vote, you do not have to, and if you do want to vote then you can. I think that is a good way of going about it for the younger voting age because it is such a contentious issue and there are issues about whether they are mature enough. But then I ask myself: are 18-year-olds mature enough? When I turn 18, does that mean I can immediately make a decision and that when I cast my vote I am mature enough? Should they have to justify the way they vote or that they have the right to vote? That is the beauty of democracy—that they do not have to justify it and that everyone gets a voice. So I think it is good that we have stated that we think it should be optional because it does take into consideration both sides of the argument.

MR GENTLEMAN: Chair, I guess the next position from Mrs Dunne's question and Ben and Elissa's answers would be to ask for a show of hands as to who would be interested in voting. I ask you to put your hands up. Thank you. And what about those who would not be interested? Only one or two in the room. That gives us a good idea of the interest on the matter.

THE CHAIR: From this group.

MR GENTLEMAN: Yes. And if they are representatives of their groups then—

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Brown: I am 16, not 17. I am still in year 11. Over time, my idea about voting at 16 or 17 may change, but at this stage I probably would not want to vote because I do not believe I know enough yet. However, perhaps by the time of the election I would feel that I could.

THE CHAIR: Morgyn, you have only spoken once. Would you like to speak again?

Ms Benstead: I think we are a very unusual group. We are much more political than the average teenager. So the show of hands that was just taken does not really mean much in terms of the average teenager.

THE CHAIR: Yes, because you believe that you are different in some way. Is that

what you are saying?

Ms Benstead: I think we are much more political because we have taken the time to join this.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: In regard to what Nathan was saying before, I know a lot of 18-year-olds who have recently come of age and I know that they would agree very strongly with what Nathan says. I am fairly certain that, at least at Copland College and from my experience, the 18-year-olds that I know are not prepared to vote in a responsible way. The bottom line is that they feel the same way that Nathan does, which is that they do not have enough information to vote in a way that will count. So while as a representative group we stand for people who feel that they have a responsibility to make decisions as young leaders, it is a leadership group, and I do not feel that our group is particularly representative of the ACT. Obviously, we are a part of the youth demographic, but I do not think that we necessarily stand for most of them because we have a high interest in this sort of issue. I think you would find that the vast majority of people would feel the same way as Nathan—that is, they do not have enough information to vote. Whether that can be changed by civics education remains to be seen, but as it stands now I do not believe they would value that vote.

Mr Prendergast: Are there any plans to have a referendum that would not just survey us, a select group, but the whole group of 8,000 17- and 16-year-olds?

THE CHAIR: Is that what you are suggesting?

Mr Prendergast: I know it would be a logistical nightmare but I think it would be more inclusive than just us. As was stated, we are just a select group, and a lot of us also have an interest in politics and want to go into politics. So if we want to change the system, just like if we want to change from a commonwealth to a republic, we should have some form of referendum that involves not just 50 people but everybody concerned.

THE CHAIR: We have been discussing this with lots of other people apart from yourselves, Simon. However, your suggestion has been recorded and it will be part of the evidence today.

Ms Bull: I believe that most other teenagers and most other people in my year do not want to be forced to vote but they would like the option to be there. That means it would be up to them and they would not be forced into doing anything. So it would be nice if the option to vote was there.

Ms Gnanasekaran: I am 17 years old and I put up my hand as someone that would not vote. I just wanted to justify this. I am involved very much with the community; I have been a Lions Youth Ambassador representing youth, but I still do not feel that I would want to vote, primarily because I do not know anything about the ACT government. I have a fairly good idea of what is happening at a federal level but I think everyone has to remember that this is about the ACT Legislative Assembly, and how many of us do know who our members are? Once in a while I will get a letter in the mail, or a pamphlet from someone who is meant to be representing our suburb, but really I know nothing. That is why I put up my hand to say, “No, I don’t want to

vote.” As a 17-year-old, I never would for the ACT government, because I have no idea about it.

Mr Duggan: In terms of representation, following on from what has been said, I do not want to be rude but as politicians do you represent the people that you are supposed to represent? We are here representing the colleges, but do you represent the areas that you are from? You try to do it as best you can, as we do, but it comes down to the individual person.

Mr Langdown: Going back to the maturity aspect, and whether 16 or 17 is too young, I believe it is a hard thing to pick because of the transition between high school and college. A lot of 16-year-olds who are in high school can be very different from 16-year-olds in college. Once you get to college, a lot of people mature, become more adult and are then able to make decisions about voting. If you talk to high school students, they would have a different opinion. It might be worth considering whether it is based on age or school level. It is a bit more difficult to decide.

MRS DUNNE: Can I interpose a difficult question. You have all talked about giving 16- and 17-year-old young people the option of voting. If we went down that path as a community, do you see that there would be problems with making voting compulsory when you turn 18? Is there a view in your group or is this something that you have considered? Is the question of optional voting as opposed to compulsory voting one that you occupy your minds with?

Ms Chinn: There may be a little bit of difficulty at first with transferring from an optional to a compulsory vote, but I think someone mentioned before that it is a good way to ease you in gradually. It can come as quite a shock for someone to turn 18 and then, when you get to a year like this where it is an election year, to all of a sudden have to be able to vote. It would be a way of being able to ease in to the process. Also, going back to whether you would know if you were well-informed enough to have a vote and say, “No, we wouldn’t want to”—and we just had that show of hands—I think that if I was told that I had the option to vote, I would feel obliged to find out more information. Even though, if you told me to vote tomorrow, I do not think I would want to, if you asked me, “Would you like to vote in six months?” I would say yes because I would have time to investigate, do some research, find out and form an opinion. So giving someone the option to vote would push them to do this as an actual, real thing. You try and be politically informed so that when you talk to groups like this you know what you are talking about, but if you had an actual aim it would promote people being more politically aware.

Ms Benstead: Going back to what you said about the gap between optional voting and compulsory voting, I think there needs to be more of a gap because if we made it optional at 16 and then compulsory at 18, elections are only a few years apart and I think a lot of people would not even vote in that time, depending on when their birthdays were. Maybe this is a bit radical, but even if we made the age for optional voting 14 and then 20 for compulsory voting, I think people would be eased in a lot better and people would feel more ready for the compulsory voting when they got to it.

Ms Marshall: Something that has been going around is the whole shock when you turn 18 and can vote. As we all know, when you turn 18, from then on you can vote. It

is sort of a personal decision if you are going to do research from the age of 16 or 17. It is a given that you are going to have to vote at some time in your life when you are over 18. So I do not think it should come as a shock if you have done research anyway. If you are 16, it will come as a shock if you have not done research, and if you are 18 it will come as a shock if you have not done research. I think it really depends on how much you have thought about it. Either way, you are going to have to go in and cast a vote in whatever way you think. If you choose to vote at 16 years old, you will do research so that you know what you are going to be voting about. At 18 years old, you have to do that. So people should not just feel like saying: “I don’t know what to do, I’m so shocked. This has come as a shock to me because I should’ve been learning about this earlier.” It is their choice. They can say, “I’m going to learn about this earlier because I know that in the future I will have to vote at the age of 18.” So it should not come as a surprise.

MRS DUNNE: Are you saying, Emma, that it’s actually a matter of responsibility to go and find out?

Ms Marshall: Yes. I think they need to find out about it themselves instead of getting to 18 and then realising that they have to vote. It should be something that you already know because it is a given that you are going to be voting at that age.

THE CHAIR: I have to leave now. Mr Gentleman will take over as chair.

MR GENTLEMAN: Thanks, Chair.

THE CHAIR: I really enjoyed being here, by the way. We are getting the information packs for you.

Ms Gnanasekaran: I just wanted to put forward an idea. If we do make voting non-compulsory at 16 and compulsory at 18, I know that it is expected that when parents vote they will also consider their children’s rights when they are voting. So they will look at education not because they are going to school but because their children are going to school; and they look at childcare because they have children in childcare. If it is non-compulsory to vote at age 16, and some people vote and some people do not, I think it will make parents’ decisions hard as well. They could say, “Okay, now my daughter is old enough to vote; they’ll be making their own decisions about who to vote for, so I don’t have to worry about education when I’m choosing someone.” I think it brings a bit of confusion there as well.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: I personally do not see where the big shock is coming from—people turning 18 and realising they have to vote. It is a sad part of Australian society that we wake up on our 18th birthday and voting is not the first thing we are most excited about. It is terribly sad. But as far as shocks go, probably it does not really alarm people. I do not have the most sophisticated friends, but those who I have talked to have—

MRS DUNNE: Don’t sell yourself so short!

Ms Godfrey-Yik: They have seen the upcoming election as something that they are old enough to take part in but they are not shocked and scared. At 17, you are given

the privilege to apply to drive by yourself. At 15 you are allowed to drive with a parent. I do not think people find that very shocking either. As you grow up you say, “Wow, I’m getting so old now,” but you do not really find it a problem. So I do not think that the question of non-compulsory voting at 16 and then compulsory voting at 18 would be a problem. I just do not see that it would be detrimental to anyone.

Mr Woodman: Luckily, this committee is not actually here to discuss the shock of turning 18 and having to vote. We have to focus on 16-year-olds. If you were to apply this to the electoral roll for those under 18—16 or maybe even the 15-year age bracket—it should be made compulsory. This would lower the shock of what happens when you turn 18; it would not be a shock to you, anyway, because you would know what you are talking about. That means that anyone who would not be shocked at 18 would know exactly what they were doing and would have voted earlier, so they are having a say earlier. Making it so that you have to apply to go on the electoral roll will lower influence. You would not be able to influence other people because they just would not go to the trouble of applying to be on the electoral roll. It adds a little bit of bureaucracy. You have to work a little harder; it will shorten the time you will have in which to apply before the election, so that could be a downside. However, you will get a more informed vote.

Ms Benstead: Going back to what Tharsiga said about parents voting on behalf of their children, I do not think they are going to decide, once their children are old enough to vote, to vote for a party that does not support their children. I also do not think they actually consciously think, “I have to vote on behalf of my child as well,” because everyone votes on behalf of their loved ones. They vote for their parents, their friends or their siblings, and they vote for what is going to be good for the people they love, not just for their children.

Ms Javid: Going back to Tharsiga’s comment, you become an adult once you are 18. If you lower the voting age—and we have all talked about making sure that it is not mandatory—it does not mean that parents stop thinking about their children. So I do support what Morgyn had to say. I know I had an important point to make but I can’t remember it.

THE ACTING CHAIR: That is okay; we can come back to you.

Ms Brown: I would like to add something that people can think about when they are talking about the shock at the age of 18. If we lowered the age to 16 and 17 and these people have a chance to vote, at the next election—they are held every four years?

MRS DUNNE: The ACT election.

Ms Brown: They will be 20 the next time they vote. So they will probably be more mature, whereas the ones who will be 18 when they vote will be 14 and 15 when the last election was held, meaning they will not have had this experience anyway. They will be 20 before they have the experience; they will not have any experience if they are 18.

Ms Lawson: In terms of the issue of having it optional at 16 and mandatory at 18, I think we have to consider the fact that if you are prepared to take on the benefits that

come from being recognised by society as an adult then you also have to take on the responsibility that you have to that society. This goes to what Tharsiga and Morgyn said. As part of that responsibility, at least theoretically, one should not simply be voting on behalf of oneself. You are voting on behalf of your community and what is best for the community as a whole. So the issue of parents voting for their children should not really be an issue because you should not simply be voting for your own personal gain, anyway.

THE ACTING CHAIR: We have had a lot of interest in the discussion right through until now about a non-compulsory scheme. The secretary has given me a little idea here. I wonder if we could have another show of hands to see who would support a non-compulsory voting scheme for 16- to 17-year-olds. It would give you the option to vote but it would not be compulsory. Could you put up your hands if you support that. Thank you. Are there any who do not support it? So that was almost unanimous.

MRS DUNNE: What about the other way? Would there be people here who would support a compulsory scheme?

THE ACTING CHAIR: Yes. So that would be the next—

Mr Woodman: In a sense, if you applied to the electoral roll, it would be compulsory, whether you wanted to or not. It is not a matter of applying early, so you do not have to think about it later.

THE ACTING CHAIR: Currently it is compulsory, yes.

MRS DUNNE: Currently it is compulsory once you are on the roll.

Mr Woodman: I know.

MRS DUNNE: And it is compulsory to be on the roll from when you are 18. But if this system were changed—and this is what we are inquiring into—what is the view of this assembled group about possibly changing to a system where it becomes compulsory to vote at 16?

Ms Javid: Is there the option of actually enrolling early—

MRS DUNNE: The way the law currently stands is that you can enrol when you are 17 but you can't vote until you are 18, at which time you must vote if an election comes along, both federally and locally.

THE ACTING CHAIR: Before we go to more discussion, can I pose Mrs Dunne's question to you. Who would be in favour of a compulsory system for 16- and 17-year-olds? Could you raise your hands? For the *Hansard*, nobody supported that position.

MRS DUNNE: That is good to know.

Ms Chinn: I am not sure if this is just my ignorance as to the way things work or if this is just my opinion. If we made it non-compulsory to vote, would they make it so that it is compulsory to enrol?

MRS DUNNE: That is one of the things that we have to—

Ms Chinn: I suppose my question is: if you are enrolled, do you have to vote or can you enrol and then choose not to vote?

MRS DUNNE: This is one of the things that are open for discussion. The possible models are that if we made a change to the current arrangements it could be that it becomes compulsory to enrol at 16 but not compulsory to vote, or it becomes optional to enrol at 16 and therefore optional to vote.

THE ACTING CHAIR: Just before we go back to Mei. I should let everybody know that there is a scheme in Canada where there is an election process alongside the formal election process for those who are a bit younger. You have an opportunity to vote but your vote is not counted. It is looked at later on as a study. So it is a bit like a practice idea.

Ms Godfrey-Yik: If you choose to enrol, if you register to enrol when you are 16 and then decide not to vote, it is just a matter of when you would like to make the choice. Are you saying that you should have two opportunities to decide whether or not to make the choice? So you enrol and then—

Ms Chinn: I was saying that now, as it stands, when you are 18 you can enrol when you are 17. I am concerned that when some people are 15 they might not enrol and then they might go to college and start to become politically aware and they might really change. I know I changed extremely from year 10 to year 11, in the change to college. They might find, “Oh no, I haven’t enrolled; I can’t vote.” Maybe it would be good if it was compulsory to enrol—say, through the school, everybody was automatically enrolled—and then you can choose when you want to vote when the election comes up. Does anyone agree with that?

Ms Godfrey-Yik: Yes, I agree.

Ms Chinn: Part of my question to you was about how it exactly works was because I was not sure.

MRS DUNNE: This is actually something that we are working through. At the moment the system does not exist.

Ms Chinn: There could be 15-year-olds out there who think, “I don’t want to vote,” but then as soon as they turn 17 a major issue comes up that they feel strongly about and they need a chance to vote.

Mr Klein: I like the idea, in principle at least, of the Canadian system. I am not sure whether you offered that as an alternative or whether it was just a push in that direction. It sounds nice but the idea that we were discussing earlier of having a non-compulsory voting system at age 16 or 17 is much better. The idea of the Canadian system would be almost rendered redundant if we had 16- and 17-year-olds voting if they choose to do so. Although not everyone might want it, it is very important, especially because, as was recently seen with the education system

restructuring, it definitely affects us—not just in education but in other issues as well, such as health.

THE ACTING CHAIR: Are there any further comments? We will wrap up and go to afternoon tea. I should say to you all that what we have done today, apart from getting all of your information, is to give you the opportunity to have a vote. You have actually all voted three times this afternoon, by show of hands, and you actually all, bar one person, took part in all three votes. Mind you, the third vote did not have any support.

I would like to thank Bob Ross, who has coordinated the CRC groups, for supporting the arrangements this afternoon. We will go to afternoon tea just outside this room, and then college representatives are due back for a private session at 3.35. We will also get a copy of the *Hansard* transcript to you as soon as we can. You will be able to read through that and look at the contributions that you have made. Thank you very much for your attendance. The Legislative Assembly education kits are available for you, too.

The committee adjourned at 3.08 pm.