

2017 SECONDARY SCHOOLS PARLIAMENTARY CONVENTION

Should Australia abolish compulsory voting and should the voting age be lowered to 16?

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Participants

Baker Abdalhamid	Islamic College of Melbourne
Sara Abdalhamid	Islamic College of Melbourne
Ghadeer Al Gburi	Thomastown Secondary College
Genevieve Alexie	Camberwell Girls Grammar School
Nadine Alshammary	Sirius College
Daniel Amrein	Mount Ridley College
Molly Ash	Frankston High School
Irjinder Babbar	Good News Lutheran College
Mark-Anthony Baini	Marymede Catholic College
Joel Blanch	Sacred Heart College, Kyneton
Natasha Borash	Ruyton Girls' School
Rosie Bourke	Sacred Heart College, Geelong
Kamaria Brancato	Marymede Catholic College
Morgan Brand	Marymede Catholic College
Simge Camur	Thomastown Secondary College
Nikki Chen	Camberwell Girls Grammar School
Rachel Cheng	Canterbury Girls' Secondary College
Emily Clarke	Mater Christi College
Sophie Clarke	Mater Christi College
Ava Cole	Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
Laura Daniele	Marymede Catholic College
James Davies	Balcombe Grammar School
Lachlan Doig	Camberwell Grammar School
Barr Donde	Bialik College
Zoe Doody	Sunbury College
Elly-May Dreier	Lalor Secondary College
Jacqueline Du	Ruyton Girls' School
Nikki Fernando	The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School
Michaela Frantz	Salesian College Sunbury
Ryan Gambin	St Monica's College, Epping
Kara Giffard	Sunbury College
Louisa Gildea	Sacred Heart College, Kyneton
Michelle Grover	Salesian College Sunbury
James Gunasegaram	Camberwell Grammar School
Hala Hamdy	Sirius College
Breanna Harper	Huntingtower School
Ethan Harrison	Marist College, Bendigo
Grace Hartman	Our Lady of Sion College
Samuel Hilson	Girton Grammar School
Gabriella Hollo	Canterbury Girls' Secondary College
Declan Hovenden	Marist College, Bendigo
Anthony James	Scotch College
Sian Janke	Mater Christi College
Anna Kaul	The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School
Manraj Kaur	Mount Ridley College
Anika Kelly	Canterbury Girls' Secondary College
Olivia Kelly	Canterbury Girls' Secondary College
Marcel Khoury	St Monica's College, Epping
Lauren Kimber	Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
Joanna Legaspi	Good News Lutheran College
Maryanne Li	Camberwell Girls Grammar School
Larissa Liberatore	St Monica's College, Epping
Natalie Litsas	Camberwell High School

Tamsyn Lovass	Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School
Audrey McCarthy	Fintona Girls' School
Jane McEvey	Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
Claire McManus	Our Lady of Sion College
Joshua Meng	Scotch College
Christina Mikhael	St Monica's College, Epping
Josh Miller	Bialik College
Jesmima Mohamed Hassan	Islamic College of Melbourne
Simran Monga	The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School
Patrick Mullane	McKinnon Secondary College
Mateenah Munkayilar	Lalor Secondary College
Josephine Murphy	Northcote High School
Sharon Nabwire	Thomastown Secondary College
Fern Nicholls	Frankston High School
Michael Nikolovski	Thomastown Secondary College
Annabelle Norman	Balcombe Grammar School
Alexander O'Brien	Koonung Secondary College
Oliver Papillo	Camberwell Grammar School
Tanisha Parekh	Glen Waverley Secondary College
Natasha Pedersoli	Sunbury College
Daniel Perri	Lalor Secondary College
Melissa Phillips	Glen Waverley Secondary College
Ceylan Ramadan	Sirius College
Tanna Reynolds	Glen Waverley Secondary College
Daisy Rickard	MacKillop College, Werribee
Shir Rosenberg	McKinnon Secondary College
Jordan Salathiel	Marist College, Bendigo
Nithya Sathyamurthy	The Mac.Robertson Girls' High School
Abbey Saxon	Girton Grammar School
Hammad Shahin	Mount Ridley College
Tayne Shalevski	Marist College, Bendigo
Claudia Shemmell	Kingswood College
Tegan Smart	Huntingtower School
Lucy Spencely	Girton Grammar School
Ally Spiegel	Bialik College
Edith Spiers	Salesian College Sunbury
Rowan Stewart-Smith	Northcote High School
Rokia Taleb	Islamic College of Melbourne
Julia Thiem	Northcote High School
Tara Tropeano	Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg
George Tyurin	Huntingtower School
Alanna Verrocchi	Genazzano FCJ College
Anita Voloshin	McKinnon Secondary College
Olivia Watson	Ruyton Girls' School
Maya Weston	Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School
Isaac Zhao	Scotch College
Baker Abdalhamid	Islamic College of Melbourne
Sara Abdalhamid	Islamic College of Melbourne
Ghadeer Al Gburi	Thomastown Secondary College
Genevieve Alexie	Camberwell Girls Grammar School
Nadine Alshammary	Sirius College
Daniel Amrein	Mount Ridley College
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Irjinder Babbar	Good News Lutheran College
Mark-Anthony Bains	Marymede Catholic College

WELCOME TO COUNTRY AND OPENING

The SPEAKER (Ms Murray) — Good morning everyone. Given that we have been delayed, we might make a start. First of all, I would like to welcome students in particular to the 2017 Secondary Schools Parliamentary Convention. It is great to see everyone here and through security. We are looking forward to a terrific day ahead. Welcome to teachers, supporters, family members and interested participants. We are lining up to have a fantastic day. I am sure you will agree that sitting in such a spectacular building gives you the impetus to debate, argue and discuss issues that really do concern you.

Before we truly begin, the first thing I need to do is to let you know that senior elder Aunty Joy Wandin North Murphy of the Wurundjeri tribe sends her apologies, so I am going to do the welcome to country. I would like to show my respect to and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and of elders past and present on which this convention takes place, and to thank the Parliament of Victoria for hosting us in this location. We have many things to do today, but before we begin on the actual convention I need to give you a few details about the workings of Parliament House.

There are a couple of things that you need to know. The first thing is that you all have microphones, which will be quite exciting the first time that you use them. The people in the front row actually get to walk up to the table and turn your microphone on. You will see a little switch that will allow you to turn your microphone on. At the end of your speech, you will be asked to turn your microphone off, and that is all. We do not want you to touch the stand. We do not want you to do anything other than turn your microphone on and turn your microphone off.

When you are going to speak, you need to state your name and your school, because we have Hansard over here who will be recording everything that you say.

You should not have any food or drink in the chamber. That will all happen out in Queen's Hall where you have been waiting. We ask that you really do only stay in Queen's Hall today. Other than that, you will need to use the bathrooms, which are located directly through this door and into the second corridor, turn right. For the males amongst us, you will use the door called 'Members' — that is you — and the girls will keep going and turn right, another door down that says 'Females'. That is in the second corridor. Do not make a mistake!

If you have notes for the people that are speaking, you might like to hand your notes at the conclusion of the session to Hansard if you are reading off a prepared speech, for people giving their speeches.

I should introduce myself, which I did not do at the start of the day. My name is Karyn Murray, and I am actually a teacher. I am really a bit bogus sitting here. I am from Strathcona, and I was very privileged to be asked to come and run this early session. You will get the real deal that will come a little bit later. Our Speaker could not be with us for the morning session, so you will just have to deal with me.

On that note, let us get going — let us make up some time. It is my great privilege to present to you Judith Graley, MP, who is the Parliamentary Secretary for Education. She is going to introduce to you the topic 'Should Australia abolish compulsory voting, and should the voting age be lowered to 16?'. I would like you to join me in welcoming Judith to the convention.

Delegates applauding.

Ms GRALEY — Welcome, everyone, this morning, and welcome to my place of work, which is Parliament House, Victoria. I too would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and who may be with us this morning. This was actually a meeting place a long time ago for the people of the Kulin nation, so Parliament House has always been a place where people gather to talk, argue and discuss the issues of the day.

I would also like to acknowledge the Acting Speaker today, Karyn Murray from Strathcona Girls Baptist School, and thank her for stepping up to the task. I am sure when the Speaker arrives he will get a few tips from you, Karyn. They will be very welcome.

I would also like to acknowledge Associate Professor Libby Tudball from Monash University. Libby and I have already had a fantastic discussion about how important civics education is, and you could be in no better place

today to practice what you have learned in school about government and governance. You can use these esteemed, august surroundings to put on a great debate.

I am really pleased to see so many students here today. I think there are nearly 100 of you. This chamber normally takes 88 of us. If you come at question time, that makes for a really robust debating forum. If you come outside the question time you will see very few people in the chamber — only those who are talking on the bills — and you will see a significantly better-behaved Parliament at that time. I suggest you take the lead not from question time but from the legislative process when we actually debate new laws.

This building has a very rich history. As you can see, it has got lots of gold in it. When the little kids come in to visit Parliament, and a lot of them do, they say, ‘Judith, is it real gold?’, and I always say, ‘Yes, it is’; and that is true. This building is a testament to Melbourne and Victoria’s heyday when the gold rush made us what they say was ‘the most prosperous city in the world’. We welcomed people from all over the world to Victoria, as we still do today. They say that Victorian democracy was born on the goldfields, and certainly this house has that feeling about — that the gold rush was integral to the development of democracy.

This Parliament also served as the Australian Parliament from 1901 to 1927. People forget that — people think that Canberra has been there forever, but it has not. When we became a federation in 1901 they had to decide where they were going to have their Parliament, and they actually had it here. The first legislative framework for the development of the Australian nation actually took place in these chambers in Victoria. They are very important chambers, so enjoy being here today.

I have been here for 11 years. I fought three elections and won them. The hardest thing about being a member of Parliament is winning those elections and getting here. When I first arrived I sat in the back row there, where the second girl is. Now I sit down here where the girl with the darker scarf is sitting. I serve now as the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, because I am in the government.

In my first term I was in the government and Steve Bracks sat in this chair. His deputy was John Thwaites, and Peter Batchelor was the Leader of the Government. Then we lost an election and I had the not very fun experience of being in the opposition. I sat over there where that girl is sitting. Daniel Andrews of course was the Leader of the Opposition and James Merlino the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. We won an election and we all came back to this side of the house. I can tell you: there is nothing like being in government. In government, let us be frank: you have power. If you want to make a difference in the world — and I really hope that you get excited about this experience today and you think about how you can be engaged politically — you do need to think about how you are going to get power and use it. As former Premier Joan Kirner used to say, ‘You get it, you use it and you keep it. It’s no fun losing it’.

I have had the great experience of being a Parliamentary Secretary for Education. You will probably notice if you are driving around in your mum and dad’s cars that there are new numberplates on them that say, ‘the education state’. I remember when Daniel, the Premier, when he was Leader of the Opposition, announced that we were going to build the education state. Without trying to give a political advertisement here — I am a politician so I am going to go there a little bit — I do want to say how important that slogan is to us as a government and as a state. The opportunities that education give you are really amazing.

I think about my great-great-grandfather visiting the goldfields of Ballarat, not finding much gold, walking back down the road to Melbourne, starting up his own little business; and in a couple of generations the first girl in his family was to go to university, and the first girl in his family to go to university was to become an MP. This was through that education experience, and through my parents’ and my grandparents’ commitment to making sure that I had a really good education. I actually said in my inaugural speech, which is the first speech you given in this house, that I said to my dad, ‘I think I’ll leave school and become a hairdresser’. There is nothing wrong with leaving school and becoming a hairdresser. My dad was a panelbeater — he had his own business. He said, ‘You’re not leaving school. You’ve got bloody brains and you’re going to bloody well use them’. That was the key to me experiencing a lot of things that I would never have been able to have unless I had that incredible experience that teachers and parents avail for their children. It is my deep personal commitment to make sure that my own children and their children — hopefully my grandchildren — have a better life than I have. That is effectively what being in politics is about — it is about getting change up — making better opportunities for the people who come after you.

You have got a great subject today — I love it. It is a double whammy: ‘Should Australia abolish compulsory voting and should the voting age be lowered to 16?’ I am not going to suggest what you should think about this. I am just going to put up a few ideas for you to think about.

I was recently at a meeting. I am very keen in all the committees that I chair in the education sector that we have a very strong student voice, so I am very pleased to have you here today and I look forward to hearing what you have to say. I need to let you know that not only will Hansard be recording this, but the Deputy Premier, the Minister for Education, will get to see the transcript and he is really interested in your ideas because we are really interested in how we can engage further with schools and students.

This meeting that I was dealing with was a very controversial meeting. It was about a subject that we are all talking about, some with understanding, some with a lot of misunderstanding. It was around Safe Schools, actually. We sat around the table. There were experts from the university sector, there were experts from hospitals, there were experts from the gay and lesbian community, and there were students there. We were having a very developed conversation about it. Then a student put up his hand and said, ‘Judith, can I ask a question?’. I said, ‘Of course you can’. He asked the most erudite question we had had all day. It was unfiltered, it was uncomplicated and it was so truthful and honest. It made us all sit up around the table and think, ‘Yes, what are we doing about that?’.

So today do not be backward in coming forward; ask the question. Do you know what? There is no such thing as a dumb question. Everybody is wanting to ask the dumb question but nobody has the guts to ask it, a lot of times. So put your hands up and put forward a proposition that may be a little bit outside the square, a little bit controversial.

The other thing I would say is that whilst I do not come down on either side of the debate, I do want to leave you with one precious thought. You can come into this house and sit in this chamber. In fact you can come in any day of the week and visit this chamber and see democracy in action. Democracy is a really, really precious commodity. The world is complex and changing — probably too fast for most of us to even comprehend it. So how we maintain institutions like democracy are even more important than ever before for how we develop as a country. People sometimes just take it for granted.

I was standing in the line for voting, I remember, at the last election. All these people were complaining about the length of the line, how long it was going to take to vote and whether they would get to the sporting ground in time — all this sort of stuff. I had to remind that this is a precious role that we play in exercising our vote. Nothing reminded me of it more than a recent trip I had to Myanmar — Burma — in 2015. I was there as an international observer for the election process.

You probably know that that country had been under military rule for 30 years and there were a lot of movements for democracy. You may have seen the beautiful pictures of the lady Aung San Suu Kyi as the face of the democratic movement. She was out campaigning; I saw her around. I saw the rallies happening and I saw the young people out on the streets, singing, dancing, really vibrant, telling people to vote for the parties that they were supporting. It was a really amazing, exciting election — because these people had never had a democratic free vote before.

On the day of the election, everybody was really scared that there may be some sort of intervention, so they were so well behaved. They all queued up really early in the morning. At 5 o’clock in the morning people were out, lining up outside the polling booths in long lines. They did not open until 6 o’clock. They all stood there patiently, with a weather eye out to make sure that things were safe, to vote. They went in and they voted. They took their ballot papers. Some of them just held their ballot paper and really studiously filled it in. They took their time, made sure it was correct and walked over to the ballot box. Some of them tried to take photos of themselves voting. Then, in their country — as is the case in a lot of developing countries that are experiencing democratic transition — they have to put their finger in a bowl of ink. That is so they say they have voted and they cannot come back in and vote again. That will last for a week, probably, on their finger. They would all come out and hold their finger up and cheer and celebrate and laugh — and all their family would gather around and take snapshots and things like that.

That said to me, ‘Why don’t we think about what we really have, why don’t we treasure it more, why don’t we talk about it more?’ — especially now, when I think that there is a social media storm out there telling us there are lots of things that are not real. The one thing that is real is something that we have always had in Victoria.

We have led the way with the secret ballot. When they went in and had their secret vote, we invented that in Victoria. That democratic process is really, really important.

When you are thinking today about what you are going to say, do not hold back, go for it — but do be respectful as well. Because that is what those people showed when they walked in to the ballot boxes in Myanmar. They were really excited, they could hardly contain themselves — but they made sure they were very respectful of the process. They came out and held their breath for the result that night which, if you followed it, was an overwhelming landslide for the lady's party, the NLD, the National League for Democracy.

It is a great pleasure to be here this morning. I wish you luck in your discussions. As I said, they are bonzer subjects and I suspect you will have a really great time debating them. If you get stuck, as I do, trying to remember what I am going to say sometimes in the fervour of the moment, just take a big, deep breath, compose yourself and get back onto the main message that you want to put out there. I am very pleased, therefore, to be able to officially open the 2017 Secondary Schools Parliamentary Convention. Have a great time. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER — Thank you, Judith, for those wonderful words really encouraging us all to be engaged in this convention today, and for really making us reflect on how important education is. It is something that we sometimes do take for granted, but it is nice to be reminded of the fact that we should not and that we should be really mindful of what a privilege it is to be here today.

Now we have got some students who are going to give us some opening remarks that have been selected, and we are going to go in school alphabetical order for the most part. The students have 2 minutes to speak, and we are going to be really mindful of the 2 minutes in making sure that people keep to their time so that we can keep moving along.

I am going to ask Barr Donde from Bialik College to stand up and start the ball rolling.

OPENING STATEMENTS

Should Australia abolish compulsory voting and should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Ms DONDE — My name is Barr Donde from Bialik College. Australia's current voting policy should not be changed as it ensures we achieve the full benefits of democracy. Through this policy people who are usually not involved in political events and decisions are encouraged to become more involved in the country's affairs and vote on what they feel benefits them most — involvement which may not be as strong if voting was optional.

Democracy is defined as, 'by the people, for the people' and hence the people are the ones that need to vote in order for this to be achieved. Compulsory voting does not deny Australians their freedom of choice, rather it supports them in utilising the platform given to them to choose what kind of a country they want to live in. In addition to this the minimum voting age should not be reduced to 16. Voting requires a certain level of maturity as it impacts the whole country and involves matters that are often beyond a school student as young as 16. Voting at an older age allows those voting to be more mature, to consider all sides and come to a rational solution, rather than voting along with parents or being influenced by peer groups as is often seen in school students.

Although 16-year-olds in many ways are considered adults, being able to drive under supervision and join the military, we are still children. The transition from childhood to adulthood is not one to be rushed; it is gradual and hence it is unreasonable to expect 16-year-olds to think and behave as adults by introducing them to the many responsibilities of adulthood. Rather, to ensure the country produces well-rounded citizens in the future it is more beneficial to gradually introduce aspects of adult life with each milestone coming at its own time. Current voting policy maximises Australia's progression as a democracy and ensures that tomorrow's Australia is one that offers a positive home for all.

The SPEAKER — Thank you, Barr, that was fantastic, because she finished right on that 2 minutes. Did you hear that? Did you time that at home?

Ms DONDE — Yes.

The SPEAKER — Well done. Excellent. We are moving down next to Fern Nicholls from Frankston High School.

Ms NICHOLLS — Good morning. I am Fern Nicholls from Frankston High School. Australia is called ‘the lucky country’ for an abundance of reasons. Importantly among these is the right to vote, entrenched in our democratic ideals and a vital necessity, the compulsory nature of which should not be abolished. And yet, despite our many privileges, young people are restricted the right to have a say in who leads their country. Each adult Australian citizen is granted the right to partake in elections. Australia’s compulsory voting system not only protects this fundamental right but also the un-biased election of our nation’s government. To abolish compulsory voting would be to insult the foundations of our democracy and shame those who we are to thank for our freedom.

A system of optional voting does not work. Take the United States: a country where the most recent presidential debate was of great speculation but where the polls indicated a clear victory in favour of Hillary Clinton. Yet this is not the outcome, and the shock value may be attributed to the small number who turned out to exercise their non-compulsory right to vote. Furthermore, voting is a right that, put simply, in my opinion should not be denied to 16 and 17-year-olds. Our very own constitution states that the Senate and the House of Representatives is to be chosen by the people. Yet who had the privilege to decide what defines the people of Australia? In my belief this term extends to every Australian citizen, regardless of their race, religion or age.

Often we hear stories of young people making a real difference. A few years ago it was the incredible Jessica Watson who sailed across the Southern Hemisphere at just 16 years of age. Watson and countless others achieve such incredible endeavours, yet share the similarity that none of them could vote in an Australian election. If the voting age was lowered to 16 we would not face this hurdle. Thank you.

The SPEAKER — Thank you Fern. Give her a clap. Can I please ask Lucy Spencely to come forward.

Ms SPENCELY — Good morning, everyone. I am Lucy Spencely, and on behalf of Girton Grammar I am here to present my views on this subject. Firstly, compulsory voting should be abolished. If Australia is truly a liberal democracy why is our voting system contrary to the value of choice? If we believe citizens have the right to vote we should also believe citizens have the right to choose to vote. By having the choice to vote political apathy will not ruin the legitimacy of elected representatives as those who want to vote are those who are interested and informed when making their decision. Besides, parties will become more likely to be engaged and committed to the local interests and their mandate with voluntary voting, because they will need to work harder to convince people to vote for them. The argument that there will be a wealthy and educated class because poorer people will not vote is an underestimate of such classes as all classes have political opinions, and besides there has always been a bias in democracies as majority always rules.

Finally, voting age being lowered to 16 is a ridiculous idea. To put it bluntly: teenagers are too focused on themselves. They are easily influenced by others and are more likely to be politically apathetic than the adult population. It is bad enough that 18-year-olds still at school have to vote when most of them are in year 12 and are busy with their final year of secondary education; they have more important things to worry about. I mean, who thought it was a good idea to have the state elections next year during VCE exams?

While some other democracies have the voting age of 16 those countries generally have a more politically engaged attitude compared to those in Australia. That is all, and thank you for listening.

Ms REYNOLDS — Good morning, everyone. My name is Tanna Reynolds from Glen Waverley Secondary College.

Compulsory voting and lowering the voting age: two very contentious debates that continue to augment the political rhetoric. Compulsory voting is an important device in our democracy. First introduced in 1924, compulsory voting has developed the election process from solely a right to also that of responsibility. One of the best facets of compulsory voting is its ability to structure a true representative democracy. This concept is embedded throughout our constitution and is immensely significant in determining government and shaping our society.

Although certain coteries believe that this system could lead to some members of society who are ill-informed about and uninterested in politics voting in an unfair and undemocratic fashion, there is one thing that will allow for a change of that: political engagement. Another option which would allow for a more representative government would be lowering the age to 16.

According to AEC statistics, in July 2017 voters aged between 18 and 29 only composed just 18 per cent of the voting population. This discrepancy does not allow for youth to have the opportunity to influence change on matters that will significantly impact their future, on matters looming overhead that we feel and see but that we cannot voice our opinions effectively enough on, issues such as climate change, housing affordability and tertiary education fees — issues like these where our livelihood is at stake, yet where we are not able to express these concerns properly.

One thing that is laughable about this debate is the arguments proposed by those in opposition. These claims are too often plagued with ageist, discriminatory and generalised comments that do nothing but belittle and humiliate young people. Their belief that lowering the voting age would swing the result is completely ludicrous because that is the exact intent of democracy. And further stereotyping young people as erratic and unknowledgeable beings can only further isolate and deter them from being engaged in politics. However, there are opportunities to boost political engagement.

Free educational programs run by the VEC and other similar bodies are available to young people and schools, and this accessibility and exposure to voting at the age of 16 will help to further develop a generational effect of educating youth and educating citizens.

Ms LEGASPI — Good morning, everyone. My name is Joanna Legaspi, and I am from Good News Lutheran College.

I believe Australia should not abolish compulsory voting. As citizens it is our responsibility to be engaged in political matters and to be involved in determining the future of our nation. It provides a sense of accountability for everyone and it ensures that we all play a part in shaping our nation.

Eliminating compulsory voting also defeats the purpose of a representative government. The principle of representative government is based on a democratic system where those elected to the Parliament are expected to create laws that reflect the values and expectations of the people. If voting was not compulsory the leaders of our nation would only be representing a portion of the population rather than the majority.

Furthermore, compulsory voting eliminates bias when candidates address the needs of the voters. It ensures that they try to gain support from everyone. If voting was not compulsory, low socioeconomic and less educated people would not vote. The results would then favour people of a higher socioeconomic group and the more educated people in the political system.

I also believe that the voting age should remain at 18 years. While some may be passionate in political matters, most teenagers are still reliant on their parents, and their votes can be influenced by their parents' beliefs rather than their own political knowledge. Young people may also make decisions based on what their friends believe due to peer pressure. This can affect the overall reliability of the votes as they may not be reflective of the young person's actual belief.

Ms HOLLO — Hello, everyone. My name is Gabriella Hollo, and I am from Canterbury Girls Secondary College.

I believe that Australia should abolish compulsory voting and that people 16 and over should have a choice to vote. Sure, voting is a duty of citizenship and keeps the Australian political system responsive to the people. However, there are many more points against than for. Citizens should have the right to choose whether they want to vote. People who are passionate and wish to get involved can, but those who are not do not have to. Compulsory voting also reduces the legitimacy of elected representatives. Many votes included are of those who are uninterested people who are just forced to vote, therefore making it inaccurate and a waste of time.

As well as the points stated above, voluntary voting would shake up the political system. Parties and candidates would have to try more to convince the general public in order to receive votes.

In terms of whether the voting age should be lowered to 16, people state that 16-year-olds are not mature enough and have too much to worry about. Despite this, I believe that 16-year-olds should have the right to vote if they wish to. It is important that a wide range of opinions are included.

Also, many 16-year-olds work and pay taxes and therefore should have entitlement to have a say in what the government does. Put your hand up if you are under 18. Now keep your hand up if you are passionate about getting your voice heard. I know I am. It is our future, is it not? I mean, should we not have a say towards it?

To summarise, voluntary voting with 16 and over included is nothing but a good idea. All voices are heard, it motivates freedom and it leads to more accurate decisions being made.

Ms MUNKAYILAR — Good morning, everybody. My name is Mateenah Munkayilar, and I am from Lalor Secondary College.

It is currently compulsory in Australia to take part in voting for all people who are 18 years of age or older. All people of voting age must also be registered with the Australian Electoral Commission. It has been proposed that Australia should abolish compulsory voting and that the voting age should be lowered to 16.

The voting age in Australia should not be lowered to 16 and compulsory voting should remain as it is. The voting age should not be lowered as young teenagers have still not matured and are unable to make fully informed decisions. Research has shown that a large amount of teenagers aged 16 and over are unable to fully understand the consequences of their decisions. The *Australian Candidate Study 2010* found that 72 per cent of voters believed that voting age should definitely stay at 18 whereas only 3 per cent of voters believed that it should be definitely lowered to 16, with only a small fraction of people unsure of whether it should be lowered or not. While there may be a small fraction of 16 and 17-year-olds who would be capable of making fully informed and logical decisions when voting, the politicians of Australia must listen to what the people of their country are saying, and the majority of the people of their country are saying no to the lowering of the voting age.

Compulsory voting in Australia should not be abolished. Countries like the United States of America and Great Britain do not have compulsory voting, and this has resulted in certain events that have had a detrimental effect on the people of those countries. Statistics show that in the last presidential election in the United States, of the 231 million eligible voters, only 58 per cent of them actually voted. This means that 42 per cent, which is equivalent to 90 million eligible voters, did not have a say in who is running their country right now. Australia should not abolish compulsory voting as it produces governments with more stability and legitimacy and a genuine mandate to govern, which results in all individuals benefiting, even if their preferred candidate or party is not elected into power.

Ms CLARKE (Mater Christi College) — Good morning, everyone. I am Sophie Clarke from Mater Christi College. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss my views on whether voting should be compulsory and whether the age should be lowered to 16. I believe compulsory voting is essential to a democratic society such as Australia. I think that compulsory voting allows for a fair vote and allows for a wide spectrum of views to be accepted. If you look at the results of the American election and Brexit, it is clear to see how the results would have differed had all citizens voted. If compulsory voting was to be abolished, then the outcomes of elections would be likely to benefit those of a higher socio-economic class, as they have the educational level to understand the outcome of their vote. While a democracy allows for freedom of choice and rights such as control of your own decisions, voting is a right and a right that should be executed by all citizens.

I believe the voting age should be lowered to 16 but that voting should not be compulsory until 18, as this allows for engaged youth to have their say and make an impact on society. Voting at 16 would contribute to more diverse views and opinions on topics that will affect youth. This is why it is essential to lower the age. Any decisions that are made today that affect the younger generation are made without any input from them; hence allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote ensures a fair and just society for all. Who is to say that a 16-year-old is less aware of political issues than a senior citizen? In fact it could be argued that the younger generation is more likely to have a greater awareness of issues as it is the youth who will deal with the aftermath of political decisions in the future.

Ms ROSENBERG (McKinnon Secondary College) — Good morning, everyone. My name is Shir Rosenberg, and I am from McKinnon Secondary College. I firmly believe compulsory voting should be

abolished. Firstly, forcing people to vote is an undemocratic infringement of their liberty, but, even more importantly, voluntary voting will provide for a better composition of the government. People are currently making uninformed votes for the sole purpose of escaping fines, but our society would benefit much more from a smaller amount of people voting for a truly representative government. This leads me to my next point — that the voting age should be lowered to 16.

In contemporary Australian society people aged 16 are legally able to drive, work, pay taxes and GST, join the military, get married and even fly a plane, so why are we still excluded from voting? We are clearly considered mature enough to gain complete control over our lives, which therefore should include influencing the government because its decisions impact our everyday lives and future. Furthermore today's youth are made up of the people who are going to have to deal with the decisions that the current government is making, and therefore influencing these decisions is paramount. Hence we strongly believe that only those truly educated and engaged with Australian politics should have the right to vote. Our resources should be targeted at involving the Australian public in our politics and educating the younger generations earlier in targeted classes — as opposed to forcing the population to contribute worthless votes with no political knowledge or informed views. Thank you.

Ms MURPHY (Northcote High School) — Good morning, everyone. My name is Josephine Murphy, and I am here from Northcote High School to speak to you all briefly about my thoughts on the topics we will be discussing here today. On the topic of whether or not we should abolish compulsory voting, I am on the side of voluntary voting. Many of the most livable countries in the world use this system of voluntary voting, including but not limited to Switzerland, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan, which are ranked the five best countries as of 2017 by *US News*. I believe we should be given the right to choose whether or not we participate in an election and that we should not force people to vote, especially if they are ill informed or just plain uninterested.

One of the main arguments against the abolishment of compulsory voting is that voluntary voting will not provide insight into the full spectrum of the population's political views. But even now, with our laws concerning compulsory voting, not every eligible Australian is enrolled to vote and a percentage of those who are enrolled do not even participate. Of those who do participate there is no telling how many do not really care about what they are putting on that ballot paper. We should not have to take into account the opinions of those who vote simply out of compulsion, who fill out a ballot just because they have to and not because they care or have an informed opinion about what they are actually doing.

In regard to lowering the voting age to 16 I believe that, yes, young people should get a say in how their future is shaped and who leads our country, but as of right now I do not believe that they are prepared to make such decisions. Speakers before me have stated that 16-year-olds are not informed enough to vote, but if we actually educate our youth on how the Australian political system works and the values of major political parties, instead of expecting them to spontaneously grow an educated political opinion once they turn 18, then I feel that we could be comfortable and confident in letting them make decisions that seriously affect their future — our future. Thank you all for listening.

Ms TROPEANO (Our Lady of Mercy College) — I am in the affirmative for compulsory voting and lowering the age to 16 years if done correctly. On the surface Bill Shorten's proposition to make compulsory voting accessible to 16-year-olds, should he win government in the next Australian federal election, shows an interest in involving Australia's youth in the current affairs of today. On closer look one could argue that the younger generation of today is naturally swayed to the political left, supporting the Labor Party's turnout in future elections. However, a percentage of today's younger society are politically interested and educated. A large majority show no interest or knowledge in the systems of government on our own soil due to a lack of education in political structures. This factor could have a massive impact on all parties in Australia, possibly jeopardising the international success that Australia carries.

Whilst continuing compulsory voting for those over the age of 18 years, as it is the fundamental backbone in assuring Australia's federal success and democracy, the constitution should include non-compulsory voting for those aged 16 to 18 years, narrowing down the votes to those with an educated political opinion and interest. If the government is to strictly lower the compulsory age to 16 years, they should fund comprehensive education regarding the political system in high school years 8 to 10. With these measures in place it will ensure that those

equipped to vote will positively contribute to our federal government whilst granting the younger generation and opportunity to have a voice earlier in their political careers.

Ms BORASH (Ruyton Girls School) — I believe that Australia should maintain compulsory voting. It is vital to ensure that everyone's opinion is noted and that the majority is preferred outcome is achieved. Australia is one of 19 countries where voting is enforced. However, if we look around the world it is clear to see why this is so important. The recent referendum on whether the UK should remain in the European Union had an unexpected and heartbreaking result for the youth of Britain, who statistics indicate overwhelmingly supported the remain position. This was due to the fact that many young people did not exercise their right to vote. Being passive is a vote in itself.

The ramifications of any result will be felt deeply by young people as they are the ones most affected. As a proud Australian citizen I believe it is imperative that voting remains obligatory to ensure that the full voice of the nation is heard, not merely the loudest, and to ensure that it represents the stance of the broad spectrum of the Australian population. The voting age should remain at 18 as 16-year-olds may be too susceptible to persuasion and manipulation by the media, as well as not having sufficient knowledge to make an educated decision. Given research into the developing frontal lobe of an adolescent's brain, the part that determines one's ability to foresee consequences, many 16-year-olds might be ill-equipped to foresee the long-term consequences of a political stance.

However, we acknowledge that there is a minority of 16 to 17-year-old students who are passionate and knowledgeable about the political activities. Thus we believe that voting should be optional in this age bracket. Let us be honest, if the elderly can vote when their advanced age means they have little stake in the future, why should not those with a clear vested interest in a better future, the youth, have a say? They will inherit what their elders have left to them — a Great Barrier Reef that is bleaching rapidly and quite possibly a nuclear-blighted landscape on the Korean Peninsula.

To ensure that government policies are forward-looking rather than short-term expedient, the politically minded youth of Australia should be given the option to vote, but for everyone over 18 years it should remain mandatory, as this will ensure the broadest possible expression of our nation's will.

Ms LIBERATORE (St Monica's College) — What is asked of voters at the polling booth concerns Australians as a whole. By making voting compulsory the opinions of all Australians are heard. At every election there are Australians who complain about voting and suggest that it infringes their freedom of apathy. The fact is that compulsory voting even allows us to measure the extent of voter apathy, through the number of donkey votes and informal votes that are cast. Compulsory voting ensures that every voter participates in the process whether they lodge a legitimate vote or not.

Furthermore, under-18-year-olds are currently disenfranchised. Those against lowering the age to 16 years argue that young people are too immature to make important decisions that affect the nation. However, disenfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds from participating in our democracy excludes us from making the important decisions, even though we are the voice of the future. Important decisions which affect Australia's future cannot exclude the current and future generations of our nation. As a new generation we should be able to have our voices heard at the ballot box. As Bill Shorten said in 2015, 'Let's trust our young people, because they are the people who are going to have to deal with the decisions that we are making right now'. By lowering the voting age to 16 and getting the young people to engage in the democratic process sooner we will have a real chance to ensure the integrity of Australia's democratic processes.

Therefore I propose that we keep compulsory voting as it is. However, we should include that those aged 16 and 17 years are able to vote but this should not be made mandatory for them. This then allows a younger generation to not feel the pressure of making these important decisions if they believe that they are not prepared to do so. But those who are genuinely interested in participating will get their voices heard.

Ms DOODY (Sunbury College) — The right to vote is a choice to vote. Mandatory voting ensures a high turnout at the polls. However, it does not ensure a better government. In fact, political scientists find that most citizens are badly informed and that most cannot even identify Australia's national present incumbents. Ignorance is not even the main issue. Citizens appear to make systematic mistakes about the most basic issues in economics, political sciences and sociology. The citizens who abstain from voting are typically even more ignorant or misinformed than the citizens who do vote. The real situation is that you can force people to cast a

vote but you cannot force them to cast a vote wisely and with well-informed reason. The fear of a fine is not driving people to the booths. In Australia voting is a privilege and an opportunity for people to have their voices heard.

As for the voting age, I believe there is an opportunity for those who are well-informed on governmental issues to vote from ages 16 to 17, with these youths having a non-compulsory period of voting.

Ms MONGA — Good morning, everyone. My name is Simran and I speak on behalf of Mac.Robertson Girls High School. I strongly believe that voting should not be abolished and should be lowered to 16 and 17 years old. As Australians we are fortunate to be living in a democratic society that gives us a right to express our voice and our opinions. Many people around the world, as I speak today, are put in jail for doing exactly the same. For this reason alone we need to acknowledge the value of the vote that we have today and acknowledge that it is a right and, fortunately, a privilege that we need to use.

Compulsory voting should not be abolished, because it upholds a key principle of a democracy — that is, participation. It also adds legitimacy to our elected representatives. Should voting be abolished then not all voices would have a fair and accurate chance to be heard and represented. This would allow opportunities for a politically skewed system, where some groups would be more represented and favoured over others. A country cannot be a true democracy until all of its people are given the chance to have their voices heard. For this reason as well the voting age should be lowered to 16 and 17 years of age.

Often in the media we see inaccurate and highly stereotypical portrayals of teenagers as being immature and uneducated. I would also like to remind you that there are teenagers like Malala Yousafzai who want a chance to have a say and who want a chance to change the world but who are deprived of that right due to these highly pathetic and preposterous stereotypes.

As I mentioned before, a country cannot be a true democracy until all of its people are given a chance to have a say. We should not let these stereotypes deprive young Australians from having their say when they genuinely want to change and shape the way the country runs.

Ms CAMUR — My name is Simge Camur, and I am from Thomastown Secondary School. I think mandatory voting should not be abolished. Due to mandatory voting, people from low socio-economic backgrounds have been politically engaged and involved in discussions about what needs to be changed in our government, which has led me to believe that mandatory voting encourages political engagement within our society and community. Being politically engaged is important for discussion within the nation.

If we were to abolish compulsory voting, this would take away minority privileges to vote in a democracy. Furthermore the voting age should not be reduced to 16 due to the fact that it has been proven that we as humans are not fully developed until the age of 25, let alone 16. Teenagers have little to no political knowledge, as they are not well known for their judgement and life experiences and therefore are incapable of making such vast decisions on who is to take control of our nation and government.

If 16-year-olds were to be eligible to vote, then they may be easily influenced or manipulated by their peers and guardians as to which party they should vote for when they may have little to no knowledge of what the party stands for. They are also often naive and disengaged from politics. Lastly, teenagers may not take the voting system seriously and cast an inappropriate or invalid vote according to what they find appealing or humorous, as they do not take voting seriously.

The SPEAKER — That completes the introductory speeches from our 16 delegates. Please join me in thanking the 16 girls who presented.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER — I think it is fair to say that we will have some terrific debate as the day goes on because there have been a range of viewpoints put to us for us to explore further. But right now we move on to our first keynote speech. I am about to introduce Dr Aaron Martin from Melbourne University. Aaron Martin was educated at ANU, the Institute of Political Studies in Paris, Stanford University and the University of Melbourne. He returned to the University of Melbourne as a lecturer in political science research methods in 2010. Is that right?

Dr MARTIN — That is correct.

The SPEAKER — Aaron's research focuses on young people and politics, public opinion and policy and citizens' agendas. He is the author of *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies*, and is currently working on a project with Keith Dowding from the ANU on policy agendas in the Australian commonwealth and on another on behavioural economics applications to policy-making. Aaron sits on the Australian Electoral Commission's advisory board on electoral research and is a member of the steering committee for Vote Compass. In 2014 he was a visiting researcher at both McGill and Princeton universities. Please join me in welcoming Dr Martin today.

Delegates applauding.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Dr MARTIN — Thanks very much for having me here. I am really happy to be to be part of this initiative. I think that it is an important one. The points that many of you have raised already in some ways make me feel I have been made redundant. Because of the way you have made those points, and with the poignancy, in some ways, of your arguments, some of what I am saying will just echo back those arguments. That really says a lot about the quality of your arguments.

So what exactly can I add? I think I can add a couple of things. First of all, I tend to ask: what does the data say? We cannot always resort to data because it is part of this, which is a normative argument which data cannot answer. But I will talk about what the data says. I tend to be quite agnostic about many things, except to say, 'What does the data say on this?'. I will draw on research that I have done and also from people who have spent much of their lives actually studying this. Hopefully that will contribute to your thinking about the issue.

The other thing I would say at the outset is that a debate really imposes an artificial construct in terms of how at least I think about the world. In a debate you have to pretend you are 100 per cent correct, and you are trying to convince everyone else of that correctness, whereas I think actually a better way to think about things is to think about cumulative social science to the extent that we have degrees of uncertainty. There is no truth as such. We are trying to arrive at the truth, but I do not think we ever get there, so what we do is we become less uncertain of something. I think that is a useful way to think about something, even though we have to. Even in life a lot of the time we pretend we are 100 per cent right about something, or we are 100 per cent certain about something. So, hopefully what I present will contribute to that sense of, 'How certain am I about exactly what I am presenting?'. I would say that of my own views as well.

I have heard some really good arguments already, but if I hear arguments that I think are stronger than mine, then I update my beliefs and I change my opinion. I would encourage you to do that not only in this setting but also in life as well.

The first thing to say — and some of you have already mentioned this — is that Australia is the anomaly in terms of having compulsory voting. There are 22 countries in the world that have compulsory voting, but even that is slightly fraught, because a number of those do not actually enforce compulsory voting. The country probably closest to ours — I guess culturally and in terms of democratic institutions — is Belgium, that has compulsory voting.

Compulsory voting was introduced in 1924 via a private members bill. A large part of that was actually responding to declines in voter turnout, in particular at the 1922 election, where turnout declined about 10 percentage points. There was a lot of concern about this, and then compulsory voting was an obvious antidote to that. It had an almost immediate impact. Turnout rose to about 91 per cent in the subsequent 1925 election, so it certainly had the desired effect.

There are some other reasons why compulsory voting was introduced. One of them was to aid the administration of elections. It was thought if everyone was required to vote, then it would be easier to monitor and detect electoral fraud. That was one reason. Another was to raise money, so you fine people and that raises money. Another was to increase legitimacy. There was a referendum regarding conscription during World War I in which everyone was required to participate. That really got people thinking about, 'If for an important issue, like conscription, everyone is required to participate, then for other issues — or for general elections —

should the population be required to participate also?'. That really planted a seed in people's minds about having compulsory voting.

The last point is that it reduced the money that some of the parties were spending on campaigning. Strangely enough, both parties thought that they would benefit from compulsory voting. I will go back to that point shortly in terms of speaking about the influence of money in US politics, which I think in part is a consequence of them having a non-compulsory setting. So, they are really the reasons for that.

I should have stated at the outset that I favour compulsory voting and I favour 16-year-old voting — they are the essential arguments that I am going to make. But that is really premised on this idea that voting is a very powerful instrument and is something that we probably take for granted and that we should not. There is a poster from the US in the 19th century which shows an African American's hands, and it says, 'Hands that were used to pick cotton now are used to pick elected officials'.

What I think that really underscores is that this is a remarkable historical achievement. Moving to a point where we actually get a say over who governs us was a remarkable historical achievement. We tend to live in the present and think it is normal, but in the sweep of human history, that is a remarkable achievement. I hold that very dear, and that informs some of my arguments. So why should people be forced to vote? Because that is in effect what we are doing. I think the strongest argument — and again many of you have raised these points — is that it helps level the playing field by actually requiring everyone to participate in politics.

What a friend of mine, who at that time was a PhD student at Harvard, did, which no Australian did, by the way, was say, 'Why don't I go to the archives and actually look at the records of who voted' — they are in Ballarat, I believe — 'before compulsory voting was introduced and then look at the composition of the people who voted against the composition of people who didn't'. What he found by looking at those archives is that the wealthier were much more likely to participate in politics than their working class counterparts. This also, he shows, had an effect on outcomes. If you look up Anthony Fowler, compulsory voting, you will find this paper. He shows that this had an effect of increasing pension spending. Compulsory voting did have that effect. He argues the results suggest democracies with voluntary voting do not represent the preferences of all citizens. I think we see that in a couple of settings, which I think you have already highlighted, but I will just explain it perhaps in a bit more detail.

I think there are probably two outcomes that we can think of that I think many of us here would call undesirable, which are Brexit and then the election of Donald Trump. Now, we can argue about what undesirable means, because they might be undesirable to us, but they might not be undesirable to others. If we think about desirability purely in terms of representation and an election expressing the views of the entire population, then I think we can think of both of those outcomes as undesirable.

The referendum in Britain was quite close, as you know — 52 to 48. We know that young people are overwhelmingly in favour of remaining in the European Union. We know that older people are on average not favourable to that. What happened? Older people came out to vote, younger people did not; and we have to make a number of assumptions about this, but I think we can say with a pretty high degree of certainty that had all of young people voted, or had the whole population been required to vote, the outcome would have been different. Again if we just think about: what are the preferences of the population, then we would have had a different outcome. I think in that case you could argue that compulsory voting would have been desirable.

I think even less controversial is the election of Donald Trump being undesirable. We know that there are more Democrats than Republicans in the American population. That is a fact, at least for the time being. Then we assume that if everyone voted, then we would have a Democratic President as opposed to a Republican President. There is this very strange thing called the electoral college, which makes everything kind of really difficult and confusing.

By the way, the only way Trump was able to carve out a victory was by this really unusual combination of electoral college votes that he won. But that was really allowed because in certain pivotal states — in particular in the Midwest — he won the electoral college often by very narrow margins. What would have happened in a compulsory voting setting? Again we are not 100 per cent sure, but we can make some pretty good guesses. Who stayed home in 2016 who did not in previous elections — in particular 2008 and 2012? In particular young people and in particular African-Americans, and we know both of those groups would have voted Democrat. It would have taken not much at all to change the whole electoral college map, and then we would

have Hillary Clinton as President and Trump would not be President, which I think would be a good thing obviously. There, I think, are two arguments where again if we just think about an electoral system as representing the preferences of the entire population, then we would have ended up with different outcomes. That, I think, is important.

The one thing I would say — I have spent a reasonable amount of time in America, and people there find this argument about forcing people to vote obscene. They just cannot believe that we actually do this, but I really do think that it is a desirable goal. I will say a few quick things about the negatives, and again some of you have mentioned these. But I think it is important to say again that a number of people who have spent more of their lives studying this than I have come out against compulsory voting. Simon Jackman has said that he thinks that basically compulsory voting delivers a whole bunch of disgruntled voters who then vote for minor parties and then we end up with the political gridlock that we have today. Ian McAllister has been very clear in arguing that it makes parties lazy and sclerotic. Others argue that: why should people with no political knowledge or no real interest in politics be able to vote? The departing Liberal Senator Nick Minchin in 2005 expressed the views of some others, saying:

I find it thoroughly offensive that Australians who choose not to vote are guilty of an offence. It should be a democratic right not to ...

vote. So there are obviously people, including who people who have no real ideological stake in this, who argue that it should be abolished.

I really think it comes down to an argument about freedom and equality. Freedom and equality are really in tension with another. We often have to make a choice about: do we select freedom or do we select equality? I think the overwhelming orientation of our country is to select equality over freedom, and the overwhelming orientation of a country like United States is to select freedom over equality. That is why my American friends find this argument that we are forced to vote obscene — because they think, ‘Why should you be compelled to do that?’ What we are really doing with compulsory voting, to my mind, is we are trading some freedom for some equality, and I do think we end up with more equitable outcomes in terms of forcing people to vote. We know study after study has shown that the more wealthy, the more educated et cetera are more likely to vote. So if we return to a non-compulsory setting I think we just end up with those groups over-represented in the electoral system.

The other part of it is that you just have parties who ignore sections of the population who they think either will not vote or are too difficult to mobilise to vote. So you just say: who are my base? You might say: they are older people because they are a much larger section of the population, so I am just going to ignore young people and go after them. Whereas at least in our setting I think you have to at least to some degree address the entire population.

The other thing is: I think money would play a much larger role in politics if we did not have compulsory voting, because we would have a lot of campaigning. In the US you have a lot of elected officials spending a lot of their time raising money to run for election or run for re-election. I think that is really undesirable, and even the people who have to do that make the same arguments. I think for those reasons compulsory voting remains desirable.

Just quickly to 16-year-old voting — the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1973. There is a very small number of countries that allow 16-year-olds to vote. Austria is one; Brazil is another. The Scottish referendum in 2014 was another case where 16-year-olds were allowed to vote. One of you mentioned the data on this. There is actually almost no public support for lowering the voting age. The Australian election study showed that 6 per cent of people favoured lowering the voting age to 16. That is actually higher among elected officials, where it is about 30 per cent. So it is clear that there is very little public support for it.

Ian McAllister shows that young people are less interested and knowledgeable about politics. That is again, I think, just a fact, so we have to also acknowledge that. The other thing is that: where do we stop? Do we have 12-year-olds, 10-year-olds, eight-year-olds voting, and we have to acknowledge that every choice is arbitrary in some sense. We just have to have the least arbitrary choice in a lot of ways.

Why do I favour 16-year-old voting? It is really on pragmatic grounds. If you thought about the worst possible age to try and get someone to vote — the worst possible age — you would probably pick 18. There are other

things to attend to, and politics on that hierarchy tends to be pretty low. I do not really blame 18-year-olds for not seeing politics as number one on their list. I think 16-year-old voting would allow first of all a period of life when there are fewer distractions, it would allow schools to enrol people to vote and it would allow schools to have civic literacy programs before the pressures of year 12, when everyone is trying to perform as well as they could.

The other thing is that voting, again in empirical studies, has been shown to be a habit. So when you vote once you tend to vote again. If that is the case, it is better to get people at 16 and then it will become a habit throughout their lives. In Austria what we saw was that young people, 16 and 17-year-olds, voted at a higher rate than 18, 19 and 20-year-olds. Again, it is a habit. If this holds true, then those people will vote at higher rates throughout their lives. That also happened in the Scottish referendum, where there was a high degree of participation by 16 and 17-year-olds. Those are I think some of the arguments for 16-year-old voting.

I will just end by quoting a passage from the *Economist* which really summarises I think some of the arguments I have made. They say:

A lower voting age would strengthen the voice of the young and signal that their opinions matter. It is they, after all, who will bear the brunt of climate change and service the debt that paid for benefits, such as pensions and health care, of today's elderly. Voting at 16 would make it easier to initiate new citizens in civic life. Above all, it would help guarantee the supply of young voters needed to preserve the vitality of democracy. Catch them early, and they will grow into better citizens.

Thank you very much for having me. I think this discussion is a fantastic one. I have to get back to the university, unfortunately, but I think it is going to be a really great day of discussion of really important issues among this group. So thanks again for having me.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER — Thanks, Aaron, and thanks for giving us some of the research and data behind what we are discussing. I think that is really important when we are making some of these decisions, so thank you.

I am going to now introduce our second keynote speaker. I would like to introduce you to Associate Professor Libby Tudball, who is here from the faculty of education at Monash University. Libby lectures in teacher education programs and supervises higher degree research students as part of her work with the university. Her publications include school curriculum resources, teacher professional learning programs, and academic articles. Her teaching and research interests include civics and citizenship and values education, the internationalisation of education, studies of Asia, teacher professional learning and education resources, the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in school curriculum, and teaching for effective learning. I can also add that when I was a student I think I might have used one of Libby's textbooks, but she is not that old.

Libby's PhD focused on improving student learning through professional learning communities in primary and secondary schools. We are very lucky to have her to speak to us today about this topic and hear her point of view. So please join me in welcoming Associate Professor Libby Tudball.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Assoc. Prof. TUDBALL — Thank you so much. I also am absolutely delighted to be here. I am really at my happiest when I am working with young people because young people are so inspiring, and it is really a privilege to be here with you today. Congratulations to everybody who has already spoken — so articulate, so well planned and went to time. It is not easy to stand up in a forum like this when perhaps this might be your first time. I am sure your schools are very proud of you. They should be.

I found myself nodding in my head as I listened to Aaron. Aaron, I agree with you. I agree with you that the voting age should be lowered to 16, because I believe in young people, and I agree with you that we should hold onto compulsory voting — hard fought for and it ensures, most importantly, equality. It ensures most of all that the maximum opportunity is there for all voices to be heard in our systems.

But I have been asked to provide a slightly different perspective today. I have been asked to give some contextual understanding around the whole question of civic participation and youth voice. When I thought about all of you, I thought you are at a time when actually we have been through a good few years when civics and citizenship education has not actually mattered very much. We have been working on it, but not all schools

have been expected to ensure that young people do develop civic knowledge and civic understanding and citizenship participation. But now in this nation and in Victoria civics and citizenship is a mandatory subject. How many of you did not know that? Could you put up your hand if this is new to you? Put up your hand high.

This is because in many schools it is not happening yet. But it is likely to be over the coming years. One of my big arguments is that in the times we are in now where there will be a much greater focus on young people being educated, to have opinions, to understand civics and to understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens, is in the curriculum, as a subject, as a learning area that all young people should study. I am very interested that some of you who have already spoken this morning have said, 'We need more education about this' — and 16-year-olds should in the coming years all, particularly in Victoria where it is mandatory, have an opportunity to develop their understanding far more.

So what is this thing called citizenship? Citizenship is such a critical element of our lives, and being active and informed citizens is a national goal for Australian education that was agreed to by all ministers and by all states and territories and signed off as being part of what was called the Melbourne declaration for schooling. It involves, as you know, both a formal and a legal status, but it is so much more than that. It is about having a view, having a voice and about participating in communities. So there is three elements of being a citizen, and it is not just about voting and going to sleep for the next three years. It is about knowing your rights and responsibilities. It is about participating. It is about knowing who your representatives are and understanding this. But it is also about identity: who am I and where do I belong? What is my connection to my local community, to the nation-state and to the world?

There is international research and arguments that say young people should be able to voice their will, their needs and their opinions. They should be able to participate and engage with and affect and influence the course of social events and act as agents who shape and change society. Noted researchers Westheimer and Khane out of the United States say that what we need in education in schools is to have personally responsible citizens, participatory citizens, justice-oriented citizens, critical citizens who have the knowledge and understanding to make a difference in communities. So my hypothesis is that youth voice matters; that youth participation is vital for the health of our democracy and for our future — and youth engagement matters. I have seen constant evidence — I am seeing it here with you here today with the way you can speak so elegantly — that this not only matters, but it is possible for you to be well-informed, have a view and make a difference.

In my view it is our responsibility as teachers and as schools to make sure that you are not just drilled about the facts of the Constitution, but you are actually involved in inquiry and investigations of issues and concerns that matter to you and that you are actually passionate about. We actually now do have a curriculum that not only focuses on the kind of conceptual understandings you need about civics, but in terms of the skills that you are going to require to be creative, critical-thinking, problem-solving, able to look at civic realities and concerns and to create new opportunities. Some of the few things that I would comment on, some of the issues that might matter to you that I have asked young people about — increasing pressures for young people around matters to do with mental health and wellbeing of young people, youth unemployment, alternative energy sources in the nation — these are just a few of the really important matters that are about your future. If we as educators provide opportunities for you to engage with, research, come up with your opinions, express and take action then we can do well.

It is not just about you here now in your local communities; it is also about you as global citizens. I know young people who are already contributing to global challenges such as the movements of people fleeing terrorism and war-torn countries, intercultural and religious rivalry — questions like food security and finite resources. I sat down with a young friend who is just 20 and finished his undergraduate degree in international development at the University of Melbourne, and he said to me, 'What do I do now?'. We googled 'Syrian refugees' and up came an organisation called the International Rescue Committee, which helps about 60,000 Syrian refugees currently in Athens in Greece, and that is where Lucas is now. He is going on to Berlin to study his Masters in international development, and where did this passion come from? He was school captain. Have we got any school captains here today? Put up your hand if you are a school captain or a member of a student representative council. Probably about a third of you have got your hands up. So it is through this modelling and opportunity in schools to become engaged that Lucas is where he is now. I believe that this is really exciting stuff.

So we need you to be interested in social and political concerns, but it is a lot more than interest. It is about actually making a difference through your vote, through your engagement and through what I call 'social action

competence'. Social action competence was developed by famous Danish researchers Jensen and Schnack who said that young citizens need intentionality. They need a clear intention that they want to make a difference, and we can only do that if education empowers you to have that critical view and understanding that is actually required. I think being able to vote at 16, as Aaron says, when you are really focused on learning about this in your school curriculum and you have got the time to learn what it means to be engaged, and if we as educators provide you with opportunities such as this forum, then really great things can happen with youth voice.

I know the realities; I am not only going to play the glad game. I know that participation in enrolling to vote amongst 18 to 24-year-olds is low; there is a bit of a reluctance. Even though this is a privilege it is not always happening, but I think the education system is partly to blame. I have been a teacher for over 40 years — 43 years — I used to teach politics at Mac.Rob Girls High many, many years ago, and I know that we have had a period here in schooling where we have not done a good enough job for young people. There has been too much telling and not enough engaging in opportunities. I do not believe we have enough focus on contemporary issues in schools and schooling. How many of you would agree that you need more opportunity to look deeply into contemporary issues that matter to you? Could you raise your hand if you agree? I think we are pretty much unanimous on that one.

So there are many schools doing amazing things in civics and citizenship education. There are incredibly passionate teachers, there are business education programs, there are history teachers, there are social geographers who give young people an opportunity to look at matters and questions that they are truly engaged in and interested in. But some schools do not have strong humanities, social sciences and citizenship programs, and there are a lot of my colleagues and I, like Christine Reid, the commerce teachers association and the social education association, who are really excited — we are excited — that this is a mandatory subject here in Victoria.

I am wondering if you know about NAPLAN. Put up your hand if you have done NAPLAN. Okay. Put up your hand if you know about NAP-CC — the National Assessment Program for civics and citizenship education? Ever heard of it? Not one hand. Yet we have had cycles of this since 2007. We know a lot about what young people think about politics and citizenship because we have the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and we have the NAP for civics and citizenship as well. Not every student in the nation is involved.

Do any of you remember doing a test about civics and citizenship at some stage online? You would have gone online; it is not handwritten. No? So for your interest, in 2016 this test was delivered online to around 12 000 year 6 and year 10 students. It is a random sample and it occurs every three to four years. In 630 government, Catholic and independent schools in metropolitan, rural and remote locations students sit down with their laptops and are involved in this test. So we have a lot of information about what young people actually think about citizenship, about civics and about their engagement.

Unfortunately, I do not have a report yet that I can read and comment on from the 2016 data, but I do have data — you can Google the NAP-CC and read about young people if you are interested — from 2013. This is something that I think is significant. The 2013 results showed that one-third of all students are, probably like you, 'political enthusiasts' — one-third of all students surveyed, and there were 12 000 students.

They ticked the box that said they were likely to endorse all kinds of citizenship behaviour and participation. That is encouraging, but it is also a bit worrying at the same time. It means that two-thirds have not ticked that box. But this was in 2013, when not a lot was happening across all schools in citizenship education. Your questions that you are deliberating on are about 'What are we going to do about compulsory voting and 16-year-olds into the future?'

I am an optimist. I think if we can situate this important area of education that is a nationally agreed goal for schooling that we can have more political enthusiasts, particularly if we as teachers do a good job of listening to you and giving you the chance to get engaged in topics that you are very interested in.

The results of this test also showed high levels of positive attitudes amongst students in terms of their view about their values and their participation as active citizens. Who do you think 16-year-olds said they trust? Do they trust the Australian Parliament, the state Parliament, the law courts, the police, Australian political parties, the media? Think about that yourselves. The institutions most trusted by young people were actually not the parliaments; they were the police and the law courts.

But the results showed that year 6 students expressed more trust than year 10 students. I actually find that encouraging, because I find that tells me that year 10 students — 15-year-olds roughly — are actually questioning authority and they are starting to debate issues and concerns, and that gives me some evidence that something is happening in their heads if there is a difference in that age range.

It is interesting that female students are more trusting than males. Males are more questioning. But what the national assessment program tells us is that there is a great opportunity to harness an energy that is already there amongst young people if we do a better job of citizenship education.

We know that a lot of young people are not reading newspapers, but I must admit, even me today, I am a consumer of very diverse forms of information, and a lot of it is online and a lot of it is debates that are non-mainstream. I think, again, if teachers give young people an opportunity to be engaged in more questioning and critical views that we will have a more empowered youth in what we do.

But it is quite encouraging to know that a lot of young people do have very regular conversations about issues that are of concern with that. The majority of all students at both levels agreed with statements about the value of civic action: year 6 and year 10 students. This study showed this. And among year 10 students the majority of students thought they would certainly or probably — they are the words— inform themselves about candidates before voting, but few students had considered participating in more active forms of engagement.

There is so much that you are already doing. How many of you have been involved in leadership training of some sort? Look at the hands going up. How many of you have been involved in student councils, buddy programs, community-based programs? I rest my case. There is a capacity there that we need to channel.

My argument is that the evidence we have as a nation of young people being able to be responsible, critically informed, socially active, competent young citizens provides a strong argument for lowering the age to 16. Time limits mean that I cannot say more, but I could go on for hours.

How many of you have heard about the Australian Youth Climate Coalition and the work they are doing to stop the Adani mine and to encourage investment in alternative forms of energy? If you have not, please go home and Google it: AYCC, the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. They got 300 000 people per month on Facebook on a campaign called Don't Risk the Reef. There are 120 000 youth members of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition. They do extraordinary things. They ended up in Canberra getting a third of the Senate to listen to stories from young people across the country about climate change.

You are not citizens in waiting. You are citizens now. Your voice matters. Your participation matters. You can make a difference. Congratulations on all that you are achieving being here today, and I look forward to seeing many of you here sitting here as members of Parliament in the future. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER (Ms Murray) — Thank you, Libby, for those inspiring and impassioned words. I think the big takeaway for everyone sitting as a student is that youth voice matters. That is something that you can think about and reflect on today as you start getting your arguments in order for the soapbox session this afternoon. We have had a lot to think about this morning. After morning tea we will go into discussion groups, where you will get more of a chance to have a think and a say.

Sitting suspended 11.09 a.m. to 1.33 p.m.

REPORTING SESSION

The SPEAKER (Ms Edwards) — Good afternoon everyone. My name is Maree Edwards. I am the member for Bendigo West and the Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. I welcome you all to this afternoon's session. I hope that you had a very enjoyable break and that this morning's session went really, really well.

I was very privileged to be in the chair for the primary schools convention a couple of weeks ago. I anticipate a little more vigour and a little more getting into the arguments today. We will commence this afternoon's session with each group giving a three-minute statement followed by student group discussions. I ask students to stand

in their places as representatives of their groups, to turn on their microphones and to state their names and the groups that they are with.

Group 1

Mr MULLANE (McKinnon Secondary College) — On the question ‘Should Australia abolish compulsory voting?’, my group believes that we should not and that voting should remain compulsory. This is because compulsory voting has many benefits to Australian society, one of which is that it reduces the spending of money for elections in Australia. If the voting group is larger, it is far more difficult for money and wealth to influence people’s decisions and their opinions. This is something we should be trying to keep so people are putting forward their own opinions and not the opinions of those with wealth.

Compulsory voting also requires candidates and parties to target the entire population as opposed to individual groups that perhaps vote more than others. This means that all members of the population are addressed by candidates directly, meaning that everyone is involved.

In regard to whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 years, it is the opinion of my group that the voting age should be lowered to the ages of 16 and 17, as well as 18-year-olds as it is already. This is on the condition that those aged 16 and 17 years are not required to vote and that it is voluntary and that we increase education programs prior to the voting age being lowered, to ensure that all people under the age of 18 years who are voting are properly educated in the ways of the Australian political system.

We should lower the voting age because it gives young people a say. Decisions made in Parliament today affect the youth of tomorrow, and yet as it stands they have no voice. They should have a say in the decisions that affect them more than anyone else.

At the age of 16 years voting can be a higher priority than it is for 18-year-olds. For the most part 18-year-olds are undergoing VCE learning and as such that should be taking precedence in their lives. At the age of 16 years school does not play as large a role in their lives as it is at the age of 18 years and, as we heard earlier from one of our keynote speakers, voting is a force of habit. If you vote once, you are far more likely to vote again. As such, we should be encouraging people to vote at an early age to ensure that their opinions will be constantly heard through the rest of their lives.

Delegates applauding.

Group 2

Mr HOVENDEN — I am Declan Hovenden from Marist College, Bendigo, and I will be speaking on behalf of group 2. I would like to start by stating that my group sided with ‘no’ — compulsory voting should not be changed and that it should remain’. Our arguments for this, I believe, are quite strong. Voting is a duty and a right. We must vote so that we can benefit our country and so that everyone gets to have a say. No matter what someone’s socio-economic background or education level is, they should get to have their say in our country.

Our second point is for freedom and equality, so balancing the socio-economic levels, everyone gets to have a say, no matter what their background is. I think voting can really be of benefit for community involvement, including patriotism and joining our community, state and nation together.

Our third point was that it increases legitimacy, so it broadens everyone’s view. If you vote, you are able to listen and take in more perspectives because you are actively doing it, although some people do decide to donkey vote and falsify their voting sheets to not represent their views and ideas.

On the argument for whether the voting age should be lowered, my group decided ‘yes’. It should be lowered and it should be made compulsory for 16 and onwards. We discussed it being optional for the ages of 16 and 17, becoming compulsory at 18, but we ultimately decided to side with one of the two options. Our arguments for lowering the voting age are that it means more views, a wider range, more people get to have a say and more people are listened to, which is quite important for getting an overall view on people’s beliefs and views in our country.

If you lower the age to 16, you are more likely to get involved in politics at a younger age, without the VCE and other stresses hanging over your head, which is really beneficial for kids who are going through the VCE and who are quite stressed. Also, youths will be able to deal with it in the future, so once you vote once, you are more likely to vote again —

The SPEAKER — Your time has expired.

Delegates applauding.

Group 3

Ms MIKHAEL — Good afternoon. My name is Christina Mikhael from St Monica's College, Epping, and I speak on behalf of group 3. As a whole, we came to the conclusion that we should not lower the compulsory voting age to 16. However, when proposed that it should be optional, the vast majority of us believed the notion to be plausible. Whilst we acknowledge that some youths may have some interest in the system, or are susceptible to biased opinions, lowering the voting age will enhance an individual's knowledge and represent youth who want a say in their future.

What is really the difference between a 16 and an 18-year-old if none of them fully mature until their early 20s? There is no criteria in terms of eligibility as well as experience in order to vote. Therefore if 16-year-olds are given adult-like tasks, such as paying taxes and receiving jobs, they should be allowed to have a say to improve their youth.

We also concluded that voting should remain mandatory, as it is an integral part of democracy and promotes fairness. People fought hard for this right and it should be utilised correctly rather than Australia appearing to undermine voters' rights. The bigger the turnout the more representative government will be; hence it will be more representative, as opposed to only representing the minority who choose to vote. That is our robust stance on this topic. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 4

Ms LIBERATORE — My name is Larissa Liberatore, speaking on behalf of St Monica's College. As a group our main stance on the topic presented is that we should keep compulsory voting as well as lowering the voting age to 16. We also agree with the idea of making voting not mandatory for 16 and 17-year-olds. The points that we discussed are as follows. Firstly, we believe that compulsory voting will allow political parties to be able to focus on and dedicate their time to their campaign rather than just trying to persuade people to come to the ballot boxes. This will save resources economically as well as the parties' time. Furthermore it ensures that issues such as wealth and weather do not affect the overall election turnout. People's educational opportunities, financial status or even that it is just raining outside could be a factor if voting is optional and people do not feel inclined to vote.

Lastly, having the right to vote is an absolute privilege. Other countries do not even have optional voting and some elections are not fairly counted — for example, Zimbabwe suffered a rigged election in 2002, so this civil duty cannot be taken for granted. For lowering the voting age we concluded that if, like today, we are able to have civil discussions about political issues, then we are more than capable of voting. Young people are the voice of progression and as Libby mentioned in her hypothesis, the youth voice matters as it is vital. We are open to development, unlike our conservative older generation, and we feel like we are more tuned into the time.

Secondly, Australia and New Zealand are actually signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child so they are obligated to honour children's rights to freely express their views on all matters affecting them. Yes, we do have freedom of political speech, but not where it counts most — at elections, where it affects our future.

Finally, we are the people who are old enough to pay taxes, work and drive — just like adults — so we, the new generation, are seen as not mature enough to make a choice in our nation's future. I feel that, as people who have jobs like adults, we should be able to go and vote. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 5

Mr KHOURY — Good afternoon. My name is Marcel Khoury, representing group 5. We believe that Australia should not abolish compulsory voting. Our first argument for this is simply democracy. It is only a true democracy if everyone's interests are expressed, not just a select few. Participation is fundamental. It is only through participation that people can learn.

Our second argument for this is that a compulsory voting system leads to a more legitimate and less biased government. We acknowledge that if more people have an opinion, society is made more equal and minority groups are recognised.

We believe that the voting age should be lowered to 16. Our first argument for this is that we live in the real world. We are responsible and mature-ready. We are taxpayers, we are drivers, we work in jobs and we know our sexual orientation. Most of all, we know our identity and beliefs. We are living proof.

Our second argument is that it is our future. Eighty-year-olds have no control over lives that they will not live to see. They should not.

I would like to close this argument with a quote from Nelson Mandela: 'The youth of today are leaders of tomorrow'. Our third argument for this is that we are expected to act like adults. Let us. I am sure that we have all received that speech telling us that we are young adults and that we are seen as role models and senior students of our colleges. If we are truly responsible, why are we not given the power to choose how we are to live? Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 6

Ms BRANCATO — Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kamaria, and I am from Marymede Catholic College. On behalf of group 6, we believe that Australia should not abolish compulsory voting and the voting age should be lowered to 16. However, it should be voluntary for 16 and 17-year-olds.

Voting is a necessary part of the duties of citizenship, just like jury duty and paying taxes. Compulsory voting allows for true legitimacy, and the idea that candidates win a majority of people's votes remains true. If voting was not compulsory, there is not a true representation of the winning political party. If voting was voluntary, poorer and less educated people would tend not to vote, and this would skew the political system towards the higher class and well-educated people. It increases political education of the people, and they would tend to pay more attention to politics if they know they have to vote.

The voting age should be lowered to 16, however, it should be voluntary for 16 and 17-year-olds. At 18 voting would be compulsory for everyone. We are the future of the world. Young people make up 20 per cent of the population, but we are 100 per cent of the future, and we need to be able to make a contribution at this age. They will be able to represent their age group when it comes to voting, and it will encourage more 16-year-olds to be politically active and will encourage political engagement.

Lowering the voting age may make it more likely for civics to be taught in schools. This will make students more educated about voting, and this may make them more informed about who they vote for not only at this age but also when they are older. If you want us to mature and act like adults, let us do so and have the opportunity to vote.

To summarise, voting should remain compulsory for all Australians over 18 and should be voluntary for 16 and 17-year-olds. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 7

Mr JAMES — I am Anthony James of Scotch College. Upon first discussion, our group was a simple majority in favour of compulsory voting. We were in favour due to concerns that voluntary voting would lead to the disenfranchisement of the Australian population caused by inadequate voting infrastructure.

We also support compulsory voting due to concerns that party spending being redirected away from focusing on genuine policy towards targeting specific groups of the Australian population.

Our group was also in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 on the provision that 16 and 17-year-olds would take part in voluntary voting. That is because of a belief that the more people undertaking the vote, the more democratic and legitimate our government. Although allowing the youth to vote will also increase the political awareness of our country, within the entire community children will educate parents, and parents will educate grandparents. It will continue on.

Finally, the elderly, who are less likely to experience the after effects of their vote, still receive one, yet the youth, who have decades of externalities — positive or negative — have no say in our future. That is why we support compulsory voting and lowering the voting age to 16. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 8

Ms LOVASS — Good afternoon. My name is Tamsyn Lovass, and I am from Strathcona and representing group 8. We strongly disagree with the statement that Australia should abolish compulsory voting and partially agree with the notion that the voting age should be lowered to 16, believing that 16 and 17-year-olds should be allowed to vote, providing that this is voluntary.

It is clear that compulsory voting is the most democratic approach to selecting our government. It ensures that the values of democracy — being by the people, for the people — are represented to their greatest extent. We live in Australia and should make the most of our civic duty to vote.

Our group also discussed how compulsory voting allows for more regional involvement and is less susceptible to fraud.

Finally, a major focus of our group was how compulsory voting will encourage better and cheaper election campaigns so will be focused on issues and policies rather than convincing people to vote. In the end, we agreed that it is unnecessary to sacrifice a little freedom for heightened equality.

Our group was also in support of allowing 16 to 17-year-olds to vote with the provision that this vote is optional. This allows for politically minded teenagers such as ourselves to impact the policies affecting us in the future but reducing the amount of useless votes provided by other teenagers of our age. Having the ability to vote will result in less disruptive processes, such as protests, and a more democratic approach will be taken. This also enforces higher political education in schools and subsequently a more educated voting population in the future. It allows us youth to have a greater impact on our lives, which will be shaped by policies decided by our current government. We also recognise that a lot of teenagers do not fit the stereotype that is so often projected on us of an uncaring and unintelligent, uneducated population. Those who choose to vote will be the ones who are educated and so deserve to have a say.

In summary, we believe that compulsory voting is essential to Australia's democracy, and that having a voluntary vote for 16 to 17-year-olds is absolutely necessary.

Delegates applauding.

Group 9

Mr GUNASEGARAM (Camberwell Grammar School) — Good afternoon. My name is James Gunasegaram, from Camberwell Grammar School, and I am representing group 9. We believe that compulsory voting is essential for Australia. It brings significant benefits to our democratic process that cannot be ignored. It safeguards our right to vote by making voter suppression nearly impossible and making voting a priority instead of an afterthought. It forces political parties and our elected representatives to focus on Australia as a whole instead of only active voting blocks, and in the process it ensures the government works for all Australians equally. More than that, it is our civic responsibility to vote. Voting is a right that even in today's world is enjoyed by so few. The least we can do is exercise it. For these reasons, group 9 believes the compulsory voting is required for a functioning democracy.

We are also in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 if voting, is voluntary until the age of 18. Despite the negative stereotypes that so often surround the younger generation, we believe that they are mature and capable individuals who deserve a voice. They deserve the ability to vote on the issues that will affect them most, from climate change to education reform, instead of relying on the judgement of ageing older voters. This room is a testament to the fact young people have political drive and energy. We need to seize the opportunity to make them engaged in politics and passionate about the future of our country.

More than that, we already expect young people to take on the responsibilities of adults. We demand that they drive responsibly, obey the law, pay taxes in some circumstances and make serious decisions about their education. Why do we not follow up the responsibilities of an adult with the rights of one? It is only fair that we allow young people to vote. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

Group 10

Mr TYURIN (Huntingtower School) — Good afternoon, everyone. I am George from Huntingtower, and I am speaking on behalf of group 10. On the issue of compulsory voting, we were slightly contentious. However, we ultimately decided that it is an essential part of a democracy. We believe that some fundamental discrepancies and problems would arise in a nation that does not support compulsory voting. As one of our esteemed keynote speakers, Dr Martin, made abundantly clear: citizens of lower socio-economic status would fail to turn up to the voting booth at the same rates as those of higher socio-economic status. It is hard as somebody living on the poverty line to look up at a politician making hundreds of thousands of dollars every year and truly relate to them and believe that they care about the issues that face people of lower socio-economic needs.

A democracy supplies assistance with stability, progress and equality, and a level playing field in terms of voter demographics is essential for it to work. It is also the role of citizens and us as a nation, as the people of Australia, to give back to the democracy under which we live — to fulfil our obligation to where we live and to cast our vote. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its 21st article states that:

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of ...

his or her country. Should we not implore our citizens to exercise this privilege as they live in First World countries?

On the issue of 16-year-olds being able to vote, we unanimously agreed that this needs to be the case. However, we contend that two things must be in place for this to exist as a working and effective part of our political system: non-compulsory voting for 16-year-olds and proper civics education. As our second speaker, Associate Professor Tudball, made abundantly clear: our youth, the driving force behind the progress of our nation, can indeed vote, be responsible citizens and be educated on civics while expressing their opinion if given the proper guidance and support.

Altogether, group 10 endorses fully the ability of 16-year-olds to vote if given the proper support and guidance, and we endorse compulsory voting for Australian citizens over the age of 18. Thank you.

Delegates applauding.

SOAPBOX

The SPEAKER — Thank you so much, everyone. That was an amazing contribution. I congratulate you all on the very well-researched and thought out arguments that you have presented. I would also like to congratulate you very much on the respectful way that you have all listened to the presenters this afternoon. It is not always my experience sitting here in this chair of respectful arguments across the chamber, so thank you for that.

The second half of the session this afternoon is the soapbox, something that all politicians love to do. I will invite students to stand in their place and make a 2-minute contribution on the subject of either: ‘Should Australia abolish compulsory voting?’ or ‘Should the voting age be lowered to 16?’. Just a reminder to turn on

your microphone and state your name and school. I will try to fit in as many speakers as I can over the next half an hour. If I do not call you, I apologise in advance.

Ms DU (Ruyton Girls' School) — I am from Ruyton Girls' School. I think we have established here today a general consensus. It is fairly unanimous that compulsory voting is a good thing or that it is desirable and that the voting age could be lowered to 16 to 17 and be voluntary in these years. I would like to further this argument and stand by this. However, I would like to also address some other perspectives. Today the maturity levels of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds were raised and the way they are easily influenced, especially by social media. I think the social media issue is one that has two sides to it. Yes, they can be influenced by social media, but that might not necessarily be a bad thing. For example, I am not sure if any of you have seen the Snapchat filters that were like, 'Oh, two days to enrol', 'One day to enrol'. That was really good. Statistics show that about 100 000 new people were put on the electoral rolls and that boosted voting numbers. So I think social media is something to be embraced. The other thing about compulsory voting is something that we might take for granted. We have talked about the socio-economic aspects, that maybe people from lower socio-economic classes would not vote, but we have not considered whether they could not vote. Under compulsory voting, the government is obliged to provide accessible voting booths to rural areas, even if it means they are for three people. But it means those three people have a say and they do not have to make the journey — or if they are elderly. The elderly deserve just as much a vote as younger people, but they get the access to vote if it is compulsory.

Ms DANIELE (Marymede Catholic College) — I am from Marymede Catholic College. I would like to further the point that has been fairly unanimous amongst us, that 16-year-olds should be able to vote. I think the main arguments against allowing 16-year-olds to vote have been fairly similar, in the sense that they say we are not mature enough, but as you can tell from everyone in this room there are some people within the 16-year-old age bracket and 17 that are very mature and that deserve a right to be able to express our opinion where it matters most, in a democratic vote. The main arguments against it are that we are not mature enough. Well, for that one it should be put on a voluntary basis, as many people have given as a solution. But I think to further this point, because people keep using this not being mature, you cannot really say that all 18-year-olds are very mature. Someone brought in some psychology and talked about the brain not being fully developed. Your brain is not developed until 25, so perhaps voluntary voting until the age of 25 is the way to go, because then it would allow people with those more politically active views and people that are closer to the issues the platform to kind of express their opinion in a vote but then allow people that are not interested and who have less time not to worry about it until they are an age where they are more mature and they have become more politically active, they have settled down and they have moved past the age of not caring about it. I think that that is a very important point to note.

Mr O'BRIEN (Koonung Secondary College) — I am from Koonung Secondary College. Despite the fairly unanimous views, I would like today to contest the idea that 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds should be given the vote, for a variety of reasons, such things as the ridiculously high political apathy in our generation. One simply has to go to their own school and see the people who maybe just do not like politics. It is all very good for us to look at the demographic of us here in this room today, who all care a lot about politics. We are interested, we do our research and we speak out about our views. We are here; we do our stuff. But most people or some people at the very least do not do that. Several people have brought up the issue of maybe optional voting for 16-year-olds. But if we are going to give it to the 16-year-olds, why do we not just give it to everyone? What makes us so special? If you are going to say, 'Oh, these people don't have the maturity yet' or 'These people are too apathetic, so we should only let the good people vote', you may as well say that about the entire population. Another thing I have heard is that young people are the future and it is the future; we are the future and the decisions that people make now affect us and they are going to affect the old people. If we are the future, then the old people are the now and the now is just as important as the future. If we are to get to the future, we must make it through the now.

Mr GAMBIN (St Monica's College) — I am representing St Monica's College. I think we are very privileged today to have a forum where we can project our voice and be heard. It is obvious and very blatant that there is a lot of passion and a lot of conviction in this room. I highly endorse that we can be the catalyst for change, for both the present and for our own futures as well, and I highly endorse empowerment for people our age. However, I think we must realise the sad truth that currently political studies is a dying subject within our year levels.

For example, I will reference my own school. We have only a very small class of 14 students and only half of these students are going to take it into a 3/4 subject. This is clearly not for the lack of committed teachers but for the fake elitist culture that surrounds politics. I think that is something that we need to abolish if we are to move forward and not encourage, as the previous speaker did mention, the type of fake complexity of politics that I think boggles the minds of people our age. In order for us to move forward I think that we must both reform the mandatory education system as we know it. We have to turn it on its head; it is clearly not working.

Although we do come in numbers with conviction, we are the minority; we are not the majority. I think we also need, as I previously mentioned, to remove that type of scary culture that is around politics and make it approachable for the people that have a disdain for it. They think, as one of the other speakers has mentioned, ‘Look at these politicians; they are earning hundreds of thousands of dollars on a good wage, while I sit on the poverty line’. However, I think that this is all false and that we must include everyone and make it approachable for everyone and remove this kind of culture that currently sits around the current political climate.

Mr SHAHIN (Mount Ridley College) — Hello, I am Hammad Shahin from Mount Ridley College. I am of the opinion that compulsory voting maintains a system that is less prone to corruption. For example, in America with Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, because voting is not compulsory they have to go around the country and try and get money and raise money in order to run their political campaigns, but the thing about this money is often this money comes from oil companies and foreign countries. What they do is they send these candidates a huge amount of money in order to have their interests ingrained into what the parties do.

For example, I know everyone sees Donald Trump as ‘that bad person’ right? But what the media ignored during the whole campaign was that Hillary Clinton got a really large portion of her funding from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is not a country with democracy; women are not even allowed to vote. This is inherently corrupt. Through a system where voting is not compulsory it forces the candidates to accept these donations unsustainably, but this means other countries’ interests are represented more than the actual people within the country. Even with Donald Trump people do not think that their interests are being represented, but that may have been a similar thing with Hillary Clinton, because they would have advanced imperialistic and those sort of agendas — they are still not representative of us.

This whole pretence under democracy and voting — there is a sort of corruption that we have to take into account. We have a privilege to be able to state our opinions here, but there is this thing that we need to address. It is so good in Australia that it is compulsory, because it forces our politicians to actually focus on our needs and we make them accountable to what we are interested in.

Ms FRANTZ (Salesian College Sunbury) — Hello, I am Michaela Frantz from Salesian College Sunbury. I have noticed that many arguments against both compulsory voting and lowering the age were the fear of informal votes or donkey votes or that these people will not be mature enough. However, there is a solution to that: education. It is the key to eliminating the majority of worries surrounding people voting. If we are concerned that teenagers or even citizens older than 18 will not be politically inclined or are unable to understand the consequences of their vote or will not be adequately informed then education will change that.

Already civics and citizenship is mandatory for the Victorian curriculum, yet that needs to be reformed and changed. I think a previous speaker said it very nicely over there — I think that there needs to be less stigma around politics so more students can actually learn about it. If we can encourage more students to become engaged in earlier years due to an effective education then 16 and 17-year-olds will be more politically informed and aware, and there will be less worries regarding them voting. I believe that if there is more political and citizenship education, and if we heavily reform the curriculum, then 16 and 17-year-olds will be active citizens along with those older than 18 and will have the opportunity to have their voice heard.

Ms BOURKE — My name is Rosie Bourke from Sacred Heart College in Geelong. I wish to speak to you about lowering the voting age to 16 years of age. A lot of people have raised concerns about how informed 16 and 17-year-old people are. However, I think we should ignore these concerns, because that is not what a democratic system is meant to be considering. While there is a difference between being politically informed and having a political opinion, the voting system is not meant to take this into account. Power to the people is meant to mean that everyone with an opinion has the power to voice that opinion. Whether or not this constitutes them fully understanding the implications of their decision or what their decision actually is is irrespective of that power to make that decision.

So whether or not 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds should be able to vote should be dependent on whether or not they have a political opinion, not whether they fully understand the political system, because to define 'politically informed' would be an opinion in and of itself. Hence, the voting system should not differentiate and should allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote, because just about everyone regardless of whether or not they are in this room or they are in our schools will have a political opinion about at least one issue that is prevalent in our society such as climate change, same-sex marriage or the refugee intake into Australia. Thank you.

Mr AMREIN — I am Daniel Amrein from Mount Ridley College. I would like to further the importance of compulsory voting within the commonwealth of Australia. Voting in this nation is just as much a privilege as it is a right. We must acknowledge that developing nations, such as my motherland the Republic of Macedonia — a developing nation — is ravaged by corruption and proof that the opposition has given that the Prime Minister himself has rigged the most recent election. My friends and family overseas only dream of participating in real elections. This is why we must take advantage of this in Australia. Thank you.

Ms BRAND — Hi, my name is Morgan, and I am from Marymede Catholic College. I just want to first start by saying that I completely understand both sides to the argument — that we should not have ages 16 to 17 being able to vote and that we should also have it — but I would like to point out a few problems that we have been seeing within some of these arguments. I do believe that people within this age range are often generalised to the majority when, as we have seen today, there are so many people in this room who can sit down and have a mature discussion. And if we can do that I do believe we can make an informed decision about the future of our country.

There was also something brought up a bit earlier, with somebody saying, 'What makes us so special? Where is the limit for allowing people to start voting? Like, next we are going to have eight-year-olds coming up to be able to vote'. But I think the reason we are questioning this is that at the ages of 16 and 17 we actually do begin to experience adult things, such as driving, being able to earn money, jobs and things like that, and I think we should not generalise the behaviour or maybe the maturity factor of some people to the entire population.

Mr HILSON — My name is Sam Hilson, and I am from Girton Grammar School. The current view of many younger voters being politically apathetic is an integral reason why many oppose the lowering of the voting age. However, can the general political apathy of the wider Australian public not be traced back to the actions of those currently in Parliament rather than the lack of education and the immaturity of those already of a legal voting age?

This political immaturity and rotating door of politics have led many to become disenfranchised and frankly uninterested in the current political climate. This is a much more far-reaching issue, I feel, than lowering the voting age, and having already existing issues addressed would be far more influential in the current political scheme.

Mr MILLER — Good afternoon. My name is Joshua Miller, and I am from Bialik College. Frankly, I am tired. I am extremely tired of seeing legislation that does not represent me. I am tired of being passive and I am tired of hearing that 18-year-olds have passed the age and are ready to vote.

I strongly do not believe that there is an enlightenment in 18-year-olds. I believe that as a 16-year-old gay Jewish Australian I know who I am. I know my beliefs and I am proud of them. I believe that many people in this room sound the same way. We know who we are and that is why we are here. We know what we believe in and we are ready.

We are ready to vote and I am ready for my vote. I am ready to stand up as an Australian and have a say in my future. I would like to get married, but I do not have a say in that. Other people do. Many people sitting around here have the right to say whether I can get married. But that is okay, that is all right, that is the way it is for now. But I think that as 16-year-olds we should be able to vote. We know who we are.

I think education needs to be improved. We need people in rural areas who may not be as informed to learn and to know who they are and develop. But we are ready. As a group of 16 and 17-year-olds we are ready to stand up, and we need to have our voice heard. We know our beliefs. We know who we are. We need greater education. However, I do think that it does not need to be a compulsory vote.

As a 16-year-old gay Jewish Australian I am ready for my vote, and I just cannot wait for the government to give it to me. Thank you.

Ms REYNOLDS — Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Tanna Reynolds, and I am from Glen Waverley Secondary College. Today I just want to be able to talk about access to political education. I think what is so amazing about our generation is our ability to access information about politics.

In a world of social media it is an amazing place to be able to find out opinions from all these different perspectives on different issues, to be able to develop our own opinions in a very syncretic method, to be able to become a better person than we were yesterday because we are able to develop and grow with the influence and with the opinions of other people being able to shape what we think is right, what we think is morally correct.

I think that is something that works much to our favour in our generation. We are able to access opinions from the other side of the globe. We are able to look at some failures in politics like Brexit, for instance, or arguably Trump, and see what kinds of effects they had and make our own judgement about what that means to us. We have so much opportunity in this age group and it is quite upsetting to see that we have been failed by current parliamentarians. We are not able to express ourselves.

Referencing what Josh said before, many of us know who we are and that we are not given that platform to effectively influence that kind of change. If we are able to educate ourselves or be provided with educational programs to understand how to vote, to understand how to research about voting and political parties, then not only will this generation be educated, but the generation after ours, and then the generation after that, and after that. This is the generational effect of education: once you educate one generation, every other one following becomes so. So if we are able to become politically engaged at this age we will be able to make a more politically engaged society in 100 years time.

Mr ABDALHAMID — Good afternoon. I am Baker Abdalhamid from the Islamic College of Melbourne.

I think most of us agree today on lowering the voting age to 16 and also on keeping voting compulsory, but I think these two arguments can link together. When it comes to lowering the age of voting to 16, lots of us today said it should be just voluntary for 16 and 17-year-olds. I think this is wrong. I think, as was stated before by another speaker, just like there are immature 16 and 17-year-olds, there are immature 18 and 19-year-olds and even older — you can go as high as you want — so just like we can have a mature society of 18, 19 and 20-year-olds. And we do not expect everyone to be highly interested in politics. Not everyone is going to be highly interested, become politicians and go there and read every single article about every single issue.

What I am saying is that we can have people that are interested in this and everyone can have their say. I was reading an article this morning, and it was said in this article that teenagers are all about their social media, being popular, their girlfriends and boyfriends and making any relations, but I think this is untrue. Just as I said before, not everyone is going to get to a level where they are highly interested in all politics, but everyone has got to do it because at the end of the day the future is going to affect you. It is going to affect the businessman. It is going to affect the politician. It is going to affect the panelbeater. It is going to affect every person working in society just like it will affect a high school student.

My second point is on education. We must have a curriculum for this, and I believe the government is already working on this in Victoria and other places. We must have a curriculum working so that everybody can just learn and then form their own opinion, because without a curriculum any teacher — a humanities teacher or any other teacher — can just teach their own opinions. Thank you.

Mr TYURIN (Huntingtower College) — Hi, I am George from Huntingtower College. I just wanted to look at this debate from a slightly different perspective. One of our speakers today, Dr Martin, used an analogy when discussing the topic of compulsory voting. He said that it is a case of simple alternatives and that it is essentially freedom versus equality. We in Australia sacrifice some freedom for equality and equity in voter demographics and essentially the functioning of our democracy, as opposed to nations such as America. I just want to gauge the opinion of the room and of all of you gathered here today on the issue of rights and freedom. Are you all willing to accept an infringement of your right to choose or to refrain from doing so for a functioning democracy and a level playing field?

Ms VERROCCHI (Genazzano FCJ College) — I am Alanna from Genazzano FCJ College. I wanted to just briefly touch on the issue that has not really been addressed today in the room — that people who are above the age of 18 should be allowed to choose whether they want to vote or not. Not everyone likes politics. It is the truth. Not everyone has to. I cannot force anyone to like something they do not like, but still we force them to vote. I can see a lot of people in this room who care about politics enough to come here today but are not allowed to vote because they are too young. There are many people who are over the age of 18 who do not care about politics at all but are still forced to vote. They do not care any more than the next person. People who are young — 16 and 17 years old — should be allowed to vote because they are the future of this country. We are the future. We are going to be around longer than the 80-year-olds, and they probably do not care as much about what happens to the country because they know that they are not going to be around for long.

Ms NABWIRE (Thomastown Secondary College) — I am Sharon from Thomastown Secondary College. I strongly agree with the Australian voting age being lowered because at the age of 16 or 17 we are able to get jobs, we are able to work, we are able to pay taxes. Not allowing us to choose whomever we want to lead us would be like, ‘You are trying to make us not representative in what you do, and yet you want to take the taxes that we are paying to the government’. Australia making its voting system compulsory is offending someone’s right because it is about making someone agree with whatever he or she wants, and making something compulsory would be affecting that individual.

Ms CLARKE (Mater Christi College) — I am Sophie Clarke from Mater Christi College. I just want to rebut the statement that was made before without making that sound like an attack. Voting is not necessarily whether you like or dislike politics. Voting is giving yourself the opportunity to have a say on how your life is going to be affected by the government. Politics may be a subject at school, but politics is not voting. Voting is very, very different to politics. Politics is the subject of how the laws are going to be made; it is not how you are going to vote and how that vote is going to have a say or an impact on your life. I just wanted to go with that and say that just because you do not like the subject or you do not like the politicians, that does not mean that you do not need to have a say. That does not mean that you do not need to have a vote just because you do not like it. You should have the right and the decision to make that vote to then see how that will affect your life.

Mr MENG (Scotch College) — I am Joshua Meng from Scotch College. I would just like to say that I think the debate on compulsory voting is a bit redundant. We can find reasons for and against abolishing compulsory voting, but I think we already have the answer. Australia boasts of being a democracy, meaning ‘by the people, for the people’. Although there is a dispute about whether true democracy can be achieved, we as a nation can strive towards it in the best way possible by continuing to implement compulsory voting. The people of Australia refers to all its citizens — 100 per cent, not just a fraction. Voluntary voting creates a major flaw with this definition of democracy. Political apathy is the people’s choice, but because Australia is a democracy it has a responsibility to offer voting to all its people. Therefore I think that it is crucial to have compulsory voting in order to have a truly functional democracy.

Mr HARRISON (Marist College, Bendigo) — Hello, my name is Ethan Harrison, and I come from Marist College, Bendigo. Obviously I think it is fair to say most of us in the room have been talking about how we should lower the voting age, and a lot of people have been thinking that for those aged 16 to 17 it should be voluntary or compulsory. In saying things like that — and people have disagreed — there is one question that I have been asking myself for quite a while throughout the day, and that question is: was all the stuff we have done in the past worth it?

If we look back into the last century or so, we have been creating rights campaigns for people to vote — for women, for Indigenous people — and in places like America as well they have been doing things like that for Native Americans to be able to vote. There have been a lot of other situations where we have been trying to get people to vote. In the end, if we introduce voluntary voting and nobody chooses to do it, was it worth doing it in the first place?

Mr GUNASEGARAM (Camberwell Grammar School) — I would like to address some of the points made by critics of compulsory voting. They have insinuated that we should only care about the votes of good voters, people who are informed, people who care. But this is a borderline, elitist view. Your value as an Australian citizen and the value of your opinion is not determined by how much you know or care about politics. In this country we pride ourselves on being ruled not by the vocal minority but by the silent majority, and the only way to maintain this is by having compulsory voting.

Furthermore, compulsory voting safeguards our right to vote. It makes voter suppression nearly impossible, because when everyone has to vote, everyone has to be able to vote. This is not the case in several countries with voluntary voting, such as the United States. A University of California San Diego study found that elections have been swayed by up to 2 to 3 percentage points by voter suppression methods. This may not seem like much, but that is greater than the margin that Brexit was decided by. The fact is that voluntary voting makes it easy to commit voter suppression. Once you break the norm of universal suffrage it becomes easier and easier to exclude more and more people from voting by putting up discriminatory hurdles. By preserving compulsory voting we are preserving the right to vote and ensuring that the rule of the people is the rule of all people.

The SPEAKER — Thank you, everyone. The time for the soapbox has now concluded. I thank you all for your contributions. I am very, very impressed by your knowledge, by your passion, by your emotional contributions, by your informed contributions and by your mature approach to this particular argument. Clearly we have some future leaders here in the house and/or politicians, depending on your choice. Also, thank you for being such great representatives of your schools. Thank you to your staff who are with you today for involving you in today's debate. I think our future is in good hands, and maintain the rage.

THE VOTE

The SPEAKER — We are now about to vote. We have two questions before the house. The voting will be by a show of hands. Unfortunately we cannot make an amendment to the question: should the voting age be lowered to 16? I certainly heard a lot of arguments in the chamber this afternoon for yes but that it should be non-compulsory. Unfortunately that is not a question to be put before the house today. There are two questions.

I will put the question and then we will have a show of hands. The first question is:

Should Australia abolish compulsory voting?

Question defeated.

The SPEAKER — The second question to be put before the house today is:

Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Question agreed to.

The SPEAKER — The house today passes, on a show of hands, that Australia should not abolish compulsory voting. The second vote: should the voting age be lowered to 16, is a yes.

REPORT ON THE 2017 NATIONAL SCHOOLS CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The SPEAKER — I would now like to introduce Gerard Felipe, who is the founding chairman, executive board, of the Victorian Student Representative Council. He will share his experience of the 2017 National Schools Constitutional Convention. Thank you, Gerard.

Mr FELIPE — Thank you very much, Speaker. It is good to see such bright individuals here today. I did have an official script written for today but halfway here on the train I decided to speak on the spot, so bear with me.

Earlier this year I was very lucky to be selected to attend the 22nd National Schools Constitutional Convention in Canberra. Those of you who have been to Canberra will know that they are very keen on roundabouts. Nonetheless we did get to our destinations, and Old Parliament House was one of them. It introduce a very, very interesting topic, and that topic was on whether or not Indigenous Australians should be recognised in the Australian constitution. Pleasingly, the result was that the majority of the states, through the representation of our delegates who went there, voted yes, that there should be some form of representation of Indigenous Australians in the Australian constitution. I am not sure about the territories, but the states were definitely in full favour of this alteration to the constitution.

The third day was when it all happened. We went through the alteration process for the constitution. I can tell you that it was a very complex process, but it was very revealing and I learned a lot. The Australian Electoral Commission came over, presented to us and gave us the information about how we were to vote for a change to the constitution and how that process would go. The 120 delegates who were there spoke from their hearts.

They spoke about what they believed in, whether they were for or against, but in the end we came to the decision that yes, there should be Indigenous recognition in the constitution.

One of the biggest highlights for me in attending the convention was meeting very like-minded students. It really brought me to challenge my preconceived thoughts about issues, like the ones you have been discussing today about lowering the voting age. It really is that experience which gives you the opportunity to thrive on your own thoughts and your ability to stand up for what you believe is right. The convention gave me the opportunity to have a say in the issues that affect us. It brought me to realise that as the youth of this country we do have a lot to say about the future of Australia. That was one of the biggest opportunities that the convention gave me.

We were lucky enough to have dinner at the High Court of Australia on the second day. I actually did not realise we were in the High Court until someone told me that we were there so — I do not know— it was probably that the three days went faster than I thought they did or I was just that excited at being there. We had the privilege of hearing from very, very inspirational speakers on the day. One of them was the Australian Youth of the Year, and he gave us a very good insight on how we should go about making these positive changes we need to make for a better future. Simon Birmingham, the Honourable Senator, said that the convention brought together the best and brightest of Australians. I have no doubt that that tradition will continue with each and every one of you today.

Regardless of that I think my most favourite and biggest experience was definitely the friendships I have made throughout the conventions — the people we have encountered, the things we have learned. It really opened up the floor to the differences we have, but it shows that it is through our differences that we grow stronger together. You are really challenged at this convention; you are really challenged in your views. You start to think in very different way, but you also develop a new understanding of what these issues are and how they affect us altogether. So I very much urge you to apply for next year's constitutional convention.

I forgot to mention that we went to Government House. That was one of my highlights as well. We were very lucky to have attended a session, a reception, at Government House hosted by Lady Cosgrove. She is a very wonderful lady. We had the opportunity to meet with her and discuss our views on the issues. I really do encourage you to apply for the National Schools Constitutional Convention next year. If I had a chance, I would go a second time, but I can tell that that will not be the case. I really encourage you to go.

Make the most of the opportunities and the experiences that are given to you, because if there is one thing I have learned, it is definitely about making the most of what you are given. I made a speech right here last year, saying that we often take things too much for granted in here. Having been born in a Third World country we are very lucky to have these opportunities to go interstate to discuss these issues. That is one of the greatest things about these opportunities. Make the most of these opportunities. Speak about what you believe is right. Whether you are for or against an issue, do what you believe is right. Say what you believe is right and stand up for what you believe in. That is one of the most important things I have learned throughout this opportunity and throughout this year. Apply for the National Schools Constitutional Convention. I hope you have enjoyed your day today and thank you for bearing with me. I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER — Thank you very much, Gerard. I would like to invite to the chair the Honourable Nick Wakeling, MP, shadow Minister for Education and my colleague in the Parliament of Victoria. The Honourable Nick Wakeling will be closing today's session. Thank you.

CLOSING

Mr WAKELING — Thank you very much. Can I firstly start by acknowledging my parliamentary colleague, Maree Edwards, who is the Deputy Speaker in the Victorian Parliament. Congratulations to each and every one of you on the opportunity to participate in this very important event. I hope your participation has demonstrated the importance of arguments, of persuasion, because that is what being a leader and a representative in this place is about. It is about having a view, but understanding how to voice that view in a way that can persuade others to be guided and convinced of your arguments. Some of you will have been successful; some of you will not have been successful. The point is that this building is a living testament to that important trait.

This building was built in the 1850s, 20 years after John Batman had landed in Melbourne. There were about 30 000 to 50 000 people living in what was known as the Port Phillip district. We built this magnificent building off the back of the gold rush. Between 1901 and 1927 federal Parliament operated in this room. All of the important decisions that were made in the formation of the federal Parliament, the Commonwealth of Australia, were made from this chamber, with Edmund Barton sitting here as our first Prime Minister.

I trust you have enjoyed this opportunity and I trust that some of you may in fact go on and return to this place as a representative, but even if you do not, you have had the opportunity to participate in a very important event. Not everyone has the opportunity to participate here, and you should be very proud of the fact that you have been selected. I trust that you have enjoyed your experience and that you will take your knowledge and your understanding from this event back to your school and your studies. I wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

Delegates applauding.

The SPEAKER — Thanks very much, Nick. Can I just quickly add to that by saying that I think you are all very powerful advocates for your generation. Thank you for your passion and your interest. I now say that the house is adjourned. Thank you again and goodbye.

Convention adjourned 2.45 p.m.