

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

Witnesses

Mr Leo Fieldgrass, chief executive officer, Youth Affairs Council Victoria

Dr Jessie Mitchell, policy manager, Youth Affairs Council Victoria

Mr Thomas Saxton and

Mr Christopher Klepacz.,

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — This is a public hearing in relation to the Electoral Matters Committee’s inquiry into civics. I thank the Youth Affairs Council for coming along to discuss their submission. I will just remind you that these hearings are protected by parliamentary privilege, but that privilege does not extend to anything you say outside that may in fact be derogatory, which I am sure you would not do. Given this is only a 20-minute hearing, could I ask you to state your full name and business address and to just let us know whether you are attending in a private capacity or whether you are representing your organisation.

Mr FIELDGRASS — I am Leo Fieldgrass, CEO of the Youth Affairs Council Victoria. The business address is level 3, 180 Flinders Street, Melbourne, 3000. I am attending in a work capacity.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Perhaps, given this is a 20-minute hearing, you might want to say a couple of things about your submission and then I will throw it open to members of the committee to ask questions.

Mr FIELDGRASS — Thank you. The Youth Affairs Council Victoria is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria. Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities. We are an independent not-for-profit organisation that represents young people aged 12 to 25 and the sector that supports them. We have 345 members, approximately half of whom are young people and the others represent the vast array of services that support young Victorians.

All too often young people miss out on taking part in decisions that affect their communities. Only around 80 per cent of eligible young Australians are enrolled to vote. Victoria has just seen a slight increase in 18 to 24-year-olds registering to vote, an increase of nearly 4 per cent between June and August of this year, probably in response to the marriage equality survey. But more work is needed to make sure that all young Victorians are playing a meaningful part in the democratic process.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, young people are not apathetic or uninterested in what is happening in their communities. For example, half of young Victorians have taken part in volunteering and 40 per cent have taken part in student leadership activities. In our own consultations with young people we see lots and lots of passion for social change on issues varying from education, employment, mental health through to discrimination. The challenge is to support all young people to translate these passions into active engagement with electoral and political systems. At this stage I will pass my remarks over to Dr Jessie Mitchell, if I may.

Dr MITCHELL — We believe there are several approaches that would be helpful, which include the following. Firstly, we need to work closely with the diverse range of students and teachers to strengthen the education about elections, voting and indeed Australian politics in ways that are interesting and relevant to all students. YACVic recently held a series of regional forums for nearly 500 young people around Victoria and one of the key messages they gave us was that they wanted their schooling to include a greater focus on life skills. One of the skills that they specifically identified was how to engage with politics, elections and voting. We recognise the Victorian Electoral Commission has produced really great resources for schools on this topic, but we do not know how many schools use them or how students respond.

Secondly, we need to strengthen young people’s involvement in advocacy, leadership and decision-making in their schools and their communities to encourage a broader climate of active citizenship. These might include getting involved in things like meaningful student elections, volunteering, charitable work, activism and engaging with politicians and the media. Young people should also be engaged in designing and delivering public and media campaigns to boost enrolment and to promote understanding of political and electoral processes.

Finally, YACVic encourages the Victorian Parliament to consider the possibility of widening the franchise to enable voluntary voting by young people aged 16 and 17. This has happened in various types of elections in Brazil, Austria, Argentina, Germany, Norway and Scotland. We feel there would be two potential benefits to lowering the franchise on a voluntary basis. Firstly, it would recognise the developing

maturity of 16 and 17-year-olds and encourage them to see themselves as active citizens with a contribution to make. Secondly, we suggest it might make first-time voting a smoother, more appealing experience. At present young people are expected to vote for the first time usually between the ages of about 18 and 20, but this is a time when young people are often going through huge life changes and experiencing new forms of stress, isolation or transience. For some, it is not an ideal period to start voting if they have never really thought about that before.

Voting for the first time might be easier if the opportunity were offered at a time when most young people are still in school and still living with families; 16 and 17-year-olds are arguably more likely to be living in a relatively stable environment, with supportive adults around them most of the time. Recent research from some of those countries that have attempted to lower the first-time voting age indicated that those younger voters did turn out in significant numbers. However, should the voluntary voting age be lowered, this must be accompanied by targeted campaigns in schools and the media to encourage enrolment and engage them in politics and to boost the status of citizenship education.

YACVic promotes the voices of young people in everything we do. Leo, would you like to introduce our young speakers?

Mr FIELDGRASS — Thanks, Jessie. Today we are very pleased to have with us Chris Klepacz from Hampton Park, who is a member of the Youth Disability Advocacy Service steering committee, and Tom Saxton, who is a YACVic young member who has travelled down from Shepparton today.

The CHAIR — Thank you for making the effort.

Mr SAXTON — My name is Tom Saxton. I am 16 years old and I am a year 10 student who attends Notre Dame College in Shepparton. Shepparton is a great place, although it does have its fair share of issues. For example, Melbourne uni has listed four out of the six major schools in Shepparton as being under-represented. Shepparton also has a large economic inequality issue, particularly in youth. I have observed that generally the more economically disadvantaged a person is, the more likely they are to be politically uninformed. This is terrible, because no matter how much someone in Australia may lack, they always have the right to vote. This right to vote empowers them and enables them to make real, necessary change. If people in these situations are not politically informed, how do we expect to move towards a fairer society? I believe the best way to move to a society of politically informed people is to give the youth of today the necessary tools to become politically involved and the tools to develop their own opinions.

I have learned very little about politics from my school experiences. The very few times we do learn about politics, it is always the uninteresting parts like the functions of Parliament or the stages in passing a bill.

The CHAIR — Or the politicians.

Mr SAXTON — Yes. While I believe knowing these functions are important to our society, it does alarm me because it does not get the students excited about the potential of politics. I am interested in politics and that interest has developed outside of the school system. I know just how amazing, interesting and sometimes entertaining politics can be — for example, when one politician calls another politician a social climbing sycophant.

School needs to be working at getting youth involved in politics. Not only does this target the general youth to become politically informed, but it also has extra power and influence with the students who need change the most — the ones who may have issues at home and find school to be a sanctuary from the hardships they face. Any school program implemented should be about issues that are relevant to the student — for example, the recent assisted dying bill, the same-sex marriage debate or the dual-citizenship scandal.

Any program should also be about developing individual opinions and needs to encourage class discussion and debates. Just imagine a class bored out of their mind staring at a work sheet which explains royal ascent compared to a room full of passionate students debating which party should be in government or

how to fix the current energy crisis. This would have amazing effects on youth like me. Not only would this make us more politically informed but it would instil the value of the power and the responsibility of the democratic process and the vote. I believe a well-created and planned-out school program could also boost the amount of youth signing up for the electoral roll.

At school I began asking my friends questions about how they learn about the news and modern issues. Not surprisingly traditional media was rarely mentioned. We should be using and utilising social media to inform youth because it is just so effective in reaching us. The most regularly mentioned news sources amongst my friends were the iPhone news app, Snapchat and Facebook. The iPhone news app and Snapchat seem to be based on a publisher-like model. This is best explained as independent publishers who access these apps to publish their new story; the way Facebook news seems to spread is through multiple people sharing articles.

Reaching youth through social media is an important step to getting them politically involved. If we are able to create programs to get youth engaged in politics, then I believe it can become a viable possibility to lowering the voting age limit. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics we currently have a youth population of around 5 million. That is 5 million Australians who are not represented through the vote. We need to be able to lower this amount of people who are not represented.

The youth who need political representation the most are often the least knowledgeable about how they could change things. We need to work together to alter this situation.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Now is Mr Klepacz presenting?

Mr KLEPACZ — Yes, I am.

The CHAIR — I am just a bit worried about the time, that is all.

Mr KLEPACZ — Good morning. My name is Chris Klepacz. I am 18 years old and I am studying in VCAL at Hampton Park Secondary College. One of the issues I wanted to raise is no-one under the age of 30 currently sits in Parliament. In my opinion this makes youths disengage from politics because they know that most members are over the age of 40, which makes them not interested in issues like social media and cyberbullying.

One of the other things I wanted to raise today is there is no-one in Parliament who currently has a disability. I think the Victorian Parliament should encourage parties or Independents who have a disability in order to encourage young people with a disability in Parliament.

There is also another issue with engaging Victorian disabled people. When I completed my civics subject in school I felt that I did not have a great grasp of the subject. I feel that it would help if we had more high schools attending excursions to Parliament House just to see question time or even a debate.

Also we should encourage high schools to use CSEF (Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund) for people who are financially disadvantaged. Another thing, like I said before, is we should encourage more youths through their target media, which is social media, and have a party or an Independent or someone from the VEC to encourage more people with a disability, especially young people.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my speech.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, and perhaps it may be advantageous to Hansard if your notes could be handed to them.

Mr KLEPACZ — Yes, that is a good idea.

Ms SPENCE — I have a question. There is a lot of information about the variety of programs and ideas of what can be done within the traditional education space in schools. Have you done any work on what can be done for those youth that are no longer in formal education? I know there were a couple of programs mentioned within your submission, but have you delved any deeper into that to see how youth

can be engaged, particularly those that are also in other groups that are traditionally disengaged, such as the multicultural community et cetera?

Mr FIELDGRASS — It is a very important point that we would like to ensure that all young people, no matter their educational setting, have access to and engagement in programs that inform and empower them to take part in the electoral process. Our experience is that youth-led initiatives, whether that is in a VCAL setting or whether that is in a setting that works with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, are usually the most successful. In terms of specific research that YACVic has undertaken, we have not had an opportunity to do that as yet, but we do hope to do that over the coming year.

The CHAIR — Could I ask a question. I am old enough to remember the debate when the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18, and it was an ‘easy’ argument to make because 18-year-olds were being conscripted, 18-year-olds could drink, 18-year-olds could drive, a whole range of things, so 18 was an easy landing point because there were a number of obligations or rights that happened at 18. Can you walk me through the rationale of 16?

Mr FIELDGRASS — There are a number of different ages in Victoria to gain a number of different rights within our community, and 18 may be seen by some young people as being a bit arbitrary. I believe in Victoria you can get a firearms licence from the age of 12, so we would really be working with young people to listen to their concerns about having an equal say in their communities from the age of 16. I might ask either Tom or Chris if they have got anything that they would like to add.

Mr SAXTON — Youth contribute a reasonable amount to the GDP. Why is it not fair that we also are able to have a vote as to who can represent us in Parliament? Also among my friends we actually have discussions about politics and keep up to date on things like this, so to say we are not informed is not necessarily true for all of us.

Ms PATTEN — Can I just ask, Tom or Chris, there has been some discussion about holding elections at schools. So rather than them voting in an election it would be to actually run an election at your school that mirrors the election, so it is the same candidates, it is everything. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr KLEPACZ — Yes, school is a good environment for that. They can go out and ask the schools and the people to do that. It is a good idea for the high schools to implement that because that would get students ready when it is time for them to vote when they are 18.

Dr MITCHELL — Can I add a little point to that before I throw to you, Tom, if you would like to. I suppose the other thing that I think, from our work with young people, is that were such a model to be implemented — and there might be a lot of enthusiasm — it would need to have some kind of meaningful ramifications for that school community. So it is important that it is not just a kind of exercise that does not have some kind of outcome, that young people can see how their choice to vote within that model would impact on the community around them.

Mr SAXTON — I agree with Jessie and Chris on that. I also feel like in my school experiences the times where I have learned the best have been through actually doing and engaging in class discussions like this. So I feel like this could really empower that sort of effect and make it very strong. I feel like we would learn a lot more about politics through doing something like that. Yes, I agree.

Ms BATH — I was just interested, in terms of external to school, specifically probably Shepparton because I am a country-based MP, in community-led political voices or community-led social interaction. Is there much in rural Shepparton?

Mr SAXTON — Do you mean like programs?

Ms BATH — Youth groups or the like that you can engage on that level.

Mr SAXTON — There are a lot of programs like that. Obviously there is Young Labor and political groups like that. There is also Headspace and things which are youth-engaged programs, which try to

encourage leadership and skills that we need like that. So there are some programs like that. I feel like there should be more engaged towards politics though.

Dr MITCHELL — And local government youth services could be another setting for that. They often have elected councils there.

The CHAIR — All right then. This is very tight today. Can I thank you very much — all of you. Thank you for coming along and addressing the committee today. It is much appreciated. You will receive in a couple of weeks a Hansard transcript. You are free to alter minor mistakes, but obviously the substance cannot be altered in that. I think you have done this multiple times before and are familiar with the process. Again thank you very much, all four of you, for coming along today. We appreciate the effort that you have gone to in your presentations, particularly the two younger people.

Witnesses withdrew.