

## LOWERING THE VOTING AGE

06/08/09 – Tim Udorovic

### ***A smart move for Labor, a real opportunity for the Liberals, and good public policy - can this really be?***

When it comes to voting, some Australians may see it as nothing more than a hassle, one more onerous incursion on their time by the Government. Of course, many see it quite differently. It might come as a surprise, but sentiment today suggests a significant number of young Australians under the age of 18 view the right to vote as something of incredible value. Later this year, the Rudd Government intends to raise the issue in its second green paper on electoral reform. However, the debate at least is not a new one. In 2004, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) produced a research paper entitled "Lowering the Voting Age: A Discussion of the Issues from the Victorian Electoral Commission's Perspective." This detailed most of the popular arguments against lowering the voting age and provided convincing responses. The VEC it seems is clearly in favour of lowering the voting age. The report can be used equally to analyse Federal electoral rules. To understand the issue more fully though, the political effects must also be considered.

The VEC paper states, broadly, that people are eligible to vote in Victoria if they answer two questions, the first in the positive and the second in the negative: do they have a substantial stake in the Governance of Victoria? (in the positive) And, are they excluded from voting? (in the negative). The author makes the claim that, "It is hard to think of an argument that would show that 16 and 17 year olds do not have a substantial stake in government decisions." The exclusion of young people from voting tends to stem from one of the exclusion criteria, namely that they, "Are incapable of understanding the nature and significance of enrolment and voting". Assuming a very liberal interpretation of these words, the excuse for many years has been that young people just don't understand the importance of voting, and if they did, they wouldn't vote properly. The paper goes on to highlight the arguments that are used to further that claim, and systematically provide evidence to the contrary. I strongly urge anybody interested in this issue to read the VEC research paper, a link to which is provided at the end of this piece.

With an appreciation of the basic debate, an awareness of the political motivation is illuminating. It is well accepted that young people, Australians included, tend to be politically left leaning. The virtues and ideals of the left are indeed admirable. The Labor party, thanks in part to Kevin07's presidential-like campaign for the Prime Ministership, has managed to recruit vast numbers of young people to their ranks, whether officially or not. This has been seen in other countries too, with the most recent perhaps being the election of Barack Obama in the United States. It is clear that the inspiration and mobilisation of the younger demographic paid enormous dividends to the Democratic party's push. Does it seem that far-fetched to suggest that a decrease in the voting age would produce even more young votes for the left? I think not. The Liberal party continually struggle to engage Australia's young people relative to Labor, even if it is through no fault of their own. With a commanding presence in youth circles, the time is right for the Labor party to be pushing for a lower voting age, it makes perfect political sense.

The case for non-compulsory voting for young people was also discussed in the VEC report. In order to minimise the disadvantages of lowering the voting age, the VEC support a lowering of the voting age to 17 with non compulsory voting for those young people only. Voting would then become compulsory at the age of 18, as is the law currently. In many ways, this is a very attractive proposition. It should be implemented. So, we arrive at a rather disturbing dilemma. The proposal is good public policy. It will lead to an increase in



Democratic rights without the common disadvantages of health, economic or environmental concerns. It is founded on rational thought and clear reasoning, without spin or obfuscation. However, its political ramifications are immense and demand careful consideration. Giving a political party easy votes isn't the most effective way to preserve our Democratic system and representative Parliament. That's the Liberal party line. Seen in a different light though, the change may just inspire the Liberal party to make a concerted effort to try and connect with young people in a meaningful way.

This proposal will lead to a beneficial form of competition, and it might just shake up our political process enough to make young people a key interest group, not just symbolic showpieces for Governments and large corporations. The claim by Government and corporate Australia that they 'consult' young people needs to be replaced with "Young people have a key stake in our continual operation; the time to treat them seriously has come." This thought transformation is integral to the future of good governance in Australia.

See: "Lowering the Voting Age: A Discussion of the Issues from the Victorian Electoral Commission's Perspective" < <http://www.vec.vic.gov.au/files/LoweringtheVotingAge.pdf> >

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