


Multicultural Council of Tasmania Inc

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Mr Stuart Wright

Committee Secretary

Legislative Council

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Dear Committee Members,

I am writing as Chairperson of the Multicultural Council of Tasmania to make a submission to the Legislative Council *Inquiry into the Tasmanian Electoral Commission*.

The Multicultural Council is the peak advocacy body for a multicultural Tasmania. The organisation turns 37 in 2015 and continues to provide a voice for some of the 56,000 Tasmanians that were born overseas and who identify with a national cultural or religious organisation.

There are 38 current member organisations of the Multicultural Council, which represent 22 nationalities and 7 different religious affiliations. We estimate that our member organisations represent communities of approximately 15,000 people.

Our motivation for making a submission to this Inquiry is a concern raised in media reports about alleged 'gaming' of the General Manager's Roll for electoral gain. We do not condone any misuse of the provisions in the General Managers Roll rule. However we would be concerned if addressing this issue led to a perverse policy change that disenfranchises a large number of people in the community from their current right to engage in the democratic process.

We support the current right to vote for all 'occupiers' or residents of a local government area who are not on the eligible for Tasmanian House of Assembly enrolment.

The 2011 Census found that there are 20,547 people living in Tasmania who were born overseas and who are not yet an Australian citizen. These people are likely to be a mix of permanent residents, international students, refugees and asylum seekers and other migrants on a range of visa classes. Of this group 10,407 had arrived between 2006 and 2011.

There are barriers and delays that impact on how long it takes someone to become an Australian citizen with full suffrage rights. Some visa classes require people to be in Australia for four years before they can start the citizenship process. For others there are a range of family or settlement reasons why they are reluctant to move to the formality of Australian citizenship in the first years of arriving. None of these factors necessarily impact on these people's commitment to, engagement with and involvement in their current city of town of residence.

Many of these Tasmanian residents are currently eligible to vote in local government elections through the provisions in the Tasmanian Electoral Act 2004. This right is not linked to the formal citizenship or to their ownership of property.

This right to vote and have a say in the governance of their local community is an important and legitimate part of Tasmanian democracy. These people they live, work, send their children to school and pay taxes, rent and other fees and charges for the use of services in their local communities.

Right to vote and multiculturalism

The concept that the right to vote in Local Government elections should not be linked to citizenship or nationality has been a central guiding principal of Australian multicultural policy since the 1970s.

Residents (who aren't yet citizens) are entitled to vote in local government elections in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Recent local government electoral review panels in both Victoria and South Australia reiterated the importance of giving franchise to permanent residents.

In addition these reviews have linked the right to vote at a local level to an important goal of introducing non-citizens to engagement with government more broadly. In both states these reviews have proposed other steps to improving multicultural voter participation and the diversity of representation in local government.

Right to vote internationally

Resident non-citizens can vote in local government elections in more than 40 countries – including New Zealand, the United States, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Venezuela who have all extended the right to vote at the local level to non-citizen residents.

The right to vote at the local level has been granted in these nations by acknowledging some well-established democratic principles, such as “no taxation without representation” and equality before the law.

Also driving the granting of this right has been acknowledgement of the key international Conventions on Human Rights which state that equal enjoyment of political freedoms is based on the principle that those regularly subject to the laws of a country should be able to participate in the political process.

Importance of being inclusive

Tasmania's future depends on maintenance and growth of our population and our economy. Many of our towns and cities are competing with other places in the world to attract skilled global citizens that are looking for places to work and settle.

The right to vote in local government elections sends an important signal to new residents, and would similarly send a very strong signal if this right was removed.

The benefits of giving residents a vote in local elections include:

- It sends a signal of belonging and participation for newcomers
- It enhances the accountability and legitimacy of Councils because they would represent all the people they serve
- It encourages the political participation of newcomers early in the settlement process
- It put issues that are important to new arrivals on the political agenda at the local government level

- It invigorates and enhances the notion of city citizenship
- It send the message that local government is responsible for the services and well-being of all city residents

The Australian Local Government Association reports that over the past twenty years, all spheres of government, including at the local level have responded to the growing diversity of the population by developing appropriate legislation and policies to ensure equality of treatment for all members of the community.

The fundamental principle underlying all these laws and policies is that regardless of race, religion, language, culture or other attributes, all residents must be guaranteed equal opportunity and equal access to services, and have a say in how these services are designed and run.

Evidence indicates that the earlier that people begin participating in political life, the more likely they are to continue participating in the long term. This is valuable for Tasmanian society.

Poorly integrated migrant communities can give way to feelings of alienation and resentment, but well-integrated migrant communities bring a unique insight into cultural diversity and are well placed to help improve inter-cultural understanding and cooperation across diverse populations.

As the tier of government closest to the community, local government authorities are a critical player in this respect.

Challenges for local government

Local governments are committed to social inclusion and community strengthening and many have policies that say that they value cultural diversity and the benefits this brings to our collective lives and to the fabric of our society.

However local governments report to us that they have experienced difficulty in engaging new migrants and those from refugee backgrounds in consultation processes. The removal of the right to vote for many non-citizens will only exacerbate this problem.

The Multicultural Council urges the Committee to recommend the retention of all resident, non-citizens right to vote in local government elections and examine ways recommended to enhance the engagement of the overseas born community in the democratic process.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alphonse Mulumba', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Alphonse Mulumba
Chairperson