

Teenagers ask court to lower the voting age

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Report from RNZ

"Let us vote" is the plea from 16- and 17 year-olds who have today taken their case to the High Court in Wellington.

A youth-led campaign, Make it 16, argued the voting age of 18 is unjustified age discrimination. It wants the court to rule it inconsistent with the Bill of Rights Act.

Wellington High School student Sophie Crozier is 16 years old and ready to head to a polling booth.

"I'm ready to vote as a 16-year-old and this is what matters," she said.

Standing outside Parliament and over the road from the High Court, she said it was not fair to prevent people from voting at her age.

"We're allowed to have sex and to consent to our own medical care – so why should we not vote? ... we're part of this democracy too and us not being able to vote means we're just excluded from it and that's not acceptable," she said.

Campaign group lawyer Jason McHerron told the court the voting age was last changed in 1974. He said it had not seriously been on the parliamentary agenda since then. McHerron said that 16- and 17-year-olds were competent and mature enough to vote and didn't need special protections.

"That, in my submission, just doesn't apply in the case of voting – there is no need to protect 16- and 17 year-olds from being able to vote," he said.

In reply, the Crown told the court there were no inconsistencies with the Bill of Rights Act.

Its lawyer, Austin Powell, said the act stated you must be at least 18 to vote. "I fully accept that one will find both precocious children and incompetent adults – but you still have to put the line somewhere," he said.

It was estimated in court that by the next election in 2023, there would be close to 130,000 16- and 17-year-olds.

Today's decision has been reserved with the judge to deliver it in writing at a later date. It was unclear whether it would be released before the October election but, if successful, any changes would have to go through a lengthy parliamentary process.