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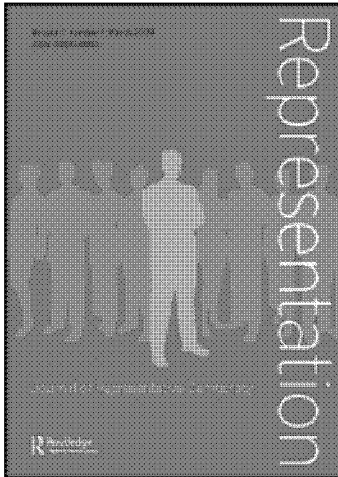
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### The case for votes at 16

Alex Folkes<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Campaign Manager for the Votes at 16 Campaign,

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# The Case for Votes at 16

**Alex Folkes**

The decision by the Electoral Commission in 2004 not to back the case for lowering the voting age to 16 is disappointing but does not mean that those who are interested in reconnecting young people with formal politics should stop arguing the case. Nor does it mean that the Government cannot go ahead with plans to change the voting age after the next general election.

There have been a number of other reports since the debate on the voting age began in earnest a couple of years ago and these have all favoured the lowering of the voting age as being in the interests of politics in the UK. For instance, the Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales (commonly known as the Sunderland Commission) said:

*'We recommend that the age of entitlement to vote in local government elections should be reduced to 16 years. We realise that a consequence of this, as the law stands, would be that such young people could also vote in elections to the National Assembly for Wales, and we would be content with such a conclusion.'* (para 4.20).

The Votes at 16 Campaign welcomes the evidence gathered on the issue by the Commission. The Commission's conclusion appears to be out of step with the majority of this evidence. We would encourage the Government to consider the evidence, but not to accept the Commission's own conclusion.

Many arguments have been put forward in favour of lowering the voting age to 16, but the most important of all is that it will re-connect an entire generation of young people with our country's democratic structures.

Much has been made of the apparent rise in the tide of political apathy. Arguably this is most apparent in the low electoral turnouts which are rife in UK public elections, but it can also be seen, for example, in the falling membership of political parties. There is clearly no lessening in the interest many people have in individual issues. The presence of so many people on the streets to protest against the war in Iraq shows that, when they feel strongly enough, most people will still want to make their voices heard. But, as the Electoral Commission's own cartoon to promote turnout in the 2004 elections shows, there is often a lack of comprehension that some matters of concern are 'political'.

In an effort to enhance the civic responsibility of young people, the Government has made it compulsory to receive citizenship lessons at school between the ages of 11 and 16 for pupils in England. Similar schemes are either in place or being introduced in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Young people learn about how our democracy works and how to vote. They are encouraged to develop views on a variety of subjects and to put forward their case in debates. By the end of the course they'll have views on a wide range of political issues and the tools needed to express

them. In fact, most will know far more than their parents! We then face a choice; do we allow them to have their say and treat them as real citizens, or do we ignore them for the next two years and risk their becoming disillusioned with democracy? Apathy is fast becoming the most popular choice in elections and it would be foolish to encourage further alienation and deeper erosion of our democratic system.

The Electoral Commission has claimed that citizenship education lessons are yet to fully reach their potential in schools and this is one reason why it would be wrong to rely on them as a means of helping younger voters to participate. This is very much a chicken and egg argument. Many educators would argue that citizenship education lessons will only reach their full potential when the 'prize' of a vote exists at the end of the process.

Sixteen and seventeen year olds have a variety of rights already. At 16 a person can leave school, get married, join the armed forces and pay tax. Not everyone chooses to do these things at 16, and some rely on parental permission, but the fact that they have these rights indicates that they are considered able to make responsible and rational choices. Doesn't it send out the wrong message when in the eyes of the law voting requires more maturity than having a child and taking care of them for at least the next 16 years? Incidentally, the statement that the UK subscribes to the UN doctrine on child soldiers and therefore that 16 and 17 year olds could never be sent to war is a fallacy. The UK has given only qualified support to this declaration and will not guarantee that members of the armed forces under the age of 18 will never see front line service in exceptional circumstances.

Clearly, not every 16 or 17 year old is interested in politics (just as there are many 40 year olds who have no interest) but virtually all have views and are keen to be listened to. Over the course of the last two years, the Votes at 16 Campaign has conducted a large number of focus group type exercises with young people aged from 11 to 24. Whilst virtually none would admit to being 'politicians', all but a tiny number claimed to have taken part in political acts such as going on a march, signing a petition or writing to an elected politician. As for those who really don't care, they wouldn't vote – a choice that many over 18s already take. However this is not an argument for preventing those who wish to vote from doing so.

As the Children and Young People's Unit *Y Vote/Y Not* report concluded, *'It is unwise to put low levels of participation down to apathy – young people do place a value on voting, albeit in a different way to older age groups. To them it's important to be heard and have a say. The Government, politicians and others with a vested interest need to recognise this, and listen.'*

In its report on young people and their views on politics, the Electoral Commission found that the vast majority viewed the subject as being important and agreed that elections are a serious business. This was reflected in our own work and it was interesting to note the answers to our question of whom young people would listen to when deciding how they would cast a vote they were entitled to. Disappointing those who claim that there would be a large 'David Beckham factor',

very few young people said that the views of pop stars or sports people would hold any sway at all. Most said that the views of their friends would be of interest to them and that their family would influence them (as was the case with most existing electors when they first had the chance to cast a vote). However, the group of people who young people said would most influence the way they chose to vote were the politicians themselves. Such political maturity may come as a shock to some, but not to those who work with young people on a regular basis.

It is sometimes suggested that lowering the voting age would lower turnout. Although turnout levels can be a transitory thing and should not form the basis for a decision on whether or not to lower the voting age, we believe the opposite is true.

There are good reasons for believing that 16 and 17 year olds will behave in a different way to 18-24 year olds. The 18-24 year old age group is perhaps the most mobile section of society. It is the age when most young people leave home and move between a number of short-term addresses. Changing address each year tends to mean that many young people in this age group find themselves unregistered at their election time address, and this makes the process of voting more difficult for them. It is, perhaps, not surprising that many do not go to the bother of organising a postal vote or updating their electoral registration midway through the year without prompting.

In contrast, the 16 and 17 year old cohort is one of the most stable in society. Almost all live at home with their parents and are therefore very easy to register. It can be convincingly argued that they would be as likely to vote as their (much older) parents – at or above the overall national average.

Although existing younger voters are less likely to vote than average, it is arguable that they are not the least likely to vote. This dubious honour goes to sections of the black and minority ethnic population, particularly those for whom English is not a first language. Yet no-one (other than perhaps the BNP) is arguing that these groups should be disenfranchised. In fact, if the argument that levels of turnout should decide whether a cohort should be allowed to vote then the voting age should be raised to 60.

Allowing 16 year olds to vote would get them into the habit early and they would continue for life. A study by Beth Breeze, former Deputy Director of the Social Market Foundation, found that people who turn 18 in the year leading up to a general election are significantly more likely to bother to vote than those who turned 18 in the year after the previous general election and have therefore had to wait up to 5 years. She looked at the difference that a few months made to turnout. She tracked a group of 17 and 18 year olds from the time of the 1992 general election through to the 2001 poll. A turnout of only 49% was recorded in the 2001 election amongst the then 27 year olds. These same people were 17 in 1992 and therefore had to wait until 1997 when they could finally vote in a general election at the age of 23. Amongst those who had just turned 18 in 1992, 65% bothered to vote in 2001. This 'birth effect' cannot be put down to a mysterious accident in 1992 as

similar findings hold for last year's election. In 2001 the oldest first-time voters at 22 had a turnout 14% lower than those voting within a year of turning 18.

Those who vote young vote often. Lowering the voting age to 16, whilst it cannot erase the lottery of birthdays, will ensure that everyone can participate in a general election by the time they turn 21.

Just as the decision on the voting age should not be determined by turnout, it should not be determined by international comparison. However, it is worth looking at the experiences of those few western-style democracies which have tried votes at 16. In Austria, 16 and 17 year olds are allowed to vote in many local elections and turnout amongst this age group reaches 90%. The Electoral Commission claimed that because no other similar democracies allowed voting at 16 in national elections, the UK should not lead the way. They ignored the fact that the previous change to the voting age – in the 1969 Representation of the People Act – was a case of the UK leading the world and most other countries lowered their voting age soon afterwards.

There has to be a cut off age and it is important that there should be debate about where to fix it. We respect those who argue that it should stay at 18 but society has moved on since the law was set. Young people are growing up faster than ever before and it is wrong to prevent them from airing views which are just as legitimate and deserve to be taken just as seriously as everyone else's.

Some people argue that politicians are doing more than ever before to take account of the views of young people. A study by the Youth Voting Network (which is co-ordinated by the Electoral Commission) found that this is not necessarily the case. Whilst some politicians at all levels are examples of best practice in consultation with young people, most are not, and it is more common for young people to be used in photo opportunities than genuine consultation exercises. In any case the ultimate consultation, the one that a politician will be most likely to listen to, is a real election (which, after all, threatens a politician's job and livelihood). Until young people can vote, their views will always take second place to those who are enfranchised.

It is worth noting that there are some who are uneasy about lowering the voting age because they feel it would be inconsistent with the right for all young people under the age of 18 to protection. We believe that there is no inconsistency in having an overlap. The right to vote should be granted at such an age that the majority are able to cast a vote which accurately reflects their wishes, needs and desires. We believe that the right age is 16. The right to protection should be granted until such an age that all but a few are able to cope without it and those few, many of whom will always need extra protection, are cared for by other provisions within the law. This age is rightly 18.

Finally, any consideration of this subject must consider the wishes of young people themselves. It is argued that young people themselves show no desire to see a lower voting age and that an extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds

would be of interest and benefit to just a few, rather than the many. Studies of this subject are limited and contradictory.

A survey by the pressure group Article 12 in Scotland found that 62.8% of respondents thought that the voting age should change (and 37.2% favoured the retention of 18). Of those who favoured change:

- 13.9% felt the right age should be 15 or below
- 71.6% felt the right age should be 16
- 7.4% felt the right age should be 17
- 2.5% felt the right age should be over 18
- 4.6% did not know.

These findings were broadly replicated in a survey by the British Market Research Bureau for the Government's Children and Young People's Unit as part of the *Y Vote/ Y Not* report.

The Electoral Commission's own consultation exercise found that a consistent two to one majority of all respondents (both adults and young people) favoured lowering the voting age to 16. This included respondents who had written a formal submission as well as those who had taken part in on-line forums and attended meetings on the subject. Regrettably, the Commission chose to largely ignore this balance of responses as they felt they may have been skewed by the interests of organisations keen to see a lower voting age (and, presumably, also by those opposed to such a change). The Commission had their own poll conducted late in their review which found that only 34% of 15-19 year olds favoured change. However, this poll did not give respondents an opportunity to consider arguments on both sides of the debate and interviewed only 234 young people. The Votes at 16 Campaign was bitterly disappointed that the Commission chose to place the findings of this poll above the responses they got to their consultation.

Lowering the voting age to 16 has support from politicians in all parties. A bill put forward by former Conservative minister Lord Lucas was approved by the House of Lords in 2003 and many charities and organisations which represent young people have come out in favour. Although the Electoral Commission has decided not to back the case for a lower voting age, many other reviews have taken the opposite view. We hope that the Government will press ahead with this key measure to reconnect young people with politics.

### **About the Author**

*Alex Folkes* is Campaign Manager for the Votes at 16 Campaign – [www.votesat16.org.uk](http://www.votesat16.org.uk)