

VOTING AT 16?

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Neglected for a generation, a troublesome political question is back : when should young people be able to vote for candidates in elections? Conservative peer Lord Lucas of Crudwell and Dingwall recently tabled a Private Members Bill in the Lords. It proposed a voting age of 16. And this week, for the first time, a national coalition has been launched at the Houses of Parliament. The *Votes at 16 Campaign* is backed by a wide range of groups – from the National Black Youth Forum and Plaid Cymru to the YMCA and Liberal Democrat Youth and Students. Meanwhile, the Electoral Commission’s Sam Younger (true to his surname) has backed an independent review of the current voting age. The Minister for Young People, John Denham, has agreed to look closely at its findings, due the end of this year.

The reformers’ case is strong, and could in practice count as an historic innovation. Most countries where the age of political majority is already lower (the key exception is Brazil) are dictatorships preoccupied with demographics and spin. The campaign for reducing the age of political majority is gathering pace globally, but breakthroughs have so far only been local : in regions (like Scotland, where some local authorities permit 16-year olds to vote in council elections) and in cities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose city council supports votes at 17, and Hanover, which pioneered the voting at 16 that is now the rule in many German states. So Britain has a chance of becoming the first-ever European country to give kids of sixteen the vote. But why should we (or they) take the plunge?

The reformers point to the legal precedents. At sixteen, they say, young people can sleep together, marry (without parental consent in Scotland) and have children. All sixteen year olds can be company directors, or be tried by jury in Crown Court and locked up, or change their name by deed poll, or leave school. Young men (women have to wait another year) can even join some sections of the armed forces. Reformers add that young people are living in social conditions far different than those in which their parents were teenagers. The battle for the right to define and protect youth culture was fought and won a full generation ago – culminating (on January 1st 1970) in the reduction of the voting age from 21 to 18. Since then, reformers say, young people have become more worldly wise. Pressured by advertising and the sexualisation of their bodies, teenage hormones change earlier, and faster. The rights of young people – not to be abused, beaten or exploited – are gathering pace. Youth parliaments and school councils are multiplying. Young people have their vernacular, their opinions, music and dress sense. From this school year, there's also the new citizenship curriculum, which could well make teenagers as a whole politically more knowledgeable than many adults. The reformers issue a warning : the right to vote and the obligation to take an interest in public affairs should be extended to sixteen and seventeen year olds in order to raise their flagging spirits. Polls and surveys prove that this age group shows very strong (and possibly rising) levels of interest in politics, broadly understood. Yet youth are annoyed by governments, parties and politicians, who are condemned as lying sleazebags, irrelevant bores, and worse. Such reactions, the reformers say, reflects the chasm that's come between youth and politics. The solution : bridge the gap by bringing parliamentary politics to them.

The opponents of reform sound nervous, and aren't averse to moralising. Note the strong parallels, in the history of modern democracy, with the language of those who opposed the emancipation of slaves, or who resisted granting the vote to male workers, or women, or colonial subjects. The conservatives say that kids lack 'maturity'. That means that their ability to think logically through an argument, to understand cause and effect, and to take responsibility for their own actions, is sub-standard. The claim is of course circular and true by definition : kids are naturally kids. Maturity has no history. Youth and politics

will never mix. So it follows that teenagers, in their imprudence, will misuse the vote. At sixteen (says Ellie Levenson of the Fabian Society) ‘teenagers are at their most rebellious and negative stage, a time when they are more keen on making a statement than acting responsibly.’ Like hysterical suffragettes bent on dragging passions into politics, or ill-mannered nineteenth-century workers, young people are a danger unto themselves. ‘Let us not provide’, runs Levenson’s objection, ‘an extra means by which teenagers can rebel against authority, by either abusing their vote or not voting at all.’

Defenders of the present system are so far in the majority. Yet when judged in terms of arguments they are in trouble. Their sense of history is poor and they lack both a unified voice and intellectual authority. No Edmund Burke or Thomas Carlyle is to be found in their ranks. They have Tony Blair, it’s true. At this year’s Blackpool conference, when asked about granting sixteen years olds the vote, he said that citizenship should have a ‘legal’ starting point : eighteen. The Prime Minister no doubt knows that the current legal condition of young people is anomalous, but he is not alone in his beliefs. The conservatives have plenty of politicians on their side, but – given their rising unpopularity - that may prove to be their joint undoing.

The wiser strategy would be to reform in order to inject more energy into parliamentary politics. It is no coincidence that groups like Article 12 in Scotland, Rock the Vote in America and Germany’s KRATZA (which stands for the abolition of all age limits for voting) are on the rise. For the one key point the opponents of reform arguably misjudge is the potential radicalism of some of our disaffected kids who don’t see themselves primarily as cynics, or as consumers looking down at their new trainers. ‘Children of my age are too young to vote’, said my daughter a few days ago, casually munching her way through a big apple. She’s ten. ‘14 is about right’, she continued. ‘By then, you definitely need freedom. You know what’s right and wrong. By that age you should find out what they’re doing – bombing other countries, being mean or picky, or being racist or paedophiles.’ Votes for sixteen year olds? Certainly. More youthful enthusiasm for the current government and the present system of parliamentary democracy? Not likely.

