

# The REAL Democratic Deficit:

why 16 and 17 year-olds should be allowed to vote

This country is a democracy. Every day, vital decisions affecting all our lives are taken by Members of Parliament and local councillors elected by the people. You can help choose them. Make sure you have your say – use your right to vote. If you don't, you will lose your chance to influence the way things are run in the country, or your part of it. All votes are equal – your vote is as important as anyone else's.

***Can anyone vote?***

**No. You have to be 18 or over...**

*Extract from Government promotional leaflet aimed at 16 and 17-year-olds,  
August 1999*

**Children's Rights Alliance**  
for England

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) exists to significantly improve the status and lives of children in England through the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We are an alliance of over 160 organisations, including all the major children's organisations.

CRAE has 16 Task Forces dedicated to co-ordinating and leading action on different aspects of children's human rights.

CRAE is the only England-wide non-governmental organisation systematically appraising progress on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are working with each Task Force - and with sister organisations across the UK - to prepare a comprehensive overview of the state of children's rights in the UK.

CRAE is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. We receive grants from the Department of Health, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Nuffield Foundation, Barnardo's, The Children's Society, Save the Children and UNICEF.

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As a young people's organisation committed to giving children a voice in all matters which affect them, we feel it is vital to let young people have a say in politics by lowering the voting age. We also want to be involved and consulted in all other aspects of life.

The government has an influence over all of us, and practically all of our life, such as education, public transport and health care, plus smaller things like parks and roads. Public debate seems preoccupied by children in one form or another, but nowhere is there a chance for us to speak: we feel it is incredibly important that young people are listened to.

As for adults saying that young people "don't know enough about politics", well surely the way to resolve that is by teaching us. There is also the difference between party politics, and issues. Many young people are vegetarians, or go on demonstrations, or join student councils, so by bridging the gap between formal and informal politics it will interest us more. With education we can make "informed" political choices, like everyone over the age of 18 does!

If, for some reason young people seem bored or disaffected by government, is it any wonder when we feel shunned and left out? But we don't all feel the same. Lots of young people would use a vote, if they had one, and, of course others wouldn't, but you get the same with adults.

We feel, as young people, that we are often all classed as the same. We all have different opinions, and it seems essential that governments listen to these opinions and take us seriously, and one important way of doing this is to lower the voting age.

*“To be a young person is to simply see life from the outside. Not being able to interfere or effect any action that goes on around you. We see things – natural disasters, wars, politics – and we are neither asked about them, or given the chance to change anything... To be a young person in the future is to hopefully see life from the inside.”<sup>1</sup>*

**INTO THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY**

By the time they reach their sixteenth birthday most young people will have spent a total of over 1500 days – or about six solid years – in school, yet they are still not considered fit to vote. At sixteen, they are legally permitted to buy cigarettes and alcohol, and can have sexual relationships with people of the opposite sex<sup>2</sup>. They can leave home, get a job, pay taxes and get married with parental consent. But still no vote.

By the time they reach their seventeenth birthday many young people will be working and paying taxes; others will be raising children; many will be choosing careers and studying hard; and others will be preparing to join the army. Care leavers will be making tough decisions about their future; young carers will be continuing to look after their sick or disabled relatives; some young people will be coping with life threatening illnesses; and a small minority of young people will be leaving secure units and young offenders’ institutions.

The lives of the UK’s one and a half million sixteen and seventeen year-olds are as rich and varied as any other age. What unites them is an inability to vote – not because they don’t understand, or cannot be bothered but because adult society has not yet acknowledged them as real citizens.

Just as it is now remarkable that it took until 1970 to lower the voting age from 21 years, history will also show that the continuing exclusion of 16 and 17 year-olds from the UK’s voting system was irrational and unjust.

At the end of 1999 a new Representation of the People Bill was introduced into Parliament, receiving Royal Assent on 9 March 2000.

The Bill included a range of proposals to improve the electoral process, as recommended by the Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures, led by George Howarth MP<sup>9</sup>:

- homeless people will be able to register to vote using temporary accommodation, including shop doorways and railway arches;
- people in mental hospitals will be able to register to vote unless they have been detained on criminal grounds;
- prisoners on remand will be able to register to vote;
- people with physical impairments and people who cannot read can be assisted by a ‘companion’ who must be over 18 years but can be a relative;
- local authorities can run pilot schemes to encourage voting – by locating polling stations in supermarkets, using technology or by experimenting with voting on different days of the week for example.

There was a notable omission from the deliberations of the Home Office Working Party, and from the 1999 Bill: the exclusion of young people from the UK’s electoral system.

Despite the absence of proposals concerning young people, the House of Commons did debate the issue on 15 December 1999 when Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on health and youth, was one of four MPs to propose an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill. The amendment, if passed, would have led to the lowering of the voting age to 16 years. The matter was discussed openly and received positive support from members of all three main political parties. The amendment was defeated by 434 votes to 36 but the tone and content of the debate displayed a high level of support for opening up democratic processes to young people. With strong backing from young people active in local communities and national organisa-

**YOUNG  
PEOPLE WANT  
TO BE  
INCLUDED**

tions, this booklet makes the case for Government action for lowering the voting age at the earliest opportunity.

1999 saw the publication of three reports from consultations with nearly a thousand under 18 year-olds. Each consultation exercise was undertaken to coincide with the UK Government's second report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.<sup>4</sup>

Article 12 young people's organisation carried out research with over 200 under 18 year-olds across the UK, using questionnaires and small group interviews. They found that:<sup>5</sup>

- children want to learn about their rights;
- children want to be consulted and involved in all decision-making that affects them;
- children want to have better links with local councils, and the Government;
- children want to be represented in government, or have their own Parliament;
- children want their Convention rights to be legally enforceable.

The Children's Society consulted over 100 children and young people in England and Wales, using small group interviews and specially designed worksheets. They found that:<sup>6</sup>

- young people's knowledge about the Convention on the Rights of the Child was extremely poor, and mostly non-existent;
- most groups of young people were extremely concerned about drugs, violence and vandalism in their local communities;
- physical punishment within the home concerned younger children and older teenagers with step-parents;

- many young people felt pressured to achieve at school; there was also a high degree of concern about repetition and petty rules;
- lack of local leisure facilities was a recurring theme;
- many young people were concerned about racism and the lack of opportunities and job prospects for Black young people;
- young people were puzzled by different age restrictions; in particular they wanted to see the lowering of the voting age and less restrictions on participation in the labour market;
- young people were concerned about exploitation at work, particularly unfair wage levels;
- the living conditions and educational opportunities of locked up young people were worse than even the poorest of children living on deprived council estates.

Younger children were generally positive about their lives, and placed great importance on play and friendships. Where concerns were expressed these reflected the themes raised by older children: bullying; physical punishment in the home; drugs and vandalism; lack of choices and independence; and boredom and pressure at school.

Save the Children consulted over 500 under 18 year-olds in England in partnership with CRAE and the DfEE. The findings from this exercise were fed into the Government's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Using a variety of creative methods, and discussion groups, Save the Children found that under 18 year-olds want the Government to:

- listen to children's views and experiences;
- lower the voting age;
- address racism and others forms of discrimination;

- educate adults and children about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- become more aware of what it is like to be a child in different circumstances – at school, in care, in secure units, and being a young refugee;
- examine young people’s social security entitlements;
- tackle violence against children, including bullying;
- promote healthy living;
- make communities safer.

*“...what is at stake here is not simply the denial of citizen rights but the right to be a citizen”*<sup>7</sup>

## VOTING THROUGH THE AGES

Anyone over the age of fifty will remember when the voting age was last reduced.

30 years ago over two million people became UK citizens overnight. They had lived in the UK all their lives, most were paying taxes and many were raising families. The laws of the land affected them all yet until this moment they were deemed unfit to vote.

The Representation of the People Act 1969 came into effect on 1 January 1970. It was this piece of legislation – driven by the Harold Wilson Government – that welcomed 18, 19 and 20 year-olds into representative democracy. The 1969 Act followed other steps to remove discrimination from Britain’s electoral system:

- before the Reform Act of 1832 Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield had not one MP between them yet one district of Cornwall had 18. The most notorious ‘rotten borough’ of Old Sarum (Wiltshire) had seven voters and two MPs. The 1832 Act removed 56 rotten boroughs, slightly reduced property qualifications for voting, and established some seats in the emerging cities;

- the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts extended the franchise to most working-class men; however, there were many prohibitions on registration - for example recipients of poor relief were disqualified<sup>8</sup> - leading to less than 30% of the adult population being registered to vote in national elections in the 1900s;
- the 1918 Representation of the People Act gave married women over 30 years the right to vote; that same year the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act gave women aged 21 years and over the right to stand as MPs;
- in 1928 women finally gained equal suffrage with men;
- 12 'university seats' (Oxford and Cambridge had two seats each) - which entitled graduates to a second vote - were finally abolished by the 1949 Representation of the People Act.

The UK led the way in extending the franchise to under 21 year-olds, with France, Italy and the USA quickly introducing similar changes. The same is likely to happen when we reduce the voting age to 16 years.

*“It appears that society has found one group against which it is acceptable to discriminate. But just because we will grow out of it does not make it right”<sup>9</sup>*

UK law lacks consistency when it comes to children and young people making decisions, and taking responsibility for their actions.

A person of any age can consent to medical treatment, so long as they have sufficient understanding.<sup>10</sup> In Scotland the age of criminal responsibility is eight years old<sup>11</sup>, and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 places a duty on parents to consult children of all ages about significant decision-making.

**HOW OLD IS  
OLD  
ENOUGH?**

In all countries of the UK, local authorities and the courts have a duty to ascertain and give due consideration to the wishes and feelings of children when making decisions about their welfare.

Joint guidance from the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment advises local authorities to consult all users of services, irrespective of age<sup>12</sup>. This advice was strengthened by the introduction of the Government's Quality Protects and Children First initiatives at the end of 1998<sup>13</sup>.

In England and Wales consent is required from children aged 12 years and over before they can be adopted.

There is no minimum age for children making applications for asylum in the UK, and children are permitted to make such applications without the assistance of a legal representative<sup>14</sup>.

Children can be tried by a jury in Crown Court, and detained in custody from the age of 10 years. In February 1999 an 11 year-old boy was placed on the Sex Offenders' Register<sup>15</sup>.

Under 10s can:

- be subject to a Local Child Curfew
- take part in school assessments
- be a member of school council
- take part in mock school elections
- be a director of a company (16 years in Scotland)
- pay income tax

10 year-olds can

- be convicted of a criminal offence (8 years in Scotland)
- be tried by a jury in Crown Court
- be fingerprinted, photographed and searched in custody
- be subject to Anti Social Behaviour Order (breach can be up to five years' imprisonment)
- be locked up

- be employed part- time (only in certain jobs)
- drive a moped or 'invalid carriage' (with license)
- leave school
- have heterosexual relationships (17 in Northern Ireland)
- get married (with parental consent in England and Wales; without parental consent in Scotland)
- drink wine/beer with a meal in a restaurant
- work full-time if left school
- buy cigarettes/tobacco
- pay full fare on all public transport
- leave home (with parental consent)
- make a request to be accommodated (received into care of local authority)
- change name by deed poll
- pay for prescriptions, dental treatment or eye sight tests (unless in full-time education, or in receipt of social security benefits)
- join the Armed Forces without parental consent (certain sections only) if male
- claim social security benefits in certain circumstances
- vote in local community council elections in some Scottish local authorities
- obtain a provisional driving licence
- pilot a plane or helicopter
- join the Armed Forces with parental consent if female
- be interviewed by the police without an 'appropriate adult' being present
- vote

13 year-olds can

16 year-olds can

17 year-olds can

18 year-olds can

18 year-olds can

- be tattooed
- leave home
- marry without parental consent
- adopt
- serve on a jury
- be a Trustee of a charity

21 year-olds can

- be elected as a local councillor, MP, MSP, AM or MEP

22 year-olds

- are subject to adult minimum wage levels

25 year-olds

- receive 'adult rate' of income support and housing benefit

It is not surprising that the law has evolved in a piecemeal fashion. There are justifiable reasons for not setting a fixed age at which all rights are acquired. Such a law would inevitably err on the side of caution, and make unnecessary prohibitions on young people's activities. It would also run counter to common sense principles, enshrined in medical case law, that children's capacities are evolving, not fixed.

However, where there are outstanding discrepancies in the law that are impossible to justify these have to be corrected. The voting age is a glaring anomaly.

If 16 and 17 year-olds are deemed competent enough to leave home, get a job, pay taxes, get married, raise children, join the army and serve prison sentences ... why stop them voting?

*"...the foundation of our democratic forms of government is that the people provide a mandate through the ballot box to those they elect to govern"*<sup>16</sup>

## INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The voting age has been reduced to 16 years in eight countries with varied government types, including communist

and republican states. These include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Philippines, Serbia and Montenegro and Slovenia.<sup>17</sup> Iran has a voting age of 15 years. Only one country in the European Union has so far experimented with extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds. In 1996 Germany's second largest state, Lower Saxony, held its first municipal elections in which 16 and 17 year olds could vote.

*"The images of South Africans going to the poll that day are burned in my memory. Great lines of patient people snaking through the dirt roads and streets of towns and cities; old women who had waited half a century to cast their first vote saying that they felt like human beings for the first time in their lives"* <sup>18</sup>

Nelson Mandela cast the first vote of his life on 27 April 1994, at the age of 75 years. In recognition of young people's role in dismantling apartheid, and the fact that under 18 year-olds comprise nearly half the South African population, extending the franchise was a key aspect of Mandela's presidential campaign.

On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1867 John Stuart Mill proposed an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill which would have extended the right to vote to women. 73 MPs voted for the amendment; 194 against. As a consequence, the first permanent suffrage society was formed in 1867 in Manchester.

The Suffragettes endured imprisonment, hunger and thirst strikes and public humiliation as part of their long struggle towards enfranchisement. Emily Davidson died because she was not allowed to vote – she threw herself in front of the King's horse on Derby day in 1913. The reasons put forward for sexual inequality were very similar to those heard today for excluding young people. Women were seen to be too delicate (innocent) for the world of politics; and it was argued that their husbands knew what was in their best interests, therefore making women's votes unnecessary.

The struggle for working class suffrage was similarly long and hard. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Chartists tried unsuccess-

## IS VOTING A HUMAN RIGHT?

fully in 1839, 1842 and 1848 to petition Parliament to accept their six point 'People's Charter', which would have extended the franchise to all men; removed property qualifications; introduced payments for MPs; and instituted the secret ballot.<sup>19</sup>

Nobody can doubt that when men and women across the globe laid down their lives for the right to vote, they were not just asking to mark a cross every few years. They wanted much more.

The enfranchised are recognised as people, and treated as part of society. Those that are excluded are seen as unimportant, second-class, even less than human.

Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year-olds will be a huge step forward for young people, and for us all. First, it will show young people that adults believe and trust in them as people. Second, it will allow young people the choice to participate in systems currently out of bounds. Finally, it will be part of the process of creating a society that values young people, not as half or quarter citizens but as full citizens of the human race today.

In December 1991 the UK Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention applies to all people under the age of 18 years, without discrimination. Only two eligible countries in the world have failed to sign up to the Convention - Somalia and the USA. The Convention grants children a comprehensive set of civil, political and social rights. Although the Convention has the status of international law, individual children have no right of redress for breaches of their Convention rights.

Article 12 of the Convention states that all children have the right to express and have their views taken into account in all matters that affect them, giving due weight to their age and maturity. It could be argued that this aspect of the Convention requires governments who pledge to fully implement the Convention to accept children's participation in the democratic process.

The Human Rights Act 1998 will come into effect in the UK in October 2000. The Act incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. Discrimination in relation to the rights and freedoms set out in the Convention is prohibited on any ground. Article 3 of the First Protocol requires states to ‘hold free elections ... which will ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature’.

While CRAE strongly supports the extension of voting rights to 16 and 17-year-olds, this must not be confused with debates about ‘age of majority’. There are a whole range of protective rights that 16 and 17 year-olds have, within domestic and international law, related to child abuse, labour, involvement in war and juvenile justice for example. These rights recognise the difficult circumstances and challenges facing many teenagers, not connected to their capacity as individual people to vote. Protective rights exist for other groups in the population – relating to sex discrimination and race and disability equality for instance – but these do not invalidate their basic civil rights.

Protective rights for under 18-year-olds do not shield them from responsibility. As we have seen, they are expected to obey the law and are punished if they do so, they are required to work either as school students or in jobs, and if they have sufficient income they must pay taxes.

*“They [adults] don’t treat us like humans. They treat us like babies who can’t talk”<sup>20</sup>*

On the rare occasions that the subject of young people’s right to vote is debated, the same questions and concerns arise:

- If young people could vote, they would waste time arguing for trivial things such as the abolition of homework or school uniforms;
- If young people could vote, they would be overly influenced by their parents;

**PROTECTIVE  
RIGHTS MUST  
STAY**

**WHAT’S IN  
THE WAY?**

If young people could vote, they would waste time arguing for trivial things such as the abolition of homework or school uniforms.

If young people could vote, they would be overly influenced by their parents.

- If young people could vote, they would make mistakes – they don't have the understanding that adults do;
- If young people could vote, they wouldn't – so why bother?
- If young people could vote, they would focus too much on themselves and ignore other people's needs and rights;
- If young people could vote, they would act frivolously or irresponsibly;
- If young people wanted to vote, *they* would be lobbying for change, not adults

Clearly, all of these arguments can be applied (and similarly dismantled) to many adults.

The right to vote is not contingent upon people's wants or aspirations.

Homework and school uniforms may seem trivial to adults but they are important issues for young people.<sup>21</sup> Extending the right to vote to young people may help transform adults' empathy towards young people, just as many 'women's issues' are now treated seriously by men.

The biggest single factor affecting a person's voting choices is their parents' voting habits.

However, there is no evidence that 16 year-olds will be any more influenced than 35 year-olds. Indeed, it could be argued that this is precisely the age when young people seek independence from their parents.

Young people influence and educate parents too. How many adults have been introduced to computers by their daughters and sons? There is a school of thought that bringing young people into representative democracy may revive adult interest in voting and politics. Discussions at breakfast, arguments over dinner and clashes at bedtime – the 'trickle up' effect.

The notion of the completely independent individual is flawed. Everybody is open to influence – from family, friends, work colleagues, celebrity figures and the media. If the concern is that parents will coerce rather than influence young people, this is a different matter.

Unless we believe that parents abuse their power, and have tyrannical control over their teenagers, it is difficult to understand the coercion argument. Of course some young people are in extremely abusive relationships with parents. The same is true for some relationships between consenting adults, and for relationships between some adults and their aged parents for example.

The Representation of the People Act 2000 allows new groups of vulnerable adults to register to vote – people living on the streets; mental hospital patients; and prisoners on remand. The use of a ‘companion’, previously only a provision for blind people, has now been extended so that people with physical impairments, and those who cannot read will find it easier to vote.

All these positive steps to ameliorate voting exclusion will be introduced without any safeguards – either because they are seen to be unnecessary, patronising or impractical.

Tabloid newspapers aim for a literacy level of an average 11 year-old. Psychologists tend to agree that by the time human beings are 12 years-old their thinking and cognitive skills match most adults. Children as young as eight in Scotland are held responsible for crimes they commit.

Young people in the UK are involved in an array of activities to improve their local communities, as acknowledged by the Social Exclusion Unit’s report on young people<sup>22</sup>. At a national level thousands of young people have been involved in government initiatives to involve children and young people in decision-making<sup>23</sup>. These include:

- Children’s Parliament run by the DETR and DfEE;
- consultation carried out by Save the Children across the UK for the Government’s second report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child;

If young people could vote, they would make mistakes – they don’t have the understanding that adults do.

- Scottish Youth Summit involving over 1000 young people; many more participated through a 'virtual e-conference;
- Young Voice initiative to ensure young people's participation in the National Assembly for Wales;
- the Home Office Listen Up consultation with 500 14 to 25-year-olds about their concerns and experiences.

There are other examples of young people-led initiatives. Article 12 young people's organisation is entirely run by under 18 year-olds, and has over 400 members across the UK. Participation Education Group (PEG) is an organisation of under 25 year-olds, with the majority being under 18 years. Young and Powerful is a disability rights organisation run by children and young people, and each country of the UK has a national organisation run by young people who have care experience. There are over 200 youth councils across the UK, and many primary and secondary schools have now set up school councils.

The Department of Health has estimated that there are between 19,000 and 51,000 young carers in England alone<sup>24</sup>. These are under 18 year-olds who carry out domestic and caring responsibilities above and beyond normal household tasks. Since the 'discovery' of young carers in the early 1990s research studies have continually found that on the whole young people do not want to stop caring for their relatives but instead ask for recognition and support.

Finally, the Low Pay Unit's recent survey into child labour found that a quarter of school age children have jobs, some working up to 29 hours per week.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly the evidence of many young people's lives is that they are everyday making complex decisions, and carrying out activities which require a great deal of responsibility and maturity. To continue to politically exclude them is to reject facts in favour of a romanticised and patronising image of childhood being an easy, uncomplicated ride.

Voting in the UK is not compulsory, although it is in three other European countries – Albania, Austria and Belgium.

Women are less likely to vote than men are; poor people less than affluent; and people from minority ethnic communities vote less than white people. Yet nobody suggests that non-voting adults should have their voting rights removed.

There is increasing concern at declining election turnout. One estimate is that 45% of under 25 year-olds did not vote in the 1992 general election<sup>26</sup>. A survey carried out by the British Youth Council in 1998 found that 50% of eligible young people didn't vote in the general election of 1997.<sup>27</sup> In fact, almost 30% of the total voting population failed to mark their cross on 2 May 1997; and in the European parliamentary elections in June 1999 the turnout in Sunderland was about the same size as a post office queue on pension day<sup>28</sup>.

The problem of disengagement with party politics is a problem for the whole of society, and promoting participation in the democratic process will be one of the key functions of the new Electoral Commission. Similarly, pilot schemes allowing the electorate to vote at weekends<sup>29</sup>, or in supermarkets and older people's housing complexes, are being encouraged by the Government.

It is possible that, once enfranchised, the majority of 16 and 17 year-olds will decide not to use their right to vote, at least initially. Political participation of any nature is low in the UK, and political activities that do attract young people tend not to be associated with polling stations. But children and young people are heavily engaged in environmental issues, animal welfare and local planning. What is certain is that giving 16 and 17 year-olds the right to vote will wake up politicians to the interests and priorities of young people. At the moment any contact between politicians and young people is seen as a gift rather than a necessary part of the democratic process. MPs who visit schools, or invite young people to Westminster, currently do so out of their own goodwill rather than as part of their democratic duty to young citizens. Importantly, granting 16 and 17 year-olds the right to

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vote will show young people and adults alike that they are part of society, rather than outsiders looking in.

One person one vote relies on individuals exercising choice about who will serve their interests, and those of their communities, best. Our political system encourages voters to focus almost exclusively on their own needs and wants. Personal taxation was one of the leading issues in the last three general elections. It was adults who promoted looking after number one in the 1980s: young people cannot be blamed for a system which they had no part in designing.

There is nothing innately selfish about young people. Research shows that young people's attitudes are very similar to those of adults.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, children are generally characterised by their strong sense of justice and compassion for others. However, as young people have been uniquely excluded from all areas of political decision-making for so long, it is likely that when they are finally included many will want to assert themselves loudly and strongly, just as other minority groups and women have done.

It has been suggested that the first letter of their surname influences the fate of election candidates. McLean<sup>31</sup> shows that voters are more likely to choose a candidate at the top of their ballot paper rather than at the bottom. This gives candidates with surnames beginning with A, B or C an advantage over those whose name begins with V, W or Y.

If adult voters are so serious about voting, why is it that rainy election days are seen to benefit the Conservative Party; and why was so much attention given to the hairstyles of Tony Blair and William Hague in the run up to the 1997 general election?

The voting habits of some adults are questionable but this has not led to them losing their right to vote. Conversely, many schools hold mock elections at times of general elections and young people are seen to take such activities very seriously.

In the House of Commons debate on 15 December 1999, on several occasions MPs referred to the fact that they had received no letters from young people about the voting age. The implication was that young people are not concerned about this issue.

A degree of humility is required from adults when assessing young people's concerns. Unless we actively set out to engage with young people, we are left second-guessing their wishes, or – worse – imagining their views are the same as ours. MPs are not collectively renowned for being in touch with young people, and it is a great shame that they felt able to debate this important issue without first making contact with organisations and groups run by and for young people.

Three weeks before the House of Commons debate Article 12 young people's organisation designed and circulated to all MPs a postcard celebrating the tenth anniversary of the United Nations adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The postcard described a recent research project into children's views on how well Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is respected (see page 4). One of the recommendations of the research – written entirely by under 18 year-olds – was the lowering of the voting age to 16 years.

The British Youth Council has campaigned for the lowering of the voting age for nearly two decades. Two recent consultations carried out by Save the Children and The Children's Society exploring children's perspectives on their rights both called for the lowering of the voting age to at least 16 years (see pages 4–6).

The fact that young people are not using traditional ways to express their views – through letters to MPs or visits to constituency surgeries for example – does not mean this is a matter which doesn't concern them. In fact it probably tells us more about how excluded young people feel, and in this respect is rather like saying poor people have no desire to eat in expensive restaurants because they never visit them.

There is growing global support from young people for the enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year-olds. In New Zealand young people are actively campaigning, and YouthSpeak in

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## IN SUMMARY

the USA was established in March 1997 to campaign for young people's suffrage.

There is no rational reason why voting rights should not be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK. Indeed, the benefits are immeasurable – to society as a whole as well as to individual young people. All the UK's major political parties are committed to creating modern and fair democratic processes. All are committed to social inclusion and taking positive action for those people living on the margins of life. All are committed to young people.

CRAE knows that young people feel excluded, marginalised and patronised by their continued exclusion from democratic processes. We also know that young people are everyday exercising responsibility and making decisions that stand them in good stead for voting. Nobody disputes the fact that today's teenagers face challenges and difficulties barely evident in previous generations. Most families have at some time included 16 and 17-year-olds holding firm ideas about social and political affairs; we all know young people who have more understanding and knowledge of political processes than many of their older counterparts. A recurring finding of consultation exercises with children and young people is their disenchantment with adults, and their sense of exclusion from the 'adult world'. For all of these reasons, the continuing exclusion of 16 and 17-year-olds from the democratic process is both illogical and unjust.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Baker, Article 12 member in Carnegie Young People Initiative and National Youth Agency (2000) *Voices Unheard. Young People at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Youth Work Press.
- <sup>2</sup> The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill 1999 will equalise the age of consent at 16 for gay and heterosexual young people. It has successfully completed all its stages in the House of Commons, and will be debated in the House of Lords after the 2000 summer recess. The Bill has the personal backing of Home Secretary Jack Straw.
- <sup>3</sup> The Home Office Working Party on Electoral Procedures was set up at the beginning of 1998 to carry out a fundamental review of UK electoral procedures, in the context of declining voter participation.
- <sup>4</sup> When countries ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child they must prepare an initial report after two years, then periodic reports every five years. The UK's second report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child will be scrutinised by the Committee in May 2002, by which time the Convention will have applied in the UK for over 10 years.
- <sup>5</sup> The full report – *RESPECT!* – can be obtained from Article 12, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE. Price: £5 adults; £1 young people.
- <sup>6</sup> The full report – *It's not fair! Young People's Reflections on Children's Rights* – can be obtained free from the Social Policy Unit, The Children's Society, 69-85 Margery Street, London WC1X 0JL.
- <sup>7</sup> Bob Franklin (1986) in *The Rights of Children*. Basil Blackwell, page 24.
- <sup>8</sup> This would be equivalent to disqualifying income support claimants from voting.
- <sup>9</sup> Phil Pinder, Chairperson, TGWU Young Members' Forum *Guardian Newspaper* letter about economic and social security policies which discriminate against young people, 18 May 1999.
- <sup>10</sup> The House of Lords 'Gillick ruling' in 1985 concluded that children's competence to make decisions about medical treatment is evolving, and that setting a fixed age for such decisions is arbitrary and wrong.
- <sup>11</sup> The Scottish Executive's (2000) Report of Advisory Group on Youth Crime recommends that the case for increasing the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years in Scotland should be reviewed.
- <sup>12</sup> DoH and DfEE (1996) *Children's Services Planning: Guidance*.
- <sup>13</sup> The Quality Protects Programme in England, and the Children First initiative in Wales, aim to radically transform children's services, especially those relating to looked after children. Consulting and involving children in all aspects of decision-making is one of the main objectives of both initiatives. There is no minimum age limit, and local authorities are expected to consult children about decisions affecting their own lives, as well as those related to general policy and service development.
- <sup>14</sup> Although the law allows children to make applications without the assistance of a legal representative, in practice this is rare. A non-statutory Panel of Advisers was established in 1994 to assist unaccompanied children to make applications, and obtain support from local authorities.
- <sup>15</sup> The boy pleaded guilty to an indecent assault on a two year-old at Edinburgh Crown Court.
- <sup>16</sup> Final report of the Working Party on Electoral Procedures, October 1999: para' 1.5.
- <sup>17</sup> Four of these countries adapted the legislation of the former socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- <sup>18</sup> Nelson Mandela (1996) *The Illustrated Long Walk to Freedom*. Little, Brown, page 199.
- <sup>19</sup> The other two demands were for annual parliaments and equal electoral areas.
- <sup>20</sup> The Children's Society (1999) *It's not fair! Young People's Reflections on Children's Rights*, page 32.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 36-37.
- <sup>22</sup> *The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young People* recommends that young people should be consulted and involved in policy development and service delivery in all matters that have a 'significant impact' on them
- <sup>23</sup> Many of these initiatives are summarised in the Home Office's (2000) consultation report *Listen Up, a Dialogue with Young People*.
- <sup>24</sup> Department of Health (1996) *Young Carers and their Families*. Stationery Office.
- <sup>25</sup> Low Pay Unit (1999) *Fair Play for Working Children*
- <sup>26</sup> See Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995) *Freedom's Children: Work, Relationships and Politics for 18-34-year-olds in Britain today*, page 98.
- <sup>27</sup> The full report – *State of the Young Nation – Seen and Heard!* – can be obtained from British Youth Council, 65-69 White Lion Street, London N1 9PP.
- <sup>28</sup> Sunderland's estimated 1.5% turnout (20 people) made British electoral history.
- <sup>29</sup> Doncaster council is to be the first local authority to pilot Saturday voting in nearly 30 years. Saturday voting was popular in urban and rural districts prior to the 1972 Local Government Act. Other councils are expected to follow if the Doncaster initiative is successful.
- <sup>30</sup> Holland, J. and Thomson, R. (1999) *Respect. Youth Values: identity, diversity and social change*. ESRC Children 5-16 Research Briefing.
- <sup>31</sup> Cited in Franklin (1985) *The Rights of Children*, op. cit.

There is great concern among politicians and others about the decreasing numbers of 18 to 25 year-olds who choose not to vote in government elections. This is often termed the 'democratic deficit'. While there are many reasons why under 25 year-olds may positively choose not to vote, those who complain about the democratic deficit hardly ever turn their attentions to the millions of people in the UK who are deemed unfit to vote in any type of formal election. There are 13 million under 18-year-olds in the UK: one and a half million are aged 16 and 17.

UK law sanctions 16 and 17 year-olds:

- working
- having sexual relationships
- becoming parents
- getting married (with parental consent)
- paying income taxes and national insurance
- serving custodial sentences
- serving in the army (with parental consent)

But this group of one and a half million people are still not allowed the choice to vote for politicians who make decisions about taxes, working hours and conditions, sentencing and prison conditions, and support for parents. In addition, they – like their younger contemporaries – have no formal way of influencing policy and legal changes in education, health, social services, defence and foreign policy.

This is the real democratic deficit.

This groundbreaking booklet coherently shows that the continuing exclusion of 16 and 17-year-olds from representative democracy is both unjust and illogical.