

 Young people pose the thumbs up

Votes at 16: An Aspiration?

Opinion piece by Ian Betts

January 2012

In my Salon article [New Year, New Optimism](#), I suggested reducing the voting age to 16 to help end the stagnation of progressive politics and the endemic disaffection of young people in our society. Here, I lay out my reasons why I believe this to be the case.

Whatever your political leanings, this year will see significant developments in the mechanisms of our democracy. How we register to vote will change with plans to introduce Individual Electoral Registration, and how we are grouped in constituencies will be reworked by the Boundary Review. With a week of campaigning planned in February by [Votes at 16](#) supporters to add names to their [e-petition](#), it seems timely and relevant to discuss this proposal now.

The goals of the Votes at 16 campaign are to [engage, empower and inspire](#) older teenagers with the idea that they can contribute to society as part of a wider social community. To me, this is a noble endeavour, and one which seeks to address and resolve many of the issues raised by the rioting last year. We cannot blame criminal acts on political concerns such as these, but what we can do is investigate those events to recognise fault lines in our society and legislate in a way that addresses the problems we discover.

The idea of giving mature teenagers the chance to vote in political elections is one such measure. If the riots sent one clear message, it was that some young people don't care about the communities that they inhabit or the people who are living around them. It's a harrowing thought and one that needs addressing. We should all recognise the danger of further marginalising and disassociating our youth. Even [David Cameron has admitted](#) that there is a major problem in our society with children growing up not knowing the difference between right and wrong.

 Young people on the conveyor belt to rioting?

Yet repeatedly the current government has pursued a rigorously Conservative agenda which marginalises vulnerable groups of citizens, [rounding on immigrants and benefit-claimants](#) in a way that implicitly blames them for our current financial difficulties which are, in fact, largely the fault of the bankers who are funding the politicians. [Be young and shut up](#) is the inferred message, one continually contested and satirised by [student bloggers](#) who see Cameron's actions as inflammatory and irresponsible. It seems that one way or another, teenagers are being disregarded. So by whatever route our young people arrive at being immoral, indifferent or disenfranchised

non-citizens, we must at least acknowledge that something should be done to deal with the problem.

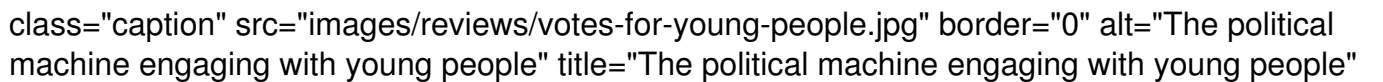
Is lowering the voting age to 16 the answer to this social rift? In my mind, there is no clearer signal to young people that what they say and do affects the community around them. This link has to be made in order to extinguish the [divide and conquer rhetoric](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/08/conservative-compassion-disabled-sick) and the isolationism it has subsequently created. Moreover, we need to establish that a person's contribution to society is what defines them and thus re-engage young people with their communities accordingly.

Now, more than ever before, teenagers are engaged by immersive social and commercial worlds often accessed through digital media. Social networking sites like **Facebook** encourage them to create virtual identities which are defined by the messages they release, groups they belong to and items they like. These actions empower them as individuals and promote a relativist worldview that implies their opinions can never be wrong. Coupled with that, online marketing targets teenagers specifically as consumers and encourages them to define who they are through isolated trends in language, music and clothing. Therefore young people cannot help but see themselves as isolated preferentially as an independent consumer group, subject to their own whims and interests, and set aside from the communities around them.

Thus, technology has empowered teenagers in every way except as citizens. How has such an important consideration been overlooked? Compare the above ideas to the complex world of politics which relies on the more traditional application of Reason and educated understanding of economics, and also history to some extent. The formalised procedures and antiquated language of Parliament are exclusive barriers between those in power and those subject to it. It is not hard to recognise how easily a relativistic teen would dismiss such a social sphere, no matter how influential, when it remains completely remote and closed off to individuals who feel so empowered in the other areas of their lives. Most teenagers are not encouraged to access the world of politics, and will therefore ignore it feeling that they have equally been ignored, perhaps even disrespected. They grow up distanced and disassociated, only encountering this echelon of society when it criticises their actions through the press or challenges their actions through the Police. Deliberate or not, it amounts to social kettling.

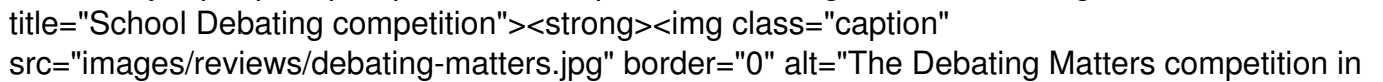
For both adults and teenagers, there is a pervading sense that politically, [nothing can be done](http://theoccupiedtimes.co.uk/?p=2098), and the rise of groups like **Occupy London** express this frustration. With the additional political deadlock engendered by a Coalition government which is poorly held to account by its co-opted liberal allies and [an ineffective Labour movement](http://planningblog.planningresource.co.uk/2011/09/26/labour-the-party-without-policies/) which is yet to publish its key policies for opposing the government's agenda, a general sense of stagnation in terms of ideas has taken over, despite a number of strikes and protests campaigning for change.

In my opinion, reducing the voting age to 16 will break this deadlock and encourage young people to take an active role in society. Suddenly, teenagers will have to decide about the policies and political parties that will shape their future. Isn't it right that decisions about Higher Education are made with consideration of the students it will affect? If we are to make critical changes to taxation and pensions, shouldn't those people who are legally entitled to work be involved in that debate? What about marriage, parenting and welfare? If it affects you, then you will have an opinion about it and those views should be heard.

The irony is that this campaign is being promoted by teenagers, for teenagers. The **Labour Party** adopted this policy into its political manifesto in 2008 because it won support from the majority of delegates thanks to the high-profile and effective campaign run by young members and young people themselves - a measure of their political awareness and ability, [explained Lucy Powell](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2008/aug/01/iwassurprisedtoread). Our much-maligned teens are campaigning to take a greater role in governance and social development, and we have a responsibility to listen to them.

So are teenagers up to the job? If the riots showed anything, it was that there are some lawless and disrespectful youths in our midst. Many would use this as evidence of the ineligibility of teenagers to contribute to the progression of our society, that such immaturity would be the downfall of our current political institutions. Yet evidence emerging from [restorative justice schemes](http://www.restorativejustice.org.uk/restorative_justice_works/matrix_evidence/), and the efforts of Boris Johnson to [introduce teen mentoring schemes to East London](http://www.london.gov.uk/media/press_releases_mayoral/mayor-boris-scheme-gets-1700-volunteers-support-young-black-boys) suggests that the more responsibility and guidance young people are given, the more they will prosper. Academic research has proven that [active participation of youth is essential to reenergizing and sustaining the civic spirit of communities](http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5001358613). Shutting petty offenders away does not encourage them to change, but empowering young people to take charge of their future does. We cannot write off members of society for making mistakes if there is a chance that they can become productive members of the local and national community.

Will people accept this proposal? I think many will recognise how valuable the arguments presented by the campaign for giving 16 year-olds the vote are [in terms of fairness](http://brentlibdems.org.uk/en/article/2004/036545/votes-at-16-it-s-a-question-of-fairness), but when the time comes to actually legislating for it, a sort of nimbyish cynicism can overtake us and causes people to acquiesce to small-minded comments in the media which mock teenagers and lament their shortcomings. This attitude only fuels the moral panic about lawless teens and further pillories this critically important group of our society.

Certain newspapers are the worse exponents of this judgemental behaviour. Giving spotty, lazy 16-year-olds the vote is madness, [railed Tom Utley in the Daily Mail](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1264717/GENERAL-ELECTION-2010-Giving-spotty-lazy-16-year-olds-vote-madness.html), essentially writing off a generation of talent. While some teenagers do lapse into criminal behaviour, others prepare themselves for vigorous academic and professional lives. The rise of the BBC's [Schools Questions and Answers](http://www.schoolsquestionsandanswers.co.uk/) and [Debating Matters](http://www.debatingmatters.com/) competitions

demonstrate that young adults are more than capable of dealing with complex political arguments independently, and it is initiatives such as these that we should encourage to welcome young people into the political arena.

So it is surprising that Ed West of the Daily Telegraph has

[argued](http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwest/100026061/we-should-raise-the-voting-age-to-21-not-reduce-it-to-16/) that the voting age should be raised to 21, a view [supported](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2008/jul/29/michaelwhitespoliticalblog211) by Michael White in The Guardian. Mr West's arguments, cloaked in the authority of research into physiological development, conclude with his real justification for rejecting these ideas in that younger voters are more likely to be socialist and vote for Labour. Yet is it such procedural evaluations that are undermining our ability to engage with political issues. Matters of principle are being [ignored](http://www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/politics/a-bad-monday-for-principles/) in favour of expediency while under pressure. We should consider the moral implications of policies beyond their relationship to partisan politics or the much-feared deficit and I have every confidence that teenagers who are engaged with political issues would explore these ideas fully and with care. Moreover, West's article is an entirely foolish and futile dismissal which only shows the contempt these newspapers hold for young people in that they are not expected or encouraged to speak for themselves.

In fact, both these arguments undervalue the impact that young adults can have and only worsen the representation of teenagers to older readers. Ironically, their reasons for excluding teenagers serve as a criticism of the society that they are appealing to: if West is to base his arguments on how our brains develop, according to his research we should not vote until the age of 25; yet the law allows us to vote at 18 when supposedly we are at a mental disadvantage. Utley's suggestion that most British 16-year-olds are almost completely cocooned from economic reality actually applies to many more disenfranchised voters and summarises the apathy and discontent that runs much more deeply through our social fabric, the kind of apathy and disrespect that journalism like this feeds.

What these two writers fail to confront is the basic truth that many voters are not as equipped to deal with political issues as many commentators would like. Although this is true, it is by no means a justification for ignoring the views of the electorate or dismissing their right to take part in our national debate. Neither is it an acceptable argument for ignoring young people. I would have far more respect for the *no* argument if they were prepared to listen and consider the ideas of the young people they are marginalising rather than dismissing them with ageist disdain.

Voting is both a privilege and a responsibility. But it is also a right and one we should not withhold due to issues of intellectual taste or political loyalty.

Young people being schooled in parliamentary debate

Let us imagine for a moment that this policy was successfully passed as law; how would it be implemented? In my mind, it should be a gradual process, perhaps even stretched out over the next decade. Legislation would come into effect by 2015 which granted 17 year olds the right to vote at the next general election. This would function as a trial run to be reviewed, discussed and debated in Parliament, and if deemed successful, would apply to all subsequent elections in Britain. Ultimately, the voting age would be lowered again to 16 for elections in 2020 as a permanent move. It is a long-term strategy with long-term

goals.

An interesting consideration raised in our discussions at the Salon was whether a 16 year old could become Prime Minister. I would argue not on the grounds of our current employment laws and the physical demands of the job; young people cannot work for more than 40 hours a week and I think Mr Cameron does a little more than that. But I would not advise ruling people out based on age rather than relevant experience: would a political party really elect an untested teenager as leader anyway? But at the same time should we really advocate placing age limits on certain roles as a matter of taste rather than promoting and adhering to the legal limits which our society has set?

Although under this proposal there would be sufficient time to iron out such technicalities, I think now is a critical time to debate this matter in order to send out an immediate message about the future of our young people. The reason I am arguing for the policy is to create a national aspiration which promotes teenagers into adulthood with a sense of responsibility and accountability for their society. At a time when rising [youth unemployment is dangerously high](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15747103) and [university applications are falling](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-15430180) too, it is imperative that we reach out to young people and present them with a manifesto that promises some kind of progress and social development. While there should be time to implement these changes, a decision about them is needed swiftly.

Moreover, we constantly hear from politicians of the importance of raising standards in education, yet we need some sort of outcome that rewards efforts to do so. We need to reach out to young people and challenge them to be better, to raise our expectations of them, and what they expect from themselves. This is a concern that transcends party politics, and seeks to provide a vision for the future of our developing society.

Indeed, my intention is not to argue for a knee-jerk reaction that would put Labour into power, or to pursue some sort of liberal agenda based on my own personal politics or tastes in newspapers. Nor do I wish to argue for a major constitutional change in emotive, subjective or reactionary terms; any decision should come from reasonable and open debate that considers all groups within our society. Opinions will differ on this issue so it is important that a decision is made for the future based on sound arguments and not prejudice, fear or inconvenience.

The challenge for our political parties is to articulate a progressive future of growth and prosperity over one of decline and blame, a future which must involve young people in a meaningful and significant way.