

VOTES AT

**16**

# **16 for 16** **16 reasons** **for Votes at 16**

With an introduction from Julie Morgan MP

## **Acknowledgements**

Many parliamentarians have supported attempts in recent years to lower the voting age to 16. There is now a real opportunity to make progress, with Labour MP Julie Morgan's Primate Members' Bill and the creation of the Youth Citizenship Commission

This pamphlet was produced by the Votes at 16 Coalition Steering Group: British Youth Council, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Electoral Reform Society, National Union of Students, National Youth Agency and UK Youth Parliament.

## **About the coalition**

The Votes at 16 Coalition campaigns for 16 and 17 year olds to be able to vote in all UK public elections. Launched in 2003, the coalition is made up of over 40 leading youth and democracy organisations.

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Edited by Tom Burke, Children's Rights Alliance for England  
Designed by Jonathan Pyke, Electoral Reform Society

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The views expressed in the pamphlet reflect those of the coalition as a whole. Different organisations within the coalition have different reasons for supporting the lowering of the voting age to 16.

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# Foreword from Julie Morgan MP

When my name was drawn in the Private Members' Bill ballot in November 2007, I had to choose a Bill to present to the House of Commons. Private Members' Bills provide a great opportunity to campaign on a particular issue and so it's important to champion a cause that really counts.

It didn't take me long to decide on the Voting Age (Reduction) Bill which proposes lowering the voting age to 16.

With the 2007's Governance of Britain Green Paper's general aim of reinvigorating our democracy and its specific commitment to consider arguments for lowering the voting age, the time seems right for meaningful discussion about reforming our electoral system.

My Bill, even if it doesn't get passed into law, provides a great opportunity to put the arguments forward and I'm very pleased that a lot of people are already convinced – the Bill has received support from over 100 MPs and from over 40 organisations.

There are many excellent reasons why I think we should reduce the voting age to 16 and many of these are outlined here. This is the age when young people start to make important decisions about their lives and when



many real rights and responsibilities come into play. Lowering the voting age would provide the opportunity for the many young people who are already politically active to have their say and would also provide an opportunity to engage those who are not while they are still likely to be in a formal education setting. It's time for young people to be listened to more seriously – if they could vote, this would certainly happen much more.

Let's get the debate raging; let's make 16 even sweeter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Julie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. It is positioned above the printed name "Julie Morgan MP".

**Julie Morgan MP**

# Young people want the vote

There is a clear and consistent demand from young people for Votes at 16.

Thousands of young people have signed up to support lowering the voting age to 16. All the leading young people-led organisations – the British Youth Council, the UK Youth Parliament, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Funky Dragon (the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales), the English Secondary Students' Association – support the campaign. Individual young people, youth councils and youth groups across the UK are lobbying their parliamentary representatives for the right to vote at 16.

Research and polling consistently shows that young people in the UK want Votes at 16.<sup>1</sup> The Electoral Commission's public consultation on the voting age in 2004 found that 72% of respondents favoured a voting age of 16. The consultation attracted huge participation, including nearly 8,000 young people.<sup>2</sup> More recently Funky Dragon ran a wide-ranging and very robust survey, which found that 80% of young people in Wales wanted Votes at 16.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See for example: CYPU (2002) Young people and politics; British Youth Council (2000) Listening to the Unheard; Save the Children (1999) On the right track; The Children's Society (1999) It's not fair! Young People's reflections on children's rights

2 Electoral Commission (2004) Age of electoral majority Report and recommendations Pg. 40

3 Funky Dragon (2007) Our Rights Our Story Pg. 75  
<http://www.funkydragon.org/en/fe/page.asp?n1=1036>

It is important to remember that even if young people do not shout out their views to politicians and political parties this does not mean they have no strong views. As the Children's Rights Alliance for England explains, "The fact that young people are not using traditional ways to express their views [about the voting age] does not mean this is a matter which doesn't concern them. In fact it 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".<sup>4</sup>

Unless we actively engage young people to find out their views, we are in no position to guess what concerns them, or what they want changed in our society. Lowering the voting age is another method of engaging with young people.

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<sup>4</sup> Children's Rights Alliance for England (2000) The REAL Democratic Deficit: why 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote

# 16 and 17 year olds are ready to vote

Not all 16 and 17 year-olds will be able to give an informed, nuanced or articulate critique of all aspects of UK political affairs, but neither will all 18 and 19 year-olds or all 56 and 57 year-olds. The criterion has to be when the majority of a given age group is able to make a free and informed choice at the ballot box.

Advances in education, youth engagement, 24-hour instant communication and news, and increasing responsibilities for younger people strongly suggest that that majority is now to be found among 16 and 17 year olds.

Women finally won universal suffrage in 1928 –61 years after John Stuart Mill first proposed an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill which would extend the right to vote to women. Over this time many argued that women were too innocent and naïve for the world of politics and it was argued that their husbands knew what was in their best interests. Many of the arguments put forward for denying 16 and 17 year olds the vote are the same as those put forward in the past to deny women the right to vote. Applying this attitude to young people is just as patronising today as it was to women in the last century.<sup>1</sup>

Opponents of reform highlight that a small minority of 16 and 17-year olds oppose lowering the voting age. This is of

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<sup>1</sup> Children's Rights Alliance for England (2000) The REAL Democratic Deficit: why 16 and 17 year-olds should be allowed to vote

course true – many are persuaded by prevailing attitudes and media coverage hostile to young peoples opinions. For those that have taken a more informed view it shows how they are capable of weighing up options and taking an informed view of the issues. If 16 and 17 year olds can do this on issues such as the voting age, surely they can do it when choosing who to vote for?

Other opponents of Votes at 16 worry that young people are too impressionable. Our experience is that when young people are involved in a meaningful democratic process they respond with enthusiasm and responsibility. Indeed, evidence suggests that current voters can be easily impressionable by a whole range of issues. Why do wet polling days seem to favour some parties over others?<sup>2</sup> Why does the surname of a candidate, and therefore their position on a ballot paper, seem to affect voting?<sup>3</sup> Why does inclusion of candidates' photos seem to affect choices?<sup>4</sup> Individuals are affected by all sorts of factors – there is a lack of evidence that 16 and 17 year olds are more impressionable in their voting habits than others.



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2 Gomez, Brad T.; Hansford, Thomas G.; Krause, George A. (2007) "The Republicans Should Pray for Rain: Weather, Turnout, and Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections" *The Journal of Politics* Vol 69 (3) pp. 649-663(15)

3 Rallings, C., Thrasher, M., & Gunter, C. (1998) "Patterns of voting choice in multi-member districts: the case of English local elections" *Electoral Studies* Vol. 17 (1) Pp. 111-28.

4 See the forthcoming work by Robert Johns and Mark Shephard, University of Strathclyde

# Citizenship education should lead to voting

This is the first generation of voters who have ever had to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Today's 16 and 17 year olds have had more opportunity to be informed of voting than most current voters!

In 2002, citizenship was introduced as a compulsory subject as part of the English National Curriculum. At Key Stage 3 young people are taught about the electoral system and the importance of voting, central and local government, and the key characteristics of parliamentary and other forms of government.<sup>1</sup> At Key Stage 4 they explore, among other things, the actions citizens can take in democratic and electoral processes to influence decisions locally, nationally and beyond; and the operation of parliamentary democracy within the UK; and of other forms of government, both democratic and non-democratic, beyond the UK.<sup>2</sup>

Following this education, young people are denied the right to use their knowledge for at least two further years and anywhere up to seven years.

Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice. As Harriet Harman MP, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and Secretary of State for Equality, said earlier this year;

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1 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2007) Citizenship Programme of study for key stage 3 and attainment target (This is an extract from The National Curriculum 2007)

2 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2007) Citizenship Programme of study for key stage 4 (This is an extract from The National Curriculum 2007)

"My concern is that there's a generation of young people who are never going to get into the voting habit... we've got citizenship classes going on in schools... if people come straight out of the citizenship class into the polling station then there's continuity and that might be an opportunity for them to get the habit of voting."<sup>3</sup>



# Lose 16 and 17 year olds and you risk losing them for life

The exclusion of 16 and 17 year olds from elections is fuelling the disengagement of 18-24 year olds. The longer young people are denied involvement in the formal democratic process, the less chance there is of engaging them ever.

In the 2005 General Election, only 37 per cent of eligible 18-24 year olds voted, representing a 2 point drop from 2001 and a 23 point drop from 1997.<sup>1</sup> However, they are not alone and these trends reflect the political behaviour of older age groups. Yet young people are politically aware and active - 81% of 12-16 year olds believed there should be a way to give young people a voice in politics.<sup>2</sup> The problem is translating the enthusiasm of 12-16 year olds into a lifetime of active citizenship and voting.

Many young people are deprived of democratic participation until they are 23. Opening up voting to 16 and 17 year olds would ensure that they get the opportunity to vote from a younger age and it is more likely to be seen as an essential element of the transition to adulthood.

18 year olds often have more transient lifestyles than older

1 Figures cited in 4Children (2007) Make Space Review Final Report, Pg. 90

2 Trikha, S. (2003) Children, young people and their communities: summary of top level findings from 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey

people - they are more likely to be leaving home, beginning full - time employment or starting university. At this busy time of life voting can all too easily drop down the list of priorities.

Beth Breeze, former Deputy Director of the Social Market Foundation, found that closer an individual's 18th birthday to an election the more likely they are to vote. People who turn 18 in the year leading up to a general election are significantly more likely to vote than those who turned 18 in the year after the previous general election and have to wait 5 years.<sup>3</sup> The longer the wait between achieving the right to vote and putting it into practice the less likely you are to vote. Whilst lowering the voting age to 16 cannot erase the lottery of birthdays, it would ensure first engagement with parliamentary democracy for all young people by the time they are 21 years old.



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3 Cited in Folkes, A. (2004) 'The Case for Votes at 16' Representation Vol. 41 (1) pp. 52-56

# Support politicians listening to young people

Many people and organisations seek to speak for and with young people and to represent their interests to decision-makers and politicians. But if 16 and 17 year olds were given the vote then their views as citizens would have to be taken seriously by politicians directly.

Attempts by political parties to engage young people have been inadequate.<sup>1</sup> Membership levels of political parties are falling especially amongst younger voters who don't believe politics is for people like them. Allowing people to vote at an earlier age would spur politicians and political parties into actively seeking their engagement in policy formation, debate and as activists.

Political parties formulate policies and manifestos based on the opinions of those whose votes they are trying to attract. Preventing 16-17 year olds from voting means their views and needs are excluded from this process, and traditional low turnout among the 18-24 age group allows politicians and political parties to ignore younger people's views more generally with little fear of negative effect. Lowering the voting age to 16 and increasing turnout among the younger age group would force policy makers to listen to young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Electoral Commission (2002) Voter engagement and young people

Individual politicians would also have to listen to young people if the voting age were lowered to 16. Young people can be difficult to contact, often living in university, short-term rented or multi-occupancy accommodation, and without many of the more permanent living arrangements that politicians use to communicate with people. Lowering the voting age to 16 would mean that politicians would have a vested interest in engaging young people at school, in a controlled and accessible environment.

This would represent a shift in the way public policy is made with regard to young people as they would cease to be legislated *for* and instead be legislated *with*, as part of the electorate.



# No taxation without representation

First coined by Rev. Jonathan Mayhew in 1750, and popularised by Americans fighting the British during the War of Independence, the phrase has been appropriated by many groups struggling for political rights over the years.

Once employment can begin at age 13, there is no minimum age limit on paying income tax and you start to contribute national insurance at 16. Any income above the personal allowance (£5,225 during the 2007/08 tax year) is taxed. The most common forms of taxable income are earnings from full or part-time work, including tips and bonuses. Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) is also taxable. The most up to date figures show that 548,000 16 and 17 year olds are in some form of employment.<sup>1</sup> This of course hits 16 and 17 year olds harder than younger people as they are able to work, and pay tax, full time.

The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that in the past decade the total tax liability for 16 and 17 year olds was over £550 million pounds. During 2005-06 alone this was approximately £47 million pounds.<sup>2</sup>

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1 1. ONS (2008) Labour market statistics Table 2 Employment by age (January – March 2008)

2 Personal Correspondence to Children's Rights Alliance for England from Department of Work and Pensions (15th May 2008) based on 563,000 taxpayers aged 16 and 17 in Financial Year 05/06. Figures are based on analysis from Survey of Personal Incomes (2005-06). Note, this is a sample survey based on information held by HMRC tax offices on persons who could be liable to UK tax. It is carried out annually and covers the income assessable for tax in each tax year. The figures for the past decade are indicative as changes in sampling methodology can affect results.

New proposals are set to raise the minimum training or education age to 18 by 2013. However, 16 and 17 year-olds will continue to be working and tax-paying members of society. Even those studying part-time will be able to work more than 20 hours a week and be taxed on this income.

"No taxation without representation" equally applies to those 16 and 17 year olds paying tax, but denied the vote. If government is spending the money of young taxpayers, they should allow them to influence how it is spent.



# 6

# More young people will be having a say

In instances where the voting age has been lowered to 16 and there has been a sustained public awareness campaign with young people, turnout in elections has been boosted. Germany has seen higher turnout levels in the 16-18 age group than in the 18-24 age group.<sup>1</sup>

Similar examples have also been seen in the UK: over 27000 young people voted in Essex to elect 6 Members from 92 candidates into the UK Youth Parliament. Indeed, in 2005 the turnout in Sutton was higher in the Youth Parliament elections than it was in the 'real' election!

Some people are concerned that lowering the voting age would lead to a lower turnout in elections, the theory being that a larger voting population made up of younger voters, who are currently less likely to vote, would reduce the overall turnout. However, analysis by the Electoral Reform Society shows that if 16-18 year olds turned out in the same proportion as the 18-24 age group, there would be virtually no effect on turnout. Even if not one 16-18 year old voted, overall turnout would drop by only 2%.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Cited in Russell, A. Fieldhouse, E. Purdam, K. Kalra, V. (2002) Voter Engagement and Young People Electoral Commission

2 For full details on the effect of lowering the voting age on overall turnout, see the forthcoming briefing from the Electoral Reform Society at [www.votesat16.org.uk](http://www.votesat16.org.uk)

As the Power Inquiry notes as it recommended lowering the voting age to 16;

*"We have also heard the claim that reducing the voting age to 16 will drive down turnout figures as the youngest age groups have the lowest turnouts. This argument suggests that a significant reform should be rejected on the grounds that its results may embarrass politicians and reinforce the widespread view that the party and electoral system are disliked. This cannot be accepted..."*<sup>3</sup>

Women are less likely to vote than men, poor people less likely than the more affluent and people from minority ethnic groups less than white people.<sup>4</sup> Nobody suggests that these lower turnout groups should have their voting rights removed. No one should suggest that some 16 and 17 year olds not voting is a good enough reason to deny the many that do want to vote.

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3 Power Inquiry (2006) Power to the People – The report of Power: An Independent Inquiry into British Democracy Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

4 Electoral Commission (2005) Election 2005: turnout Pg. 25

# Equality of expression and the right to vote

Preventing 16 and 17 year olds from expressing their political views through the ballot box gives them – and the rest of society – the impression that young people's views are somehow not valid and young people are not 'real' citizens. This contributes to the disconnection that many young people feel from political processes and structures.

The past decade has seen an explosion of activity to support children and young people to influence decision-making which affects their lives.<sup>1</sup> It is widely accepted that the best authority on a young person's life and their experiences is that young person him or herself.

The right to vote is an inalienable human right.<sup>2</sup> In 2005 the European Court of Human Rights declared that the restriction preventing convicted prisoners voting in the UK was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>3</sup> The Court stated that any restrictions on the right to vote must be legitimate and proportionate – blanket exclusions are unacceptable. It also said that the number of prisoners barred from voting – approximately 48 000 – was a 'significant figure' and that it could not be claimed that the bar was negligible in its effects. Yet, on Thursday 1st May 2008, 900 000 16 and 17

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1 Burke, T. (2008) Listen and Change – an introductory guide to children and young people's participation rights Participation Works

2 Article 25 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 3 of Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

3 October 6 2005 Case Of Hirst V. The United Kingdom (No. 2) (Application no. 74025/01)

year olds were denied the opportunity to vote in local elections – 18 times the number of prisoners denied a vote.<sup>4</sup> Lowering the voting age would end the blanket exclusion of large groups of people capable of voting - 16 and 17 year olds.

Extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds would send a powerful signal that this Government believes that young people are capable of making decisions which affect their lives. Lowering the voting age would be an historic opportunity by which to mark this Governments commitment to young people.



<sup>4</sup> Analysis by the Children's Rights Alliance for England, based on analysis of Office of National Statistics estimated resident population mid-2006 and estimates for projected change in age demographics: Figures do not account for population migration since 2006.

# Maintaining and enhancing protection: never weakening it

The Votes at 16 Coalition is calling for the voting age in local, national and European elections to be lowered to 16. We are not calling for a 'common age of majority' at 16.

16 and 17 year olds have important protective rights enshrined in both domestic and international law concerning, for example, protection from violence, exploitation, and the existence of a separate juvenile justice system.<sup>1</sup> These rights must remain in place.

The opportunity to vote would not affect the protective rights of young people. There is protective legislation for other groups in society, for example, in sex, race and disability equality laws.<sup>2</sup> Such protection does not remove or threaten the right to vote that these groups have.

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1 For example, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules) (1985); United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (The Riyadh Guidelines) (1990); United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty (1990) and the United Nations Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System (1997)

2 See: The Sex Discrimination Act (1975); The Equal Pay Act (1970); Equal Pay Act 1970 (Amendment) Regulations (2003); The Race Relations Act (1976) ; Race Relations Amendment Act (2000); The Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations (2003); Disability Discrimination Act (1995); Disability Discrimination Amendment Act (2005) and the National Minimum Wage Act (1998)

We know that young people are concerned about their safety and the safety of their communities. By enabling younger people to vote they will be able to elect a government which protects their interests and welfare, rather than relying on older people to do this for them.



# 9

# Civil society

## wants it

The Votes at 16 Coalition is a group of over 40 civil society organisations from a wide variety of backgrounds that believe in a voting age of 16. These organisations campaign on this issue for many of the different reasons proposed in this publication.

Some coalition partners work directly with young people and campaign for what young people themselves want. The British Youth Council represents the views of Local Youth Councils; the UK Youth Parliament represents the views of 500 young people elected by over 600 000 of their peers (2007-08 elections); and the National Union of Students represents the views of seven million students.

Others, such as the Children's Rights Alliance for England, the National Children's Bureau, The Children's Society and The National Youth Agency, are concerned with the rights and wellbeing of young people. Organisations such as the Electoral Reform Society and Unlock Democracy are concerned with the health of democracy in the UK.

Support comes from organisations representing young people in all parts of the UK, including the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Scottish Youth Parliament, the English Secondary Student's Association and Funky Dragon (the National Assembly of Children and Young People in Wales). The youth wings of political parties from across

the spectrum are also on board, including LIBERAL YOUTH (Liberal Democrats), the Young Greens, Young Scots for Independence (Scottish National Party), Cymru X (Plaid Cymru), the Young Fabians, Compass Youth and London Young Labour.

# 10

# Addresses the population timebomb

Britain's population is facing a population timebomb. Increased longevity and lower fertility is ageing our population. In 2007, for the first time ever, the population of state pensionable age is projected to exceed the number of children.

In 2006 (the most recent estimates available) there were 9.6 million people aged 65 or over in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The population will gradually become older with the average (mean) age expected to rise from 39.6 years in 2006 to 42.6 years by 2031. The number of people of state pensionable age is projected to increase from 11.3 million in 2006 to almost 15 million by 2031. The numbers in the oldest age bands will increase the fastest, with those aged 75 and over rising by 76 per cent over the next twenty-five years – from 4.7 million in 2006 to 8.2 million by 2031.<sup>2</sup>

With such a demographic mix, there is less space at the table for younger people in decision making with a larger, more experienced adult population dwarfing the child and youth minority. On current trends, younger voters (18-24) will have even less of a say in national decision making.

Lowering the voting age to 16 would help to redress this imbalance. It would ensure that the views and concerns of young people had weight at the ballot box.

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1 ONS (2008) Estimated Resident Population Mid-2006 By Single Year Of Age And Sex On Boundaries As At 1 April 2006

2 ONS (2007) Press Notice - UK population set to increase to 65 million over the next ten years



11

# Sent to war: denied the vote

In recent years few issues have caused as much controversy as the government's ability to declare war. For those over the age of 18 there is the power to vote out a government who has taken a course of action you disagree with but for people of 16 and 17 this right does not exist.

This disenfranchisement becomes all the more apparent when you consider the number of young people in the armed forces. On April 1 2007, there were 4560 16 and 17 year-olds serving in the UK armed forces.<sup>1</sup> In the financial year 2006-07, 30 per cent of all new recruits were under 18 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

It is Government policy that personnel under the age of 18 are not to be deployed on any operations that would see them engaged in hostilities.<sup>3</sup> However, eighteen 16 and 17 year olds have been deployed since 2003; fifteen to Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

You can apply to join the British Army at 15 years, 7 months and the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force at 15 years, 9 months. Surely if they are old enough to join the armed forces, young people should have the right to vote for the

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1 Ministry of Defence (2007) UK Defence statistics 2007. Table

2 Derek Twigg MP, 8 Oct 2007 Written Answer, House of Commons Hansard : Column 66W

3 UK Government (2007) The Consolidated 3rd and 4th Periodic Report to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

4 Adam Ingram MP, 1 February 2007, Written Answer, House of Commons Hansard Column 508W

government that decides to send them to war? Most young people sign up to four year contracts, and so at the age of 16 they are considered able to make a decision that could well see them on active service in a couple of years time.

# 12

# Don't be left behind

The UK has a pace-setting precedent for delivering democracy for its people. As one of the oldest and most respected Parliaments in the world, when the UK lowered the voting age to 18 in 1969 France, Italy, Canada, Australia and the USA quickly followed.

Austria became the first EU state to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections last year and young people across Austria went to the polls for the first time in April 2008. 5 of the 16 German Lander (regions) and the Swiss Canton of Glarus have also lowered the voting age to 16.

Closer to home, the Isle of Man lowered the voting age on 11th July 2006, in advance of its elections in November 2006. Speaker of the House of Keys Steve Rodan was quoted as saying;

*"My own view is simple: it may be that only a few 16 and 17 year olds will want to vote but if we can get even a small number engaged at this early age it could lead to a lifetime's active interest in politics and even political activism as candidates."*<sup>1</sup>

Several young people then commented that while they were disinterested in politics beforehand, the opportunity to vote spurred them to take more of an interest. Jersey and Guernsey then followed the Isle of Man's example for similar

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<sup>1</sup> Tynwald, 22nd August 2007. Press Release Voting at 16 in the Isle of Man

reasons and both have lowered the voting age to 16.

16 and 17 year-olds can vote in Brazil, Cuba, and Nicaragua. 16 and 17 year-olds can vote in Slovenia if employed. 17-year olds can vote in Indonesia, North Korea, Sudan and the Seychelles.<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason why young people in these places are any more qualified to have a say in the politics of their country than here. As other European countries and Crown Dependencies successfully extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year-olds the UK needs to be a part of this progressive group. The UK must not get left behind.

# 13

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2 All ages taken from Central Intelligence Agency (2008) World Factbook

# Politicians want it

On 9th January 1985 Jim Wallace, the youngest member of the Liberal party, introduced a Private Member's Bill which intended to 'establish rights and create a framework within which young people can participate more fully in the affairs of their community and the decisions that affect or shape their lives.'<sup>1</sup> The Bill would have lowered the voting age to 16. Whilst it did not pass at the time it was widely supported and sparked a wide ranging debate on the place of young people in society.

For the past twenty years there has been consistently strong political support for lowering the voting age. The move is backed by many political parties including the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. During recent debates both Labour and Conservative politicians have backed Votes at 16.

This support has been growing. In 1999 Simon Hughes MP was one of four MPs to propose an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill. The amendment was defeated. In 2005 Stephen Williams MP put forward his own Private Member's Bill to reduce the voting age. It was defeated in the Commons by just 8 votes, with 128 MPs voting in favour. In both debates the matter received

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Franklin, B. (1989) 'Children's rights: developments and prospects' *Children and Society* Vol. 3 (1) Pg. 56

positive support from members of all three main political parties.

The Government-backed Councillors Commission, which investigated the role of Councillors and local democracy in England and Wales more widely, recommended lowering the voting age to 16.<sup>2</sup>

As well as backing in all the Crown Dependencies, Votes at 16 has very strong support across Wales. In 2002, The Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales (The Sunderland Commission) backed calls to lower the voting age to 16.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Councillors Commission (2007) Representing the future Pg. 82

<sup>3</sup> The Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales (2002) The Sunderland Report

In 2007, 90 years to the day after Parliament introduced the right to vote for women, Welsh Assembly Members Jenny Randerson and Eleanor Burnham proposed a motion to the Welsh Assembly to lower the voting age. This motion was passed with an overwhelming majority, with 44 votes in favour and only 4 against.

Votes at 16 has also received backing in Scotland, with support by the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group<sup>4</sup> and of the Parliamentary Local Government Committee.<sup>5</sup> The Scottish National Party unanimously backed votes at 16 at its annual conference in October 2007, meaning the Scottish Government as well as a majority of the Scottish Parliament supports the campaign. In 2003 Tricia Marwick, then SNP local government spokesperson, pledged that the party “would ensure that the voting age was reduced to 16 for all elections in Scotland”.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Renewing Local Democracy Working Group (“The Kerley Group”) (2000) The Report of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group

5 Scottish Parliament, 24th January 2003, Press Release Local Government Committee Supports Voting Age Of 16 For Local Elections

6 BBC News (2003) Friday, 24 January, 2003 Call for lowering of voting age <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/2690489.stm>



# Increase the diversity of the electorate

Reducing the voting age could have a positive impact on increasing Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) participation in elections.

In the 2005 General Election turnout levels among BME groups were significantly lower than that of the white population (47% to 62%). As among the British population as a whole, abstention was highest among younger BME people but it appears that this 'young' group includes not only 18–24 year olds but 25–34 year-olds whose turnout was just as low.<sup>1</sup>

However, demographically the younger population (under 18) is increasingly more ethnically diverse.<sup>2</sup> By enabling more young people to vote we will be enabling a greater number of BME people to vote, redressing the under representation of minorities in the political system.<sup>3</sup> It would also provide an opportunity to reduce the marginalisation of issues specific to these communities and increase political focus and activity in these areas.

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1 Electoral Commission (2005) Election 2005: turnout Pg. 25

2 Personal Correspondence to Children's Rights Alliance for England from Office of National Statistics (21st May 2008)

Figures are based on analysis from Population Estimates by Ethnic Group (October 2007 release) ONS Ethnic group by single year of age and sex. Figures were only available for England.

3 Khan, O. and Berkley, R. (2007) Local decision-making and participation Runnymede Trust; The Equalities Review (2007) Fairness and Freedom: The Final Report of the Equalities Review; Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) Our Shared Future



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# The time is right: the time is now

In 2003 the Electoral Commission review of the voting and candidacy age suggested that it was not the right time for reform, but that the issue should be reviewed in five years time – 2008.

In the intervening period more organisations have signed up to our campaign. More youth organisations, youth-led groups, political parties and democratic reform groups have come out in support of reform. Support is increasing not decreasing.

In July 2007, in one of his first major speeches on becoming Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced a programme of constitutional reform through the Governance of Britain Green Paper. He acknowledged the “very specific challenges we must meet on engaging young people” and, as part of this, “to examine, and hear from young people themselves” the case for lowering the voting age”<sup>1</sup>

A Youth Citizenship Commission, to be chaired by Professor Jonathan Tonge, will lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. It is set to be launched in the summer of 2008. Alongside which the Voting Age (Reduction) Bill will be debated in Parliament and focus the attention of MPs and Members of the House of Lords on the case for reform.

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Gordon Brown MP 3 July 2007 House of Commons Hansard: Column 818

The Votes at 16 Coalition has warmly welcomed the Commission and the commitment to truly engage with the people who matter most in this debate – young people. We know young people care a great deal about issues affecting them; about our communities, our nation and our world. We also know that they face considerable barriers – legal, social and cultural – to express those views. Lowering the voting age will not, in isolation, change this. It is however a vital component.

The debate on lowering the voting age has been simmering for over 20 years.

As Professor Tonge has said: “We’ve got to do things quickly. Time is tight”.<sup>2</sup> The time is not just tight; the time is right to bring the discussions and debates to an end. The time is right for action. That time is now.

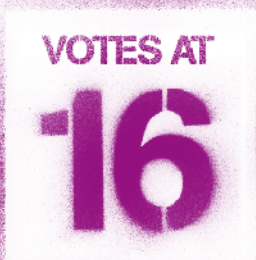
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<sup>2</sup> Times Higher Education Supplement, 20th March 2008, Former rebel vows to make voting ‘trendy’ among young

# **Over 1.5 million 16 and 17 year olds are denied the vote in the United Kingdom.**

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public elections and explains why reform  
is necessary, fair and long overdue.



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