
☐ Electoral
☐ Reform
☐ Society

Civic Duty

The Conservative Case for Votes at 16 & 17

Edited by Charley Jarrett
July 2018

Contents

5	Introduction
9	Chapter 1 – Owen Meredith An updated Conservative case for Votes at 16
11	Chapter 2 – Nicky Morgan Why Votes at 16 is the next suffrage bridge we must cross
14	Chapter 3 – Sir Peter Bottomley Britain’s democratic story is unfinished, let’s write the next chapter
17	Chapter 4 – Miles Briggs Scotland shows that votes at 16 works
21	Chapter 5 – Lisa Francis My dad would have been ready to vote at 16, and today’s young people are too
25	Chapter 6 – Cecilia George A Tory government could reap the rewards of trusting young people



Introduction

Darren Hughes
Chief Executive
Electoral Reform Society

British politics is becoming increasingly unpredictable – that much we know. But there are some things which are becoming increasingly certain. One of those is the likelihood of 16- and 17-year-olds getting the vote across the UK.

This isn't a hunch – at the start of this year we saw the landmark moment when the Welsh government – in a statement backed by the ERS – revealed it intends to legislate for 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in council elections from 2022.

That came just a month after the Expert Panel on Assembly Reform recommended the minimum voting age for Welsh Assembly elections be extended to 16 with effect from 2021.

These reforms will see Wales replicate the existing situation in Scotland, where 16- and 17-year-olds also took place in the historic 2014 independence referendum.

But the government at Westminster is yet to give its support to similar reforms for either General Elections or local elections in the rest of the United Kingdom. This has left our country divided when it comes to the franchise.

Firstly, while 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland (and soon Wales) are entitled to vote in local

elections, their counterparts in England and Northern Ireland are not.

Secondly, while 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland are entitled to vote for their local and national representatives, they are denied a voice when it comes to electing MPs.

This is a bizarre message to be sending the next generation – and one which we expect to be rectified in the near future.

The question remains: which party will position itself as the foremost advocate for extending the franchise, when – not if – it happens? Who will reap the rewards from leading this charge?

This is an opportunity – one which more Conservative voices are urging their party to seize – not least the Tory Reform Group. Owen Meredith writes about his organisation's backing for the policy, reflecting on contributions from Ruth Davidson MSP and others in 2015.

Nicky Morgan MP has also been vocal in her case for extending suffrage. She makes a direct comparison between the campaign for votes at 16 and the campaign which resulted in partial women's suffrage a century ago.

But, she argues, the one “*overwhelming reason*” for extending the franchise once more is to create a level playing field – for a modern, democratic union of nations.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP also places the current campaign in a historical context, going back to the Great Reform Acts of the nineteenth century. Votes at 16 is the latest chapter in Conservatism's democratic story. He also sets out his experiences with young people in politics, whom he considers to be “*impressive and sensible*”

Miles Briggs MSP also draws on his own personal experiences of witnessing 16- and 17-year-olds in action in Scotland. Their contribution in the lead up to the independence referendum

changed many minds on the right, in favour of a fairer franchise.

From Wales, former Assembly Member Lisa Francis gives a personal take on the debate, through the experiences of her late father. She concludes by asserting that votes at 16 is a matter of ‘Conservative principles’ – the extension of civic duty.

And we hear from Cecilia Parker, who as a young Conservative and former Member of Youth Parliament remarks on the many responsibilities already entrusted to 16- and 17-year-olds, in a rallying cry for fair representation.

The contributions in this pamphlet go well beyond the traditional arguments, and form a persuasive case for the Conservative Party to endorse votes at 16. The alternative is that 16- and 17-year-olds are enfranchised in Scotland and Wales, leaving England looking increasingly out of touch and further fragmenting the UK.

The time is for extending the civic duty of voting and equalising the franchise is now. The Prime Minister should seize this opportunity to show leadership – and inspire a new generation of active citizens.



An updated Conservative case for Votes at 16

Owen Meredith
Chairman of the Tory
Reform Group

In 2015, the TRG put together the *Conservative case for Votes at 16*, with contributions from Ruth Davidson MSP, Sarah Wollaston MP, and Damian Green MP.

In that publication, we sought to address some of the many reason why the Conservative Party should be the one to grant 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote.

Time has moved on, and so have the arguments. Many of those very 16- and 17-years-olds who read that TRG publication with hope will have found themselves with an earlier than expected opportunity to vote when Theresa May called an early General Election in June 2017.

That in itself I find one of the most powerful argument for the cause. While at 18 we acquire the theoretical right to vote, in truth very few of us really have the opportunity to exercise it. Turning 18 shortly after a General Election means your first chance to vote for national government, under the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, is more likely to come aged 23.

In 2015, Ruth Davidson relived the Scottish referendum (where 16- and 17-years-olds could vote) and how that experience changed her mind

on the issues. She found younger voters were more willing to engage in the argument, and hungry for information about the decision in front of them. Far from set in their ways, or following orders from elders, those younger voters took pride and responsibility in voting, understanding the gravity of their ballots.

I myself have been on a journey with this issue. There has to be a cut-off point at which the right to vote is granted. When successive governments have sought to change the age of majority in recent years, it has nearly always been to take rights away from younger people – not to grant them. Indeed, increasingly it seems like governments are less inclined to trust young adults to make decisions for themselves.

Yet as Sarah Wollaston argued, young people will live the longest with the consequences of decisions made by governments in their name. With governments increasingly having to make decisions about the balance of equity between generations as our population lives longer and places greater demand on healthcare resources, it is surely right that young people have a say in those debates.

In moving the floor in the voting age to 16, we would – I hope – see more young people engage in the politics that will shape their lives. By extending the voting age to 16, we will simply achieve what most already assume to be true, lowering the average age at which we first vote closer to 18.

We are pleased to be backing this new addition to the debate – to ensure we have a united suffrage which is fit for the 21st century.

Why Votes at 16 is the next suffrage bridge we must cross

Nicky Morgan

Member of Parliament for
Loughborough and former
Education Secretary

On July 2nd, we marked the 90th anniversary of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act which gave women the same voting rights as men.

In the 21st century it seems almost incomprehensible that women weren't allowed to vote for hundreds of years. But at the time many people, including women, felt that we would be unsuited to making such decisions and that it would disturb the natural order of things for the right to vote to be shared with men. And, of course, there was a time when the right of male suffrage was very limited too.

In the same way that allowing all men and women to vote seemed a brave step forward – but is now something we wonder why it took so long to achieve – I think the time has now come to allow votes for 16- and 17-year-olds. That is why I am backing a Private Members' Bill tabled by Labour MP, Peter Kyle.

I strongly suspect that many of the arguments we hear now are the same that were used before 1918. There is no doubt that the age of adulthood is a bit of a hotchpotch with different rules for leaving school, getting married, carrying a knife and joining the armed forces. But that reflects society's evolving views about these issues and may

change in the future.

But, to me, there is one overwhelming reason why this area has to be addressed. By accepting that 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland could vote on their future in their 2014 referendum, the arguments for not extending the franchise further were completely undermined.

Earlier this year the Welsh Government announced its intention to allow 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in Welsh local elections, and voters of that age can already vote in Scottish local and Parliamentary elections. If we want to remain in a Union with each other then we need to have the same voting system.

In the context of Brexit, there is a determination from the Government not to undermine the United Kingdom. Democracy is a key British value which we teach to our pupils and we encourage them to register to vote and to take part at election time.

We cannot now have elections in different parts of the United Kingdom where 16- and 17-year-olds can vote and then other elections where they cannot.

But the most patronising argument, which I suspect has been recycled from the time of the Suffragettes, and which really doesn't stack up, is that 16- and 17-year-olds aren't mature enough to vote. Making such a sweeping generalisation on the basis of no evidence whatsoever should be given no air time.

There is no political knowledge test which the rest of us are required to pass before we vote. If 16- and 17-year-olds could take their responsibility seriously in the Scottish referendum then why wouldn't they do so in Westminster Parliamentary elections and English local elections?

In the same way that the suffragettes and the suffragists needed visionary men to support their cause, our 16- and 17-year-olds now need older

voters to support theirs. Fear of change is an understandable reason to do nothing – but it sends a powerful ‘not welcome’ message to those who remain excluded.

At any rate, the experience of Scotland shows that Conservatives have little to fear in supporting a fairer franchise – and much to be gained. Labour do not have a monopoly on youth – so it is time we recognised this and provided something inspiring for young people.

It is increasingly clear that votes at 16 is a question of ‘when’, not ‘if’. Given this, we can either stand like King Cnut against a welcome surge in youth engagement – or sail with it.

It is time politicians stopped wringing our hands and wondering why young people aren’t politically engaged – and instead took the most obvious step to address this: by extending the franchise to our 16- and 17-year-olds.

The Suffragette slogan of ‘Deeds not Words’ has resonance again.

Britain's democratic story is unfinished – let's write the next chapter

Sir Peter Bottomley
Member of Parliament for
Worthing

“What it means to be a truly democratic society remains an ongoing, unfinished, story.” These words conclude the history of voting rights on the website of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

In the UK, the story could be said to begin in 1832 with the Great Reform Acts, following the rejection of reform the previous year.

This landmark legislation abolished the ‘rotten boroughs’ – constituencies in which just a handful of people were able to elect the MP. The vote was still limited to just four percent of the population until the second Reform Act 1867, the secret ballot in 1883 and the third Reform Act to seek fairness between rural and urban voting.

Nearly a century later, there was progress again with the Representation of the People Act 1918. This removed practically all property requirements for men, allowed the vote at 19 to military service personnel and enfranchised women over 30 who met property qualifications.

Gender equality concerning voting was achieved via the Equal Franchise Act 1928, though in Northern Ireland many could not meet the property qualification to vote in local elections, and the 1969 Representation of the People Act

reduced the age of voting to 18.

Nearly 50 years on, I am convinced that the electorate should be expanded: people aged 16 and 17 should have the right to vote.

Those who disagree can point to examples of requirements for people to reach the age of 18, such as when buying alcohol or getting married without parental consent in England and Wales.

But there is no logical reason to have a uniform age for all responsibilities. The issues surrounding the various social and political matters in which people are restricted by age vary greatly, and so it is right there are individual debates around each.

When it comes to voting, there is a sensible argument for why the age should be 16. If we are in favour of the average new voter taking part in a national election aged 18, to achieve this, voting eligibility needs to be 16.

General elections occur every five years under normal circumstances. More than half of those newly enfranchised at 16 would only be able to cast a vote once they were aged at least 18.

The direct vote for an MP is an indirect vote for a national government that could be in place for up to five years. By the end of that Government, a 16-year-old will have reached the age of 21.

Beyond this pragmatic argument, there is also a positive story to tell about those we would like to welcome to our democracy.

When I listen to students and apprentices at colleges in my constituency, or to interns in my office, I do not think they are too young to vote.

They are impressive and sensible. They are capable of making reasoned judgments.

I have the same feelings when in discussions with youth councillors and youth mayors across the country.

My appeal to Conservatives and supporters of

other parties who oppose this is not to approach this issue with calculations of party advantage. The United Kingdom's democratic story is more important than that.

Let us unite in trusting and engaging with our country's future. We can add our chapter to the story of reform.

Scotland shows that votes at 16 works

Miles Briggs

Member of the Scottish
Parliament for Lothian

Arguments for and against votes at 16 are often highly subjective. For some time there has been a suspicion that 16- and 17-year-olds are too young to be trusted to vote sensibly – or indeed that they are not interested in securing the vote.

Thankfully, there is no longer an absence of information and experience with which to move this important debate forward.

In Scotland, we are proud to say we were the first nation in the Union to extend the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds. They were first given the opportunity to express their democratic will in 2014 during the independence referendum.

Far from being apathetic, they seized the chance. A survey for the Electoral Commission found 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds had voted in that referendum. Thousands of young people, supposedly uninterested in politics, attending the polling station alongside their parents and grandparents – despite having no experience of having ever done so before.

But it was the experience of how they participated in the debates which surrounded the referendum itself which inspired many Conservatives in Scotland to the cause.

This was not 16- and 17-year-olds being dragged along or told how to vote by their elders. This was 16- and 17-year-olds making up their own minds, contributing to the discussion both inside and outside of their schools, making decisions about what they wanted from their futures.

I have not met anyone who was out there campaigning, who was not impressed by their contribution, their intelligence and their diligence.

Since then this age group has been entitled to vote in both local and Scottish Parliament elections, and has done so.

This has not somehow detracted from Scotland's traditions – it has bolstered them. I believe this to be one of the most politically engaged generations we have seen: people who are also deeply affected by political decisions are actively contributing to our democratic process.

Looking now at the United Kingdom as a whole, we have been left with a democratic anomaly. 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland can vote in local and Scottish Parliament elections, but not in General Elections.

Meanwhile, their counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland remain entirely disenfranchised, frustrated that they do not have the same rights.

This anomaly must be set right.

The positive option is to continue with the progress which has already been made by advancing it across the United Kingdom.

In Wales, there are positive signs. A consultation is ongoing which could result in 16- and 17-year-olds being given a vote in Assembly elections. The Welsh Government also want to extend the voting age for council elections from 2022.

It is in Westminster, and often among my own party, where opposition remains. So let me outline

to my political friends why I believe we should as a party lead this positive change to give 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote.

Many of my Scottish colleagues, having seen the positive experience here, are now firmly of the belief that an extended franchise would not only be a forward-looking step for our party, but would strengthen the bond between our young people and our Union.

Because there is a lot to be gained – both for the Conservative Party and our country – in embracing this shift. Whatever the case, the wheels have been set in motion and the brakes will only hold for so long.

There is an opportunity right now to position the party alongside this group, to earn their trust and support. But this chance could soon disappear.

I am proud that the Scottish Conservatives voted for extending the franchise to all Scottish elections – we have built on recent tradition and have been rewarded for it at the ballot box.

This is now the time for the Conservative Party at a UK-wide level to take this beyond Scotland – ensuring 16- and 17-year-olds are empowered to take control of their lives and help shape the institutions by which they are affected.

Our young people are our future – let's hear their voice.



OPENING TIMES
7.00am-10.00pm

WAY IN →

DISABLED
ACCESS

← POLLING
STATION

My dad would have been ready to vote at 16, and today's young people are too

Lisa Francis

Former Welsh Assembly
Member for Mid and West
Wales

Last year, my dad died at the age of 88. Losing a parent is something of a watershed moment in anyone's life, and it got me thinking very much about his own life. Born in 1929, he had to wait until he was 21 before he cast his first vote.

At 14 he was already out at work, had lost his own father and was using his earnings to contribute to his family's living costs. By the time he'd reached 16, I have no doubt he would have been mature enough to know how he wanted to cast his ballot. I have no doubt either, that he would have exercised that right should it have been allowed.

In the wake of last year's report of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform, which recommended the minimum voting age for Welsh Assembly elections be changed to 16, as a Welsh Conservative Chairman, I found myself discussing the proposal with party members.

Many of those I met (in their seventies and eighties) were quick to conclude that: "*16 is far too young to vote*". Until, that is, they started to think about their own lives and what they had been doing at 16.

Just like my dad, many were already in full-time employment, 'courting seriously' (just love

that expression!), or about to embark on National Service.

‘So, would you have been mature enough to vote?’, I asked them.

Most responded they probably were.

And from a political perspective, if Welsh Conservatives choose not to support votes for 16-year-olds, then other parties will use this as stick with which to beat us – one can already see the tweets:

‘Miserable Tory dinosaurs trample over youth rights’, etc, and frankly, who could blame them?

It cannot be right that we currently have different voting rights in different parts of the UK.

And not just between Wales/Scotland and the rest of the UK: within the Conservative Party it frankly makes no sense at all that some senior Conservatives bang on about 16-year-olds not being mature enough to vote, when the party’s own rules allow 16- and 17-year-olds to become full members of the Party – which includes voting rights in party leadership contests!

Looking again at Scotland, in 2015 Holyrood passed a bill allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local elections, doing so with the support of Conservative MSPs.

The Leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, said at the time:

“The democratic effect turned out to be entirely positive. Surveys before the vote showed that 16- and 17-year-olds had the exact same concerns as everyone else, the economy prime among them”.

If 16-year-olds got the vote, would they turn out?

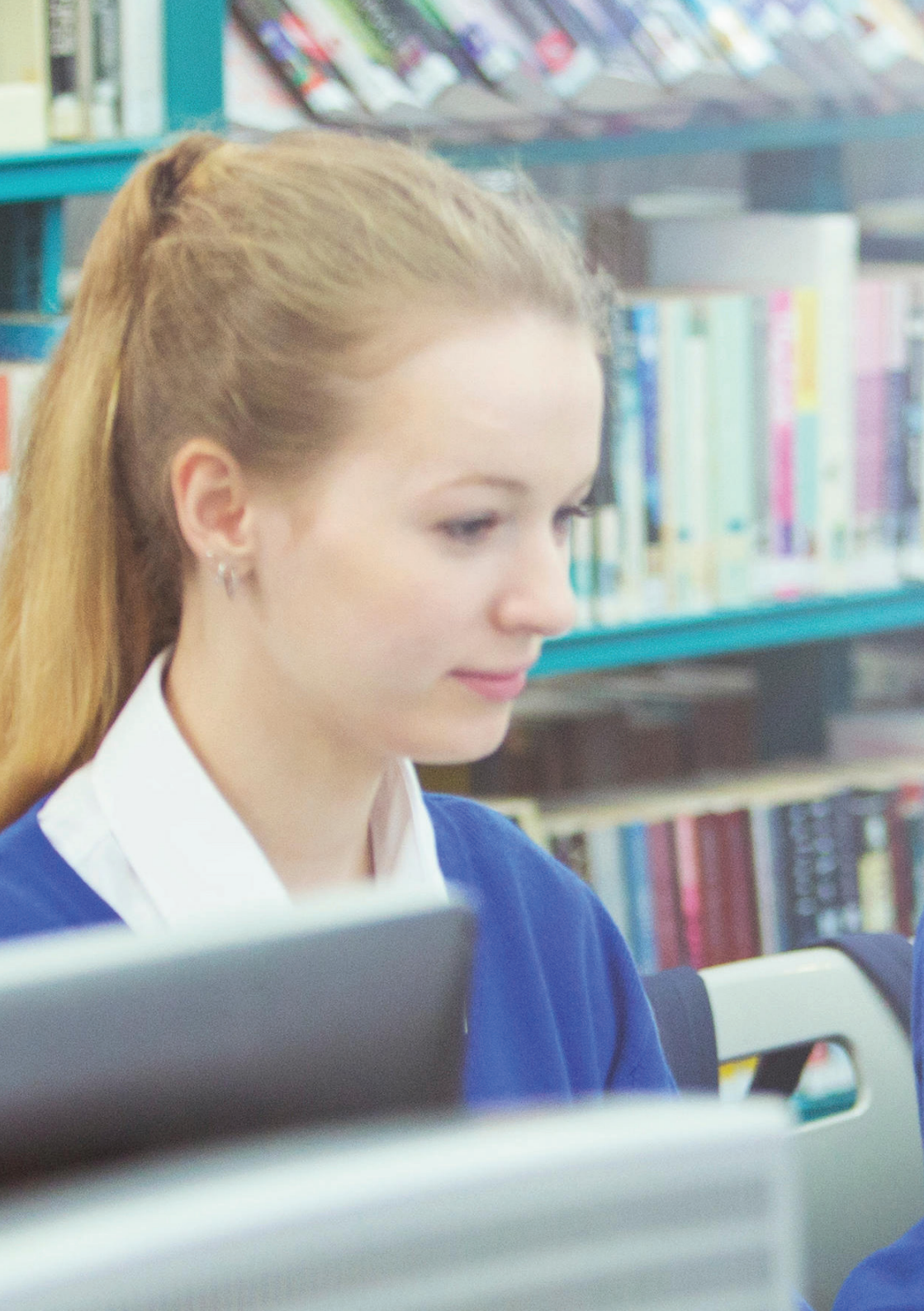
Professor Mark Franklin, who chaired the Advisory Board of the British Election Study 2015, showed whether a person votes the first time they are eligible has a considerable effect on whether they adopt a voting habit thereafter.

And the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform states there are good reasons for establishing the habit of voting at a young age, when many young people are still living at home, leading to increased turnout in the longer term. If enfranchising 16-year-olds increases the proportion of voters who do vote first time, turnout would rise in the long run.

Aside from the considerable evidence on the civic benefits of extending the franchise – from Austria to Scotland – for me this issue is a no-brainer.

If you are old enough to get a national insurance number, join a trade union, leave school, join the armed forces, make a baby and change your name by deed poll, then you are certainly old enough to vote.

This is about Conservative principles. So I'll leave the final word here with Scottish Conservative MP John Lamont, who sensibly said: *"The Conservative party believes in individual responsibility and civic duty – and what better way to extend a sense of civic duty than to give more UK citizens the right to vote?"*



A Tory government could reap the rewards of trusting young people

Cecilia George

Former Member of Youth
Parliament for Wiltshire

16-year-olds are deemed mature enough to join the army, pay taxes, get married with parental consent and even have relationships that could lead to parenthood. And yet time and again I am told my friends are “*not mature enough to vote*”.

Call me cynical but surely – anyone who contributes financially to the state and, indeed, able to risk their life for it, should have a say in how it is run.

The UK has an aging population meaning that, as society grows older, young people will become increasingly underrepresented if the current situation continues.

Yet as a sophisticated and long-established democracy, the UK should be exploring additional ways to increase the representation of its citizens and their interests.

Improving levels of education, and increased awareness of politics have meant that it has never been easier for young people to wrestle with the world of politics and understand party policies. We are more clued up on politics than ever before – and yet our voice is nowhere to be heard in the halls of power.

Right-wing parties need to address the concerns of young people – both through our campaigns and by creating policies that work for them. The current situation – denying 16- and 17-year-olds a say – does the Conservatives no favours.

Jeremy Corbyn appeals to the young because of his shameless targeting of their anxieties, notably around university fees. But while the aims are laudable – I speak as someone about to embark on tertiary education and saddle myself with a mountain of debt – his sums just do not add up, if we want to keep running other national services at a high standard.

We hear so many idealistic, empty promises, swaying towards the left of the political rainbow.

And we hear the ramblings of the Corbynistas. But this is arguably because they thrive on opposition. (Having the Conservative Party in power, means articles containing the latest Tory updates are easy for young Corbynistas to share and complain about.)

The loud, virulent ranting of young left wingers creates the illusion that there is a larger proportion of young people supporting the left than there is in reality. And – while it may currently be a majority – that can change.

Aside from Theresa May's absence from Glastonbury, there are many reasons why the Tory party have fewer than 10,000 young members while Labour have over '15,000 in London alone'.

But given the responsibility of voting – and the political education and in-depth conversations to go alongside it – we can tell that someone with Jagger-like status is not really who we want for PM. Not all young people are so gullible.

There's an understandable fear that opening voting to younger people could possibly lead to an eternal winter of Labour government. But

Generation Z are yet to experience a Labour government – they are not truly aware of the implication of the sort of socialist policies which lead to the former chief secretary to the Treasury, in last Labour government, Liam Byrne, leaving a note for his successor which said “*there’s no money left*”.

But if we trust 16- and 17-year-olds to make contributions to national security, our tax system and building future generations, our democratic system should be mature enough to let them vote. A party that rewards them with that trust could be trusted in return.

Electoral Reform Society

3rd Floor, News Building
3 London Bridge Street
London
SE1 9SG

Email: ers@electoral-reform.org.uk
Phone: 0203 743 6066
Facebook: [electoralreformsociety](https://www.facebook.com/electoralreformsociety)
Twitter: [@electoralreform](https://twitter.com/electoralreform)

☐ Electoral
☐ Reform
☐ Society

**electoral-
reform.org.uk**