
For and Against Lowering the Voting Age: A Round Table

Lord Tyler, Lord Norton of Louth, Lord Wills, Lord Adonis, Baroness Young of Hornsey, Lord Parekh, Lord Wallace of Saltaire

*Under the Edinburgh Agreement between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government for a referendum on independence of Scotland it was agreed that the franchise could be extended to 16 and 17 year-olds for this vote. On January 24, 2013, the British House of Commons voted by 119 to 46 for a motion to rationalise the extension of the franchise in this respect throughout the United Kingdom. A month later the House of Lords debated the issue of voting age, a topic of interest to legislators in Canada and elsewhere who are concerned about ways to engage youth in politics. The following is an abridged version of some of the interventions for and against lowering the voting age. For the full text of all speeches see *Debates of the House of Lords*, February 27, 2013.*



Lord Tyler: It would be patently inequitable, irrational and absurd to limit this reform of the franchise to one part of the country for one occasion only. As things stand, the same cohort of the Scottish population that will be added to the register for the referendum will then be refused a vote in the general election a few months later. That makes no sense. What if a Westminster, Holyrood or local government by-election poll takes place in Scotland on the same day as the referendum? Are 16 and 17 year-olds to be issued with only one ballot paper for the referendum, but excluded from choosing their representative? Would 16 and 17 year-olds be refused a vote in any subsequent referendum, such as on our continuing membership of the European Union? Quite apart from the issues of principle, let us imagine the complex bureaucratic nightmare of such markedly different registers for different purposes if these inequities are allowed to continue.

It is being trailed that the Scottish change was agreed only reluctantly because the First Minister demanded it in exchange for meeting the UK Government's insistence on one simple, approved question in the referendum and a supervisory role for the Electoral Commission. It has even been suggested that Mr Salmond made it a condition of accepting these other

requirements because he anticipated that they would be refused. Some cynics take pleasure in noting that not only did the Westminster Ministers and all parties call his bluff, but all the signs are that younger people are just as doubtful about the merits of breaking up the UK as everyone else.

Whatever may have been the cause of this acceptance of a temporary change to the Scottish electorate, surely no one can deny that it would be irresponsible and damaging if it led to what the Constitution Committee of your Lordships' House has always warned us against—namely an, “*ad hoc* and piecemeal approach to constitutional reform”.

In its report, *The agreement on a referendum on independence for Scotland*, our committee also insists that the relevant authorities must act,

in accordance with their constitutional responsibilities of fairness and equal treatment.

If that applies north of the border, surely it must also apply everywhere else in the United Kingdom. The case for equality in the franchise must make itself for the whole of our country.

However, to those Members of both Houses who regularly attend outreach programme – the substantive case for extending the franchise must be just as clear. Students of this age cohort are far better informed about the major issues of our day than I was at that age.

Fifty years ago, most people inherited their opinions and political allegiances from their parents. This was all too apparent when I first canvassed in the 1960s.

It is of course also true that 18 year-olds at present are, on average, unlikely to have the opportunity to vote in a general election until they are well over 20. Even if the franchise is extended, 16 and 17 year-olds may not have that opportunity until they are 18 or more. However, getting on the electoral register with full entitlement to vote would be a natural end product of the citizenship course in schools. It would become part of the normal process towards complete legal maturity, and addressing it in school would deal with some of the fears about under-registration that have been expressed in this House.

When the Government bring forward regulations for individual electoral registration, they could easily stipulate that all 14 and 15 year-olds in school should be registered in year 10 at school, in readiness for entitlement to vote, once they turn 16. The Government would, in turn, have to bring forward the time at which national insurance numbers are issued, or establish an alternative identifier for this group. That is not that difficult.

This simple but significant change would also help young people to appreciate that national elections are not the only occasions for democratic influence on the conditions in which they live. As Stephen Williams observed when he introduced a successful Motion in the other place on 24 January, this age group has shown a dramatically increased awareness of political issues and institutions in recent years. The audit undertaken by the Hansard Society has shown an increase from 17% to 31%, in a relatively short number of years, in that age group's general knowledge of the working of Parliament, bringing them into line with the older electorate. It should be a logical further step in the success of citizenship education to bring them into the franchise.

I know that some Conservatives resist the idea that a 16 or 17 year-old is mature enough to cast a vote in a local or national election. However, as I noted in the January debate, the Minister responsible, Chloe Smith, was not able to deny that a 15 year-old can be a voting member of the of the Conservative Party, and therefore vote for the election of its leader. What I am asking the Minister to do this afternoon is accept that there is now a strong case for a proper examination of this issue.

As a member of the informal cross-party group of parliamentarians who advise the Electoral Commission, I am very conscious that the commission, rather than party politicians, should be responsible for advising Parliament on extensions to the franchise. However, it

is now nearly 10 years since the commission studied the issue. Its report promised a, "further formal review of the minimum voting age within five to seven years of this report".

That was nine years ago, in 2004. In July 2007, the then Prime Minister promised yet more examination of the case, including an analysis of, "whether reducing the voting age would increase participation in the political process".

Although the resulting Youth Citizenship Commission found strong support for votes for 16 and 17 year-olds, it also identified "a real evidence gap" on the issue. That was nearly four years ago.

There are two areas in which further evidence could be sought immediately. The first is the claimed tendency that those who start voting young, continue to do so throughout their lives. Secondly, we need to take account of the practical experience of secondary schools in Northern Ireland where completion of citizenship naturally leads to inclusion on the individual electoral registration process.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give us a firm commitment, after all these previous promises, that the Government do not consider the upcoming franchise extension in the Scottish referendum as an ad hoc, piecemeal, self-contained irrelevance, and that the Electoral Commission will now be invited to fulfil its promise to undertake further comprehensive investigation as a matter of urgency.



Lord Norton of Louth: Debate on the issue appears to stem from a false premise. Voting is a consequence of political interest, not a cause of it. Lowering the voting age is not likely to have a positive impact on turnout any more than it did when it was lowered to 18 in 1969. It did not promote participation in democracy, but rather served to demonstrate what we already knew: young people are among the groups least likely to vote. That is borne out by the data for recent general elections. One does not change that by further lowering the voting age.

Focusing on the voting age may be seen as a form of displacement activity, recommending change to process rather than addressing the real causes of distrust in the political system. The claim made in another place by one MP in an Early Day Motion that, "lowering the voting age could play a huge role in helping young

people feel more connected with political processes”, is to misunderstand the root of the problem and is arguably a dangerous misunderstanding.

Our time today would be better spent getting to grips with the really important question of why young people are not willing to engage with the political process. As the Youth Citizenship Commission observed,

while enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year olds is a valid issue for consideration, it is not the key component of any strategy for better engagement of young people.

It is variously pointed out that more young people will vote for participants in television programmes such as “X Factor” and “Britain’s Got Talent” than vote for parties in a general election. However, that observation rather misses the key point, which is that nowadays political activity has to contend with a plethora of competing interests in a way that it did not have to 40 or 50 years ago. Political parties used to hold a more prominent role in social activity than they do today. Young people are now able to indulge their passions, which can be instant and transient, through social media. Political parties are not able to respond effectively. They cannot offer instant gratification. Neither, I fear, can elections. We need to be addressing this mismatch. There is no easy answer, which is all the more reason for addressing the problem. What we are discussing this afternoon does not get to grips with the real issue.

As to the voting age, what are the arguments for change? Those who favour lowering the voting age advance the argument that at 16 you can join the Army, marry and pay taxes. You cannot simply join the Army at 16. You can apply to join the Army, which is not the same thing at all. Having applied, you have to be selected. What this recognises is that only certain people in this category have the requisite ability. Even if you are selected, you are not sent to the front line. You can marry but only with parental consent. Very few 16 year-olds pay income tax.

As the previous Government’s Children and Young People’s Unit said in its *Young People and Politics: A Report on the YVote/YNot? Project* in 2002:

As far as lowering the voting age is concerned, it is clearly necessary to decide at what minimum age most people are sufficiently politically aware, mature, and independent to make up their minds and choose between the various candidates standing for election. On balance, Government takes the view that there is more likely to be a higher percentage of people aged 18 who are able to do this than at 16.

We live in a society where the road to becoming an adult is staggered. We grant rights to young people

at different ages on their journey to adulthood. There has to be some age at which we grant the right to vote. No magical property attaches to it being at 18, but neither does it to being at 16. Most nations opt for 18. A number do not, and just because most nations follow one practice, it does not mean that we have to follow. However, given the lack of a compelling case for change, and with no clear public support for it, I am not persuaded by the case that my friend proposes.



Lord Wills: I am more agnostic than Lord Tyler about the issue of lowering the voting age. It is not an issue where sides are chosen on the grounds of political ideology. It is also an unusual issue in that positions are not driven, as is so much public policy, by differing priorities. Rather, the position taken on this issue seems to be as

much the result of some gut instinct as anything else. For every argument advanced by one side there is an equally compelling argument on the other.

If the argument for lowering the voting age is that young people should be considered adults at 16 rather than 18, there are counterarguments that young people mature at different rates. Whereas some are clearly adults at 16, others are clearly not, and there is no sensible way of evaluating this. If the argument is that the law should be consistent in a way that it is not currently and that there should be one age at which young people are deemed to have become adults, with all the rights and responsibilities that follow, there is no particular reason why it should not be equalised at 16 rather than at 17, when young people are deemed mature enough to take possession of the lethal weapon that is a motor car-or at 18, which will soon be the age up to which young people will be deemed unarguably in need of full-time education.

If the argument is that possession of the vote will engage young people more in civil society and democracy, there is no evidence that it has had that effect on those aged 18 and over. If the argument is the principled one of no taxation without representation, it will soon be the case, when the school leaving age becomes 18, that the already very small number of 16 and 17 year-olds who pay tax will dwindle even further.

In the face of the directly conflicting arguments that have clearly bedevilled the resolution of this issue for many years, it might be tempting to fall back on the essentially conservative argument that Lord

Norton, put forward: namely, that the case for change is insufficiently compelling to merit the upheaval that always accompanies any kind of profound constitutional change. However, I have an alternative suggestion.

Whenever constitutional change is discussed politicians lament the decline of trust in politicians, the increasing disengagement from formal political, democratic processes, and how disadvantaged groups and younger people are increasingly unlikely to vote at elections. One way of helping to tackle these problems is to develop ways in which the public can be more directly involved in the formulation of public policy. New methods of engaging the public in this way through deliberative democracy are potentially important both in engaging the public in politics between elections and in improving public policy.

Such methods would bring together perhaps 500 to 1,000 people to deliberate on policy, exposing them to a range of opinions and policy options and allowing them to debate them over a period of time, typically a day or two, before coming to conclusions. Such exercises would enable the public to bring relevant knowledge, experience and wisdom to bear on policy formation that may not always be available to cloistered Ministers and officials. Engaging the public in this way could help legitimise and entrench policy that might otherwise be unnecessarily contentious.

When politicians cannot come to any sort of settled agreement on an issue such as the one we are discussing today, constitutional change should always take place as far as possible on the basis of broad agreement across Parliament. That is not always possible, but it should always be at least the starting point. When the change so directly affects our constitutional arrangements and, therefore, everyone in the country, such deliberative democratic arrangements could play an important role in crystallising the issues and helping Parliament to come to a conclusion, thereby providing an important part of that proper consideration that Lord Tyler, has so rightly called for. Those involved in such an exercise would be selected randomly but filtered to ensure that they are demographically broadly representative. In this case, they might legitimately include a significant weighting of 16 and 17 year-olds. Whatever decision this group arrived at, in keeping with our precious system of representative democracy, it would still be for Parliament to reach the final decision, but now it could now do so informed by the wisdom of the people that it serves.



Lord Adonis: I support votes at 16. It was Aristotle who said: “We are what we repeatedly do”. This is of course why education is so important in forming social habits as well as acquiring information and skills.

In this country we are ambivalent about educating teenagers in democracy and democratic duties, even as we complain incessantly that teenagers are too irresponsible and disengaged. The issue of the voting age typifies this ambivalent and contradictory stance. We deplore the fact that only 44% of 18 to 29 year-olds voted in the previous general election, yet many draw the conclusion that to lower the voting age would pile apathy on apathy. I draw the opposite lesson. Too few young people vote, in part because democracy and education in democracy are not, as Aristotle would put it, repeatedly done at school and college as teenagers are maturing.

Democracy and civic responsibility need to be taught and learnt in schools. We cannot carry on, as with sex education a generation ago, expecting them to be learnt spontaneously or informally, where parents are not engaged, and then complain when this does not happen. This is why the previous Government introduced citizenship as a subject in the school curriculum. It is why I strongly support school councils, in primary schools as well as secondary schools; it is why, in my own party, I am constantly urging university students to stand in local elections and to become councillors; and it is why I now believe that the time has come to lower the voting age to 16, in national and local elections.

I take up the point made by Lord Norton: this is not because that is the only step needed to promote civic responsibility among teenagers. He and Lord Wills have identified a number of other possible steps, many of which I support. However, I do not understand the argument made by Lord Norton, against votes at 16 that because it is only one among several steps needed, and not a *panacea*, it should therefore not be taken at all. That is a very conservative argument against progress of any kind.

It is important not to see these things in isolation. Education and democracy need to go together literally. Most 16 to 18 year-olds are in school or college, and that is where the polling stations should be as well. Every school with a sixth form and every further education and sixth-form college should have a polling station, and young people should be registered to vote there-instead of there being the perversity that some

schools are actually closed on polling day so that the adults can vote undisturbed. If we did this, voting would become a semi-obligatory rite of passage, like taking GCSEs and A-levels; citizenship education in schools would have a stronger and more urgent focus; candidates and parties, in local as well as national elections, would regard school and college students as a key constituency; and mock elections would lead to real elections within the education system itself, in the same way that mock exams lead to real exams, and work experience leads, it is hoped, to real work. All this can and should be done.

We are told by Lord Norton that Britain should not innovate in this way because it might make us look odd internationally. When Britain helped lead Europe in introducing and sustaining democracy in the 19th and 20th centuries, we often looked odd. But we were odd and right, and others followed. I am sure that it would be the same, in time, with votes at 16.



Baroness Young of Hornsey: Encouraging young people to become actively involved in local community politics through exercising a right to vote could help reinvigorate local government, as well as contribute to boosting the number of people who vote in police and crime commissioner elections, and so on. I agree with

Lord Norton, that giving younger people the right to vote should not be seen as a universal *panacea* for increasing engagement with parliamentary and local government democracy, but there seems to be little evidence to suggest that lowering the voting age will be detrimental to voter turnout. In Austria, Nicaragua, Guernsey and the Isle of Man—where 16 year-olds are allowed to vote—there are consistently higher levels of voter turnout than we currently have here, and we need to understand why.

I have heard some extraordinary comments about 16 year-olds and their apparent lack of sense, political naivety, lack of intellectual capacity, inability to tell when they are being taken for a ride, attachment to superficiality and celebrity, et cetera. I only wish I could say that none of those observations applies to people of my own and other age groups. In my experience of visiting schools and speaking with groups visiting Parliament, young people know and feel very strongly about key global issues relating to the environment and poverty, through connections with schools overseas, the internet, and so on. As Lord Tyler, has said, this information was simply not available when many of us were younger.

Back in 2006, in response to a recommendation by the Power report, one MP argued against the lowering of the voting age to 16, saying:

Clearly, a line must be drawn to indicate when a young person becomes an adult, and the present age of 18 is widely accepted across society as signifying a major turning point in the personal development and maturity of individuals.

Of course, that is not actually true because there is so little consistency about when we deem a young person to be an adult. In any case, those kinds of distinctions are very much socially constructed and change over the years. When I was a teenager, the line was drawn at 21, and I am sure that at that time it seemed equally obvious that that was the magical age at which maturity suddenly dawned. But I would argue that even in the seven years since the inquiry headed by the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy of The Shaws, reported its findings on participation, we have seen sufficient changes in society to warrant a fresh look at this issue.

There is a general recognition, that many of our children and young people mature physically and psychologically earlier than previous generations. Some even have the responsibilities associated with older people, such as acting as carers for family members. Since the 1980s, more and more young people have expected to go on to further and higher education and as a consequence have had to develop skills of intellectual analysis, which again were not necessarily available to some of us when we were younger. A-levels are offered across the country in government, politics and public administration, and there are courses on citizenship, rights and responsibilities, mock elections, and so on.

As has already been mentioned, the so-called new media such as Twitter, YouTube, the internet and apps offer opportunities to learn about the world in a much wider way than ever before. Young people born into the digital age are most adept at exploiting these resources.

Anyone who doubts that 16 and 17 year-olds are capable of unpicking and analysing political discourse should go to some of the schools that colleagues and I have visited as part of the Peers in Schools programme.

When I went to Haringey Sixth Form Centre in Tottenham, when we were in deadlock here debating the reform of the House of Lords, I was well grilled by a group of 16 and 17 year-olds on every aspect of the Bill in a very knowledgeable way and in great detail. They were far more knowledgeable than some of my friends outside the House.

Then there is the Youth Parliament, formed in 1998. Members are aged between 11 and 18 and more than

500,000 young people vote in the elections each year. I will give the last word to somebody who was a representative in the Youth Parliament and who now interns for me, Adam Jogee. About six years ago, when he was 16, he wrote the following:

As an elected representative of the young people of Haringey, I have first hand experience of their passion, energy and commitment: the energy they use to serve our community, the passion with which they view the world and its future and the commitment which they use to contribute to our society. If we look back over the decades, there are countless cases and examples of people rising up and fighting for their basic human right-the right to vote!



Lord Parekh: I must have thought about this question for nearly 40 years as a political philosopher. Although it is a subject on which it is difficult to take a definite position, because one can see arguments on both sides, I am increasingly convinced that the case for a reduction in age from 18 to 16 is very weak and the

case against it is fairly strong.

The case for it seems to rest on three arguments, which I will call the arguments of consistency, fairness and democracy. The first argument runs something like this: reducing the age to 16 will bring it in line with other areas of life; for example, children can leave school at 16, get married at 16, can and have to pay tax at 16, join the Armed Forces at 16 and consent to sexual relations at 16. If that is the common age, why can it not be true of voting as well?

The second, right-based, argument is that 16 year-olds these days have the maturity to form political judgment and it is only right that they should be able to vote in the same way as 18, 19 or 20 year-olds. The third argument is that it will increase their interest in politics and strengthen the foundations of participatory democracy.

I am afraid that I am not persuaded by any of these three arguments. The first, that it will bring it in line with other areas of life, is a half-truth. There are several areas of life in which 16 year-olds today cannot do things; for example, they cannot buy alcohol, they cannot serve on a jury and they cannot place a bet. If they can join the Armed Forces at 16, it is only with the consent of their parents, not on their own. Therefore, to say that it will bring them in line is not true.

It is also important to bear in mind that, although they pay taxes-the argument being that there should

be no taxation without representation-if a five year-old or seven year-old goes to a shop to buy a bar of chocolate, he ends up paying VAT or whatever indirect taxes he is subjected to. It would be wrong to say that a nine year-old should be able to vote simply because he pays tax; the argument would be absurd.

On the second argument, that one can acquire the capacity for political judgment on what is the right thing to do at 16, there is no evidence for this. What kind of research is this alluding to? I have not seen any here, in the United States, or in any of our European partners. People having access to more information on the internet simply means that they have more information-but information is not knowledge, let alone judgment. In politics, as a voter one is concerned with a practical activity that entails a practical judgment about the range of possibilities that are open to one, and how one should exercise one's vote. Practical judgment does not come simply by looking at Google and the internet. I would say the same of citizenship classes. One can marshal all kinds of information about various political ideologies; all the things that we have taught in universities for years. Does the kind of information that one can communicate to students in itself give someone the competence to make a political judgment on the issue of whether they should be voting Labour or Liberal Democrat, or whether or not they should be supporting the war in Iraq?

On the third argument, that this will increase their interest in politics: fair enough. However, as Lord Norton said, that seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. You cannot dangle a vote in front of somebody, saying, "We will give you the vote now in the hope that you will take an interest in politics". One would hope that a vote is a reward, not an incentive. We are reducing a supremely sacred political activity-the vote, the exercise of highest sovereignty a community has-to dangling a kind of carrot and asking, "Look, if we give it to you, will you vote?". It is striking that 18 year-olds have had votes for a long time. In the previous general election, only 39.6% of them voted, compared to the rest of the population at somewhere in the region of 70%.

Therefore, I would suggest that the arguments for are not persuasive; at least I have not found them persuasive so far, but other arguments could be produced, in which case I would like to hear them. The arguments against 16 year-olds being allowed to vote seem fairly strong. First, as I say, voting is an exercise of power. It is a participation in sovereignty. If you are going to exercise power, you must have a capacity for judgment of a practical kind. Unless you have had some experience of life, some independent existence

and have broken out of the sheltered environment of the family and seen the world on your own and made choices, how will you be able to know what kind of judgment you should make?

My other simple fear is that, given low turnout among young people and the fact that low turnout can be habit-forming, if a 16 year-old gets into the habit of not voting, he or she might continue that habit until the end of their lives. There is a danger that if we give 16 year-olds the vote in the hope that they will participate more enthusiastically in the voting process, the opposite will occur.



Lord Wallace of Saltaire: Let me stress that the Government have no plans to lower the voting age in this Parliament and that, as has already been mentioned, there is no consensus within the coalition Government. That in turn reflects the different views held across society at large and the divergent positions on this topic

both within and across the various political parties. After all, we have discovered over the course of the past two and a half years just how difficult political and constitutional change is and how on any proposals for political and constitutional change there are always at least 15 different and contradictory arguments for why nothing should be done, while fewer arguments are made in support of the case for change. Nevertheless, we welcome the ongoing discussions and debate on this issue and we would encourage Lord Tyler, and others to maintain their approach.

On the question of the age of majority, which was raised by a number of Lords, I simply repeat the comment made by Lord Parekh, that there is no standard age of majority within the United Kingdom. The process of moving from childhood to majority takes place over several years, and the question of where that should be standardised would itself open up a very difficult process. However, the question of how to re-engage young people in our democracy, in citizenship and in local society is important and we all need to address it. When taking the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill through the House of Lords, I was struck by how severe a problem this is becoming. Younger people do not feel engaged in politics and they are not committed to political parties.

In one way or another, we all have to address that problem. Lord Adonis said that providing the vote at the age of 16 is not the answer, but it may be one of the ways of contributing to an answer. It would certainly mean that schools and parties would pay much more attention to citizenship education, which is important, and we would have to think about how else we could hook young people into their local communities and into wider engagement as a whole.

We all recognise, as Lord Norton, pointed out, that young people are already the least likely to vote. That is the problem, of course, and the question is how to tackle it. We know that a number of things have contributed to it: the increasing remoteness of national politics; the decline in local government and local politics; the decline in respect for our political institutions—above all for Westminster—and the decline of participation at all levels in intermediate bodies from churches and chapels to trade unions and social organisations. The question is: where do we go from here and how can we ensure that engagement in democracy at all levels from the local to the national does not continue to decline in the long term? We cannot let this question go.

Perhaps, as Lord Wills suggests, deliberative democracy on the Granada 500 model is something that we should be experimenting with again in terms of bridging the gap between the governors and the governed. However, I suspect that television companies would be less willing to invest in such activities today as they were 20 or 25 years ago, partly because they would be less convinced that it would command the sort of audience that those very interesting experiments did in the 1980s.

We have a real problem here; we do not yet have a consensus on how we should move forward, as the debate has again shown. The research that there has been in a number of different projects is itself inconclusive. The Government do not disagree with the conclusions of the youth commission report that the approach of using independent commissions to review this should not be used again in the near future. However, we all need to focus. All of us who are committed to democratic politics and want to see a high level of political engagement have a huge and rising problem. All the research that went into looking at the shift to individual electoral registration persuaded me that this is a large and secular issue to which we do not have much of an answer.