

BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL

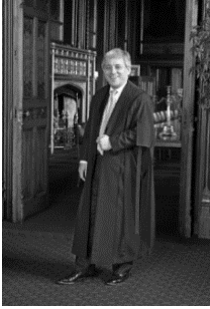
Youth Select Committee 2014

Lowering the voting age to 16

British Youth Council

Youth Select Committee 2014

Lowering the voting age to 16



Introduction from Mr Speaker

I am delighted to introduce the third Youth Select Committee Report on Votes at 16, produced by the British Youth Council with support from the House of Commons.

I believe that it is extremely important for young people to have the opportunity to participate directly in the consideration of issues that affect them.

As Speaker I met with the young people involved in running the Committee and I was most impressed with their dedication to ensuring a fair and full examination of the topic of votes at 16 and whether 16 and 17 year olds should have the right to vote in all elections.

It is wonderful to see the progress and development of the Youth Select Committee each year and I am looking forward to seeing the outcome of this report and recommendations.

Mr Speaker, Rt Hon John Bercow MP

The Youth Select Committee

The Youth Select Committee is an initiative by the British Youth Council to encourage young people's participation in issues that affect them.

Current membership

Michael Hope (Chair)	Scottish Representative
Thea Smith (Vice Chair)	Member of Leeds Youth Council
Saadia Sajid	Former Elected Deputy Young Mayor for Newham and Member of Newham Youth Council
Louise Hawkins	Member of Barnet Youth Board
Brandon Minichiello	Member of Youth Parliament for Hertfordshire
Thrinayani Ramakrishnan	Member of Youth Parliament for Somerset
Philip Robinson	Member of Scout Association
Joe Higginson	Member of Youth Parliament for North Down, Northern Ireland
Orson Gard	Member of Bristol Youth Council
Jack Gillum,	Member of Funky Dragon, Wales
Shakeel Hajat	Member of Youth Parliament for Derbyshire

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to: The British Youth Council, CAN Mezzanine, 49-51 East Road, London, N1 6AH. Or via mail@byc.org.uk

In memory of Paul Boskett MBE 1954-2014

Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Summary	3
Introduction	5
1 Voting as a right	7
2 At what age should the voting age be set?	8
Introduction	8
Rights and responsibilities	8
Maturity	9
Ages of maturity the voting age	9
Are 16 year olds mature enough to vote?	11
Reviewing the age of responsibility?	12
Conclusion	13
Balancing rights and responsibilities	14
Public opinion on lowering the voting age	14
Practicalities of lowering the voting age	16
Young voters and public policy	17
Young voter turnout and engagement	19
Recommendation	21
3 Young people’s engagement in politics	23
Introduction	23
Are young people disengaged from politics?	23
Why are young people disengaged from formal politics?	25
Addressing youth engagement in politics	27
Introduction	27
Work to increase engagement	28
Citizenship education	30
First time compulsory voting	32
Youth engagement work and lowering the voting age	33
Recommendations	33
Conclusions and recommendations	36
Witnesses	41
Published written evidence	42
About the Youth Select Committee	44
About the British Youth Council	45

Summary

The Youth Select Committee has undertaken an inquiry into whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 for all UK elections. This followed a UK-wide ballot organised by the British Youth Council called 'Make Your Mark', in which all young people could vote on what Members of the UK Youth Parliament should campaign on for the year ahead. 478,000 11 to 18 year olds voted in 2013 and chose Votes at 16 in all public elections as their preferred topic.

We are very proud of the democracy in which we live and of the UK's history extending the franchise. We consider voting to be a human right, and therefore any restrictions placed on it should be the minimum to achieve their aim. One legitimate restriction on the right to vote is that people should be mature enough to make a decision, and therefore it is right that there should be an age limit on voting. UK society has a number of different ages at which it gives rights and responsibilities to people, and there is no single age of maturity in the UK, although both 16 and 18 are clearly important milestones. We firmly believe that 16 year olds are mature enough to vote and we think our evidence supported this. There is no conclusive proof of the age at which people are, in general, mature enough to vote, and if there is any uncertainty, the least possible restriction on the right to vote should be imposed. We recommend that the voting age be lowered to 16.

The experience of the recent referendum in Scotland, in which a very high proportion of 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote, shows that including 16 and 17 year olds on the electoral register is achievable. There would be some practical obstacles to lowering the voting age following recent changes to voter registration, but these could be overcome.

Evidence suggests that policy makers may design policies which benefit people who vote over those who don't. Low voter turnout among young people may therefore create a risk of them being disadvantaged by government policy. Lowering the voting age alone would reduce this risk by increasing the number of young voters, but lowering the voting age alongside measures to increase engagement could make an even bigger difference.

Young people are interested in and care about political issues and the world around them. However, they do not appear to be engaged in formal political processes. This must be addressed. To prepare for lowering the voting age, a comprehensive programme should be designed and implemented to improve formal political engagement among young people. Young people's education does not currently prepare them adequately to vote. Politics should be taught in schools, including explaining the fundamental differences between the main political parties. Lowering the voting age alongside such a programme has the potential to ensure that a well-informed, engaged generation is equipped to take our democracy into the future.

Introduction

1. The UK has a proud history of struggle by its people for the right to choose by whom they are governed by voting in elections. This has resulted in extension of the right to vote, also known as the franchise, to a greater and greater proportion of the population, from only certain rich, male landowners in the early nineteenth century to all people over 18 today.¹ This progress has happened in many steps and continued into recent history: less than a century has passed since women secured the vote, and 18 to 20 year olds have only been able to vote for 45 years. The purpose of this inquiry is to consider the case for giving 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote in all elections. Our terms of reference can be found at <http://www.byc.org.uk/uk-work/youth-select-committee>.

2. This topic was referred to the Youth Select Committee by the British Youth Council (BYC) in November 2013 following both BYC's Annual Council Meeting and the prioritisations of campaigns at the United Kingdom Youth Parliament's Annual Sitting in favour for the following year. Each year the UK Youth Parliament holds a UK-wide ballot called 'Make Your Mark', in which all young people can vote on what they think Members of the Youth Parliament should campaign on for the year ahead. 478,000 11 to 18 year olds voted in 2013 and chose Votes at 16 in all public elections as the leading issue. The top five issues chosen by the national poll were debated as motions by Members of Youth Parliament in the House of Commons Chamber in November 2013 and Members voted for Votes at 16 to be their priority campaign for 2014. Despite the position in favour of lowering the voting age taken by the BYC and UKYP, we have approached the inquiry with open minds and taken evidence from people with a variety of views.

3. Ours is not the first investigation into lowering the voting age in recent years. In 2004, the Electoral Commission published a review of the voting age which included a public consultation. This concluded that the voting age should stay at 18 "for the time being", but recommended that the situation be reviewed in five to seven years.² In 2006 the Power Commission, a review funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust on political disengagement among the whole population, recommended lowering the voting age as a way of "reducing the extent of [...] exclusion [from the political process] for many thousands of young people, and of increasing the likelihood of their taking an interest, and taking part, in political and democratic debate".³ In 2008 the Government created the Youth Citizenship Commission to "examine ways to invigorate young people's understanding of the historical narrative of our country and of what it means to be a British citizen, and to increase their participation in the political sphere".⁴ This included a consultation on lowering the voting age; the inquiry did recommend lowering the voting age, concluding that "there is a real evidence gap on this issue".⁵ There have also been a

1 The right of people over 18 to vote is subject to a limited number of exceptions; see Chapter 2.

2 Age of electoral majority: report and recommendations, Electoral Commission, April 2004

3 Power to the People, Power Commission, February 2006.

4 The Governance of Britain, Cm 7170 July 2007

5 Youth Citizenship Commission, Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16? June 2009

number of attempts to lower the voting age through Private Members' Bills, none of which was successful in passing into law.⁶

4. In this report we first, in chapter 2, consider the implications of voting being a human right. In chapter 3 we go on to consider in detail some of the arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16. Finally, in chapter 4 we examine the reasons for low levels of political engagement among younger people and some potential remedies for this. While the initial focus of our inquiry was solely on lowering the voting age, it became clear that youth engagement in politics was an issue that was difficult to separate from this question. Therefore the scope of our inquiry broadened to include it.

5. We would like to thank all of those who gave up their time to submit oral or written evidence to the committee. We recognise the thought and effort this involved and are grateful to those who gave oral evidence for approaching their contribution to the committee with the same professionalism and rigour with which witnesses approach parliamentary committees.

⁶ A Private Members' Bill is a proposal for a law which is made by an individual MP or Member of the House of Lords. It is not very common for them to be made law. Most proposals for new laws (Bills) are made by the Government.

1 Voting as a right

6. The right of all adult citizens (with a small number of exceptions⁷) to vote in elections is an important part of the UK's unwritten constitution, and is enshrined in law in the Representation of the People Act 1983, which brought together a number of laws that were already in existence.⁸ In recent years it has also been established that voting is a human right under Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which is part of UK law following the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998. However, the right to vote is not unrestricted. Isabella Sankey, Policy Director at Liberty, said that while the right to vote was “a fundamental human right”, there were “many restrictions that can be imposed for good reason, and are, across the world”, which included age restrictions.⁹ David Kingman, a researcher at the Intergenerational Foundation, agreed, saying that “there is nothing wrong with having reasonable restrictions on the application of the human right.”¹⁰ Other witnesses told us that they did not consider that 16 and 17 year olds were currently suffering a breach of their human rights by not being allowed to vote.¹¹

7. However, Liberty also pointed out that when human rights were limited, “any restrictions [...] must pursue a legitimate aim and be shown to be proportionate.”¹² The Intergenerational Foundation argued that because voting was a human right, it should be up to those seeking to restrict the franchise to demonstrate why it should be so restricted, saying “given that the vote is regarded as a fundamental human right in a democracy, surely the burden of proof should rest upon those who want to restrict access to the franchise, rather than upon those who want to expand it.”¹³

8. The right to vote in elections is a well-established and vital part of the UK constitution and a fundamental human right. We accept that there can be legitimate restrictions on the right to vote, and that one of those restrictions is the age at which people vote. However, because voting is a human right, any restrictions placed on it should be the minimum to achieve their aim.

9. Given that voting is a human right which can be limited by age, in the next chapter we discuss some of the arguments about at what age that restriction should be imposed.

7 The exceptions are Members of the House of Lords, detained convicted prisoners, offenders detained in a mental hospital and persons convicted or reported as guilty by an election court of certain corrupt or illegal practices (see HM Government written evidence)

8 For a comprehensive summary of who is able to vote in UK elections see the Government's written evidence paras 11 to 20

9 Q 53

10 Q 54

11 Q 53 [Darren Hughes]; Q26 [Andy Mycock]

12 Liberty written evidence

13 Intergenerational Foundation written evidence

2 At what age should the voting age be set?

Introduction

10. In this chapter, we consider a number of arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16. First we examine the arguments which centre on the other rights and responsibilities which 16 and 17 year olds have, and we break this down into arguments about maturity and arguments about whether some rights and responsibilities should be linked. Next we consider public opinion on lowering the voting age and the effect of this on whether the voting age should be lowered, the practical implications of lowering the voting age, and, finally, the relationship between lowering the voting age and the engagement of young people in formal politics. As this chapter considers different factors relevant to a single question of whether the voting age should be lowered, we draw some conclusions throughout, but all of our recommendations are at the end of the chapter along with our recommendation on lowering the voting age.

Rights and responsibilities

11. The argument that is perhaps put forward most often for lowering the voting age is that people are given a number of rights and responsibilities at 16, and therefore should be allowed to vote at that age too. For example, Rt Hon Sadiq Khan MP, Opposition Spokesman for Justice, said in a recent speech:

Think of some of the things that a 16 year old is able to do [...], like marry or enter into a civil partnership, become the director of a company, and join the armed forces. And think of the things that the state has decided a 16 year old in work must do, such as paying income tax and National Insurance. So, while in a pure numbers sense, 16 year olds may be technically teenagers, they are also young adults deemed old enough and responsible enough to begin to take part and engage in adult life by being afforded some incredibly important privileges. And yet, our young adults are not allowed to step into a voting booth to select the elected representatives that govern them on a daily basis.¹⁴

12. A large number of respondents to our call for evidence made similar points. However, simply saying that because 16 year olds have some rights and responsibilities they should also have the vote is an oversimplification of this issue. Dr Andrew Mycock, reader in politics at the University of Huddersfield acknowledged this when he said “the terms of [the] debate [about the voting age] and the depth of quality have been limited. Often it is reduced to proponents saying “tax, marriage, Army” and opponents saying “tax, marriage, Army”.¹⁵

14 Sadiq Khan, *Why I believe 16 and 17 year olds should be allowed to vote in all elections*, 24 January 2013, <http://centrallobby.politicshome.com>

15 Q 39

13. This argument actually addresses two separate issues. The first is that of maturity, and the second is whether certain responsibilities should carry with them certain rights. We address both below.

Maturity

Ages of maturity the voting age

14. The mental and emotional maturity to make an informed decision on who to vote for is a desirable quality for any voter. Witnesses pointed out that there was no age at which everyone suddenly reached adult maturity, but that, because judging maturity on a case-by-case basis for each individual is completely impractical, society had to pick an age at which it judged that most people were mature enough to vote.¹⁶ Hassan Abu-Bakir explained that “What actually constitutes an adult is such a grey area. Plus, people mature at different ages. It is difficult to put an arbitrary stop at one point and say, ‘At this point you are not mature enough to make that decision, but at this point you are.’ It just does not work.”¹⁷ Given that no age will be perfect, it is therefore necessary to choose an age at which most people will be mature enough to vote. Even this is a very difficult thing to do, not least because of the question of who should decide at what age young people become mature, and the approach many take is to make reference to the different ages at which young people are currently allowed or required to do certain things as a way of measuring society’s view on when people are mature. These types of argument are used both by those for and those against lowering the voting age: those in favour argue that as society judges 16 year olds to be mature enough to make a number of important decisions then they must be mature enough to vote, whereas those against argue that because there are a number of rights that do not come until people are 18, they should not be judged mature enough to vote at 16.

15. These arguments are problematic. The age at which responsibilities accrue to young people varies. For example, the age of criminal responsibility in the UK is 10; young people cannot buy alcohol or cigarettes until they are 18; they can join the armed forces (but not serve in combat) at 16; they can learn to drive at 17; and they can give consent to sexual activity at 16, but in certain circumstances (for instance where their partner is in a position of responsibility) not until 18; certain vehicle licences cannot be obtained until 21.¹⁸ Some political parties allow 15 year olds to vote on party policies.¹⁹ Matt Korris, Senior Researcher at the Hansard Society, in response to arguments about rights and responsibilities told us that “I am not sure that that argument holds unless there is one

16 Q 53 [Isabella Sankey]; See also Mark Harper MP written evidence

17 Q 20

18 Barbara Hearne; intergenerational foundation; for example see <https://www.gov.uk/agricultural-vehicle-licences-and-fuel>

19 For example see Q 213 and Q 241

clear point at which society has decided that you are mature enough to do all of these things.”²⁰ There is no such point.

16. We also heard evidence that in recent years governments have tended to give rights and responsibilities, for instance the right to buy cigarettes, to young people at a higher age, and that young people are taking up some of the rights they received at 16, like leaving home and getting married, later than they have in the past. Some suggested that lowering the voting age would sit oddly with this general trend.²¹ Andrew Russell, Professor of Politics at the University of Manchester, said that “The direction of travel is towards embedding 18 as the age of national adulthood”, and Matt Korris supported this view.²² However, using this fact to argue against lowering the voting age is problematic itself. The recent upward trajectory in the age of responsibility has come at a time when young voters are less of a force to be reckoned with by politicians than in previous generations (see later in this report), and when 16 and 17 year olds have no say at all in elections. Dr Mycock said that “[politicians] see, because older people are voting in more numbers, that it is more politically salient to curtail the social rights of young people.”²³ Also, the fact that more young people choose to stay in education for longer and wait longer before taking important decisions like marrying and having children may actually indicate maturity levels that are rising rather than falling.

17. It could also be argued that the ages at which rights and responsibilities accrue do not actually prove anything about maturity; in the absence of any other evidence, it is just as likely that the age of consent is too low than that the voting age is too high. Professor Russell argued that:

You can join the Army at 16 with parental permission, which is an important caveat, but because we have signed the UN declaration of the rights of the child, you are kept out of active service until you are 18. That actually strikes me as a really good argument for raising the age at which you can enlist and a pretty poor argument for lowering the age at which you can vote.²⁴

Therefore it is difficult to see any evidence based on maturity by reference to rights and responsibilities as conclusive. Witnesses noted the difficulty of finding conclusive scientific evidence on the age at which a person could be considered an adult.²⁵ However, the fact that young people are able to exercise rights (or choose not to) at certain ages suggests that there is a broad consensus in the UK that these ages are milestones of maturity. Therefore the best we can do may be to infer from the fact young people are able to exercise rights (or choose not to) at certain ages, that there is a broad consensus in the UK that at these ages are milestones of maturity, and that the accrual of rights and responsibilities at these ages is

20 Q 206 [Matt Korris]

21 Tonge and Mycock written evidence; Professor Russell written evidence

22 Q 168

23 Q 28

24 Q 159

25 Q 91 [Professor Birch]; Barbara Hearne written evidence

not harmful. This may also explain why witnesses felt that 16 was the right age for people to be eligible to vote and not, for example, 15 or 14. Andy Slaughter MP, a shadow Justice Minister for the Opposition said “I am not saying that you could not make an argument for 15-year-olds or 17-year-olds and putting it at that level, but there is a consensus around 16, because that tends to be something of a sea change in taking on responsibilities, in working rights and in being a part of society.”²⁶

Are 16 year olds mature enough to vote?

18. As noted above, maturity is a very difficult thing to prove because people will have different opinions of what maturity means, and because people will reach different levels of maturity at different ages. Some of our witnesses argued that there were some decisions that the society did not feel 16 year olds were ready to make. Both Professor Russell and Jonathan Tonge, Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool and former Chair of the Youth Citizenship Commission, argued that people would not feel comfortable being tried by a 16 year old juror.²⁷

19. However, many of those who submitted evidence to us did believe that 16 year olds were mature enough to vote, including many who worked closely with them. Natasha de Freitas, Head of Youth Action at London Youth, told us that:

Through my youth work career I have seen that 16 and 17-year-olds have a great understanding of the world, of politics, of things that are happening in their community—a real breadth of understanding about issues—and the confidence and agency to go and actually implement that.²⁸

Alex George of the Scout Association said that:

We have young leaders in the Scouts from the age of 14 who are educating other young people. There are young carers in the UK who are looking after their loved ones all day, every day, all the time. Saying that young people are not mature enough to vote is quite naive. It does a disservice to young people who are already very active within their local, national and regional communities.²⁹

Stephen Williams MP agreed that 16 year olds were mature enough to vote, saying his opinion was based on “years of experience of talking and listening to sixth form and college students”.³⁰ UK Youth pointed out that the act of voting might demonstrate that a person is mature enough to do so: “suffrage is voluntary so someone choosing to go to the ballot box and cast their vote is evidence in itself that they have the qualities to vote.”³¹

26 Q 213

27 Q 48; Q 158

28 Q 4

29 Q 20

30 Stephen Williams written evidence

31 UK Youth written evidence

20. We took oral evidence from two panels of people involved in voluntary community activities and from young people who had been elected to representative bodies or roles, for example youth councillors, young mayors and Members of Youth Parliament. Although other witnesses pointed out that these young people demonstrated an unusual level of political and social engagement,³² it would be difficult to argue that younger people did not at least have the potential for civic and democratic participation. Although not all of the young people who gave evidence were under 18, they represented organisations which encompassed a huge number of people under 18, and in many cases were elected by a body of people who were under 18.

21. Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government at the University of Essex, suggested that people's capacity to understand voting could develop once they had acquired the right to vote:

[The same] argument has been used for a couple of centuries to restrict the extension of the franchise. Are women sensible enough to vote? Are working class people sensible enough to vote? [...] Above all, if you allow people to participate, they will learn. They will acquire skills and see that there is a stake in this and, therefore, be motivated to get involved.³³

This echoes the view stated by the Power Commission, a body funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust to investigate democracy and people's engagement in democracy, in 2006 when it concluded that "when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility."³⁴

22. We also heard arguments that young people were more informed about the world around them than previous generations because of developments in technology. Natasha Philips, who runs a project inside the family justice system dedicated to child welfare, wrote that "in a world where information is so easily accessed by young adults, thanks to the internet and an increased use of smart technology like iPhones, young people are more aware than ever of the world they live in."³⁵

Reviewing the age of responsibility?

23. Witnesses acknowledged the inconsistency in the fact that different rights and responsibilities came at different ages,³⁶ but also felt that in some cases there were strong reasons for these inconsistencies, such as health reasons for limiting the age at which young people could smoke or drink alcohol.³⁷ In general, those from whom we took evidence did

32 For example Q 160 [Professor Russell]

33 Q 94

34 Power to the People, Power Commission, February 2006, p 199

35 Natasha Philips written evidence; see also Q 117 [Chris Waller], Electoral Reform Society written evidence

36 For example Q 61 [David Kingman]

37 Barbara Hearne written evidence

not identify the fact that we have a number of ages of maturity as a problem, those who commented accepting that it was most pragmatic to accept the inconsistency as part of our society that worked well.³⁸ However, others felt that allowing young people to vote at 16 would sit oddly with other rights coming at 18, with more than one pointing out that those who voted at 16 would not be permitted to celebrate by buying a firework.³⁹ The Hansard Society in their written evidence argued that “a wider debate about the age of maturity with a view to addressing the largely ad hoc nature of the decisions that have been taken in this area in the past in order to reach a coherent settlement rooted in principle”.⁴⁰ Professor Russell expressed concern that if the voting age was lowered to 16, many protections that campaigners had fought hard to ensure 16 and 17 year olds had, for instance the obligation on local authorities to provide shelter for homeless people under 18, may be at risk.⁴¹ He argued that “it is precisely because these young people are not yet recognized as full citizens that this protection can be afforded. Enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds might put these hard-earned rights at risk.”⁴² Barbara Hearn, however, argued instead that the “fact of different age markers for different matters should be reinforced” if the voting age was lowered.⁴³

Conclusion

24. The argument that because some rights and responsibilities accrue at 16, it follows that the right to vote should accrue at that age is oversimplified and overstated. We have no single age of maturity in the UK; nor do we conclude that it is necessary to have one. However, it remains indisputable that 16 is an age at which a number of important rights and responsibilities accrue, and including a number of significant examples like paying income tax and consenting to activity which could result in parenthood. Much is made of the fact that 16 year olds cannot, for example, buy fireworks or cigarettes, but the rights that accrue at 16 appear to be more indicative of citizenship: serving in the armed forces could be seen as a way of expressing active citizenship of the UK, but it is difficult to argue that buying alcohol could. While we at present have no single age of maturity in the UK, both 16 and 18 are ages at which important rights and responsibilities accrue, and it can be inferred from this that society judges both 16 and 18 to be milestones of maturity.

25. Maturity is a very difficult thing to prove, and to some extent will always be based on a subjective judgment. It is our firm belief that most 16 year olds are mature enough to vote. We have not received any evidence that shows that they are not.

38 For example Q 244 [Tom Brake MP], Q 143 [Daisy Murphy].

39 Hansard Society written evidence; Q 48 [Professor Tonge]

40 Hansard Society written evidence

41 Andrew Russell written evidence

42 Andrew Russell written evidence

43 Barbara Hearn written evidence

26. We do not view it as a problem that different rights and responsibilities come at different ages. However, the debate about lowering the voting age to 16 does raise the question of whether other rights and responsibilities come at the right age. There may be a case for a wider review of the ages of responsibility in the UK.

Balancing rights and responsibilities

27. In the previous section we examined the argument that because society deems young people to be mature enough at 16 to do some things, this means that they should be considered mature enough to vote. A second type of argument relating to the rights and responsibilities of young people is that because they are given or allowed to have obligations to the rest of the society like paying tax and serving in the armed forces, they should be given a say. ‘No taxation without representation’, a slogan used in the American Revolution, had resonance for a number of witnesses, including Members of Parliament.⁴⁴ The Welsh Government said that “At present, 16 and 17 year olds are deemed old enough to pay taxes [...]. However, currently they are not considered to be old enough to vote for the people who make decisions on how to spend those taxes — which is, in effect, taxation without representation.”⁴⁵

28. 16 and 17 year olds are able to make various contributions to their country. We believe that citizens who are seen as old enough to make such contributions should also be able to elect the representatives who make decisions about the effect of these contributions, like public spending and going to war.

Public opinion on lowering the voting age

29. One of the arguments we heard against lowering the voting age is that the UK public in general do not support such a move. The Hansard Society presented survey evidence from 2008 which showed that 67 per cent of people were very or fairly satisfied with the voting age of 18, with only 12 per cent dissatisfied, and presented further evidence which suggested that public opinion had not changed a great deal since then.⁴⁶ Professor Russell described a voting age of 18 as “one of the few aspects of British constitutional life that the public know and support.”⁴⁷

30. However, a number of witnesses suggested that extension of the franchise should not depend on public opinion. Darren Hughes, Deputy Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society, said that:

The idea that you would ask the majority to decide the human and civil rights of the minority by way of a referendum runs counter to many historical examples, where

44 Stephen Williams MP written evidence, Tessa Munt MP written evidence, Intergenerational Foundation written evidence

45 Welsh Government written evidence

46 Hansard Society written evidence paragraphs 9 and 10

47 Professor Russell written evidence

you require leadership from the legislature to protect the minority—not to subject them to the will of majority opinion, for whom the consequences are absolutely zero, when the consequences for the minority are huge.⁴⁸

Other witnesses felt that the reason that many people were against lowering the voting age was because they wanted to maintain their favourable political position. Ellie Emberson, Member of the Youth Parliament and Reading Youth Council, said that “in my opinion, [the public] are scared. They do not want to have to have to appeal to us and relate to us. They like it how it is now. I think that they are worried that things would have to change, and people do not like change.”⁴⁹ Professor Whiteley made a similar point, saying the move would be opposed by those who “want to protect their interests”, suggesting that they think the benefits they may currently enjoy from their influence at the ballot box might be lessened.⁵⁰

31. Public opinion on lowering the voting age may also be coloured by broader negative perceptions of young people, in part influenced by the way young people are portrayed in the media.⁵¹ Liberty noted a report by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child which expressed concern at the “general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents, which appears to exist in the UK, including in the media”.⁵² Kyle Thornton, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, suggested that in Scotland those who had initially opposed lowering the voting age for the referendum had been pleasantly surprised and were “suddenly thinking, ‘These young people who we weren’t sure about are taking this really seriously—more seriously than many other groups.’”⁵³ This suggests that attitudes towards lowering the voting age may be based on misconceptions.

32. Other evidence suggests that although public opinion is against lowering the voting age, this opinion is not particularly strong. The fact that the evidence we received was overwhelmingly in support of lowering the voting age reinforces this view: although a large number of people may not support lowering the voting age, strikingly few felt strongly enough to submit evidence to us.⁵⁴ The Electoral Commission also noted this trend in its consultation on the voting age, and the Youth Citizenship consultation also recorded a majority of respondents being in favour.⁵⁵ Research conducted by Sarah Birch, Professor of Comparative Politics at Glasgow University and Professor Whiteley concluded that if the

48 Q 63

49 Q 144

50 Q 96

51 London Youth written evidence

52 Liberty written evidence; see also London Youth written evidence

53 Q 144

54 It may also be the case that people who are more likely to engage in British Youth Council projects and read our call for evidence would be those who are disposed to be in favour of lowering the voting age.

55 Age of electoral majority: report and recommendations, Electoral Commission, April 2004; Youth Citizenship Commission, *Old Enough to Make a Mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16?* June 2009

“voting age were lowered to 16, it is likely that there would be relatively little concerted opposition, and support for the measure would grow over time”.⁵⁶

33. Although there appears to be neither great public support nor resistance to lowering the voting age, evidence suggests that the public are in general satisfied with the voting age staying as it is. This is not a strong reason against lowering the voting age. Very few people would, for instance, argue that women should not have the vote, but there was considerable opposition to this when it was first proposed. The civil rights of minorities should not be decided by reference to the opinion of the majority, but by reference to what is fair.

Practicalities of lowering the voting age

34. The fact that 109,500 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland registered to vote in the referendum on independence suggests that any practical obstacles to lowering the voting age are surmountable.⁵⁷ However, including 16 and 17 year olds on the electoral register would have some practical implications that would need to be addressed.

35. 16 and 17 year olds, like all voters, would need to register to vote. A new system of voter registration called individual electoral registration came into force in England, Wales and Northern Ireland earlier this year, and to register under this system it is necessary to give a date of birth and a National Insurance number. People approaching the age of 16 may not receive a National Insurance number in time for them to register in this way. They may also not have access to the identification documents that people who do not have National Insurance numbers can use to prove their identity for registering, like mortgage statements or driving licences.⁵⁸ Witnesses from the Electoral Commission agreed that this was something that “would need to be thought through very carefully” were the voting age to be lowered, indicating that a solution would be found.⁵⁹ The Government said that there were contingency arrangements for people who could not provide a National Insurance number or other identification documents, but “it would not be practical or desirable to administer a system where a significant proportion of the eligible electorate are required to register via an exceptions process”.⁶⁰ However, no witnesses suggested this would be fatal to the project of lowering the voting age. A further practical consideration for lowering the voting age would be protecting the data of young people who were registered to vote. The electoral register contains personal information on people who are included on it, and is available for everyone to view. The Government told us that special steps had been taken to ensure that personal information on people under 18 who registered to vote in the Scottish referendum was not available in the same way, and that “similar data protection issues would arise and consideration would need to be given as to how to ensure the safety of

56 Evidence submitted to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

57 BBC, Should 16-year-olds get the vote following referendum? <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29327912>

58 HM Government written evidence

59 Q 127 [Tom Hawthorn]

60 HM Government written evidence

young people while maintaining the integrity of the electoral process” if the voting age was lowered throughout the UK.⁶¹

36. Lowering the voting age would involve a cost to the public purse; this is because of increased costs in the registration process, the administration of elections and of publicity educating younger voters on registration.⁶² However, all the evidence we received on this topic suggested that the cost would not be significant.⁶³

37. Although there are clearly some practical problems that need to be addressed before lowering the voting age, it was pointed out that there might be some practical benefits. Tom Hawthorn, Head of Policy at the Electoral Commission told us that lowering the voting age to 16 could present “opportunities for improving the process, engagement and registration rates”.⁶⁴ These included opportunities for electoral registration officers to do “more focused work specifically in schools”, and opportunities to streamline the processes by which young people received their National Insurance number and information about electoral registration.⁶⁵

Young voters and public policy

38. Many of those in favour of lowering the voting to 16 suggested that doing so would encourage politicians to pay more attention to the needs of younger people, which were currently under-attended to. London Youth said that “By [young people] engaging and voting, political parties would need to formulate policies that benefit young people, because they would be an important target vote. The impact of policies on young people would therefore be a more important consideration for policymakers.”⁶⁶ Our evidence made clear that at present younger people were not a significant presence at the ballot box when compared to older voters. The Intergenerational Foundation explained that far more older than younger voters participated in elections, and that this difference was likely to grow:

The gap between levels of turnout for old and young voters is triple the OECD average in Britain and one-and-a-half times greater than in any other EU country. IF’s analysis showed that the intergenerational democratic deficit is set to grow because the median age is rapidly rising both among people who actually vote (because of low turnout among the young) and for potential voters (because the adult population of Britain is ageing generally).⁶⁷

39. Several people argued that the fact that young voters are greatly outnumbered by older voters means that policymakers fail to take adequate notice of them. Barbara Hearne OBE

61 HM Government written evidence

62 HM Government written evidence; Q 170 [Tom Hawthorn]

63 For example Barbara Hearne written evidence, HM Government written evidence.

64 Q 172

65 Q 172

66 London Youth written evidence

67 Intergenerational Foundation written evidence

wrote that “Parliamentary law makers have no incentive to speak with and listen to [young people], even though some do so. This leaves an open field for criticising and ignoring young people.”⁶⁸ Stephen Williams MP wrote that “politicians fear alienating the ‘grey vote’, which is becoming more significant as our society ages.”⁶⁹ Some of our witnesses argued that this meant that government policy benefited older voters to the detriment of younger voters. Professor Whiteley gave an example of this, saying:

I have got a free bus pass. I can ride around on buses, free. Do I need it? No, they should take it away from me, but they won’t. Why? Because people like me vote. They would take it away from [young people], because people like you don’t vote—it is as stark as that.⁷⁰

Dr Gottfried told us about a study he had conducted with Professor Birch which found that in the Government’s 2010 Spending Review, “16 to 24-year-olds were likely to experience cuts equivalent to about 27.5 per cent of their income, while for all other age groups it ranged from about 10 per cent to 15 per cent of their income.”⁷¹

40. Not all witnesses agreed that lowering the voting age would make a difference to the attitudes of politicians. Mark Harper MP, in a recent debate in Parliament to which he drew the Committee’s attention, said that he listened to and engaged with all of his constituents, regardless of whether they had voted, saying “Some of my constituents—for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses—do not vote because they choose not to, but I still listen to their views and take their arguments seriously.”⁷² Rt Hon Tom Brake MP, Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, made a similar point.⁷³ Professor Tonge and Dr Mycock argued that those who argued that lowering the voting age would encourage politicians to engage with younger voters did not explain “why political parties and politicians have typically overlooked or [not] sought to engage with the large group of 18-24 year-old voters.”⁷⁴

41. The politicians from whom we took oral evidence acknowledged that there may be a relationship between whether a person voted and their influence on policy, but were keen to point out that this was not the result of cynicism from politicians or deliberate decisions to ignore non-voters. Mr Slaughter said that:

I don’t think I have ever heard anybody say, even in the most private political meetings, ‘We are going to do this because the turnout among older people is so much higher. Therefore, if we gravitate towards their needs and prejudices, it will be

68 Barbara Hearne written evidence

69 Stephen Williams written evidence

70 Q 80

71 Q 74

72 Mark Harper MP written evidence

73 Q 248 [Tom Brake MP]

74 Mycock and Tonge written evidence

electorally advantageous.’ However, you can’t say that it doesn’t happen subliminally.⁷⁵

Mr Brake told us that while MPs made every effort to represent all their constituents, “[i]n practical terms [...] politicians identify people who we know take part in elections. We are more likely to engage in a dialogue with people who have recently taken part in an election, for instance, than if we identify someone who has consistently, in the last three, four or five elections, chosen not to vote.”⁷⁶

42. There appears to be a relationship between whether or not someone votes and whether they are listened to and taken account of by politicians. Lowering the voting age would increase the number of younger people who were eligible to vote and may have some effect on how governments and political parties design their policies. However, we accept that lowering the voting age would not necessarily have this effect on its own. In order to grab the attention of policy-makers, young people not only need the right to vote; they need to use it.

Young voter turnout and engagement

43. Arguments about youth engagement were used by those who were both for and against lowering the voting age. Those who were in favour argued that lowering the voting age would increase engagement among young people, partly because, as discussed above, it may lead to politicians targeting policies and campaigns more actively towards younger people, but also because 16 was a practically better age for young people to start voting. Barbara Hearne noted that a report on the voting age by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁷⁷ concluded that “that the impact of citizenship education was likely to be weakened because of the gap between key stage 4 citizenship learning and the act of voting”, and that “[t]hose leaving school at 16 might have to wait 6 or 8 years before they can cast their vote.”⁷⁸ Professor Whiteley suggested that if 16 year olds could vote, polling stations could be placed in schools.⁷⁹ Professor Birch argued that 18 was practically quite a difficult time to begin voting, and that 16 year olds might be more likely to vote when they became eligible:

People who are 16 and 17 are more likely to be living at home, and so if their parents go along to vote, they might go along with them. People who are 18, 19, 20 are more likely to be in transition, moving home frequently. Perhaps they might be recently moved to a new place where they do not necessarily know where the polling station is, and lots of them may be in university or just going into work, so they may have so much going on in their lives that voting just seems really peripheral.⁸⁰

75 Q 224 [Andy Slaughter MP]

76 Q 248 [Tom Brake MP]

77 Power to the People, Power Commission, February 2006

78 Barbara Hearne written evidence

79 Q 82

80 Q 90

Professor Birch also noted that in Austria, where the voting age was lowered to 16 in 2007, there appeared to be a positive relationship between engagement and lowering the voting age. Professor Russell suggested that there was little evidence to suggest that lowering the voting age in other countries had had a positive effect on engagement.⁸¹

44. Others, however, were doubtful of the difference that lowering the voting age would make to engagement. Matt Korris, Senior Researcher, Hansard Society, said that on its own he did not think “the act of lowering the voting age would necessarily make a massive difference [to engagement].”⁸² Mark Harper said that while decisions on the franchise should not be based on turnout, “it is an odd argument that lowering the voting age will engage more people, because there is no evidence that suggests that 16 to 18-year-olds would turn out to vote in higher numbers than those aged between 18 and 25.”⁸³

45. Professor Tonge and Dr Mycock argued that lowering the voting age might actually be detrimental to youth engagement, as politicians would see it as a solution to youth disengagement, whereas it actually would address the symptoms, not the causes, of youth disengagement. They suggested that youth engagement should come before any move to lower the voting age and wrote that:

Reforms to voting systems such as lowering the voting age or introduce compulsory voting will not provide satisfactory redress to the complex causes of youth disengagement alone. We therefore argue that the voting age should not be lowered until other issues affecting young political engagement are addressed by politicians, political parties and other civil society actors.⁸⁴

46. The voting age is 16 in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.⁸⁵ Evidence on the turnout of young people in those elections is mixed, with some examples of lower turnout among young voters.⁸⁶ Dr Mycock described Brazil as an interesting case study:

there was a surge in turnout in the first couple of elections, but that has since dropped. The reason for that is quite fundamental, because the political culture has not changed and the parties are not designing policies for young people, so they are disengaging from a much earlier age. They are now disengaging from the age of 16.⁸⁷

47. The decision on whether or not to lower the voting age should not depend on the likely turnout of 16 and 17 year old voters. However, low turnout among voters aged 18 to 25 is undeniably a problem which may worsen over time if it is not addressed. Likely voter turnout among 16 and 17 year olds may not be as low. The potential practical

81 Professor Russell written evidence para 15

82 Q 187

83 Mark Harper written evidence

84 Mycock and Tonge written evidence

85 HM Government written evidence

86 For example the Isle of Man – see Andrew Russell written evidence

87 Q 32

advantages of voting for the first time at 16, for instance the fact that it is likely to be a time of less upheaval than 18, could lead to higher turnout. Regardless of their view on lowering the voting age and the place of youth engagement in politics in that debate, the need to address low turnout amongst young people and increase their engagement in politics was the one thing on which our witnesses overwhelmingly agreed. We therefore address this topic in more detail in the next chapter.

Recommendation

48. *We recommend that the Government introduce legislation to set the age at which people become eligible to vote in all elections at 16. Voting is a right. We accept that it is a right that should be limited in some circumstances, but the limitations should be the least possible to achieve their aim, and the burden of proof should be on those who would seek to limit it to show that their limitations are justified. One legitimate limitation on the right to vote is that people who vote should be sufficiently mature to understand the decision they are making. As we are unable to measure the maturity of every citizen, we have to use age as a way of deciding whether someone is mature enough to vote.*

49. *There is no single age of maturity in the UK, and rights and responsibilities accrue at different ages. However, both 16 and 18 emerge as ages at which society judges people to have reached milestones of maturity, as they acquire a number of important rights and responsibilities at these ages. We are convinced that 16 year olds are mature enough to vote, and, though we accept that this is a difficult thing to prove beyond question, we have not received any convincing proof to the contrary. The experience of the recent referendum on Scottish independence will be a useful source of evidence in examining this question. The fact that any limitation of the right to vote should be the minimum to achieve the aim of ensuring that people who are too young to understand voting are not allowed to do so suggests that we should pick the lower age of maturity. In addition, the rights and responsibilities that 16 year olds do acquire allow them to participate in society to a significant degree, for example by contributing to the public purse through taxation and to the UK's security by serving in the armed forces. Given that Parliament will be dissolved on 30 March 2015 at the latest, this may not allow enough time to implement our recommendation to affect the 2015 General Election. Therefore we urge all political parties to not only include lowering the voting age to 16 in their General Election manifestos but commit to early empowering legislation in the new Parliament so as to affect all local, devolved, devolved, European and mayoral elections.*

50. *We did not receive evidence to suggest there were any major practical obstacles to lowering the voting age, and the experience of the Scottish referendum on independence shows that lowering the voting age is achievable in practical terms. However, we recognise the importance of ensuring that the transition to a voting age of 16 happens as smoothly as possible, and that data protection issues relating to 16 and 17 year olds are managed effectively. We therefore urge the Government to allow enough time between Parliament passing a law to change the voting age and implementing that change to allow work by the Electoral Commission to ensure that all practical elements are correct, including work*

to learn lessons from the experience of lowering the voting age for the Scottish referendum.

51. Whether or not young people will use the right to vote should not be a factor in deciding to give them that right. However, we agree that the potential benefits of lowering the voting age in terms of convincing policymakers to take more account of the needs of younger people will not arise from lowering the voting age alone. It is also necessary to increase the engagement of young people in formal politics, a task to which lowering the voting age will contribute, but also which also needs separate attention.

3 Young people's engagement in politics

Introduction

52. As noted earlier in this Report, we do not think that the likely turnout of 16 and 17 year old voters should affect whether or not they allowed to vote. However, we also heed the warnings of those who suggested that lowering the voting age should not be seen as a way in itself to address youth engagement in politics, and that lowering the voting age on its own would not address the causes of the disengagement of young people.⁸⁸ We also note the evidence that we heard from a number of witnesses that voting is “habit-forming”, meaning that if young people vote early in their lives, they are likely to keep doing so. For example, Liberal Youth wrote that “Numerous academic studies and electoral analysis show that voting is habit-forming, and voting in one election substantially increases the likelihood of voting in the future.”⁸⁹ This means that addressing youth engagement could also bring gains in future engagement and turnout. The Electoral Reform Society wrote that “If we get young people registered early and into the habit of voting, we will not only see lasting improvements in turnout, but a lasting improvement in our democracy.”⁹⁰ In this chapter we therefore examine the level of engagement in politics of young people and the reasons for that level, consider some ways to address disengagement and make recommendations on how engagement could be improved.

Are young people disengaged from politics?

53. A lot of evidence we received shows that younger people are less likely to vote than older people. The Hansard Society told us that “Just one quarter (25%) of 18-24 year olds are certain to vote, compared to 58% of those aged 25+”, and that “18-24 year olds are much less likely to be registered to vote (68% say they are registered) compared to 84% of those aged 25-34 and 90%+ of all other age groups”.⁹¹ Other witnesses told us that the turnout among 18 to 24 year olds in 2010 was below 45%⁹². Dr Glenn Gottfried, Quantitative Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research, told us that the difference between the proportion of younger people and the proportion of older people who voted was getting bigger, with the difference in turnout between 18 to 23-year-olds and people over 65 rising from 18 per cent in 1970 to 40 per cent in 2005.⁹³ This is a tide which needs to be turned as soon as possible.

54. However, other witnesses pointed out that the fact that younger people were less likely to vote did not necessarily mean that they were not interested in politics and political issues. Professor Whiteley explained in his evidence that:

88 See Mycock and Tonge written evidence

89 Liberal Youth written evidence. See also Q 79 [Dr Gottfried], Q 118 [Helena Dollimore], Liberty written evidence

90 Electoral Reform Society written evidence

91 Hansard Society Written evidence

92 Q 5, Q 6, Q, Q 89

93 Q 76

we know from teaching our own students that for the most part young people are very interested in political issues, in the broader sense—the big issues of global warming, poverty and so on? But when it comes to party politics, and they see voting as an aspect of party politics, they are really turned off.⁹⁴

Others noted that young people did get involved in political actions, but not necessarily voting. The Association for Citizenship Teaching noted the case of “students in Plymouth who managed to get 10,000 people to sign a Facebook petition to stop the deportation of one of their classmates in the Spring of 2008.”⁹⁵ Kithursana Jeganathan, BYC Representative for Dudley North, noted that 16 and 17 years olds were involved in street protests.⁹⁶ Kyle Thornton, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, reported that:

I have seen 12, 13 and 14-year-olds—young people—who are interested in engaging and grasping the issues. Young people are absolutely able to engage with it; the problem is that democracy is not very good at trying to engage with young people. Party spinning and Westminster politics just puts young people right off.⁹⁷

These examples appear to support the point made by Professor Whiteley, that it is not political issues, but mainstream politics, that are discouraging younger voters from participating. The think tank part supported this view, presenting study data that suggested that “lower voting participation rates should not be interpreted as political apathy or disinterest, as they may be manifestations of disengagement from traditional political actors, but not politics [itself].”⁹⁸

55. While young people’s engagement in issues through less traditional means is laudable, it is vital that they also participate in our democracy by voting in elections. We noted in the previous chapter that politicians appear to be more likely to devise policies which address the needs of people who vote. In his evidence, Hassan Abu-Bakr from UK Youth told us that “the Government don’t need to focus on young people because they are not making their voices heard, because they are not the ones voting.”⁹⁹ Professor Whiteley argued that the activities young people did engage in just didn’t have the same impact as voting:

the paradox is that the most serious activity in terms of its impact, which is to vote, is the one that we are worrying about most in relation to young people’s activities. They are a bit more likely to protest. The age profile of protesters shows that more young people do that, in proportion, and more young people do internet-based sorts of things, as well. [...] But on voting, they are losing the plot and this is arguably the

94 Q 74

95 Chris Waller written evidence

96 Kithursana Jeganathan written evidence

97 Q 130

98 D part written evidence

99 Q 5

most important form of participation, if you think of participation as a way of influencing policy and outcomes.¹⁰⁰

Beccy Allen, Project Manager, Education Projects at the Hansard Society, agreed, saying that “politicians have to listen to the votes that are cast, but they do not necessarily always have to listen to the protests or more informal routes for politics.”¹⁰¹

56. Young people are as likely as any other group to be interested in the world around them and passionate about political issues. However, evidence shows that people aged 18 to 24 are far less likely to vote than older people meaning they are disengaged from formal political processes. This gives them less say in how the country is run. This lack of influence applies when politicians are formulating policy, because politicians may be more likely to pay attention to people who vote, and when the country decides in elections which party’s policies it wants implemented. It appears that young people do not see politics or politicians as relevant to them, and feel disempowered and removed from Westminster politics. Their understanding of what different parties stand for, and what their policies are, is not clear. This must be addressed.

Why are young people disengaged from formal politics?

57. The reasons for the disengagement of young people are complex and unclear, and our evidence did not show one single cause, but several contributing factors. Some of these factors, however, emerged as significant. We noted in the previous chapter that politicians may be less likely to design policies to meet the needs of younger people because young people were less likely to vote in elections and therefore there was no need to attract their vote. Professor Birch and Dr Gottfried described a ‘vicious cycle of engagement of turnout’, whereby this lack of focus on young people led to young people disengaging further:

You have young voters looking at the politicians and saying, “They are not really speaking to me; they are not reflecting my interests within their policy ideas, so what incentive do I have to turn out to vote?” The politicians then look at young people and say, “They’re not turning out to vote, so why should we reflect their interests in our policy ideas?” So you have two groups self-reinforcing one another to essentially not listen to one another. This is simply strengthening, because we are finding that young people are turning out for elections less and less, and politicians are listening to their policy interests less and less.¹⁰²

58. Others pointed to the fact that young people did not necessarily feel engaged with the policies being talked about by politicians. Kyle Thornton suggested that one of the reasons that young people had engaged in the Scottish referendum was that there was a clear choice involved, and that “modern politics could do more about having clearer choices and clearer manifestos. Parties should not be afraid to stick their heads above the parapet and say, “This

100 Q 75

101 Q194

102 Q 78

is what we believe. Like it or lump it. This is why you should vote for me’.”¹⁰³ Matt Korris suggested that without an in depth knowledge of politics, people may not feel immediately affected by government policies, citing using the health service, trying to get children into a school and using services like rubbish collection and local parks.¹⁰⁴

59. We also heard that political culture and a lack of diversity among politicians may partly cause political disengagement among younger voters. Witnesses felt that this issue was not isolated to younger people, but some felt that it might apply more strongly to younger voters.¹⁰⁵ Kyle Thornton suggested that “parliamentary politics [...] just doesn’t work for young people. What we see in Westminster politics is that it is a very divisive world. It is off-putting to young people; it is negative.”¹⁰⁶ David Langridge agreed, saying that mainstream political culture “probably deters some young people from involving themselves”.¹⁰⁷ Some felt that the narrow view of politics that most people were exposed to may give an inaccurate view of what it was really like. Mr Brake suggested that:

“If the only thing you ever see of politics is Prime Minister’s questions, that will give you a very false impression of what politics is like. [...] The rest of parliamentary business is much more business-like, much less yah-boo and often more consensual, with politicians—not just those from the coalition parties, who you would expect to work together most of the time, but those from the Opposition parties—collectively agreeing a way forward.”¹⁰⁸

We were also told that the lack of diversity among politicians may mean that younger people do not identify with them. Daisy Murphy, Youth Mayor of Oldham, told us that “young people don’t have someone they feel they can connect with or who represents them well, because there isn’t much diversity, whereas with a youth-led election, things are more diverse—there are more females involved, and the election is more ethnically diverse.”¹⁰⁹

60. A further reason cited for lack of engagement was a lack of feeling of a duty to vote among young people. Evidence from the Hansard Society showed that that “18-24 year olds are less likely to agree that they have a ‘duty to vote’ (61%) than those aged 25+ (80%)”.¹¹⁰ Professor Tonge told us that voting no longer formed part of young people’s understanding of being a good citizen:

Among over-65s, if you look at the recent evidence, about 84% believe that it is a civic duty to vote, whereas slightly less than half of 18 to 24-year-olds believe that. When people were asked what constitutes good citizenship in a survey, they said

103 Q 133

104 Q 193

105 Q 122 [Morgan Griffith-David and Helena Dollimore]

106 Q 131

107 Q 132

108 Q 254

109 Q 132

110 Hansard Society written evidence

“adherence to the law” or “volunteering in your community”. Those are both great things, and I would not want to stop anyone from doing either of them, but they did not make the connection with voting. They did not say “voting”. It did not figure in the top 10 good acts of citizenship.¹¹¹

Matt Korris also suggested that fundamental changes in the way our society operates had had a significant effect:

There was a much greater sense, for people growing up in decades past, of community feeling and of engaging with politics and debate, and with either community bodies or unions, which got people involved in politics and in the act of voting from an early age. [...] Society has changed dramatically over the past 30 or 40 years and we have seen the decline in many of those traditional structures, with much greater mobility of individuals, weaker community bonds, less engagement with parties and declining party memberships.¹¹²

61. Finally, witnesses identified a lack of knowledge and understanding of formal politics as a reason that younger people were disengaged. The Hansard Society wrote that “[t]here is a considerable deficit in the knowledge and understanding of politics across all age groups, but it is particularly acute among young people.”¹¹³ They went on to present evidence that in nine quiz questions used to assess political knowledge, those aged 18 to 24 had the second-lowest mean score.¹¹⁴ A number of witnesses noted a lack of political education in schools, and we were told that youth people wanted this education to include some education on how political parties differed. Solihull Youth Council told us that they would like “more info[rmation] on parties that show differences in policies”¹¹⁵ Powys Youth Forum said that citizenship education “could be used to give young people brief information on the different parties policies”¹¹⁶ Darren Hughes suggested that such education “must be balanced by ensuring that all the parties are covered, so that people can come away and say, ‘Well, I heard about five different parties and now I know roughly what they do and what they stand for.’”¹¹⁷ We discuss political education further below.

Addressing youth engagement in politics

Introduction

62. The problem of disengagement in politics is not limited to young voters, nor is it limited to the UK. However, it is a particularly acute problem among younger voters. In this section we briefly consider some work that has been done to increase youth

111 Q 38

112 Q 193

113 Hansard Society written evidence

114 Hansard Society written evidence

115 Solihull Youth Council written evidence

116 Powys Youth Forum written evidence

117 Q 72

engagement and some further ways youth engagement might be addressed. We were fortunate to take evidence from Dr Mycock and Professor Tonge who worked on the Youth Citizenship Commission which reported in 2009. Part of the work of the Youth Citizenship Commission was “to increase young people’s participation in politics and promote active citizenship, reflecting the communication preferences of young people,” and it made a number of recommendations to this end.¹¹⁸ Dr Mycock criticised the Government’s decision not to carry on with its work, saying:

We were rather unfortunate in our timing: we reported in 2009, and in 2010 the Government responded. That Government was then forced out of power. It lost the election in May 2010. The subsequent Government have at no point formally contacted the Youth Citizenship Commission, which we find remarkable considering the amount of money invested by the state in an independent inquiry. At the same time, they have been keen to cherry-pick our ideas, and it has been rather rewarding to see that some of those ideas are resident in policy.¹¹⁹

Work to increase engagement

63. Opinion varied on who should be responsible for engaging young people in the democratic process. Most felt that politicians should do more to engage with young people, whereas we also heard that individuals should take responsibility for their own engagement.¹²⁰ Others felt that teachers had primary responsibility.¹²¹ Many suggested that the work of engaging young people in formal politics was one that was shared among many groups, and our evidence indicates that attempts to engage young people in politics are coming from a number of different sources.

64. We received evidence about a number of examples of work that is currently going on to engage young people in politics. Parliament has an education service which “works with schools and Members of both Houses of Parliament to provide free support to young people in developing their understanding of democracy and Parliament”.¹²² Emma Whiting, Project Manager, Parliamentary Education Service, told us that, among other services:

We currently welcome around 45,000 students a year through our education service programmes. We have a range of programmes with which young people can interact. Visiting us here at Parliament, they can have a school tour of the building. They can have a school tour and plenary session, which we call “Introduction to Parliament”, and they can also have a school tour and workshop. Our workshops have three themes, “Making laws”, “Elections and voting” and “Your voice.” [... T]he idea of

118 Youth Citizenship Commission, Making the connection – building youth citizenship in the UK, June 2009

119 Q 46

120 Q 73 [Professor Birch]; Q [67 Darren Hughes]

121 Q 196 [Beccy Allen]

122 Q 149

making Parliament come to life through interactivity forms a key part of the workshops.¹²³

The Welsh Government wrote about two Measures that had been passed in Wales to promote youth engagement: the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, “which provides for the appointment of up to two community youth representatives to a community council”, and the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 which requires local authorities in Wales “to promote and facilitate participation of children in the decision-making process of the authority that might affect them,” leading to “most local authorities in Wales [...] establish[ing] a County Youth Forum as a representative body of young people who meet with their Local Council to discuss issues which impact on the lives of young people, and to bring about change”.¹²⁴ The UK Government supports the Rock Enroll! Programme, “a 45-minute interactive lesson framework that brings to life why young people should register to vote”.¹²⁵ Mr Brake explained how he used social media to engage with young people. He said that:

I use Facebook as a means of communicating with young people, which they are more reliant on. Whereas perhaps older people would use a fixed phone line, they use Facebook. I use it to engage with the maximum number of people that I am allowed to: 5,000. I use Twitter as well, so I am in dialogue with predominantly young people through Facebook, and probably predominantly young people through Twitter. I always make a point of using that in a way that is interactive.¹²⁶

65. We also heard reports of work done by other organisations not related to governments or parliaments. Ellie Emberson, Member of the Youth Parliament and Reading Youth Council, told us that Bite the Ballot, a not-for-profit organisation that works with young people:

have brilliant resources. Some involve standing up and deciding yes or no, and getting on your feet and doing something like this. It is really interactive. There are celebrities involved with them and stuff like that, which is brilliant. It needs to be interactive. I do not think it will be great if there is a teacher stood by a whiteboard, or something like that, with a presentation about it because I would fall asleep. I really think it needs to be interactive, and the resources I have seen from Bite the Ballot are a perfect example of that.¹²⁷

The Electoral Commission told us about its work with Young Scot, a youth information and citizenship charity, “to produce an online walk-through about what is involved in voting, from getting your polling card, to going to the polling station, and to what happens

123 Q 149

124 Welsh Government written evidence

125 Rock Enroll!: engaging young people in democracy, available at www.gov.uk

126 Q 250

127 Q 138

in a polling station”.¹²⁸ Beccy Allen told us about a project the Hansard Society runs which she felt had been particularly successful:

[A] project that used to run called HeadsUp, [...] was an online forum for young people to talk about political issues with decision makers, these kind of projects can be a springboard for further political involvement. For example, in one of our case studies, a teacher wrote to me from Kingsmead Technology College and said that her students had taken part in one of our debates on crime and, subsequently, they went through a whole process of working out what the issues were with crime in their local area and starting a campaign to improve the situation.¹²⁹

The evidence we received therefore suggests that there is work being carried out which is successful in promoting democracy among young people. There is a wealth of good practice to be drawn upon.

Citizenship education

66. Given the strong link between political knowledge and political understanding, citizenship education is vital to increasing engagement among young people. Several respondents commented on the positive impact of citizenship education on people’s participation in politics. The Electoral Reform Society said that:

The link between education and political participation, though not uncontested, is widely agreed on. Political education increases the skills needed to understand politics as well as increasing levels of interest and sense of civic duty. Many studies have found a positive relationship between political knowledge and voter turnout.¹³⁰

Professor Tonge cited research that showed that “irrespective of your social class, gender or whatever, good citizenship education helps deliver people into polling stations when they get to 18. You are more likely to vote if you have been recipient of good citizenship education.”¹³¹

67. The evidence we received was almost universally critical of the quality of citizenship education, with, for example, Liberal Youth calling it “often insufficient”, and UK Youth calling it “an area that needed great improvement.”¹³² A number of witnesses told us that citizenship was often taught by subject specialists from other areas and that those who taught citizenship were not sufficiently trained.¹³³ The Association for Citizenship Teaching supported this view, saying there was a shortage of skilled citizenship teachers.¹³⁴

128 Q 173

129 Q199

130 Electoral Reform Society written evidence

131 Q 37; see also the study entitled *Does Citizenship Education Make Young People Better-Engaged Citizens?*, by Tonge, Mycock and Jeffrey, Political Studies, 2011

132 Liberal Youth written evidence; UK Youth written evidence

133 UK Youth written evidence; Powys Youth Forum written evidence;

134 Association for Citizenship Teaching written evidence

Chris Waller, Professional Officer at the Association for Citizenship Teachers, told us that the teaching of citizenship by non-specialists affected the “quality of the teaching and the consistency of the teaching”.¹³⁵ We were also told that citizenship education was often allocated a very small amount of time on the school curriculum.¹³⁶ The Hansard Society wrote that “[h]istorically, citizenship education in schools has suffered from a lack of specialist teachers, inadequate training and support, a weak approach to the formal grading and recording of pupils’ work, and marginalisation in the school timetable.”¹³⁷ Helena Dollimore, Vice Chair of Young Labour, told us that “I think we need to move towards a system where being a citizenship or PSHE teacher is a respected thing; something that teachers want to go into, are properly qualified in and do for most of their time.”¹³⁸

68. One of the reasons given for the low quality of citizenship education was recent uncertainty over its future. The Hansard Society told us that “when the national curriculum review was announced it was widely anticipated that citizenship education would be abolished. Considerable uncertainty over the future of the subject for two years thus diminished the level of attention afforded to it in many schools.”¹³⁹ The Association for Citizenship Teaching told us that during this period, “many schools and head teachers decided that the subject would not survive the curriculum consultation and therefore deleted it from their strategic thinking”.¹⁴⁰

69. We also received a large amount of evidence citing a lack of political education within citizenship education. A number of young people gave evidence that their political education had been adequate. For example, Barnsley Youth Council told us that “Very little if any political education takes place”, and that “[c]itizenship doesn't really bring in the topic of ‘politics’ a lot”.¹⁴¹ Others echoed this view. Professor Russell said that “I think political education ought to be a bit more about the nuts and bolts, including questions such as: How did parties come to exist? Who do they think of as their core constituents? Who are they trying to represent? What is the point of that?”¹⁴² Professor Tonge argued that a GCSE in politics should be introduced, “so that people will actually learn about the political system”.¹⁴³ Professor Russell felt that politics education should be compulsory.¹⁴⁴ Witnesses did not argue for a GCSE in politics to be compulsory, with Dr Mycock suggesting that in current circumstances “it would be difficult to compel schools to teach politics at GCSE”.¹⁴⁵

135 Q 114

136 Q 109 [Chris Waller]; Q 155 [Helena Dollimore]

137 Hansard Society written evidence

138 Q 125

139 Hansard Society written evidence

140 Association for Citizenship Teaching written evidence

141 Barnsley Youth Council written evidence. See also Chloe Linton written evidence; Coventry City Youth Council written evidence

142 Q 165

143 Q 41

144 Q 166

145 Q 41

70. We were told that teachers may be nervous of educating children about party politics for fear of exposing themselves to accusations of bias.¹⁴⁶ Professor Birch suggested that “there are definitely going to be inherent limits on the extent to which they can talk about political parties and so forth, because the mums and dads will undoubtedly accuse teachers of bias if they get too much into that”.¹⁴⁷ However, Beccy Allen told us that schools were an ideal place for such discussions to happen, because they could “provide an impartial atmosphere for talking about politics and discussing political issues, as they all have to abide by the Education Act, which talks about political balance and presenting both sides of a case.”¹⁴⁸

71. Encouragingly, we also heard that more political education was starting to be provided more successfully. Mr Brake said that “the focus of the citizenship education programme is being switched to a greater focus on the political process, on political institutions and on voting, in a way that is much more focused on the sorts of issues that you are debating here.”¹⁴⁹ The Welsh Government told us that Welsh citizenship education already includes political elements, in that it included “understanding how political systems work [and] the main features of the major political parties in Wales”.¹⁵⁰

72. We also received evidence that suggested that practical citizenship education could be a successful way of teaching about politics. Pegah Moulana, Member of the Youth Parliament and Barnsley Youth Council, told us about a programme called ‘My journey to school’:

Young people are gathered together at a table and they talk about the political things that happen to them on their journey to school such as their tickets and the safety of the roads. That was the most successful thing that I have ever done.¹⁵¹

Other witnesses told us of the success of mock elections, debating in schools and school councils in educating young people about democracy.¹⁵² Professor Tonge suggested that school councils should be placed on a statutory basis.¹⁵³

First time compulsory voting

73. An idea suggested during our inquiry was introducing compulsory first time compulsory voting. This was first suggested by Professor Birch and Dr Gottfried in a paper they wrote with another academic for an organisation called Democratic Audit. In evidence to us, Dr Gottfried described this idea:

146 Q 165 [Andrew Russell]; Q 41 [Jonathan Tonge]

147 Q 77

148 Q 195

149 Q255

150 Welsh Government written evidence

151 Q 138

152 Hansard Society written evidence; Hazeem Arif written evidence; Q138 [Daisy Murphy]; Labour party written evidence’ Q 149 [Emma Whiting]; Q 47 [Jonathan Tonge]

153 Q 47 Jonathan Tonge

The idea is that somebody would have to turn out to vote at their first eligible election, and that includes people who have just become new citizens, in addition to young people. What we and others have found in our research is that voting and not voting is habitual. If you turn out to vote once, you are likely to do so for the duration of your life. If you do not turn out to vote in your first election, you are more likely to not turn out in subsequent elections.¹⁵⁴

Dr Gottfried went on to explain that he and his colleagues envisaged a ‘none of the above’ option being included on the ballot paper.¹⁵⁵

74. A number of other witnesses opposed this idea. Some disagreed in principle with forcing anyone to vote, and others felt treating one set of voters differently to another in this respect would be wrong.¹⁵⁶ Dr Mycock and Professor Tonge suggested that reforms such as this would “not provide satisfactory redress to the complex causes of youth disengagement alone”.¹⁵⁷

Youth engagement work and lowering the voting age

75. As noted above, the relationship between youth engagement in politics and lowering the voting age is a complex one and a number of views emerged from our evidence. However, several witnesses suggested that work to increase political engagement among young people should take place either before or at the same time as lowering the voting age.¹⁵⁸ For example, Helena Dollimore told us that:

We also think that right should be accompanied by wider progress towards educating and improving young people’s engagement with policy. It should not be done alone. We fear the consequences of doing one without the other because evidence shows that when people vote at a young age, it forms the habit for life.¹⁵⁹

76. International evidence suggests that turnout can be low among 16 and 17 year olds or become lower after the initial excitement of a lower voting age has passed.¹⁶⁰ Work to ensure that 16 and 17 year olds are equipped with the skills and knowledge to engage in the democratic process once they acquire the right to do so is therefore essential.

Recommendations

77. Lowering the voting age to 16 would present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to connect young people with the democratic process. Investing now in the engagement of young voters and forming the habit of voting early in their lives could create a permanent

154 Q 79

155 Q 79

156 For example, Q 65 [Isabella Sankey]; Q 162 [Andrew Russell].

157 Mycock and Tonge written evidence

158 Mycock and Tonge written evidence; Q 187 [Matt Korris]; Q 200 [Beccy Allen]

159 Q 118

160 Q 32 [Dr Mycock]; Professor Russell written evidence

change in our political culture. In addition, by taking time now to examine what works in political education and engagement, the UK could lay foundations for political education and engagement of young people in future.

78. If the important step of lowering the voting age is to be taken, it must be done in a way that will maximise its benefit. This means that 16 and 17 year olds must be given the skills and knowledge to exercise their right to vote with confidence. We therefore recommend that between the passing of legislation to lower the voting age and the implementation of this change a comprehensive programme of youth engagement be designed and executed. We recommend that a dedicated staff, either within Government or commissioned by the Government, be appointed to co-ordinate this programme of engagement and manage its resources. We would expect it to draw upon the previous work of the Youth Citizenship Commission, the work that is currently being undertaken by legislative bodies, national executives and voluntary organisations, and the past recommendations from the UK Youth Parliament, for instance on implementing a Curriculum for Life. We would also expect it to consider how new technologies and social media can be used to communicate with a young audience. We further recommend that work to learn the lessons of the recent referendum in Scotland include in its scope the engagement of 16 to 25 year olds in the political process.

79. Like more general disengagement, youth disengagement from formal politics is a complex problem and we welcome innovative solutions. While we are not yet convinced that the case for compulsory first time voting has been made, we think it merits further investigation. We therefore recommend that the Government undertake a consultation on introducing compulsory first time voting.

80. The neglect of citizenship education in recent years represents the loss of a chance to educate thousands of young people about our democracy and how to participate in it. We recommend that the Government invest in new initial teacher training places for dedicated citizenship teachers, with a view to ensuring that all citizenship lessons are taught by citizenship specialists by 2020. We further recommend that the Government fund additional training and resources for citizenship teachers to bolster the quality of citizenship education. We also recommend that the body responsible for co-ordinating engagement work should also consider the reasons for past inadequacies in citizenship education and how these could be remedied.

81. We feel that improvement is clearly needed in political education in schools. This should be a fundamental and compulsory part of all young people's education and should include information about how to vote, how to register to vote, how to contact elected politicians, information on different types of elections and, crucially, the different positions of political parties. We believe that teachers should be trusted to deliver political education in a professional manner without influencing their pupils' political views. We recommend that the Government commission a review of politics and citizenship education in schools which would assess the potential benefits of introducing a

compulsory politics GCSE. In the meantime we recommend that the option of sitting a politics GCSE be introduced, though not as a compulsory subject.

82. We are very proud of the democracy in which we live, and of its history and traditions. We are absolutely convinced that 16 and 17 year olds have the aptitude and the appetite to take a full part in that democracy. 16 and 17 year olds have just voted in their thousands in the referendum in Scotland, for which there were record levels of voter turnout. Alongside a comprehensive and committed programme of youth engagement, lowering the voting age is an opportunity not only to include a new cohort of citizens in decisions about their future and their communities, but to ensure a better-informed, more engaged generation is equipped to take our democracy into the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

Voting as a right

1. The right to vote in elections is a well-established and vital part of the UK constitution and a fundamental human right. We accept that there can be legitimate restrictions on the right to vote, and that one of those restrictions is the age at which people vote. However, because voting is a human right, any restrictions placed on it should be the minimum to achieve their aim. (Paragraph 8)

Maturity

2. The argument that because some rights and responsibilities accrue at 16, it follows that the right to vote should accrue at that age is oversimplified and overstated. We have no single age of maturity in the UK; nor do we conclude that it is necessary to have one. However, it remains indisputable that 16 is an age at which a number of important rights and responsibilities accrue, and including a number of significant examples like paying income tax and consenting to activity which could result in parenthood. Much is made of the fact that 16 year olds cannot, for example, buy fireworks or cigarettes, but the rights that accrue at 16 appear to be more indicative of citizenship: serving in the armed forces could be seen as a way of expressing active citizenship of the UK, but it is difficult to argue that buying alcohol could. While we at present have no single age of maturity in the UK, both 16 and 18 are ages at which important rights and responsibilities accrue, and it can be inferred from this that society judges both 16 and 18 to be milestones of maturity. (Paragraph 24)
3. Maturity is a very difficult thing to prove, and to some extent will always be based on a subjective judgment. It is our firm belief that most 16 year olds are mature enough to vote. We have not received any evidence that shows that they are not. (Paragraph 25)
4. We do not view it as a problem that different rights and responsibilities come at different ages. However, the debate about lowering the voting age to 16 does raise the question of whether other rights and responsibilities come at the right age. There may be a case for a wider review of the ages of responsibility in the UK. (Paragraph 26)

Balancing rights and responsibilities

5. 16 and 17 year olds are able to make various contributions to their country. We believe that citizens who are seen as old enough to make such contributions should also be able to elect the representatives who make decisions about the effect of these contributions, like public spending and going to war. (Paragraph 28)

Public opinion on lowering the voting age

6. Although there appears to be neither great public support nor resistance to lowering the voting age, evidence suggests that the public are in general satisfied with the voting age staying as it is. This is not a strong reason against lowering the voting age. Very few people would, for instance, argue that women should not have the vote, but there was considerable opposition to this when it was first proposed. The civil rights of minorities should not be decided by reference to the opinion of the majority, but by reference to what is fair. (Paragraph 33)

Young voters and public policy

7. There appears to be a relationship between whether or not someone votes and whether they are listened to and taken account of by politicians. Lowering the voting age would increase the number of younger people who were eligible to vote and may have some effect on how governments and political parties design their policies. However, we accept that lowering the voting age would not necessarily have this effect on its own. In order to grab the attention of policy-makers, young people not only need the right to vote; they need to use it. (Paragraph 42)

Young voter turnout and engagement

8. The decision on whether or not to lower the voting age should not depend on the likely turnout of 16 and 17 year old voters. However, low turnout among voters aged 18 to 25 is undeniably a problem which may worsen over time if it is not addressed. Likely voter turnout among 16 and 17 year olds may not be as low. The potential practical advantages of voting for the first time at 16, for instance the fact that it is likely to be a time of less upheaval than 18, could lead to higher turnout. (Paragraph 47)
9. We recommend that the Government introduce legislation to set the age at which people become eligible to vote in all elections at 16. Voting is a right. We accept that it is a right that should be limited in some circumstances, but the limitations should be the least possible to achieve their aim, and the burden of proof should be on those who would seek to limit it to show that their limitations are justified. One legitimate limitation on the right to vote is that people who vote should be sufficiently mature to understand the decision they are making. As we are unable to measure the maturity of every citizen, we have to use age as a way of deciding whether someone is mature enough to vote. (Paragraph 48)
10. There is no single age of maturity in the UK, and rights and responsibilities accrue at different ages. However, both 16 and 18 emerge as ages at which society judges people to have reached milestones of maturity, as they acquire a number of important rights and responsibilities at these ages. We are convinced that 16 year olds are mature enough to vote, and, though we accept that this is a difficult thing to prove beyond question, we have not received any convincing proof to the contrary. The experience of the recent referendum on Scottish independence will be a useful

source of evidence in examining this question. The fact that any limitation of the right to vote should be the minimum to achieve the aim of ensuring that people who are too young to understand voting are not allowed to do so suggests that we should pick the lower age of maturity. In addition, the rights and responsibilities that 16 year olds do acquire allow them to participate in society to a significant degree, for example by contributing to the public purse through taxation and to the UK's security by serving in the armed forces. Given that Parliament will be dissolved on 30 March 2015 at the latest, this may not allow enough time to implement our recommendation to affect the 2015 General Election. Therefore we urge all political parties to not only include lowering the voting age to 16 in their General Election manifestos but commit to early empowering legislation in the new Parliament so as to affect all local, devolved, devolved, European and mayoral elections. (Paragraph 49)

11. We did not receive evidence to suggest there were any major practical obstacles to lowering the voting age, and the experience of the Scottish referendum on independence shows that lowering the voting age is achievable in practical terms. However, we recognise the importance of ensuring that the transition to a voting age of 16 happens as smoothly as possible, and that data protection issues relating to 16 and 17 year olds are managed effectively. We therefore urge the Government to allow enough time between Parliament passing a law to change the voting age and implementing that change to allow work by the Electoral Commission to ensure that all practical elements are correct, including work to learn lessons from the experience of lowering the voting age for the Scottish referendum. (Paragraph 50)
12. Whether or not young people will use the right to vote should not be a factor in deciding to give them that right. However, we agree that the potential benefits of lowering the voting age in terms of convincing policymakers to take more account of the needs of younger people will not arise from lowering the voting age alone. It is also necessary to increase the engagement of young people in formal politics, a task to which lowering the voting age will contribute, but also which also needs separate attention. (Paragraph 51)

Are young people disengaged from politics?

13. Young people are as likely as any other group to be interested in the world around them and passionate about political issues. However, evidence shows that people aged 18 to 24 are far less likely to vote than older people meaning they are disengaged from formal political processes. This gives them less say in how the country is run. This lack of influence applies when politicians are formulating policy, because politicians may be more likely to pay attention to people who vote, and when the country decides in elections which party's policies it wants implemented. It appears that young people do not see politics or politicians as relevant to them, and feel disempowered and removed from Westminster politics. Their understanding of what different parties stand for, and what their policies are, is not clear. This must be addressed. (Paragraph 56)

Addressing youth engagement in politics

14. Lowering the voting age to 16 would present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to connect young people with the democratic process. Investing now in the engagement of young voters and forming the habit of voting early in their lives could create a permanent change in our political culture. In addition, by taking time now to examine what works in political education and engagement, the UK could lay foundations for political education and engagement of young people in future. (Paragraph 77)
15. If the important step of lowering the voting age is to be taken, it must be done in a way that will maximise its benefit. This means that 16 and 17 year olds must be given the skills and knowledge to exercise their right to vote with confidence. We therefore recommend that between the passing of legislation to lower the voting age and the implementation of this change a comprehensive programme of youth engagement be designed and executed. We recommend that a dedicated staff, either within Government or commissioned by the Government, be appointed to co-ordinate this programme of engagement and manage its resources. We would expect it to draw upon the previous work of the Youth Citizenship Commission, the work that is currently being undertaken by legislative bodies, national executives and voluntary organisations, and the past recommendations from the UK Youth Parliament, for instance on implementing a Curriculum for Life. We would also expect it to consider how new technologies and social media can be used to communicate with a young audience. We further recommend that work to learn the lessons of the recent referendum in Scotland include in its scope the engagement of 16 to 25 year olds in the political process. (Paragraph 78)
16. Like more general disengagement, youth disengagement from formal politics is a complex problem and we welcome innovative solutions. While we are not yet convinced that the case for compulsory first time voting has been made, we think it merits further investigation. We therefore recommend that the Government undertake a consultation on introducing compulsory first time voting. (Paragraph 79)
17. The neglect of citizenship education in recent years represents the loss of a chance to educate thousands of young people about our democracy and how to participate in it. We recommend that the Government invest in new initial teacher training places for dedicated citizenship teachers, with a view to ensuring that all citizenship lessons are taught by citizenship specialists by 2020. We further recommend that the Government fund additional training and resources for citizenship teachers to bolster the quality of citizenship education. We also recommend that the body responsible for co-ordinating engagement work should also consider the reasons for past inadequacies in citizenship education and how these could be remedied. (Paragraph 80)
18. We feel that improvement is clearly needed in political education in schools. This should be a fundamental and compulsory part of all young people's education and

should include information about how to vote, how to register to vote, how to contact elected politicians, information on different types of elections and, crucially, the different positions of political parties. We believe that teachers should be trusted to deliver political education in a professional manner without influencing their pupils' political views. We recommend that the Government commission a review of politics and citizenship education in schools which would assess the potential benefits of introducing a compulsory politics GCSE. In the meantime we recommend that the option of sitting a politics GCSE be introduced, though not as a compulsory subject. (Paragraph 81)

19. We are very proud of the democracy in which we live, and of its history and traditions. We are absolutely convinced that 16 and 17 year olds have the aptitude and the appetite to take a full part in that democracy. 16 and 17 year olds have just voted in their thousands in the referendum in Scotland, for which there were record levels of voter turnout. Alongside a comprehensive and committed programme of youth engagement, lowering the voting age is an opportunity not only to include a new cohort of citizens in decisions about their future and their communities, but to ensure a better-informed, more engaged generation is equipped to take our democracy into the future. (Paragraph 82)

Witnesses

Morning of Friday 27 June 2014

Page

Natasha De-Freitas, Head of Youth Action, London Youth, **Alex George**, Scout Association, **Wasim Ali**, UK Youth Voice, and **Hassan Abu-Bakir**, Youth Work and Policy Co-ordinator, UK Youth [Q1-21](#)

Dr Andy Mycock, University of Huddersfield, and **Professor Jonathan Tonge**, University of Liverpool [Q22-50](#)

Darren Hughes, Deputy Chief Executive, Electoral Reform Society, **Isabella Sankey**, Policy Director, Liberty, and **David Kingman**, Researcher, Intergenerational Foundation [Q51-72](#)

Afternoon of Friday 27 June 2014

Professor Paul Whiteley, University of Essex, **Glenn Gottfried**, Institute for Public Policy Research, and **Professor Sarah Birch**, University of Glasgow [Q73-99](#)

Chris Waller, Association for Citizenship Teaching [Q100-117](#)

Morgan Griffith-David, Liberal Youth; and **Helena Dollimore**, Young Labour [Q118-127](#)

Morning of Friday 4 July 2014

Kyle Thornton, Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, **David Langridge**, Chair of Reading Youth Council, **Ellie Emberson**, Member of the Youth Parliament and Reading Youth Council, **Pegah Moulana**, Member of the Youth Parliament and Barnsley Youth Council, and **Daisy Murphy**, Youth Mayor of Oldham [Q128-147](#)

Emma Whiting, Project Manager, Parliamentary Education Service [Q148-154](#)

Professor Andrew Russell, University of Manchester [Q155-168](#)

Tom Hawthorn, Head of Policy, Electoral Commission, and **Alex Robertson**, Director of Communications, Electoral Commission [Q169-186](#)

Afternoon of Friday 4 July 2014

Beccy Allen, Project Manager, Education Projects, Hansard Society, and **Matt Korris**, Senior Researcher, Hansard Society [Q187-210](#)

Andy Slaughter, Shadow Justice Minister [Q211-236](#)

Tom Brake, Deputy Leader of the House [Q237-270](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the British Youth Council's website at www.byc.org.uk/uk-work/youth-select-committee/submitted-evidence

- 1 A variety of sources from Yorkshire and Humber
- 2 Agatha Hunt: MYP Warwickshire
- 3 Association for Citizenship Teaching
- 4 Barbara Hearn OBE
- 5 Barnsley Youth Council
- 6 Buckinghamshire County Council
- 7 Charlotte Leslie MP
- 8 Chloe Linton
- 9 Coventry City Youth Council
- 10 Dr Andrew Mycock, University of Huddersfield, and Professor Jonathan Tonge, University of Liverpool
- 11 Dr Jan Eichhorn Research Director, Think Tank d|part
- 12 Electoral Reform Society
- 13 Fred Gill
- 14 Hansard Society
- 15 Hazeem Arif: MYP Warwickshire
- 16 HM Government
- 17 Intergenerational Foundation
- 18 James Christopher Maxwell
- 19 Kithursana Jeganathan, Representative for Dudley North
- 20 Labour Party
- 21 Labour Party
- 22 Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party Committees on Constitutional and Political Reform and Education, Families and Young People
- 23 Liberal Youth
- 24 Liberty
- 25 London Youth
- 26 Mathieu Leader
- 27 Natasha Philips
- 28 North Lincolnshire Youth Council
- 29 NUS Scotland
- 30 Plymouth Youth Parliament
- 31 Powys Youth Forum
- 32 Professor Andrew Russell, University of Manchester
- 33 Scottish Liberal Democrats
- 34 Scottish National Party
- 35 Scottish Youth Parliament
- 36 Solihull Youth Council
- 37 Stephen Williams MP

- 38 Suffolk Youth Parliament
- 39 Tessa Munt MP
- 40 Thomas Chidwick
- 41 Thomas Rowledge
- 42 UK Youth
- 43 UNISON
- 44 Welsh Government

About the Youth Select Committee

The Youth Select Committee (YSC) is a British Youth Council (BYC) initiative (it is part of the Youth Voice Programme), supported by the House of Commons, which enables young people to scrutinise and hold inquiries into issues that they care about in order to influence policy and legislation. The Committee mirrors the UK Parliament Select Committee structure and consists of eleven members aged 14 – 18 and includes three Members of the Youth Parliament (MYPs), one former MYP, three youth councillors, a representative from the Scout Association and one elected representative from each of the devolved nations. Applicants were interviewed by young people who were members of the 2013 Youth Select Committee and were appointed by BYC in February 2014.

The two previous Youth Select Committee inquiries focused on Transport for Young People (2012) and a Curriculum for Life (2013).

About this inquiry

This year's inquiry was identified as a priority by Members of the British Youth Council at the Annual Council meeting in August 2013 and voted as the priority campaign by the UK Youth Parliament in the House of Commons in November 2013.

The Youth Select Committee took written evidence between 19th March and 2nd May sought views on the following issues:

- Should the age at which people are allowed to vote be lowered?
- For what reasons is the voting age currently set at 18? What qualities mean that a person is ready to vote? Do 16 and 17-year-olds possess these qualities?
- Should the age at which people are able to vote vary between types of election?
- What short term and long term effect would lowering the voting age have on voter turnout?
- What can be learned from countries where the voting age is lower than 18 or where lowering the voting age has been proposed?
- What was the motivation for allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum on independence for Scotland? What can be learned from this example?
- What would the practical implications of lowering the voting age be?
- How effectively does citizenship education prepare young people to vote? How could it be used to prepare young people to vote?
- What is the best way to engage young people with the political process?

In addition, the Committee sought the views of people under 18 on the following questions:

- Would you vote if the voting age was lowered to 16? Why/why not?
- Do you feel ready to make an informed decision about who to vote for? What would help you feel prepared to vote?
- The YSC held its oral evidence sessions on 27th June and 4th July 2014 in the same committee rooms used by Parliamentary Select Committees in Westminster. The inquiry was recorded in Hansard and broadcast on BBC Democracy Live.

Further information

For more information about the Youth Select Committee visit <http://www.byc.org.uk/uk-work/youth-select-committee>, or email bycyouthselect@parliament.uk

About the British Youth Council

The British Youth Council is the National Youth Council of the UK. A youth-led charity, we empower young people aged 25 and under to influence and inform the decisions that affect their lives. We support young people to get involved in their communities and democracy locally, nationally and internationally, making a difference as volunteers, campaigners, decision-makers and leaders.

We are young people - and our charity aims to help other young people, whatever their background or barriers they face, to make the world a better place for us all.

Serving our membership

BYC is made up of more than 230 member organisations who support our common vision for young people. Members elect our Board, determine our policies and prioritise our campaigns. They also act as the link between BYC and millions of individuals within the membership of our members.

www.byc.org.uk/members

Youth-led networks

BYC runs a number of youth-led networks and programmes – including the **UK Youth Parliament, Young Mayor Network, Local Youth Council Network, National Scrutiny Group** and **Youth Select Committee** - which encourage young people to get involved in democracy and campaign to bring about change.

www.byc.org.uk/uk-work

Campaigning and consulting

BYC seeks to represent the views of young people and our members to stakeholders and decision makers at a local, national and international level. This work is based on the rolling BYC Manifesto which outlines our beliefs and aspirations.

www.byc.org.uk/campaigns

Training and recognition

Our training programmes empower young people with the skills, knowledge and confidence to bring about change. We also recognise young people who have made a significant contribution to their community through our high-profile award schemes.

www.byc.org.uk/training-services

International work

Through our international youth participation young people learn about global issues and connect and share with other young people around the world. They are able to take part in discussions and influence decisions made at an international level.

www.byc.org.uk/international

Further information

For more information about the British Youth Council visit www.byc.org.uk, email mail@byc.org.uk, or call 0845 458 1489.

BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL Youth Select Committee 2014



