

Rights and Obligations: why Britain has robbed its children by denying them the vote

by Anya Maude

It is often remarked that “children are the future”. If an issue concerning young people comes into the media spotlight, those words will almost inevitably be spoken. If a person heard the question “Has Britain robbed its children?” their mind would most likely leap to complete the sentence with the words “of their future”. Thus education and early life are seen as transient preparations for adulthood, when one gains the rights and responsibilities of a fully-functioning member of society. This is, I believe, symptomatic of the way the law treats childhood and adulthood as a binary and therefore robs children of the chance to participate in society to the fullest extent of their capabilities.

The word “robbed”, in this context, would usually be taken to mean depriving a person of something that they should expect to be given – in other words, not fulfilling your obligations to someone. The question of whether British society has fulfilled its obligations to its children seems to have a self-evident answer of “no”. Children, among many other groups, are being adversely affected by spending cuts, welfare reforms, and government policy U-turns. 700,000 more children are expected to fall into poverty in 2015 due to government spending cuts.¹ The reason for singling out children is that they have absolutely no say in the election of their government. They have no representative power, and so can be ignored by politicians as a group in their own right. “Children’s issues” are only important to politicians in the context of affecting the way parents vote. As such, reforms are tailored to what appeals to the parents, looking back on their childhoods, rather than what is actually in the interest of young people today. It is argued that adults can be trusted to vote in the interest of young people. This type of argument was used to attempt to justify denying suffrage to women, those who didn’t own property, and ethnic minorities. There is

¹ “‘Over half a million’ children pushed into poverty” *Poverty and Social Exclusion* (June 2013)
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/editorial/%E2%80%98over-half-million%E2%80%99-children-pushed-poverty>

a clear generational gap in political concerns and opinions. A series of polls carried out by Ipsos MORI showed a sharp difference between the voting intentions and major concerns of different age groups.² Children have the laws applied them, can be taxed as adults if they have an income, and are expected to finance their own educations.

One justification given for this state of affairs, for this taxation, conviction and expectations without representation, is that parents are better able to say what is in the interest of children than the children themselves. It is argued that children will vote for anyone who promises free chocolate and an end to school. This does identify a problem with the blanket extension of suffrage to children. The same arguments used to justify extending the franchise to a fifteen, sixteen or seventeen year old could be applied to a toddler. They have different concerns to their parents. They are taxed, indirectly. Thus, when extended to absurd proportions the most prevalent arguments for lowering the voting age break down. To say that a five year old does not have a brain that has reached the necessary stage of development to be able to make an informed choice and vote would be met with the observation that if those with brains not yet fully developed should not be allowed to vote, then of course you must exclude teenagers.

This would be an entirely reasonable rebuttal, were it the case that the voting age had been settled on at eighteen because neurological studies had shown that that was the point at which the brain completed its development. It was not. The general trend throughout history has been the extension of suffrage. A person does not have what could be described as an “adult” brain until age 25,³ yet nobody in this country is suggesting that the voting age be raised to that level. It is a matter of degree, and therefore it is all the more important to examine the way young people are treated by society.

Sixteen year olds can join the army (although cannot serve on the front line), can marry with their parents’ permission, can have and raise children. They can legally have sex and be a legal guardian to their child. If parents represent their children’s interests, who represents a teenager’s child?

² B. Duffy: “Generations” (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute) <http://ipsos-mori-generations.com/>

³ D. Ruder: “The Teen Brain” (*Harvard Magazine*) (2008) <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/09/the-teen-brain.html>

It has become a cliché to refer to education as a political football, but one practical consideration of the question of who should be able to vote is whose issues are the most in the political spotlight. In the last few years, sweeping educational reforms have taken place, and yet young people have largely been left out of the debate. Many of these reforms have been explicitly political in nature. In an article he wrote for the *Daily Mail*, Michael Gove – the Education Secretary – referred to those who opposed his radical educational reforms as “the ultra-militants in the unions”, and decried those drafting “politically correct curricula”.⁴ When responding to a campaign to stop a local primary school being turned into an academy, he even labelled the campaigners “Trots”.⁵ When such party-political rhetoric is being thrown around, one might be forgiven for thinking that those most affected by education reform should have some part in the process of choosing the government that carries it out. There have been moves in education that would be considered entirely unacceptable if they occurred in other spheres of life. This year, the decision was taken to remove the speaking and listening coursework elements of the English Language GCSE, and those who had already completed that coursework were told that it would no longer be counted. Teenagers were left feeling cheated and robbed by a system they had no part in. The problems could have been easily avoided by delaying the reforms by just one year, but the political capital gained by immediacy was seen as more important than an injustice inflicted on a non-voting group.

Even those young people who can legally vote are under-represented in our democracy. They, as a generation, have the lowest voter turnout and are utterly dwarfed by the “grey” vote and the baby boomer generation. A freedom of information request by the Electoral Commission revealed that the turnout of voters in the 18–24 age brackets in 2010 was just 44%, the lowest of any age demographic.⁶ Due to the size of the demographic and the turnout, the Electoral Commission concluded that the oldest demographic had four times

⁴ Michael Gove in the Daily Mail, March 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>

⁵ Sean Coughlan: “Michael Gove Labels Academy Opponents ‘Trots’” (BBC News, January 2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16809400>

⁶ Original research by Ipsos MORI (Janice Reid, 2013) http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/155071/Response-for-website-2513.pdf

the electoral power of the youngest.⁷ With a first- past-the-post system, confident that their concerns won't be represented in the government, young people are turning away from the democratic process altogether. This is just one of the results of a system that robs children of any participation in government.

There are, of course, exceptions. The upcoming Scottish referendum doesn't exclude 16 and 17 year olds. The idea that this was a calculated move to affect the outcome of the referendum has, predictably, been taken up by the media. While it is frustrating that the only time the voices of young people are considered important is when they serve the political interests of adults, it is a telling fact that the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds has been criticised due to the effect it might have. Extending the franchise makes the vote more legitimate, not less. The problem is that it was not available to them previously.

By denying even competent children the right to democratic representation, Britain has robbed its children. It has robbed older children of the chance to affect the issues that concern them. It has robbed younger children of champions who can still remember that stage of life without nostalgia clouding their vision. The voting system itself robs the young people of Britain of any sense of their political power. Older children are expected to participate in society like adults, but denied the rights that should accompany such a state. This is undeniably a robbery.

⁷ Dr Andrew Russell, Dr Edward Fieldhouse, Dr Kingsley Purdam, Dr Virinder Kalra: Research Report, July 2002 (The Electoral Commission)
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0019/16093/youngpp1_voting_6597-6188_E_N_S_W_.pdf