



TRG

# Giving 16 and 17 Year Olds the Vote The Tory Case

Ruth Davidson  
Sarah Wollaston  
David Fazakerley

Foreword by Damian Green

# Contents

Foreword Rt Hon Damian Green MP .....	2
Lessons from the Scottish Referendum Ruth Davidson MSP .....	4
The Conservative Party Must be a Party of the Future Dr Sarah Wollaston MP .....	6
The Education Imperative to Lowering the Voting Age David Fazakerley, TRG Chair .....	8

# Foreword

## Rt Hon Damian Green MP

The traditional Conservative response to the idea of giving 16-year-olds the vote has been to reject it on the ground that they are not mature enough, they don't pay taxes and therefore they don't feel the consequences of any vote they may cast. This pamphlet argues strongly, from a number of different perspectives, that the traditional response needs further thought.

Tories, particularly reforming Tories, should always be careful that the instinct to say "If it is not necessary to change it is necessary not to change" does not become a reactionary block on all change. When the Conservative Party gets in to this mode it appears to reject the world around it. It seldom prospers in this guise.

So I hope these essays provoke some new thought within the Conservative family. As Ruth Davidson, the Leader of the Scottish Conservatives, argues with her knowledge of the Scottish referendum campaign the democratic effect of giving the vote to 16 and 17 year-olds was "entirely positive". Like many of us she previously accepted the conventional wisdom on this issue but has now changed her mind.

Sarah Wollaston makes the point that the real prize in party terms is making the Conservative Party the natural home for the next generation. To reach that prize we first have to persuade them to become involved in politics in the first place. Or at least formal, electoral politics, since they are already engaged in many of the issues which fill the political agenda.

David Fazakerley addresses directly the argument that 18-24-year-olds tend not to vote at the moment, so there is no point in reducing the voting age further. He makes the point that good and bad habits learned at school carry through into adult life, and that inculcating the habit of voting at a time when students are learning about politics and history is more likely to stick with them than waiting until they have left school and asking them to start doing something new.

All of these points are worth serious consideration. In addition, in purely party terms it is important for Conservatives to demonstrate to young people, many of whom share our values, that we take their opinions seriously. Supporting a reduction in the voting age would be a dramatic way of doing that, showing that we were confident of taking our arguments to a new generation. We could introduce them not only to the good habit of voting in elections, but to the even better habit of voting Conservative.

Damian Green is a former financial journalist and worked in the Prime Minister's Policy Unit from 1992-94. In May 1997 he was elected Member of Parliament for Ashford and he was re-elected in 2001, 2005, 2010 and most recently in 2015.

He was a Conservative Spokesman on Education and Employment from 1998-99, Conservative Environment Spokesman from 1999-2001, Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Skills from 2001-2003, and Shadow Secretary of State for Transport from 2003-2004. From July 2004-2005 he was a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee; from July to December 2005 he was a member of the Treasury Select Committee.

In December 2005, he was appointed Shadow Minister for Immigration, and had responsibility for Conservative Party policy on borders and immigration.

After the 2010 Election he became Minister of State for Immigration at the Home Office, and on 4th September 2012, was made Minister of State for Policing and Criminal Justice, a role covering both the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. In October 2012 he was made a member of the Privy Council.

Damian has been a strong voice in the House of Commons on civil liberties issues. In opposition he campaigned against the introduction of Identity Cards, and was the Minister who took the Bill that abolished them through the House of Commons in 2010.

Damian is also a Vice-President of TRG.

## Lessons from the Scottish Referendum

### Ruth Davidson MSP

The Scottish Independence referendum on 18th September was unprecedented for many reasons. The decision, for the first time in British history, to give 16 and 17 year olds the vote was just one of them.

The extension of the franchise followed negotiations between the UK and Scottish Governments prior to the vote, at the insistence of the former SNP leader Alex Salmond. Salmond believed at the time that adding this extra 3% onto the electorate – or 125,000 voters – would help his cause. Some polls showed that support for independence was running highest among the younger generation (by as much as 8%, according to one survey). Thus, he ran a concerted campaign to give them a vote. The UK Government agreed to let him have his way.

The political motives for the decision may have been questionable but the democratic effect turned out to be entirely positive. As the campaign wore on, schools, colleges and universities across Scotland took the opportunity to engage with students about the referendum. Countless school debates and hustings were organised, and numerous mock referenda were staged. The level of interest was immense. Towards the end of the campaign, the BBC staged a live TV debate in the 13,000 seat Glasgow Hydro arena, inviting 16 and 17 year olds from every secondary school in Scotland. Despite widespread scepticism about whether the broadcasters could meet their ambition, the students filled the auditorium to the brim, providing a remarkable example of their level of interest and engagement.

The statistics backed that up. By polling day, the Electoral Commission declared that 121,497 16 and 17 year olds had taken the effort to register their intention to vote. It amounted to more than 90% of the total age group. Polling stations across the country witnessed school pupils in their uniforms eagerly taking up the opportunity to cast their ballot. By then, no-one was arguing that extending the franchise had been a mistake.

In the weeks following the referendum, the debate has inevitably shifted onto whether the franchise should now be extended to all other elections. Those in favour of the status quo argue that while the referendum offered a clear, unambiguous choice, parliamentary elections present a more muddled, multi-layered decision which require a more mature electorate.

But having watched and debated in front of 16 and 17 year olds throughout the referendum, I have found myself unable to agree. My position has changed. We deem 16 year olds adult enough to join the army, to have sex, get married, leave home and work full-time. The evidence of the referendum suggests that, clearly, they are old enough to vote too.

There is a final irony in the referendum example. The Nationalists had only pushed the case for extending the franchise because they believed it would boost their vote. But there was evidence that, once they engaged with the facts, a majority of 16 and 17 year olds decided – just like everyone else - to say No Thanks. In a mock referendum of more than 10,000 16 and 17 year olds in Aberdeenshire, more than three-quarters voted No. Similar votes at the Universities of Glasgow, Dundee, Strathclyde and Edinburgh all followed suit. Surveys before the vote showed that 16-17 year olds had the exact same concerns as everyone else, the economy prime among them.

Far from being dazzled by the Nationalist banner, it appears 16 and 17 year olds considered the facts just as rationally – if not more so – as everyone else. If that doesn't prove they are worthy of the vote, I don't know what does.

Ruth Davidson was elected Conservative MSP for Glasgow in May 2011, and became Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party in November of the same year.

Before entering politics, Ruth worked as a presenter, news journalist and documentary film-maker, mostly with BBC Scotland and REAL Radio in Glasgow.

## The Conservative Party Must be a Party of the Future

### Dr Sarah Wollaston MP

The majority of 18 to 24 year olds do not vote. When asked, young people report less interest in traditional politics, less belief that voting is a civic duty, and less affiliation with parties. It would be short-sighted and wrong to turn our backs on this political evolution. As things stand, there's about a decade before half of the electorate may simply not bother to vote in general elections. If this further skews policy to appeal to the needs of the voting older generation who do, this risks a downward spiral of disillusionment and disengagement by young people.

2015's first time voters have an aversion to formal politics – but they are interested in issues based politics, in new ways of engaging and in community projects. They do things other than voting but we need to persuade them that it is in their own interests to do this too.

It would be a mistake to assume that Conservatives cannot win the youth vote. This generation looks to itself to take action, believing State action to be less important.<sup>1</sup> Generation Y has strong interest in setting up businesses. These are Conservative values.

Support in Generation Y for the Conservatives has doubled since 2005.<sup>2</sup> Although our party still lags Labour in this age group, Labour support has plateaued, Lib Dem support crashed and UKIP's never left the basement.

We need the right policies and the right language and campaigners for all generations. David Cameron leads a Party which is digitally savvy, welcoming of new activism and with policy which encourages and supports people to succeed. From fixing the economy and improving education and apprenticeships to helping first time buyers, business start-ups and working parents, our policies are about security for the future.

Taking the voice of sixteen year olds seriously and making their voices count has never been more important and after all, what message does it send to 2020 if we have rejected those same voters when aged 16 and 17 in 2017?

Ruth Davidson's heartfelt piece in this pamphlet shows that Scottish sixteen year olds gripped their chance. Does anyone seriously feel that 16 and 17 year olds lack the capacity to understand the issues and weigh them in the balance? One quarter of these teenagers can expect to live to a hundred. Not only will the outcome of the referendum have a far greater impact on them but they will have far longer to live with the consequences than older voters. We should not pass by the opportunity for enthusiastic political engagement evidenced by the referendum on Scottish independence.

Embracing a change in the voting age is an important way to rebalance the consequences of demographic change and address the harmful effects of political disengagement. Handled sensitively it need not open the door to divisive party politics in our schools but rather encourage wider political interest and voting. It is in all our interests that they do so, especially their own.

Embracing votes at sixteen would also send the powerful message that young people are trusted by and welcome in the Conservative Party.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/generationcitizen>

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos Mori, Generation Strains <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-generation-strains-ipsos-mori-demos-2013.pdf>

## The Education Imperative to Lowering the Voting Age

### David Fazakerley, TRG Chairman

I have spent the last six months having discussions with members of the public and senior educationalists about their thoughts and opinions on lowering the voting age to 16. I have especially sought out young people I know who are still in compulsory education; 16 and 17 years olds, identifying what they think about being given the vote. Surprisingly it's the students themselves that seem to have more issues with lowering the voting age than some of the adults I've spoken to.

Given individual and gender differences in emotional and intellectual maturity and the need to draw an arbitrary line for voting at some age, there is some justification for the current age of 18. There is however a significant difference between curricula for years 7-11 and 12-13 (16 to 18 year olds). Year 12-13 Students are judged more able to understand and apply in-depth focused concepts having embarked upon post-16 education.

The discussions and debates have also focussed on the emotional maturity and emotional intelligence of 16 year olds and whether they have enough life and learning experience for them to properly exercise their vote responsibly. This is a concern expressed more by adults and those beyond 18 years of age.

One of the repeated concerns that come out from people, especially students, is one of being not informed enough about political parties or politics in general in order to make an informed decision about who to vote for or why. So a common theme is one of a lack of political education. Most of the 16 and 17 year olds I have spoken to in depth about this have their concerns assuaged somewhat when the issue is discussed in the context of introducing more in depth political studies in schools from 14 onwards.

However, the curriculum leading up to GCSE, and equivalent qualifications, is already very full. In-depth political studies at this level will add to that, when great emphasis is currently on GCSE grades, especially

in relation to applications for post-16 education, apprenticeship or employment.

When talking of education syllabus it is not just introducing political party histories and a background of political party ideologies but also an understanding of our democratic systems of government and state.

As for civic duty and civic responsibility, this is and may be addressed somewhat in current personal and social education. However, some senior educationalists have commented there seems to be somewhat of a shift in young people's aspirations and expectations away from consideration of others to a more self-centred interest. With the apparent ever-decreasing emphasis on religious values or moral education in state schools which has, in part, contributed to the rise of Faith Schools; how would this be addressed in the state sector to inculcate once more those virtues and values which have inspired so many of our great national politicians?

The issue also arises as to whether young people who have not yet paid taxes have the right to vote especially on matters for which they have no prior level of engagement or contribution.

Education concerns expressed by many revolves around a perceived bias in teaching and whether it would indeed be possible to educate young people whilst at school in a fair, open and unbiased way; who is best placed to deliver the teaching on political ideologies, party histories, the political system in the UK and especially current party standpoints on a variety of policy areas?

Is there an opportunity to look to external sources when raising political awareness amongst students and mix this up with traditional classroom-based teaching on less contentious and more matter of fact political history and systems of government? Perhaps involving political party organisations?

Beyond the teaching of political history, the emphasis on education should also focus on causes and single issues which many students are already engaged with but perhaps they don't view this as a form of political expression in of itself and this can be challenged and highlighted within the education framework.

Those in the education sector and higher education dealing especially with young people's psychology, feel there is no common agreement about where emotional maturity and emotional intelligence starts definitively from a specific age. It can be different from individual to individual. Therefore it makes it difficult to argue that all those at 16 have both the emotional maturity and intelligence to entitle them to vote. What is also agreed however is that this maturity doesn't simply switch on at 18, there is a case to be made that many people in their 20's and beyond do not demonstrate emotional maturity but they of course have the vote none the less.

The UK has a problem with low voter turnout in the 18 to 24 age demographic. In 2010 the turnout was only 44% and only marginally better (approx. 46%) for the 2015 election. Although this is a problem shared across the western democracies it is a particularly more problematic in the UK.

So how do we get young people to vote?

It is suggested by some that past changes in voting age, lowering from 25 to 21 then 21 to 18 has not addressed this problem of young people engagement and so why would lowering to 16 be any different?

With all of those changes in the past, none of them addressed the issue of education or lowered the voting age to those who were still in compulsory education. The argument I am putting forward is based on an education syllabus from 14 years onwards made real by actual voting opportunity whilst those young people are still at School. Positive habits gained whilst at School are carried through into later life and if political awareness, political engagement and voting at elections are introduced into School life then there is evidence to show that this will be carried through into adult life and in itself will begin to address low turnouts within the 18-24 age groups.

Why should young people suddenly have the disposition to vote at 18 when they have not been engaged throughout their teenage years whilst at school where there is the opportunity for learning and engagement? We need to be reinforcing positive behaviour patterns especially around civic duty and civic responsibility and this surely starts in the classroom.

I believe that we need to educate and engage with young people whilst they are still at School from 14 onwards and giving them the right to vote whilst still in Education is a key part of that. Not all 18 years olds have the opportunity to vote at 18 whilst at School depending on exactly when they were born in the 12 month calendar year. Lowering the voting age to 16 for all elections gives all young people the opportunity to vote whilst coming to the end of their compulsory School life. Indeed, the Scottish Referendum example demonstrates that 16 and 17 years olds fully engaged and voted in large numbers taking their role in voting very seriously indeed.

If the young people of Scotland could be trusted with a referendum vote that affects the future not just of Scotland but of England, Wales and Northern Ireland too, then surely we can trust our young people to vote in local, mayoral and general elections too. Given the EU referendum is upon us, why would we deny the right of 16 and 17 years to have a say in their immediate future, one they are predicted to live within to the age of 100?

There is a positive opportunity for the Conservative Party here, demonstrating to young people that the party trusts them and values their contribution and indeed their right to vote. We should not simply acquiesce to this because of Liberal or Labour Party pressure, we should lead on this from the front, and we should be the champions of enlarging the franchise to give 16 and 17 year olds the vote.

David Fazakerley joined the TRG in 2006 as a Midlands member. He became Treasurer in 2007 and the Head of Events in 2008. David organised two One Nation Day Conferences for the TRG in 2010 and 2014. He was elected National Chairman of the TRG in July 2014.

David has been politically active as a Conservative Party member since 1996. He campaigned in Liverpool and Sefton back in the 1997 election and was Constituency Chairman in Knowsley North and Sefton East.

After moving to Birmingham in 2004, David became a local member and campaigned in the Birmingham Edgbaston Constituency in the 2005 election. He became Constituency Chairman of Edgbaston in late 2005 until 2009 where he grew party membership from 340 to 520 including a large increase in younger members (from only 2 members under the age of 30 when he started to around 80 under the age of 30 in 2009). This was achieved through starting several new branches including a professional 'city branch' in Birmingham. Electorally, Edgbaston went from 9 Tory Councillors to 12 in that time, making David the first Chairman since 1994 to achieve this full house in the constituency.

Also during this time, David served as Finance Officer for the Birmingham Conservative party and in 2008 and 2009 was elected as Chairman of Birmingham Conservatives by his 10 constituency chairman peers.

## About TRG

TRG is an independent group which brings together members and friends of the Conservative Party to promote the values of One Nation Conservatism. First established in 1975, TRG seeks to ensure the Conservative Party governs within the One Nation tradition.

TRG advocates the benefits of a society founded on freedom, individual responsibility and community. It brings together members and supporters of the Conservative Party who share this approach to politics.

The strength of TRG lies in the breadth of its membership which is drawn from all ages, backgrounds and walks of life. Members include parliamentarians, councillors, association officers and private individuals from all parts of the United Kingdom.

TRG has a busy events calendar of round table policy discussions, drinks receptions and gala dinner events. Speakers range from leading Conservative thinkers, MPs, Peers and Cabinet Ministers. The Group also seeks to influence public debate and Government policy through a programme of campaigns and publications.

TRG is recognised as the authentic and authoritative voice of moderate, liberal Conservatism throughout the Party. It is the home of the One Nation movement in Britain.

To learn more about the TRG, visit us at [www.trg.org.uk](http://www.trg.org.uk).