Children’s Political Rights by Bob Franklin  
(excepted from The Rights of Children)

I would suggest that the most persuasive solution to the problem of political inclusion can be provided by resurrecting a simple proposal made by John Holt, which is endorsed by the research literature on political learning and childhood political socialization. Holt's prescription is as appealing as it is simple. He doesn't wish to lower the voting age incrementally but seeks 'the right to vote for people of any age.' No one should be left out. Eligibility, on his account, is determined by awareness and interest in political affairs. Everyone should have the right to vote when their interest, knowledge and involvement in politics are sufficiently developed to motivate them so to do; as interest develops, so participation will increase. This does not mean that all children would vote, and it seems probable that very young children with only a marginal, if any, interest in politics would abstain. Holt considers that few six-year olds would exercise their vote but that ten-year olds would be different, since they seem to understand at least as much about the world and its problems as I or most of my friends did when we left college...

Four Objections

First, it will almost certainly be claimed that young people are ignorant of political affairs - that they would not know a good policy from a bad one. If this is true, then it is a truth which extends to adults and we must take care not to use double standards. In a political system where voters' ignorance of issues is readily acknowledged, and where no amount of ignorance, misinformation, or outright delusion will bar an adult from voting, it is a weak argument to suggest that a presumed ignorance of political affairs is sufficient grounds to exclude children from citizenship. The major point here is that arguments about ignorance are spurious. People should possess a vote, not because they are specialists in some area of government or because they have detailed knowledge of some aspect of political life, but because it is a matter of justice that they do. Democracy requires that everyone should have the right to participate in making political decisions which will affect their lives.

A second, related claim is that children should not be considered responsible electors and may cast their vote frivolously. While there is no evidence to support such a view, there is substantial literature which suggests that adults are less than responsible in their electoral motives. Harrop and Hague lament that 'By and large ... hopes have been dashed' that voters will cast their vote in an informed and intelligent way, while McLean suggests humorously that many voters appear to have a predisposition to vote for the first candidate on the ballot paper. Since candidates are arranged alphabetically, it is not surprising that this habit benefits politicians whose names begin with the letter A, or produces a preponderance of twentieth century prime ministers with surnames beginning with A, B, or C. As with the first claim, dual standards are unacceptable. If voters are to be excluded when it can be shown that they may vote frivolously, then this proposal would disenfranchise many adults.

Third, it might be argued that children are more likely to vote on the basis of the personality of the party leader than on the policies of the party. It is true that children tend to have an extremely benevolent and uncynical view of political authority which political leaders
could exploit to their advantage, but these attitudes exist only in the period of early childhood and are transcended around the age of nine. Adults too are not indifferent to personalities when making electoral choices.

Leaders, party policy, self-interest and sheer partisan loyalty all influence voters to some degree, and disentangling precisely their separate effect is impossible. Moreover, the different personalities of the party leaders are relevant considerations which any voter might wish to take into account when assessing a party's potential for successful government and the achievement of its objectives.

Finally, it could be argued that there is a danger that parents might seek to exert influence upon children and coerce them to vote according to their preferences. This not only would render childhood suffrage meaningless, but would confer political advantage on those with children. This objection can be met in a number of ways.

First, if children had the right to vote and enjoyed a greater autonomy and responsibility for their affairs, they would be likely to be much less readily influenced by adults. Children would probably value their own judgement and grow in independence so that parental influence would diminish. Holt makes a related point when he claims that a society which had changed its attitude towards children sufficiently to acknowledge their right to vote would be a society in which adults would not seek to coerce young people, or, if they did, such interference would be frowned upon.

Second, a secret ballot ensures the child's autonomy, since no adult could discover the child's electoral choice.

Third, the argument must be conceded in a special sense. The most influential determinant of our political allegiance is the political preferences of our parents. If I had to guess the party for which a particular individual voted and I could ask only a single question (excluding "which political party do you vote for?), I would be advised to ask "Which political party do your parents support? Butler and Stokes's study revealed that 89 per cent of Conservative voters have parents who are both Conservative voters and 92 per cent of Labour supporters have parents who both support the Labour Party. The children of 'politically mixed' marriages divided 48 per cent Conservative and 52 per cent Labour. These data are, of course, complicated by the emergence of the SDP/Liberal Alliance, but such evidence suggests that, whether we are ten, thirty, or sixty when we vote, the electoral behaviour and preferences of our parents are a powerful and lasting influence; to exclude only young people because of parental influence is therefore unjust…

Conclusions and Prospects

In this chapter, I have tried to argue that the denial of political rights to children offends fundamental democratic principles and that the division between citizens and non-citizens, based upon age, is incoherent and cannot be sustained. I have tried to develop a different proposal which is more positive in its appraisal of children's capacities and their political interest and potentials. This would give rights to all young people but presumes that the majority of very young children, given their probable lack of concern for political affairs, would not utilize their franchise. There is, of course, a problem of abuse with such a procedure,
although I consider it to be less substantial than might be imagined. Moreover, the potential
danger of a few children voting who perhaps should not is far outweighed by the actual injustice
involved when large numbers of children who are interested and informed about politics and
wish to vote are excluded from so doing. The scale of the current exclusion of 12 and 1/2 million
children is massive and somewhat akin to denying voting rights to everyone in Greater London.
Giving children the right to vote has distinct advantages over other proposals aimed at the
protection of their rights. Various institutional devices have been suggested, such as an
ombudsman for children, a minister for children, a select committee on children as well as a
children's council and children's congress discussed in the Deakin Report. The advantage
derived from enfranchising children is that the responsibility for securing the best interests of
children and protecting their rights would reside with children themselves. For the first time,
children could deploy their vote to guarantee the enjoyment of their rights and the prosecution of
their interests; child perceptions would replace adult interpretations of children's rights.

Research evidence suggests that the party political implications of change would be
minimal, with no party finding its support disproportionately enhanced. But the abolition of
age-related rights would lead to change in at least three areas. First, it would be reasonable to
speculate that all political parties would give higher priority and emphasis to policies relating to
youth affairs than at present. There would be a new section of the electorate to be wooed which,
if disappointed, could hold the parties to account.

Second, it could lead to the democratization of the whole range of educational, social
and welfare institutions of which young people are currently the major consumers. If, for
example, education were not compulsory, it is hard to imagine that many teachers could attract
an audience for their tedious diet of rote learning and inconsequential knowledge. Young people
would probably demand greater participation in all aspects of the operation of their school
community, from issues of uniform to curriculum design. Similarly, the acquisition of suffrage
would possibly initiate substantial reforms concerning children's rights in care and within the
juvenile justice system.

Finally, I believe that the absence of all age qualifications, not simply political
(dis)qualifications, would mean that young people could develop skills and potentials at a much
earlier age across a variety of activities. If young people's efforts were taken seriously, criticized,
evaluated and assessed in the way that as adults we assess each other's work in a dialogue
between equals, then children's skills and intellectual achievements could be enhanced to a
degree which, by existing standards, would appear precocious... Political equality would require
adults to take young people more seriously and abandon patronizing attitudes which
systematically underestimate and indicate disrespect for their abilities. If these are some of the
possible implications of the extension of franchise to young people, I welcome them.

Children organizing for political rights will probably be treated initially with ridicule and
derision, and then with misunderstanding and perhaps eventually violence if the experience of
the struggle for women's suffrage is any precedent. Undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to be
overcome is the adult refusal to acknowledge that children suffer political discrimination and
exclusion. Adults do not perceive children as a minority group but as helpless, inexperienced,
defenseless young people who need protection. Adult paternalism seeks to protect and if in this
process it curtails freedom, truncates potential and destroys civil liberties this is taken to be
incidental. The belief in the legitimacy of paternalism justifies and cements the existing power relationships between adults and young people. This attitude must be confronted, challenged and refuted if young people are to secure their political rights...