

Votes for children, part 2

The Cranky Professor

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The voting age in Canada ought to be sixteen, if not fifteen or fourteen or thirteen, or so I argued last week. My argument was that because sixteen year-olds are agents in the public world, denying them the vote means that they have no formal say regarding the laws and policies to which they are subject. This is unfair to them as individuals and, for that reason, is contrary to the principle of consent of the governed.

The point that sixteen year-olds have public interests yet lack the ability to consent to public arrangements is, I think, sufficient justification for lowering the voting age. That is, I would hold that the voting age ought to be sixteen or lower even were politicians actually taking the public-sphere interests of children into account when fashioning policy. The argument for lowering the voting age is not made stronger, but simply becomes more urgent, when we note that sixteen year-olds are getting a raw deal. School funding, the content of secondary education or vocational training, job opportunities and job conditions, the minimum wage, opportunities for recreation—all these and more are matters about which many young people are dissatisfied.

Perhaps even worse is that in Canadian law and policy, sixteen year-olds can be required to shoulder adult responsibilities and burdens. We used in this country to have an effective young offenders act, an act that proclaimed, truly and reasonably, that adults are adults and children are not. While adults, the act implied, may properly be punished in the spirit of retribution, children most certainly must not be. The past few governments, though, have sought to destroy the act, so that authorities within the justice system would have leave to treat young offenders as adults. Now treating a child as an adult in virtue of the heinousness of her actions is seriously objectionable in itself—and crazy, too, as if the greater the offence, the more an adult the offender must be. Canadian adults and Canadian politicians, though, at least outside Quebec, seem to see nothing wrong with punishing children for the sake of punishing them, or else they would have made the matter an issue during the recent federal election. We adults didn't make it an issue. We didn't bother even to mention our government's sickening attitude toward Omar Khadr, a Canadian child long confined and abused at Guantanamo Bay.

We adults didn't make barbarism in the justice system toward sixteen year-olds an election issue, and the sixteen year-olds, the very people potentially subject to barbaric treatment, were legally barred from doing so.

I don't actually think that things would improve for young people were sixteen year-olds to have the vote. I don't think any one of our five federal parties would suddenly become worth voting for. I don't think sixteen year-olds would be any more attuned to or careful regarding their interests than their elders are. That the interests of sixteen year-olds are neglected, that sixteen year-olds can lawfully be punished in the spirit of retribution, that our government will neglect them should they be kidnapped overseas—probably none of that would change. Nonetheless, that conditions are bad for them does make urgent the project of bringing fairness to the political regime under which sixteen year-olds currently live.