

Apathetic about Democracy: Engaging Young Voters

Written by Mary Scott

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MARY SCOTT, FEB 10 2008

There is a worrying trend of growing apathy amongst young people towards politics. The United Kingdom's Electoral Commission published a report in 2002 called 'Making an Impact', which found that voter turnout among young people was at an unprecedented low point at the 2001 general election. According to MORI's figures, it is believed that only 39% of young people aged 18 – 24 used their vote[1]. Total turnout at the 2001 election was, at about 59.4%, the lowest recorded since 1918. These figures point to a larger problem: the relationship between a disillusioned society and a stale democracy. Our lives are governed by a system which has been in place for centuries. It is vital to find a way to re-engage the population, and a particularly alienated youth, with the politics that steer the course of their lives and which have global repercussions. There is a real need in Britain to find a way to assert the legitimacy and relevance of a government which was voted for by only 22% of the population yet has such a vast majority of control in the modern world[2].

The reasons for this fissure are not as clear as the fact of its existence. A survey carried out of British children revealed a fundamental lack of knowledge about the political system of their country and the wider world. The Chief Executive of the Institute for Citizenship, Jenny Talbot, complained that, "When 90% of young people claim to know less than a little about their local council or the European Union, it isn't surprising that voter turnout is as low as 1 in 3. This isn't apathy. This is a lack of information." While less than a quarter of the children quizzed was confident about how Parliament works, over half considered that large companies such as Coca Cola, Microsoft and Nike have a powerful influence on their everyday lives (compared to 40% who recognised the Government)[3].

Awareness among young Britons of social and cultural influences has clearly outshone the political. In 2005 a BBC article found that, contrary to a popular urban myth of the time, it was not true that more young people voted in reality television programmes than in general elections[4]. However, the very existence of that doubt underlines the extent of the problem between media, young people and politics. The article mentions the advantage of television shows in telephone voting, e-voting and SMS text messaging. Political voting is still carried out by the traditional method of ballot box and postal votes. To recapture a technological modern population, politics needs to learn to go e.

In addition, politics, like media, is increasingly opening up into an international realm, with international scrutiny and participation. Whether or not desirable, the internet has become a crucial platform in this development. One of Google's chief scientists, Ed Parsons, defended the Big Brother globalisation of Google, mentioning the atrocities of Darfur as an example of what a huge aid this tool can be to international politics – the international community were able to see the destruction of sites via Google Earth satellite pictures, scenes otherwise hidden by the president's continued denial.

This increasing role of the media in politics could be crucial in the re-engagement of young people and the encouragement to get them voting – allowing a political discourse to take place not beyond the reach of under-18s but amongst them. These are, after all, the future voters, commentators and politicians. What young people think of politics is important. Commenting on a survey commissioned by the Carnegie Young People's Initiative, Ravi Gurumurthy, its Chairperson, recognised that "young people want to be involved but they feel that the present political structure does not allow them sufficient opportunity"[5]. The British Youth Council's Votes at 16 Campaign is gaining momentum, with the support of several MPs including Gordon Brown, who has indicated the need for public debate on the issue. Its critics argue that the enthusiasm of a minority of young adults would not change the fact that

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young people are the least likely age group to turn out and vote on election day; they also argue about the age of responsibility in the context of the legal ages for marriage, drinking, gambling, fighting on the front line in combat. But its backers point to the need to educate and include tax-paying young people in the way their taxes are spent, rather than risk excluding them. In 2001 over 70% of young people indicated a wish for a greater voice in decisions affecting their community, but over two thirds felt that their age meant that their opinions were less valued[6].

It would seem that what politicians think of young people is, rightly, undergoing some reassessment. The stalemate of a 'catch-22' situation where low numbers of young people registering or turning out to vote drive parties to gear their policies towards older, more reliable, voters, means that young people see policies that are aimed at older people and inevitably do not see politics as a relevant force in their lives and are less likely to vote. Over the last few months, however, in our work with the British Youth Council, the UK Youth Parliament and Operation Black Vote, we have come across an eagerness on behalf of the major political parties to get involved in debates with young people, and to agree to these discussions being broadcast through the internet. The internet is unquestionably a valuable source of connection to young people. Even the TV industry is suffering as young people increasingly turn to surfing the net for entertainment. The recognition of the power of media, and its potential as a means to reconnect disillusioned young people with the state, is a crucial step towards a way out of the catch-22 situation.

In 'Resistance to Civil Government', Henry David Thoreau warned against democracy becoming "a tradition, though a recent one, endeavouring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity". In his essay, Thoreau encourages each citizen to engage in the politics of their government, to "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence"[7]. In a nation with a tiered democracy and an inactive youth, what is needed is for politics to embrace healthy, open and informed political debate with young people and connect democracy to the modern world.

Catch21 has embraced the idea of the popularity of network journalism and strives to communicate ideas, issues and questions to young people and to politicians in a format and language that people outside traditional politics can understand and relate to. Using single issues which are varied each month to reach out to young people, Catch21 is an on-line forum of political blogs, questions, interviews and information. Events produced with organisations such as the British Youth Council, the UK Youth Parliament and Operation Black Vote, are run throughout the United Kingdom at schools, colleges and public venues such as the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assembly or Holyrood Parliament; events where young people can interact with politics and politicians, and where politicians have the chance to get feedback about the implications of their parties' policies on young people and sell their parties to future voters. Using Facebook, interactive blogs and our website, questions are submitted and put to political figures by young people, filmed by young people, and watched by young people via Youtube, Facebook and our internet television channel on bliptv.

Unlike the 'catch-22' situation with low numbers of young people registering or turning out to vote, Catch21 provides a way out; a way out of political apathy and disillusionment, and towards re-engaging young people and politics.

Mary Scott is a researcher for Catch 21. Catch 21 is a charitable production company which organises and stages shows all over the UK with the key aim of engaging those currently disengaged, especially young people, with politics. The concept was initially devised and founded by a group of former students of the University of Hull. Catch21 launched the UK's first political internet television channel based at Westminster in October 2007 – run by young people for young people.

[1] 'Survey Of Attitudes During The 2001 General Election Campaign', 4 July 2001, Ipsos MORI. http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2001/elec_comm_rep.shtml

[2] The Labour Government were voted in with just over 35% of the vote in the 2005 elections, which is approximately 22% of the electorate. Figures taken from the *General Election 2005* spreadsheets produced by the Electoral Commission: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/generalelection2005.cfm>

[3] 'Children's Attitude to Politics', 22 March 2002, Ipsos MORI.

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<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2002/atl.shtml>

[4] Brian Wheeler, 'Is Big Brother really more popular than election?', 31 May 2005, BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4586995.stm.

[5] 'Most Young People Want A Greater Say In Public Decision Making', 26 June 2001, Ipsos MORI. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2001/carnegie.shtml>

[6] 'Most Young People Want A Greater Say In Public Decision Making', 26 June 2001, Ipsos MORI.

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2001/carnegie.shtml>

[7] Henry David Thoreau, 'Resistance to Civil Government', 1849, pp.838-845. Nina Baym (general ed.), The Norton Anthology of American Literature (shorter 6th edition), 2003. W. W. Norton & Company: USA.

Those interested in finding out more about youth apathy and democracy in the UK can find further reading at <http://arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/tvnewsconference/> , <http://www.gov2u.org/> , www.byc.org.uk and www.obv.org.uk.