I am writing in response, albeit somewhat late, to the proposals of the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill to extend the franchise in the forthcoming referendum to sixteen and seventeen year-olds on the advice of my local M.S.P.

If it is of interest, I myself am seventeen years old and in my final year of high school. I would like to express my opposition to the plans to include sixteen and seventeen year-olds in the franchise for the referendum. To explain my point, I would like you to consider why we have chosen to set the voting age at eighteen. It is true that in an ideal world, only those most competent to vote would do so. Understandable constraints mean that this is not the case; so we must reflect competence in age, and, thus far, that age has been eighteen: the same age as the age of majority. My argument is not that sixteen and seventeen year-olds are incompetent to vote – a good few of them are more competent than many over the age of eighteen – but that, as unscientific as it is, an age must be decided to reflect an electorate’s competence and the age at which we in Scotland define adulthood is sufficient – having, since nineteen sixty-nine, proven itself to be neither broken nor in need of fixing.

I appreciate that to the defence of the status quo there exist several popular and prominent counter-arguments which I would now like to address. Firstly, it is often argued that if one can marry, join the armed forces et cetera at sixteen, one should be able to vote. These statements are indeed true but not relevant to the situation: one can use an air-rifle unsupervised at fourteen; but not purchase cigarettes or alcohol until the age of eighteen. The age limits for rights and responsibilities unrelated to voting are inconsistent and mercifully unconnected – as such they should have no bearing over how we set the voting age.

Similarly, defenders of the status quo are often faced with the ‘no taxation without representation’ argument about voting rights: that sixteen and seventeen year olds can pay tax, therefore, they should be able to vote. Could I please point out to the committee that ‘no taxation without representation’ is not constitutionally enshrined in any part of British or Scottish law. As snazzy as the phrase sounds, it is, when applied to this situation rather than the eighteenth century North American colonies, meaningless: plenty of organisations are taxed without any formal democratic representation, as are various felons, peers and foreign nationals resident in the U.K. and Scotland.

Finally, I would like to speak against the idea that allowing sixteen and seventeen year-olds to vote creates more democracy and therefore makes the world a better place. It is indeed true that we should strive for better democratic representation; but that representation is only worthwhile expanding if it expands to those most competent to do so; as I have stated, I do not believe a voting age of sixteen reflects this better than the current voting age. If more voters make a better democracy, this argument could be well applied to extending the franchise to twelve year-olds or the mentally incapacitated.
To conclude, I appreciate that my views are in the minority and I quite realise that there are a great many people whose minds will not be budged by such arguments as I here present. Having said that, I would like to leave the committee with this to consider: why has there not been greater public consultation on this matter? This matter being one that, it could be argued, deserves a referendum in itself. I am sure that people on either side of the independence debate would agree that the referendum has been used as a cloak to sneak in this reform without the consideration that it is due.

3 April 2013