Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill

Written evidence to the Devolution (further powers) Committee

ABSTRACT
This is my written evidence that I have submitted to the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill that is based on my dissertation that I have done as part of my MA Journalism course at Edinburgh Napier University.

David Thomson Freelance Journalist and 2014 Journalism Graduate from Edinburgh Napier University
Introduction

In October 2013, I graduated from Edinburgh Napier University with an MA in Journalism. As part of my course, I had to undertake a dissertation over the summer of 2013. My dissertation can either be a 15,000 essay or practical dissertation that would involve a 7,500 literature review and either three articles – totally 7,500 – or a 20-minute television documentary or a 30-minute radio. I choose to do a practical project that would involve me doing a 30-minute radio documentary.

For my radio documentary, I wanted to cover the lead up to the Referendum on Scottish Independence that took place on the 18th September 2014. I have decided to do my documentary on the vote on 16 years old and the engagement with the wider society. My literature review was on the Media Coverage on Elections and Referendums as part of the Referendum on Scottish Independence.

I do welcome the introduction of the Scottish Election (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill to allow 16 and 17 year old to vote in the Scottish Parliamentary and Local Council elections across Scotland after the success of the Referendum on Scottish Independence.
During the referendum, I found that young people have been engaged via Social Media. In my Literature Review, I made reference to the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, by discussing the Public Sphere where it gives a platform for people who come together for discussion with a common cause. In terms of the referendum, this would be town hall debates, hustling etc. As technology has moved on, there is now the Virtual Sphere, where people do come together via computer, to discuss things with a. These people would take one side of the debate and would be either be called Cybernats or Cyberbrits.¹

Campaigning groups for the referendum Better Together and Yes Scotland had sub-groups, like ‘Generation Yes’ and ‘Better Together Youth and Students’. These groups have been engaging with other young people via Social Media – Twitter, Facebook and Blogs – to get their point across during the campaign. The result of this has been that it has made the Virtual Sphere become a campaigning for those groups that cannot get their voices heard as part of the Public Sphere through sending public and private messages through a computer. This is where social media will play a part in the referendum that it is becoming easier for people to interact with each other.²

Dr Jan Eichhorn from the University of Edinburgh has done research into the voter apathy amongst 16-17 years ahead of last year’s referendum. As there is no data available, he has done surveys of 14-17-year-olds in Scotland in April and May 2013 and 2014. They interviewed them and one of their parents separately on their referendum and general political attitudes.

From interviewing Dr Eichhorn and which was highlighted in my documentary that 16 and 17-year-olds were additionally engaged by their school. The reason is that the National Union of Students in Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament and both Yes Scotland and Better Together groups have been giving the schools a lot of information with regard to voter registration, how to vote and information as to whether Scotland should be an independent country.³

Dr Eichhorn went on to explain that 16 and 17 years were engaged by their parents because their parents were discussing the referendum that got them. They were not wholly influence by their parents on how they voted, but they felted engaged in the process.

The final reason on how 16 and 17-year-olds were engaged is through their peer. These could be their school friends or friend from youth clubs or from the debates that were aimed at the 16 and 17-year-olds. Dr Eichhorn felt that 16 and 17-year-old

---

¹ MEDIA COVERAGE ON ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM AS PART OF THE REFERENDUM ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE, DAVID THOMSON (2014)
² MEDIA COVERAGE ON ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM AS PART OF THE REFERENDUM ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE, DAVID THOMSON (2014)
³ Vote at Sixteen year old, will it empower them to vote at future elections - https://soundcloud.com/david21rfc/david-thomson-40128306-dissertation
were more than likely to be the influence to which way to vote from their peers than from their parents.
Campaign for allowing 16 and 17 year old to vote in elections

In both my radio documentary and my literature review, I have made reference to the campaign to allow 16 and 17-year-old the right to vote. I mentioned that it was about campaigning groups, like the National Union of Students and the Scottish Youth Parliament putting pressure on politicians to endorse the policy. With that the Scottish National Party made it policy in 2007 to allow 16 and 17-year-old the right to vote. ⁴

Other parties in the Scottish Parliament also consulted on whether 16 and 17-year-olds should be given the vote. Labour's Drew Smith explained that not only that they consulted by the NUS Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament, but also from the youth wing of the Scottish Labour, who wanted 16 and 17-year-olds to vote. ⁵

From doing my research in my dissertation and making my documentary, I found that the Scottish Liberal Democrats had a long-standing policy of wanting 16 and 17-year-olds to vote. Both Willie Rennie and Alison Johnstone feel that they are mature enough to make a decision of this importance.

When the Scottish Referendum (Franchise) Bill was going through the Scottish Parliament in late 2012-2013, it had widespread support from the politicians. The only party that was against the lowering of the voting age was the Scottish Conservatives because as Ruth Davidson, Scottish Conservative leader, said in my documentary that it should be rolled out for all elections. ⁶

Scotland Office Minister, David Mundell, went on to say that the reason why the UK Government gave the Scottish Parliament the power to decide whether 16 and 17 years should be allowed to vote is because it is up to the Scottish Parliament to decide, not the UK Government. ⁷

---

⁴ MEDIA COVERAGE ON ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUM AS PART OF THE REFERENDUM ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE, DAVID THOMSON (2014)
⁵ Vote at Sixteen year old, will it empower them to vote at future elections - https://soundcloud.com/david21rfc/david-thomson-40128306-dissertation
⁶ Vote at Sixteen year old, will it empower them to vote at future elections - https://soundcloud.com/david21rfc/david-thomson-40128306-dissertation
⁷ Vote at Sixteen year old, will it empower them to vote at future elections - https://soundcloud.com/david21rfc/david-thomson-40128306-dissertation
Should 16 and 17 year olds be allowed to vote in the UK elections

From doing my documentary and the subsequent feature that I have done for an English based website called the London Economic is that I found that young people are involved in politics. That can be from a single issue, such as the environment or gay marriage. That is why there is 110,000 16 and 17-year-old were reported to have been registered to vote in the Scottish Referendum. The reason is that 16 and 17-year-olds can see a clear choice as to whether Scotland should be an Independent country or remain as part of the United Kingdom. This has been backed up by what Dr Eichhorn said in my article that young people express their political opinion though “different channels”.  

There has been criticism being made by the politicians for not engaging with young people, but as the Scottish Liberal Democrat Leader, Willie Rennie said in both my documentary and for the London Economic that he is always engaging with young people. He went on to describe the case study were young boys from Dunfermline High School where looking for a new skatepark and he took it up with Fife.

There has always been a theory that by lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout. But this is not the case as both Professor James Mitchell of University of Edinburgh and Professor John Curtis from University of Strathclyde, said that in 1968 when the voting age went from 21 to 18, voter turnout went down.

As a result, in my article that there will need to be a change to the voting system to increase voter turnout. Particularly from 16-24 age group. The reason why voter turnout for the Scottish Independence Referendum was 84% was that voters had a clear choice to make. With Scottish Parliament and Local Government election, you do not have a clear choice.

---

8 Vote at Sixteen year old, will it empower them to vote at future elections - https://soundcloud.com/david21rfc/david-thomson-40128306-dissertation