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**SHOULD
TEENAGERS
HAVE
THE
VOTE?**

**WINSTON GRAHAM
considers a topical question**

"I WOULD there were no age between ten and three and twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting." The shepherd says this in *The Winter's Tale*, and many have echoed his sentiments since.

It is the classic complaint against the young made by the older generations, who seem to forget their own youth and, in making the complaint, ignore their present follies in which at any age and with much less excuse they are usually still deeply embedded.

While I cannot claim ever to have proselytised on behalf of giving teenagers the vote, it almost goes without saying that I am in favour of it—more so than ever now that for some obscure reason the Government has given them everything else and withheld this.

At 18 young people are liable to be asked to fight for their country. At 18 they may drive lethal motor cars at will along the undeveloped lanes of Great Britain. At 18 they may marry and become parents—or just become parents. At 18 they may suffer life imprisonment for murder. Why should they not be entitled to exercise a simple basic function of parliamentary democracy? The danger is not that they will misuse the privilege. The danger—and it is a real one—is that they will not use it at all.

What is a teenager? I dislike the term, which is journalese and has a pejorative overtone. A teenager is someone born at some date subsequent to November 1948. Nothing else. They are not different creatures from ourselves marked off by peculiar and distinguishing characteristics. They are exactly and precisely the same. They are not even different from what we were at their age, except that they have more freedom and more money to spend.

The oddities of one generation differ from another only like fashions, influenced by the compulsive need for change and by the climate of the time.

The climate of the time, nobody needs to be told, is unlike any other for centuries past, and teenagers are no more exempt from its heady currents than we are. But let us not ask them to accept responsibility for something for which they are not

responsible. Permissiveness—a beautiful euphemism if ever there was one—is in the air.

But permissiveness comes from the middle aged, not from the young. Revolt comes from the young, justifiably, and always has done. The permissive society is our creation, not theirs. Almost all the instigators of the way-out movements of today are themselves people of middle age initiating a new shock craze or helping to break down some last social prohibition for reasons of their own, usually for profit, but sometimes for personal notoriety or to work off a real or imagined frustration of their own youth.

Among young people I know are a few who live solely for the pop stars and dote doltily on the Top Ten, and a few who smoke reefers or take pep pills. I also know one who is only waiting until he is old enough to go out to work among the undeveloped tribes of Central Africa. I know two who are training with frantic dedication to become ballet dancers, and I know one who even wants to join the RAF.

Scattered among these more extreme examples are a few dozen others who exhibit just the same amount of wisdom and folly as their elders—the same enterprise and lack of it, the same tendency to be almighty bores, the same fondness for riding on the bandwagon of fashion and the same liking for bravely championing lost causes, the same antisocial disregard for the good of the greatest number, the same considerateness over trifles, the same unbearable egoism, the same becoming modesty.

They are human beings in the process of growing up, and some will grow up more quickly and more elegantly than others. Some will not grow up at all.

I don't believe that the French proverb "If the young knew, if the old could," contains all the truth in the world. Many people will never learn the elements of civilised behaviour if they live to be a hundred. Some are middle-aged at 20: they have stolidly settled into the physical and psychological pattern from which they will never change. A few of the old can—and do—most things until they die.

On the whole age is irrelevant. Youth has no claim to any superiority, age has no claim to any privileges. All that matters is what you are yourself, whether you have any ability or talent to contribute to the world, whether you have any understanding, vitality, grace, wit, beauty, love or loving kindness. The rest is vanity.

Possibly if the television companies would quietly strangle a few of their more ardent social investigators and the press were restricted in its news to four pages daily, the "teenage problem"—such as it is—would have a chance of being seen in its correct proportions.

But the problem of getting young people to take part in the function of democracy is quite another thing, and is the problem of democracy as a whole. On the defensive in most parts of the world and subject, where it still operates, to gigantic pressures of publicity and mass communication which paradoxically help to damage what they seem to serve, democracy has got a long hard pull ahead of it to justify its existence at all.

In this respect education might do a great deal more than it is doing to give young people an idea of what parliamentary democracy is all about. As soon as the bright ones show they are bright, their eager faces are blinkered to see only specific objectives in the world of education: the 11-plus, the eight O levels, the three A levels, University entry and a concentrated drive towards a good second in Biology or Chemistry, or the more technically minded towards a degree from one of the CATs.

Religion is still taught in schools: so now is elementary biology with its clumsy mechanical explanations of the sexual processes. Euclid still gets a showing. The Norman Conquest is still with us, and no doubt Agincourt and Waterloo. Why not Modern Democracy?

I do not mean necessarily a close examination of the policies of politicians at present in office, nor the reverential approach which—at least until recently—was adopted by American schools towards the principles of their constitution. (Though government of the people, by the people, for the people, is no bad thing to have at the back of one's mind.)

Let us not be either starry-eyed or sardonic about parliamentary government in England. It is the best of a bad lot. And let the young person be told how it works—or how it *should* work . . . from the parish council to the district council, from the town council to the county council; the thousands of unpaid magistrates, the lieutenants, and the sheriffs and the MPs. A ramshackle, double-jointed, inefficient

structure, each level interacting upon another level, so that the feelings and the wishes of the ordinary people rise upwards like the dough in a cake, and so activate decisions at the top which in their turn spread outwards and downwards again to the outermost parts of the country.

Is this itself too ideal an ideal? The enemy of democracy today is not fascism, nor is it communism. It is apathy. The nearer one attains to an affluent society, the less time, it seems, members of that society have for the mere business of running it. Competing political parties, eager to spark off enthusiasm and to gain votes, put forward programmes which promise the earth. When they get into power the facts of life have to be faced and they succeed in doing only fractionally better or fractionally less well than the party they have displaced.

Voters become disillusioned and cynical (most politicians in office only work 18 hours a day; what good is that?) and turn their attention to their own problem. Their own problem usually consists of avoiding the one disgrace left to modern man, the disgrace of poverty. In their concentration on this the pools coupon soon ousts the ballot box.

1984 is not so very far away. Before we reach it, will it have ceased to matter whether our government is democratic or authoritarian, so long as it provides social security, television from either tap, and bingo nightly?

Recent events in France and elsewhere suggest that powerful forces still simmer under the surface of apparent indifference and complacency. Frustration in the young can be violently explosive if bottled up too long. The teenage vote is only a small and inefficient outlet because that outlet is itself suspect and tainted with conformity.

Yet possibly the future of humanity—not merely in the so-called democracies but in the other three-quarters of the world as well—will depend on the ability of a sufficient number of human beings everywhere to think and judge and act for themselves, to learn to resist indoctrination whether it comes from a political boss, a press campaign, or clever ad-men, and to preserve a sense of proportion and a set of values in a shaky world.

Future teenagers are being born every minute. Future participants—active participants—in a live democracy will be harder to come by, especially while present political structures fail to catch the imagination and while it remains fashionable to denigrate and deride. In the meantime an infusion of younger voters into our electoral system can do *us* no harm. It might even do the country a bit of good.