Lowering the Voting Age to Sixteen

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 23 Ionawr 2018
Petitions Committee | 23 January 2018

Research Briefing:

Petition number: P-05-794

Petition title: Lowering the Voting Age to Sixteen

Text of petition:

We call on the National Assembly for Wales to lower the voting age to sixteen for those elections where they have the powers to do so.

Background

The Wales Act 2017 gives the National Assembly power to make provisions about Assembly and local government elections including the ability to lower the voting age. The relevant provisions are expected to come into force on 1 April 2018.

The minimum voting age for all elections and referenda in Wales, England and Northern Ireland is 18. In Scotland, 16 and 17 year olds were permitted to vote in the Independence Referendum in September 2014. According to the Electoral Commission in their report on the Scottish Independence Referendum, 109,593 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote in the Scottish referendum. 75% of the 16-17 year olds the Electoral Commission spoke to claimed to have voted and 97% of those who reported having voted said that they would vote again in future elections and referendums. The Scottish Parliament subsequently passed the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015 reducing the voting age to 16 for the Scottish Parliamentary and local elections.

The Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey also have a minimum voting age of 16.

As outlined in the House of Commons Library Research Briefing Paper on Voting Age, there were attempts during the passage of the European Union Referendum Bill 2015-16 to amend the Bill to allow the franchise for the referendum to include 16 and 17 year olds. The

amendment was agreed in the House of Lords by 293 votes to 211 but was subsequently overturned by the Commons.

Two Private Members' Bills have been introduced in the House of Commons with the objective of reducing the minimum voting age for UK elections. Both Jim McMahon MP's Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement and Education) Bill 2017–19 and Peter Kyle MP's Representation of the People (Young People's Enfranchisement) Bill 2017–19 are scheduled for Second Reading on 11 May 2018. A Private Members' Bill to the same effect has also been introduced in the House of Lords.

In June 2017, in a briefing entitled Votes at 16, the Electoral Reform Society stated their support for enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds for all elections and referenda. According to the Society:

> Enfranchising younger people is one of the ways we can try to build a better democracy in the UK. There is a widening gulf between people and politics – we see lowering the franchise as vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy. Giving 16 and 17 year olds a vote provides an opportunity to get the next generation more engaged with politics.

Welsh Government action

A Welsh Government consultation on reforming local elections in Wales closed on 10 October 2017 and responses are currently being analysed. As part of this, the Welsh Government consulted on extending the franchise to include all those aged 16 on polling day in Welsh local government elections. The consultation document notes:

> It has been Welsh Government policy for several years to reduce the voting age to 16 and indeed the National Assembly by a clear majority voted in favour of this move in May 2013. Furthermore, the policy was included in the manifestos of the Labour Party, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats at the General Election. We should soon be in a position to implement this.

In a letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee dated 5 December 2017, the First Minister stated that:

> It is the intention of the Welsh Government that 16 and 17 year olds will be enabled to vote at the next elections to the National Assembly and local government.

National Assembly for Wales action

From November 2014 – June 2015 an Assembly consultation for young people found that 53% of the 10,375 who took part were in favour of lowering the voting age to 16.

In February 2017 the Assembly Commission established an Expert Panel on Electoral Reform. One of the purposes of the Expert Panel was to advise the Assembly Commission on the minimum voting age for Assembly elections. The Panel reported in December 2017 and recommended that the minimum voting age for Assembly elections should be reduced to 16 with effect from the 2021 election (Recommendation 14). According to the Panel:

The evidence we have considered suggests a reduction in the minimum voting age to 16 would be a powerful way to raise political awareness and participation among young people. In addition, if the Welsh Government legislates to reduce the voting age for local government elections in Wales from 2022, it would be extremely anomalous, and create additional administrative and political issues, if the voting age for Assembly elections from 2021 were not also reduced. The evidence suggests that higher salience elections are more likely to result in higher turnout and voter participation; it is therefore desirable that if the franchise is to be extended in Wales, it should first take effect at the higher salience Assembly election. [Report para 15.39]

The Panel also concluded:

To ensure that young people are encouraged and supported to exercise their right to vote, any reduction in the minimum voting age should be accompanied by appropriate, effective and non-partisan political and citizenship education. [Report para 16.38]

On 10 January 2018, in a letter responding to this petition, the Llywydd stated that:

the Assembly Commission will consult in early 2018 on how the Panel's recommendations and the wider programme of reform should be taken forward.