

# Pensioners' votes should be given to children

Politicians never recognise the interests of young people. Failure to change this could be fatal to democracy

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Easter is the season of rebirth and regeneration — and this spring seems a suitable time to think about how politics should serve the next generation, what with the royal wedding and next week's referendum on the voting system.

For a genuine revival of our democracy, however, forget about the AV referendum and look to Hungary, where the Government this month proposed a truly significant reform. Hungarian mothers could be given extra votes on behalf of their children, to redress the imbalance in favour of older voters, which is increasing in all democracies with the ageing of the postwar baby-boom generation. Similar reforms, first proposed in 1986 by the American demographer Paul Demeny, have been seriously considered in the past decade in Germany, Austria and Japan.

The precise details of any such plan — whether to divide children's votes between mothers and fathers, how to deal with adoptive parents, whether to limit the extra votes per family — can be debated for ever, just like the various permutations of proportional representation and first-past-the-post.

What should not be in dispute is the principle that any system of genuine universal suffrage should recognise the interests of children who are too young to vote. Equally indisputable is that our present system fails to accord due weight to the interests of future generations and that bias against the young has recently become more extreme, threatening the future of democratic societies and economies.

In theory, everyone agrees that governments should attach more importance to the future than they do now and that politicians should be stopped from offering electoral bribes to current voters at the expense of generations yet unborn. Indeed, the most overused cliché in the political lexicon is that painful policies, such as

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of the public services

cuts in public deficits and spending, are necessary for our children's and grandchildren's sake. On closer examination, such altruistic claims turn out to be contrary to the truth.

While proclaiming their passion for education and "the future", governments in all democracies have systematically favoured older voters at the expense of the non-voting young. This dangerous trend has accelerated because of the confluence between the ageing of the baby-boom generation and the global credit crunch. The

retirement of baby-boomers born from 1946 onwards is greatly increasing the preponderance of older voters in all advanced economies.

Non-democratic nations such as China continue to invest in programmes on energy research, climate change and higher education, while democratic societies are being forced to downgrade these long-term investments because of their commitments on health and pensions. Politicians who claim to serve future generations by reducing public deficits, but in the process aggravate true multi-generational issues such as climate change, are being hypocritical.

Consider the priorities of the coalition Government. Spending has been cut on most programmes that benefit future generations but do little for the bulk of today's voters — school buildings, universities, scientific research, energy innovation and long-term infrastructure investment. Child benefit has been cut for higher-earning families and education maintenance allowances have been abolished.

Meanwhile, government spending on elderly voters continues to grow, sucking the lifeblood out of public services that would benefit children and build the nation's future. State pensions have been gold-plated with David Cameron's unprecedented "triple-lock" guarantee, which promises annual escalation in line with the highest of three inflation factors: consumer prices, average earnings or 2.5 per cent. Free bus passes and television licences, winter fuel

payments and age allowances have all been left untouched.

The National Health Service, which overwhelmingly benefits old people, has not just had its spending exempted from cuts but its income has been protected in real terms. Generous public sector pensions and early retirement deals have been preserved for older government workers, while benefits for the next generation of civil servants have been drastically reduced.

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Far from safeguarding the interests of our children and grandchildren, therefore, the coalition's public finance policies are increasing subsidies to the old. Even the reduction of public borrowing, which appears at first sight like a policy that must surely benefit our children, is actually a redistribution of wealth to the old from the young. As we have seen, cutbacks today are largely at the cost of children and future generations.

Yet the benefit of lower public debts will mostly accrue to people who are retired already or who are due to retire in the next 20 years. This is because some 90 per cent of the expected increase in Britain's public debt between 2009 and 2030 is down to the growth of public spending on pensions, health and long-term care, according

to IMF calculations. The recession and the credit crunch merely brought forward an age-related fiscal crisis that would otherwise have occurred around 2020, as the baby-boomers retired.

The most plausible response to this fiscal crisis should have been to reduce the state benefits promised by successive governments to retirees, for example by means-testing state pensions and bus passes, or by making patients contribute to the cost of their treatment on the NHS. Instead, the cuts ensure that voters who retire between now and 2030 will continue to enjoy generous pensions and health benefits.

Which brings us back to the proposals in Hungary. The rapidly rising proportion of old voters, combined with their higher propensity to vote, virtually guarantees that public policies will increasingly be distorted against the interests of children, families and young workers.

Since the elderly will never acknowledge, even to themselves, that they are voting selfishly and against their children's interests — and since politicians canvassing for votes will certainly never suggest this — there seem to be three possible ways to correct the bias against the future as our democracies grow old.

We could give extra votes to parents on behalf of their children. We could deprive retired people of the right to vote. Or we could give up on democracy. At some point, the rising generation will have to make such a choice.