

Last year, the Isle Of Man boldly went where no country has gone before, and became the first in the world to lower the official voting age. Hundreds of 16- and 17-year-olds were given the chance to make their opinions count at the Manx general elections for the first time ever.

The move was a controversial one, with critics arguing that young people are too immature by nature and too politically apathetic to be entrusted with such a key, adult responsibility. Those in favour, however, point out that 16-year-olds can legally work, pay taxes, get married, join the armed forces, and have sex – whether they are straight or gay – so why should they have to wait until the age that the law defines as adulthood, 18, to join the rest of the population at the ballot box?

Soon, we could see the heated debate between those for and against the idea raging far nearer to home. In the midst of Gordon Brown's recently released raft of proposals on constitutional reform was a suggestion that we should follow the Isle Of Man's example and lower the voting age to 16 in England and Wales.

Many in the government believe now is the right time to do this, including cabinet office minister, Ed Miliband, at 36 the youngest member of the Cabinet, who is on record as being "personally in favour" of votes for 16-year-olds, and who readily acknowledges that "we as politicians have got to do a much better job of listening to the voices of young people."

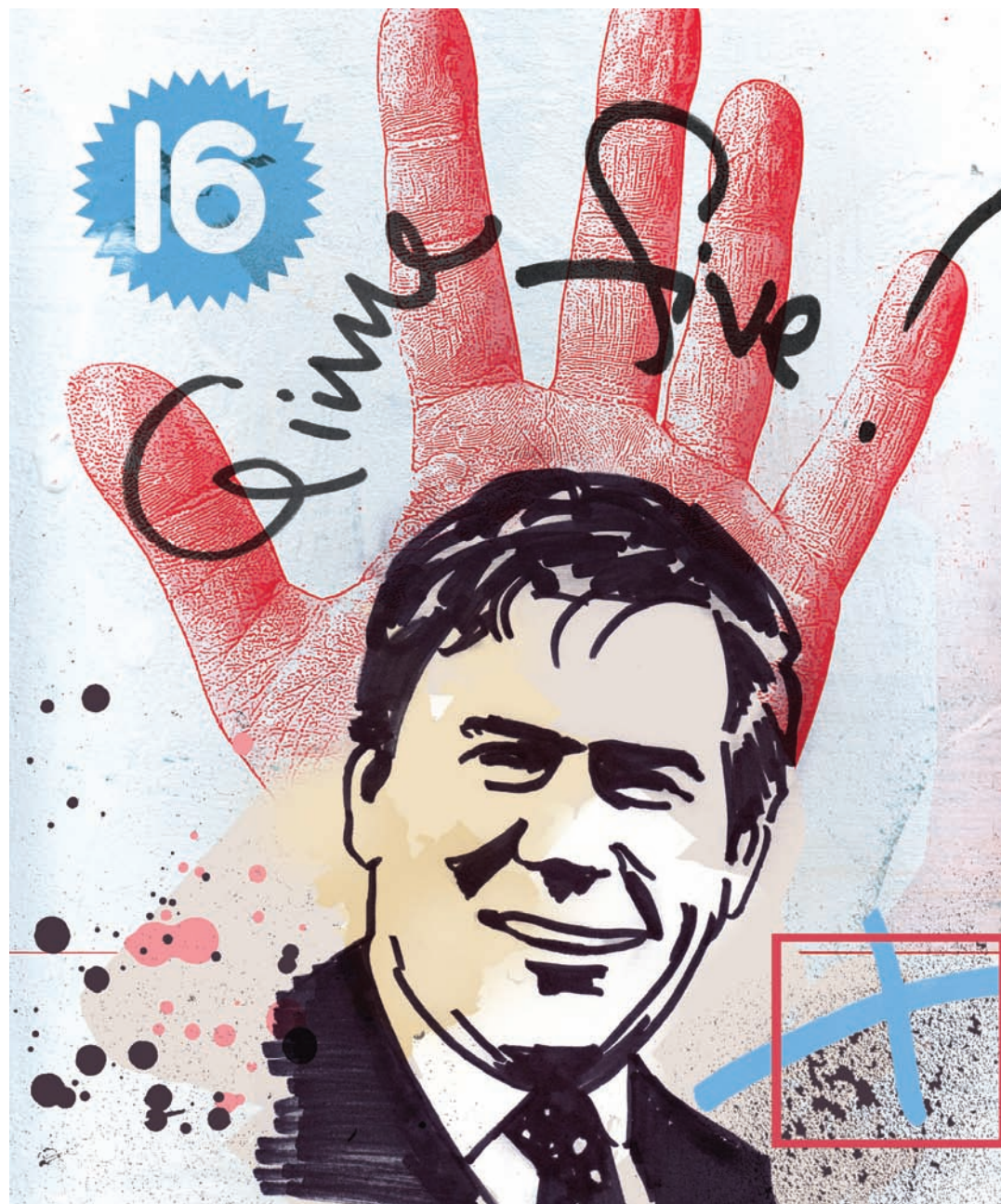
Some have levelled strong charges against New Labour regarding its attitude to young people, claiming that it has sought to 'criminalise' this group – the controversial ASBOs, and public order offences restricting certain street public gatherings to just two people being just a couple of examples. Dropping the bar on such a large group of teenagers voting would certainly be a progressive move and confirm Brown as willing to take risks his predecessor fought shy of.

But will it work in practice? Those who urge caution say that there are many salutary lessons to be found in a study of the Isle Of Man's experience.

A survey of the Manx politicians as to why they had supported the policy throws up a range of different views. Agriculture minister, Phil Gawne, said: "I support it on the tax principle alone – those who pay >>>

# THE RIGHTS OF MAN

**IN THE ISLE OF MAN THE VOTING AGE HAS BEEN LOWERED TO SIXTEEN – A MOVE THAT IS BEING PROPOSED FOR ENGLAND AND WALES. SO SHOULD TEENAGERS BE ALLOWED TO VOTE? FINLO COSTAIN INVESTIGATES THE MANX EFFECT**



tax should have a say in how that money is spent." John Shimmin, minister for local government and environment, felt that "Too often we hear in politics that young voices aren't listened to – this forces all candidates to at least consider their views and needs."

According to the island's chief minister, Tony Brown, the time was right for change because: "Young people now are more mature than we were when I was that age. They're far more focused on life."

Politicians of all persuasions are undoubtedly interested in the extra support they could garner through such a policy – and will argue that increasing voter turnout is a good thing for society as a whole. But in the Isle Of Man, many say the reform was rushed in without proper administrative planning, leaving many potential new young

voters unaware of their new right, or the need to register to take it up.

Shimmin conceded: "There should have been a proper lead in time – at least two years – to give the opportunity to raise awareness." Gawne suggests they would have been better prepared if Royal Assent (Manx laws have to be approved by the UK) had been given in "a more timely fashion."

Although the Isle Of Man parliament, Tynwald, actually approved the policy in spring 2006, Royal Assent wasn't given until July, when schools had broken up for the summer.

But chief minister Tony Brown

bats back the criticisms. "Many young people hadn't filled in the voter registration forms because the forms were late going out, but even so many young people still had the vote – and that's advancement."

Young people themselves in the Isle Of Man – both those who did vote and those who missed their chance – seemed uniformly in favour of the move. At Queen Elizabeth II school in the Manx city of Peel, Gabriella Corlett told *The Big Issue*: "It gave us the feeling that we were being listened to. I was getting more of a say in the world I live in." Pupil Sarah Curwen added:

**"IT CHANGES THE LEVEL OF INTEREST THAT YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE IN HOW THE COUNTRY IS RUN"**

"It changes the level of interest that young people have in how the country is run – as well as getting politicians interested in our views."

Student Paul Glover didn't manage to register. "On the day, I felt left out – everyone else was going off and voting... People must be made aware that they have the vote. Lots here missed out because when they found out they could vote it was too late to register."

But what about those who've left school, or work, or who are unemployed, who fall into the new voting category? Tom Burke, of the Children's Rights Alliance For England (CRAE), says that there must also be a concerted effort to engage with those who've left school. He asserts that the Votes At 16 coalition includes trade unions such as UNISON, who will be crucial partners in raising awareness if the voting age is lowered in the future in this country.

A committed pro-reformer, he points to the United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child 1989 (CRC). "The CRC recognises that as children grow they can take on increasing independence and responsibilities. As children, they need protection from discrimination and abuse, but are still capable of expressing their own opinion," he stressed.

"In general, we need to break down the barriers to voting – make registration easier and run high profile public information campaigns to explain the value of voting. It means making citizenship education relevant and stimulating in all our schools," Burke said.

When Manx chief minister Tony Brown is pressed on whether he has advice on this issue for Gordon Brown, he is loathe to pass comment – but clearly feels that the decision was the right one. "We were the first to do it, and it's been a successful policy," he says firmly.

If Labour does choose to lower the voting age, and learn from the Manx experience, it should consider carefully how to implement such a policy to ensure information and opportunity is not just available to school pupils, but to all 16- and 17-year-olds, whatever walk of life they are in. They should also be prepared for young people to start raising their voices, beyond the ballot box, to demand that future policies take their views into account.

For more information, visit Children's Rights Alliance For England – [www.crae.org.uk](http://www.crae.org.uk); Votes At 16 – [www.votesat16.org.uk](http://www.votesat16.org.uk); Ministry Of Justice (which will run the consultation) – [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk)

