

Toronto the teenager: why we need a Children's Council

by Darren O'Donnell

Wikipedia tells us that there are ten alpha cities, cities that have specific attributes, including participation in international events, advanced transportation systems, advanced communications infrastructure and world-renowned cultural institutions. Wikipedia lists London, New York City, Paris, Tokyo, Chicago, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Milan and Singapore. Toronto doesn't make the cut. It's listed as a beta city, with many but not all of the relevant qualities. As a beta city, Toronto isn't quite in the loop - it tends to overhear conversations more than participate in them. At meals, it oscillates between the adults' and the kids' table, feeling at home at both and neither. Toronto is a teenager and, as a teenager, Toronto understands the indignities of youth, the untenable position of being able to understand the situation but do nothing about it. And this visceral understanding of disenfranchisement makes it the ideal seat for a rigorous challenge to the legal status of youth with respect to democratic participation.

If you're searching for utopia, you need look no further than the kids. The beautiful thing about focusing on youth is that while we may not be kids now, we all were once. And we carry the somatic memory of those days into almost every encounter; we all share, to some degree or other, a visceral understanding of powerlessness. Barring children from full political participation not only makes no sense when we consider the rights of the child, but also when we take into account the greater good. Excluding a huge segment of the population - a segment in the midst of forming views and attitudes that shape their behaviour for the rest of their lives - is a narrow-minded act that can only serve to limit our own possibilities as adults. So, while this proposal is for the children, it's truly benefit of who those children become, for the adults who have to deal with results of eighteen years of their own political disenfranchisement.

The movement to lower the voting age is active, relatively strong but experiencing continued resistance. Early in the 2005, Liberal mp Mark Holland teamed up with then Conservative Belinda Stronach, Stéphane Bergeron from the Bloc and Nathan Cullen from the NDP to introduce a private member's bill to amend the elections act to lower the age to sixteen. In June 2005, Parliament voted it down. In January 2005, a couple of teenagers from Edmonton, Eryn Fitzgerald and Christine Jairamsingh, attempted, unsuccessfully, to get their views on the issue heard by the Supreme Court, but the Supremes refused to even consider it. New York City councillor Gale Brewer introduced a bill on June 8, 2005, which has yet to be voted on, that would also see the voting age dropped to sixteen. And in Britain, the recently initiated Votes at 16 campaign has strong support and membership from a wide variety of groups representing youth and the youth wings of many of the political parties, including the ruling Labour Party.

In the June 2005 House of Commons debate, Conservative Pierre Poilievre, at twenty-five the youngest Member of Parliament, articulated a mainstream nervouness by mistakenly pointing out that 'the responsibility ... to pay taxes usually arrives around the age of eighteen' - forgetting, of course, that everyone pays GST and most pay PST. He goes on: 'Values such as thrift, responsibility and hard work are most exemplified in the years that follow, having reached the age of majority.' Even assuming this statement is true, what do thrift, responsibility and hard work have to do with anything? If I want to

laze around and spend all my money on pot and porn, I shouldn't be barred from voting; the consumption of pot and porn keeps the economy rolling.

Around the world, a number of countries and municipalities welcome the participation of young people: Iran lets the kids vote at fifteen, and Brazil, the Philippines and many municipalities in Germany at sixteen. The logic employed by youth and their advocates is that if you're allowed to screw, drive a Hummer and be taxed on your chocolate bars, then you have every right to participate. In Canada, we have a contradiction: you can join a political party at fourteen and vote to choose the leader of that party - and potentially the whole country - but are barred from further participation.

The drive to lower the voting age can, in some ways, be seen as a response to the stretching of youth upwards into our thirties. This youth drift encourages the luxury of not taking life too seriously, of being okay with working crappy, low-paying, precarious jobs, of happily deferring full civic engagement to later years. As we left behind Fordist modernity, where adulthood is tied to working 'real' jobs, we have seen living with parents, contemplating video games as the next big narrative form, playing in bands and other facets of youth culture jump in to fill the employment gap and make it all seem a little less onerous. Art and culture get involved in this dynamic by providing distraction and the lotto-like hope that fame and fortune will come our way. This whole situation is supported by myriad print and electronic media, all providing a variation on Warhol's fifteen minutes, where the avenues and portals of notoriety have proliferated to such a degree that fame is thinly spread into an electronic eternity of self-Googleing. The youthful thirty-year-old finds no avenues for civic engagement or political enfranchisement in today's electrometropolis but does find a semblance of community and the illusion of interactivity. And, worse, as we drift into our forties, we suddenly find that these many playful passions have morphed - if we've had any success at all - into a low-paying career where the opportunity to work intrudes into almost all moments.

By nudging youth inexorably upwards and keeping children sheltered from the responsibility of full citizenship, we ensure that childhood is a time when civic *ir*responsibility is a given, when not too much is expected of us: childhood as halcyon innocence. But childhood has never been innocent. There have always been drugs, sex, dirty uncles and dirty thoughts. We kid ourselves precisely to the degree that we inculcate our children into states of passivity and, in turn, our adulthoods into years of servitude.

And there's another thing: at the same time as youth pulls itself into the thirties, we have the zombie-walk of consumerism down past youth and now fully into childhood. The child becomes the consumer while the adult becomes the youth. We learn how to be consumers first, and only much much later do we have the opportunity to become engaged citizens. If we feel it's okay to allow the complete consumerization of the children, then we must insist on their complete political enfranchisement.

Let's leave aside the very important discussion of whether there's any worth in voting *at all* - after all, when it's always a case of the lesser of two evils, it's hard to whip up any enthusiasm. Municipal elections hold a little more interest, but until cities are granted the right to govern themselves, what's happening provincially and nationally will always be more relevant. Cities are the children of the provinces - a fact that can be seen with full clarity in the Municipal Elections Act, a piece of provincial legislation in which the complete contours of how a city must run its elections are laid out - including, of course,

voter eligibility at age eighteen. That the province dictates who can engage in constituting the city is a democratic deficit of the first order. As cities continue to grow, becoming home to a greater percentage of the population, the struggle to gain more power and autonomy can also be expected to flourish. And with this flourishing will come an opportunity for cities - with their diverse and relatively progressive populations - to demonstrate creativity when it comes to policy. This, in turn, has the potential to hold some interest for voters - with specific opportunities for civic engagement from more and more of the youth population. Designing a system where full engagement is the norm rather than the exception should be the goal.

Already existing avenues for youthful political participation are most prevalent at the level of municipalities. Some cities have youth advocates who, while claiming to represent concerns of young people, still determine their own agendas. Toronto, Edmonton and Montreal, for example, have gone as far as inviting youth to participate in the process via youth councils. But the process has some deficiencies. Edmonton and Montreal assign youth of their liking, so from the start there's good reason to be suspicious. In Edmonton the exercise starts to look a lot like school with the hard line they take on attendance: 'If a member misses two consecutive meetings without prior notification, he/she will be asked to resign from the Council. Event attendance is mandatory.' Imagine laying those rules on our professional politicians. In Toronto, the politicians do not choose the reps; the Youth Cabinet is open to anyone between the ages of thirteen and twenty-six. This sounds good on paper, but like most activities of this nature, it attracts people inclined to view civic engagement as not only desirable but possible. This, it seems, would rule out a lot of youth - as can be seen by the fact that only about two hundred have decided to take the leap and join.

Imagine a polity comprised of representatives of all age groups, a polity where the practical concerns and political opinions of the six-year-old are considered as valid as those of the sixty-year-old. It's safe to say that for most of us there's a knee-jerk recoiling from such a bizarre idea. But in this age of so-called human rights, what could be more bizarre than structuring a society so that the individual is deprived of basic political participation for the first quarter of her life? That seems more ludicrous than the incredible proliferations of playgrounds we could expect if sixty-year-olds were elected to office.

The Toronto Children's Council I'm proposing would provide an opportunity for direct participation in the political process. For our purposes, I'll define a youth as anyone who does not have a legal right to vote - so, at this time, anyone under eighteen. Using the municipal ward system, every school in a given ward would elect a couple of representatives to a ward council. The ward council, in turn, would elect a couple of representatives to sit on the Toronto Youth Council, which is permitted one vote on city council with respect to any policy at all. The time spent selecting representatives, discussing issues and participating as representatives would be incorporated into the curriculum as a distinct course of study. The exact number of representatives per school would have to be adjusted for difference in size. Youth who are not attending school would participate through organizations serving youth, composing their own caucus within the council.

How the Children's Council would work, what they would do, how they might try to influence policy, are questions that would need to be addressed in the doing. One form might be to have different wards focus their attention on different aspects of

government, with all students participating in any debates about global issues such as budget. The children could essentially form a shadow council, with representatives syncing their participation with the councillors in their ward. So, if their local councillor has specific responsibilities - say, involvement with the police services board - the curriculum in the corresponding schools would also focus on policing. The fear that these kinds of discussions may be beyond the comprehension of some of the lower grades is unfounded. It simply becomes a matter of developing a curriculum that takes the kids as far as their interest is sustained. More important, it comes down to courage on the part of the teachers to communicate to the students some of the harsher realities - there's little doubt a child can understand the implications of, say, the police association spying on politicians - but will the teachers have the courage to work with this material? Some will and some won't.

But beyond utopian visions, there are practical avenues for bringing this kind of headspace into fruition. Those who work with boards of directors, whether it's within a community organization, a not-for-profit or a money-making concern, can recruit youth to serve and participate in a decision-making capacity. Develop some structure that protects the kid from fiduciary responsibility - not that it will be needed; if anybody sues you, they won't be coming after the kid but the richest fool on the board. If you think the matters of the board are too complex for a kid to understand, you're probably kidding yourself, but, in the event they are, you should figure out how to capture the kid's interest. It will probably benefit the work you do, forcing meetings to stay on point, with enough distillation of information to keep the attention of a fourteen-year-old. Most organizations already have a few members with more compromised attention spans than that, so this tactic could be a way to improve the functioning and commitment of the organization as a whole.

Serving on boards could also be included in the education curriculum and would count towards credits. But again, and most important, kids would be serving on the boards because their contribution will make the world a better place - if only for the duration of the meeting where they will force a brevity and focus into the proceedings. Keeping in mind that a kid needs to be kept in the loop will focus the meeting on the essentials. If this means that the organization has to change the pace at which its work gets accomplished, then so be it. Throughout history, people have always had their citizenship rights suppressed in the name of expediency; giving women and blacks the vote was supposed to cause chaos.

Chatting with some kids on the street the other day, I asked them what they would change if they were mayor of the world. Eradicating both poverty and biting were two of the first responses. There was debate among them about the value of taxation, but everybody deferred to the thirteen-year-old girl when she pointed out that taxes were important to make sure that obvious stuff like schools and traffic lights would run. As you might expect, they were concerned about war and world poverty. They wanted more community centres, more places to engage their minds and their bodies on their own schedule. Kids get it. It's that simple. They are capable of being as fully informed as it takes to engage responsibility in the civic sphere.

But, ultimately, the burden doesn't have to be on children and their advocates to prove the worth of allowing kids full civic participation. We don't have to demonstrate the various healthy benefits for the city and its citizenry. The benefits of allowing all citizens full participation are intrinsic to the gesture itself; there's no need to prove social benefit

beyond the full enfranchisement of every single citizen. We don't even need to speculate on what the effect may be, but since it's an interesting exercise, let's give it a whirl.

What would a city governed - in part - by children look like? What new rights would need enshrinement?

- *The Right to Candy.* All children would have the right to reasonable access to candy. For the less privileged, a candy allowance would be provided by the state. This form of welfare acknowledges that children do not have the means to provide for themselves and that their parents' fiscal situation should in no way interfere with free and easy access. Candy is one of joys of childhood, and fair and equitable access should be a given. The children acknowledge that this right brings with it a concomitant responsibility to brush their teeth.
- *The Right to Play Doctor.* Playing Doctor and its many variations would not be prohibited in any way. The prohibition of Playing Doctor is only effective in getting the game banished to dank, clandestine basements, garages and hidden corners. It would be an offence to interfere with any reasonable expression of sexuality.
- *The Right to Toys.* It will be expected that companies involved in the creation of play technology will supply less advantaged youth with state-of-the-art toys. These companies would engage in this redistribution of wealth with the confidence that plenty of compensation would be generated once the kid had the purchasing power to invest in her own toys. It would be acknowledged as an investment in future consumers; thus, no state funding would be required.
- *The Right to Public Nudity.* There is the tacit understanding that naked infants do not pose a social risk. This needs to be enshrined in law. An exact identification of the age at which public nudity becomes an offence is required, however; ambiguity on this issue lets shame creep into the formula. It should be clear: on a particular birthday, one dons underwear, never to remove it unless in the privacy of one's own home or at Hanlan's Point.
- *The Right to Take Physical Risks.* Doing so-called dangerous stuff like skateboarding, riding cushions down the stairs and running on the pool deck would be permitted on a need-to-do basis, with full acknowledgement by the child that a risk is being taken. If repeated injuries are sustained, the child would agree to attend Tai Chi classes (or a range of other designated modalities) in order to gain a greater awareness of his body in space, build stamina, strength and balance.
- *The Right to Talk to Strangers.* There would be the acknowledgment that the public sphere is a relatively safe place, certainly safer than the comfort of the home, where one is far more likely to be molested or beaten. This is not to deny that pedophiles lurk but that the prohibition against chatting with strange adults is irrational and tends to generate a fearfulness that is carried well into adulthood, in turn creating a profound atomization in the social sphere. There would be a limited right to talk to strangers but an acknowledgement that accompanying an unknown adult to another locale is strictly verboten.
- *The Right to Be Hugged by Teachers and Caregivers.* The prohibition against physical contact does nothing to reduce incidence of abuse but does interfere with the natural need for physical contact. Navigating this particular realm would have to involve a

soulful exploration of the culture's hysteria and denial around childhood sexuality.

The Toronto Children's Council would have to be merely a stop-gap in a drive to abolish any remaining limits on democratic participation, opening the process up to anyone who has the will to vote. There is no reason to fear. Concerns about a kid's ignorance of the issues are unfounded. It's a delusion to believe that children can't assemble informed opinions about general policy issues; their interest in human rights, animal rights and the environment can be clearly witnessed on any given Earth Day.

And who will forget the kids booing Mike Harris into silence to the astonishment of Nelson Mandela? If only we had the courage to let the little brats vote. And the argument that they will either be strong-armed into voting for their parents' choice or, in childish rebellion, cast a dissenting ballot, is based on the false assumption that most adults are somehow behaving differently.

As Toronto the teenager knows, youth is a frustrating state. We want to be a player. Who doesn't? Everyone desires agency. But alpha status will always be difficult for Toronto to achieve, particularly with our proximity to the U.S. and relatively low population concentration. Rather, Toronto and, in turn, Canada (a teenage country if ever there was one) are in a good position to enjoy the benefits of our youthful understanding to promote progressive, utopian agendas. The contours of this are already in evidence with gay marriage and our slightly more liberal attitude towards marijuana. The urban arena, with its diverse and generally more progressive populations, is a great place to push further and push harder.