

## The Hidden Penalty

The actual worth of a woman's vote, to which she is entitled as a citizen ("One Person, One Vote"), is reduced by half at the very instant her first child is born. When her second child arrives, the strength of her vote is reduced to a third; to a quarter when the third one is born, and so forth. This reflects the most dramatic case, that of a single parent — usually the mother — and her dependent children. But the situation is also unfair for any family or for any couple preparing to become parents.

The subsequent loss of electoral clout seriously hinders the democratic principle of representative government, and helps make the disenfranchised group formed by a child and its (single) mother, on whom he or she depends, the first victims of poverty in every country in the world. This sorry prevalence has been confirmed by countless studies carried out by both conservative and liberal researchers.

The electoral system, as practiced in democracies throughout the world, is an imperfect one. It has not yet recognized that each person (each citizen, actually) is entitled to political representation, i.e. to a vote, whether he or she has the necessary discernment (18 years of age) to exercise it directly and autonomously, or needs the assistance of a parent or of whoever has or shares custody or legal guardianship for the exercise of the minor's other rights.

For a long time, voting was denied to certain social groups or categories, for example, due to race or gender discrimination. Great progress was made when working class men's, then blacks', then women's, right to vote was recognized. Now this recognition must be extended to minors (from 0 to 18 years of age), in order to achieve complete universal participation in the electoral process.

It is obvious that once a child's right to vote is recognized, that child's needs and interests will become a factor in electoral choice, as in all fairness it should. Particularly when we acknowledge that it is precisely the child who will usually live for a longer period of time with the results of the choice made in those elections, from which he or she has thus far been excluded.<sup>(1)</sup>

This new voter will immediately be taken into account by candidates and elected officials, who will propose concrete solutions to the child's problems instead of the more or less eloquent but hollow speeches they offer now. As things stand today, parents are left to bear the burden of the responsibilities imposed on them by society, with very little help: from the first day after the birth of each of their children, parents must feed, clothe, clean, cure and educate these citizens who, for the next 18 years at least, will depend on them completely. And not only must they share whatever possessions, resources and assets they have with their children, they must also share their vote, their public voice in society. In the case of the single mother we addressed earlier, whereas her childless sister has one full vote with which to express her accord or disagreement with the policies implemented by her elected representatives, the mother has half, a third, a quarter, or an even smaller fraction of a vote, depending on the number of children under her care.

The following graph shows the effects of not recognizing the right to vote of all citizens, regardless of their age.

Groups formed exclusively by adults maintain their electoral strength, derived from the basic democratic principle of "one person, one vote". On the other hand, in groups that include adults (voters) and children (non-voters), the effectiveness of each vote is diminished in proportion to the number of minors present in the group. When the father is present, the weakening of the political voice expressed through the vote is less dramatic, though certainly unfair for that family group. The injustice is compounded when the minors depend solely on their mother. In the immense majority of these cases, it is statistically impossible to avoid the devastating effects of marginalization and poverty, exacerbated by weakness at the voting booth.

It becomes obvious that this hidden penalty must be eliminated, by recognizing the right to vote of all children, represented, preferably, by a parent. Let's give every person what is in all justice theirs, the political equality that translates into the right to vote. This single proposal can spark a revolution that would dramatically improve the social, cultural, economic and political situation of any nation.

<sup>(1)</sup> The nature of the vote as an institution involves a degree of complexity that is not always taken into account. At least two elements (vid. infra) vie for supremacy, and if absolute preeminence is given to the first, as is current practice, irreparable harm is caused to children, and many of them are collectively condemned to poverty. This poverty usually stays with them all their lives and is transmitted to their descendants in a perverse and aberrant cycle. The two elements are: (a) On the one hand, the vote is most often presented as the free and private choice of a voter among several electoral options, a citizen's opinion or personal choice. (b) But also, and in the case of the defenseless child this is much more important, the vote serves as a weapon, instrument or resource to defend the citizen's interests in the democratic arena. Indeed, because of a child's normally longer life span, the results of an election will affect him or her more enduringly than

adults. It is paradoxical then, that it is precisely children who are excluded from the electoral process. Representation of the minor by his or her guardian, tutor, caretaker or legal representative, is a common and widely accepted practice for the exercise of the minor's estate-related or other rights. It is incongruous that this representation should not be applied in the case of the most important of all political rights, preserver of all other rights. This group of citizens is left unprotected when the time comes to allocate social benefits. This is why children are the first victims of poverty. \_\_\_\_\_ This paper was prepared by Michael Kenwood Consulting for Strong Families Inc. © Michael Kenwood Consulting, LLC, 2006-2008