

**Could it be that in another few decades from now, we might be amazed and embarrassed that we did not think it "normal" for children to have the vote?**

*"It is difficult to take this silly business very seriously."*

*"Such a liberty has never been recognised in any civil society. I consider it a disgrace."*

**R**ESPONSES to Nelson Mandela's call in May 1993 for the voting age to be lowered to 14? No. They are, in fact, comments made 150 years ago to the Governor of the Cape in response to the suggestion that the vote be extended to women.

A brief analysis of reactions to Mandela's call as reported in the media – front-page reports, feature articles, editorials, letters from readers – confirms the similarity in type and tone to the reaction over a century ago to the idea of votes for women.

Outrage, derision, mockery, disbelief, disgust greeted Mandela's call, as the *Cape Times*, *The Argus*, *Weekly Mail and South* show: "deeply disturbing"; "such a suggestion would not receive serious consideration in a civilised country"; "a ploy"; a major political embarrassment"; "absurd suggestion"; "Only 14-year-olds will take him seriously"; "ludicrous"; "beyond serious contemplation"; "the idea is nonsense"; "Mandela is crazy"; "horrified"; "irresponsible".

Cartoons and jokes abound – stereotypical cartoons of what look like English schoolboys running wild in classrooms, babies in playpens, comments like "Pimple Power".

Similar hilarity and scorn were a feature of the reactions to proposals for the vote to be extended to women. Speaking in the suffrage debate in the House of Assembly in 1920, J X Merriman opined: "The more you read of the accounts of England, the more you read of the doings of those unsexed women who are rambling about the country, the more you feel anxious about the future of civilisation. Modesty and Purity apparently have fled to another planet."

Two *Cape Times* editorials are particularly interesting in this regard. On 30 April 1921 one pronounced that "because of a difference which no laws and no amount of education or intelligence can ever change, women are not fitted for voting". Some 72 years later, on 25 May 1993, another declared that "a leader of Mr Mandela's stature can only weaken his own position by sponsoring a lost cause. The



## Vote: teenagers denied a human right?

sooner the whole episode is forgotten, the better".

This kind of comparative approach shows up the rather smug comfortableness and arrogance that seems to be a feature of most of the reactions to Mandela's call.

Of course the "experts" are wheeled in – important political commentators, psychologists, teachers, children's experts. A psychiatrist consulted by the *Argus* said "a 14-year-old does not have the intellectual maturity to

**by ANNE SCHUSTER**

make a rational decision about how to vote" and a psychologist agreed: "It is generally accepted that a person of 14 is not mature by any stretch of the imagination and cannot be regarded as informed or sophisticated enough to have the vote."

"Experts" also pronounced women unfit to vote on the basis of their inferior intellect and lack of maturity. Writing in the *London Times* in 1921, Sir Almroth E Wright warned that "no doctor can ever lose sight of the fact that the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies ... it is with such thoughts that the doctor lets his eyes rest upon the militant suffragist. He cannot shut them to the fact that there is mixed up with the women's movement much mental disorder".

In his book, "Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children", John Holt reminds us that childhood is not a natural state but a rather recent invention. A passionate advocate of children's rights, he laments "all those attitudes and feelings, and also customs and laws, that put a great gulf or barrier between the young and their elders, and the world of their elders; that make it difficult or impossible for young people to make contact with the larger society around them, and, even more, to play any kind of active, responsible, useful part in it; that lock the young into eighteen years or more of subserviency and dependency, and make of them a mixture of expensive nuisance, fragile treasure, slave and super-pet".

Holt says that one of the most important rights that should be available to the young is the right to vote. "It is first of all a matter of justice. To be in any way subject to the laws of a society without having any right or way to say what those laws should be is the most serious injustice."

He adds that "the possibility of voting will stimulate an interest in voting. The possibility of exercising responsibility draws people towards it".

Martin Hoyles points out in "Changing

# Tough choices: Wuthering Heights or picketing in the rain?



The country's first teachers' strike – in the Western Cape – had its lighter moments. 'Rank and file' Sadtu member ZARINA ROSSOUW (left) recalls events from the two-week action.

**T**HIS is the first time in almost six years that I have written anything not related to schoolwork (prepping, setting exam papers, etc) and I've just realised how difficult it is. As I've never claimed to be an intellectual, this view of the teachers' strike called by Sadtu on May 24 is as seen through the eyes of a rank and file Sadtu member.

## Wednesday, 19 May

*Sadtu site meeting, first interval, library:* The call to strike has been made. Are we going to strike or not? What do we do about the pupils? Can we go on strike and still be in our classes? No, that's a chalk-down, not a strike, comrade! (we've become "comrades", we're not "miss" or "sir" any longer.)

Comrades, in terms of the question of striking or not, because we are members of a union, we have to adhere to our union's call! But com we need more time to discuss this issue (we've taken to the habit of discussing "issues"). I think time has run out, com, can we reach consensus? If we go on strike, remember "no work, no pay". But what about my subsidy com? Also remember that we can't enter a classroom nor have any contact with the pupils. But can we still talk to them? Not on educational matters of course.

Right, have we reached consensus, com chair? Can we have the POA (programme of action, for the uninitiated in strugglespeak) for Monday? 7.30 am – picketing in front of school gates; 7.55 am – meet in the staffroom (strike HQ).

## Saturday, 22 May

I hope our demands are met and the strike is called off. I still have to complete the nature of love in *Wuthering Heights* before the literature exam on Wednesday.

Will there still be an exam?

## Sunday, 23 May

A leading Sunday newspaper has reported that the national Sadtu strike has been called off – it seems our demands have been met.

(At least I can sleep for an extra 30 minutes tomorrow morning!)

## Monday, 24 May

7.45 am: I'm met by "Teacher on Strike" placards at the school gates. What's happening? I'm not on strike. The newspaper said that the strike was called off!

No, com, that's the problem – DON'T BELIEVE THE MEDIA!

The weekend meeting did not address the problems of the Western Cape particularly (i.e. the questions of rationalisation and retrenchments). Sadtu (Western Cape region) decided to go ahead with a strike in their region.

I don't know, I was prepared to strike, but then I read the newspaper yesterday and now...

It's not a question of being prepared com, follow your conscience. But what about Catherine and Heathcliff?

Your conscience, comrade...

10.00 am: What about the literature exam scheduled for Wednesday?

What can I do? Can't I just spend an hour with my matriculants?

Comrades, this is serious – WE'RE ON STRIKE!

Send a delegation and a letter to the office requesting a postponement of the examination! But what if it's not successful? Can't I just have half an hour with them? Comrade, that will be discussed after the delegation returns.

Childhood" that it was only in the 17th century that the concept of childhood arose which stressed innocence and weakness, and became linked with the idea of subservience or dependence. Noting that historically children have been involved in political issues, he says that of "all oppressed groups in society, children have perhaps the hardest task in asserting their right to equality. Indignation is often expressed that women or blacks are treated like children, but not so often that children are treated the way they are".

In "Down with Childhood", Shulamith Firestone explains how the fiction of childhood parallels the fiction of femininity. Both women and children were considered asexual and thus "purer" than men. Their inferior status was ill-concealed under an elaborate "respect" while both were considered mentally deficient. The pedestal of adoration on which both were set made it hard for them to breathe. Moreover, because the class oppression of women and children is couched in the phraseology of "cute" it is much harder to fight than open oppression.

A final similarity to note in reactions could be called the prophecies of doom, the predictions of total chaos that people warn would be the inevitable result of such "absurd notions" being taken seriously. Contemporary readers are warned from the right that "the blacks are calling for the vote for 14-year-olds because they want to make South Africa ungovernable", and from the left (Azapo) that "we must find a way of accommodating the youth while not ending up with a monster that could swallow us all".

The monster threatening to swallow the nation in 1877 was "petticoat government". A few years later in 1891, Samuel Smith, MP, was saying: "If we abandon the caution of the Anglo-Saxon race, and plunge into wild experiments like woman's suffrage, I much fear that dark days will befall this nation, and that the splendid fabric of centuries will totter to its fall".

How would it change things for children to have the vote? How, for example, would it affect the situation and problems and needs of the 100 million streetchildren in the world if those in power depended on them for their vote?

Could it be that we don't want to let children vote for the same reasons men didn't want to let women vote? That we want to keep children as an oppressed, disenfranchised "class"? Could it be that in another 70 years from now, we might be amazed and embarrassed that there could have been a time that people did not consider it "right" and "normal" for children to have the vote?

Anne Schuster is a writer who has done research on children's rights and children in courts.