

Educating the future electorate

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In 2018, 1,000 students sat A-level Citizenship for the last time. The Government scrapped the subject despite more than 2,000 entries four years ago. About 300 learners took the subject at Darlington's QE Sixth Form College alone. Sadly, citizenship education has almost vanished from secondary schools, despite it being made a mandatory subject for youngsters up to the age of 16. GCSE exam entries for the subject have plummeted.

Nothing could be more foolish or short-sighted, when policy experts like Lord Blunkett are telling us that as a nation we're experiencing a 'crisis of democratic engagement', with fewer people turning out to vote in elections or joining voluntary associations. As the American academic Robert Putman noted, in his classic book *Bowling Alone*, the demise of 'social capital' has contributed to low levels of civic participation. People are more likely to watch the sitcom *Friends* than make them, and view *Neighbours* rather than talk to them.

As a cross party House of Lords report, *The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*, made clear in 2018: rather than deleting Citizenship at AS or A-level, the subject should be made compulsory up to the age of 19. Every school and college should have a trained citizenship teacher. Restoring the subject would be welcomed by all those who want to see a politically literate electorate in the third decade of the 21st century.

In 2017 the Government placed a statutory obligation on all schools and colleges (through its British Values programme) to be pro-active in confronting extremism as part of its wider anti-terrorism strategy. This means teachers being on the lookout for signs of potential indoctrination into extremist ideologies. But there's an alternative to the State's narrow and possibly stigmatising approach.

Let's widen space in the national curriculum in the form of citizenship lessons, making possible learning about democracy, democratic processes, rights, responsibilities and justice, and developing all students' skills sets. This alternative is based on education and intellectual enquiry, not just surveillance - important as this. For liberal and representative democracy to be real, people need skills, knowledge, confidence and contacts. Aristotle called politics the 'master science' - its purposes being the common good of humanity.

One major feature of citizenship education is a grasp of political, legal, economic and cultural values,

processes and institutions. Politics is about power in our community. Who holds it? How did they get it, and how does the mass of the population access it? It affects every part of our lives. Decisions not only have to be taken in national, regional and local settings, but also in day-to-day interactions.

To take part within the decision-making process it's vital adults are suitably equipped with the relevant civic knowledge and skills. As the late Fred Ridley of Liverpool University pointed out, it helped democracy to work if you knew who to phone when your bins weren't emptied! The last forty years have seen the development of UK society with the result of more centralised decision-making in the wider context of globalisation. Concentration of power in the hands of an 'establishment' or 'ruling class', as noted by the late Marxist scholar Ralph Miliband, has reduced the ability of citizens to actively influence decision-making, let alone make sense of it.

Alarming, in the last decade or so a sizeable chunk of the populace feel disconnected from the civil process. Figures show that 95 per cent of the nation's 19,000 elected politicians were voted in on turn-outs of less than 50 per cent. There's a social class divide too. People in prosperous areas are more likely to vote than those in poor areas. In Newcastle, turn-out in the 2019 general election was 56 per cent. In affluent Hexham it was 78 per cent.

The reasons behind this are problematic. Lack of knowledge about current issues and about people's own role in facilitating change is clearly a factor. A revived citizenship programme in our schools can help create an active, informed, engaged and empowered electorate. Civic education can provide an awareness and critical understanding of the rights and responsibilities of UK citizens. It's important that young people by the age of 19 know how the House of Commons works, what an MP or local ward councillor does, and how the legal system and business operate. Classes in citizenship can help combat voter apathy, low levels of political participation and extremism, and create a mature electorate.

In what's become known as a 'post-truth' social media age, where millions of people are swayed by emotion and 'fake news' rather than reason, the need for citizenship classes could not be greater.