
Citizenship more vital than ever

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In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks on British soil, where the Government acknowledged the pitfalls of its anti-extremist strategy and operational plan, the need to win hearts and minds to our democratic norms and values is more important than ever before. It's vital that we help all young people to learn about our liberal democracy with its place both in the UK and elsewhere across the world. Every young adult has an entitlement to the opportunities to develop the civic skills, knowledge and confidence to participate effectively in society as an active citizen.

Sadly, the two largest political parties only paid lip-service to education for citizenship or democracy in the run-up to the 2017 general election. Of all the manifestos published, only the Liberal Democrats actively supported citizenship as a curriculum right. This means for pro-democracy civil society groups, like Democracy Now, Education4Democracy and Your Vote Counts, more work needs to be done to address these issues. Although young people voted in greater numbers than in 2015 (54 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in 2017), four out of ten didn't, especially white working-class and BME youngsters. Of those abstainers quizzed, over half felt that the system doesn't work for them. They don't believe they can shape decision-making in their communities, towns or cities.

Yet the Government has neglected the obvious route to address the problem. At best, schools, colleges and apprenticeship agencies are required to teach British Values, including democracy and 'understanding of how citizens can influence decision-making through the democratic process'. Yet there's evidence that it's not working as well as it should.

Schools have a legal duty to deliver high quality citizenship classes. However, citizenship as a distinct subject has been sidelined in many educational establishments. Entries for GCSE Citizenship have fallen sharply, especially in the north of England. This year, AS/A-level Citizenship Studies has been deleted from the further education curriculum. According to Tom Franklin of the non-partisan Citizenship Foundation, the number of trainee citizenship teachers dropped from 240 in 2010 to a mere 54 in 2016. Training bursaries have been withdrawn. The growing number of schools which have become academies or free

schools are not required to teach Citizenship Studies. Even Ofsted no longer takes much of an interest in whether they do, so many schools don't bother.

Our political parties have said little about education and democracy. The Conservative Party had a section in its manifesto called 'Democracy and the Rule of Law', with a commitment to 'champion British values around the globe'. Labour, in contrast, had a section on 'Extending Democracy', pledging an elected second chamber in Parliament and votes for 16 year-olds, with a commitment to making all schools democratically accountable. The Lib-Dems in their manifesto, 'Changing Britain's Future', went two steps better by promising a fairer voting system via PR, votes at 16, House of Lords reform and weekend voting. They reaffirmed citizenship as a curriculum entitlement in all state-funded schools and colleges.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of major electoral reform in 1918, which extended the right to vote to women aged 30 and over and millions of working-class men, our democratic traditions and culture are facing unprecedented threats from religious fundamentalists, far-right and far-left extremists and radicalised terrorists. All these groupings have a contempt for our democratic way of life, the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, equality of worth and opportunity, tolerance and difference. Radical Islamic terrorists want to kill and maim. Those on opposite ends of the political spectrum would like Britain to be transformed into an unaccountable 'corporate state', based on 'democratic centralism' or, worse, dictatorship.

In 1988 an important report by the Labour peer Bernard Crick called for every young person in the UK to learn about citizenship and democracy. Forty years on there's an urgent need to roll out a national programme to raise the profile and quality of citizenship teaching to all students up to the age of 19 and give it the same status as subjects like English, maths and IT. A-level Citizenship needs to be restored to the post-16 curriculum, and all trainees should be required to complete a citizenship certificate course. This works well in the USA, so why not the UK? Above all, we need a better strategy for this parliament to finally address the 'democratic deficit'.
