

# Citizenship: subscription not prescription

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When I ask my students what citizenship means to them, they invariably answer that it's an entitlement to belong to a country and to have the state guarantee one's basic rights. When prompted further they may stress the importance of building a state on democratic representation. When I ask them what their role might be in creating this democratic state that will safeguard their rights, they are stumped. They sometimes mention voting, although most of them go on to admit that they didn't vote in the last election, however more out of lethargy than apathy. The difference is important.

Stephen Lambert (*PSE 89*) is right in decrying the lack of understanding by young people of what citizenship entails, but he is wrong in his diagnosis of the reasons for this ignorance, and in his prescription of the remedy. The mechanics of what makes a citizen may be taught, the law, democratic representation, etc. But what citizenship signifies to an individual, and how it manifests itself, is a matter of subscription not prescription.

Identity, the nation state, community, democracy, and citizenship are important concepts but mutable ones and subject to discussion and debate. They cannot and should not be defined rigidly. To do so would be autocratic not democratic. And certainly, for schools and colleges to promulgate one view of what citizenship should be and the values that should accompany it, is more indoctrination than education.

The reason why the British Values policy is not 'working as well as it should' is precisely because the concept is educationally bankrupt. To state the blindingly obvious, values are not geographically bound nor defined by a national legal identity such as being 'British'. Moral and social values are a product of philosophical debates that are a history in the making. Democracy and the Rule of Law are concepts open to different perspectives and at times contradictory. Take the Brexit debacle for example, democracy as signified by the referendum result was at loggerheads with the law when the judges ruled that parliament should vote on any subsequent deal. The media's polarised interpretation would have only added to the confusion of a young person being taught about the immutability of British Values! I could go on about the whole concept of Britishness, or Europeaness, or even Spanishness given the recent challenges to the nation state identity on the Iberian Peninsula. But I am sure the dear reader gets my drift.

Lambert goes on to bemoan the side-lining of citizenship classes in schools and colleges and the paucity of a commitment to citizenship education by the political parties. To teach citizenship a school does not need citizenship classes or a citizenship curriculum. To make engaged, informed, and 'productive' citizens one needs to teach history, philosophy, sociology and politics, amongst many disciplines, including mathematics if we go back to what Plato deemed important for effective governance (*The Republic* by Plato). In my lecture on Education for Citizenship, I get my BA Education Studies students to compare and contrast between the ideas of three philosophers, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, as to what citizenship may entail and the relationship of the citizen to the state. I suggest that this is a good place to start. This is a debate that every student should be able to engage with, so we develop a progressive, free-thinking citizenry, worthy of building the future.

As to the misconception that young people's apathy is the result of a democratic deficit, and that the same 'deficit' is making British Muslim youth prone to extremism, it is simply erroneous. There is a deficit alright, but it is in our conceptualisation of education. Our youth are wary of democratic engagement because they have been subjected to an education system that has given primacy to crude performance measures rather than to intellectual and moral growth. Education's liberal purpose - 'liberal' here denoting John Stuart Mill's concept of intellectual liberty that leads to human emancipation - has long been superseded by a crude instrumentalism, that our youngsters are smart enough to detect and subvert. We have failed to secure their buy-in into a system that requires compliance and rejects liberty. And the Muslim youth are no different, except that under the British Values and the Prevent agenda they have been decreed publicly and by law as potential extremists who require surveillance by the system and the institutions. I don't think I need to spell out how this will only lead to more alienation.

Going back to that overused quote 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country', let me suggest an edit that would be a good start for a class discussion about citizenship: 'Ask not what our country can do for us, but let's ask: What is our country? What makes for a community? What can we do for others? And, more importantly, how can we ultimately be free?'